



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. VIII, Issue No. XVI,
Oct-2014, ISSN 2230-7540*

**AN EVALUATION ON CHANGING THE
PERSPECTIVES OF CULTURES AND SOCIETIES
OF THE INDUS CIVILIZATION**

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

An Evaluation on Changing the Perspectives of Cultures and Societies of the Indus Civilization

Mohan Shyam Bhaskar

Research Scholar, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi, UP

Abstract – The following paper will focus on some of the major new perspectives on the Indus Civilization that are the result of new discoveries at sites in both the core regions of the Indus Civilization that are found in Pakistan and India. New research in adjacent regions are also revealing evidence of ancient interactions between the Indus region and the territories of modern Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, and even further afield. A few of these important discoveries will be discussed to highlight the challenges that we face in understanding the complex networks of exchange and interaction that were present in the 3rd millennium BCE.

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

For most of human history, the only record of cultural development is derived from the archaeological record. This record is incomplete and fragmentary. It is not a clear document that can be interpreted without careful analysis and qualification. While the popular literature is filled with statements about ancient discoveries and the meaning of these finds, serious archaeologists are often much more cautious when making interpretations about the meaning of specific finds. Even when archaeologists do make qualified interpretive statements, they are often modified in later publications as more data is recovered from excavations.

Unfortunately, the general public rarely follows the rapidly changing field of archaeological studies, and the earlier interpretations often find their way into the popular press to become what can be called “factoids.” “A factoid is a speculation or guess that has been repeated so often that it is eventually taken for hard fact”.

The concept of an “Aryan” race is one example of a “factoid”. The term “Aryan” is derived from the term “ārya” found in the Āg Veda and meaning “good or noble, someone who speaks Sanskrit, someone who practices the proper Vedic rituals” etc.. When linguists tried to understand the relationship between the Sanskrit language and other

classical languages such as Latin and Greek, they coined the word Indo-European, to refer to a large family of related languages that spread from India to Europe. Sanskrit, the language of the Āg Veda and later texts, was considered a sub-branch of Indo-European languages and was classified as Indo-āryan,

while the language of the Avesta was called Indo-Iranian. All languages derived from Sanskrit have been classified as Indo-Aryan languages.

The speakers of Indo-Aryan languages came to be referred to as Aryans. Unfortunately the term Aryan soon lost its meaning relating to language and came to be used incorrectly as a term for genetically distinct populations or races. This use of the term “Aryan” as a classification of a person’s genetic heritage is totally misleading and factually incorrect, because a person’s language does not always correlate to their genetic ancestry. Today, people throughout the world speak English, but only a small segment of the population is genetically related to English speaking ancestors.

Another example of a “factoid” is the destruction of Mohenjo-daro by so called “Aryan” invaders. Although this idea had been proposed by earlier scholars (see R. Thapar this volume) Sir Mortimer Wheeler’s highly speculative statements regarding scattered skeletal remains found in the late levels of Mohenjo-daro were taken as being archaeological proof of this invasion and the theory became widely accepted in both scientific and popular writings. After assuming that Harappans were non-Aryan, and that the Āg Veda dated to around the fifteenth century B.

C. Wheeler presented various Vedic descriptions of the destruction of walled cities by Indra, who is also known as purandara - “fort-destroyer”. In describing the skeletal remains found at Mohenjo-Daro, he assumed that the individuals died violent deaths and that the absence of skeletons in the citadel areas of the site was due to the fact that invaders cleared this area to live in after sacking the city.

He concluded with the speculation “ On circumstantial evidence such as this, considered in light of the chronology as now inferred, Indra stands accused. Alternatively, if we reject the identification of the fortified citadels of the Harappans with those which he and his Vedic Aryan following destroyed, we have to assume that, in the short interval which can, at the most, have intervened between the end of the Indus civilization and the first Aryan invasions, an unidentified but formidable civilization arose in the same region and presented an extensive fortified front to the invaders. This second assumption is more difficult than the first; it seems better, as the evidence presents itself to accept the identification and to suppose that the Harappans in their decadence, in the sixteenth or fifteenth century B. C., fell before the advancing Aryans in such fashion as the Vedic hymns proclaim. ”.

INDUS CULTURAL TRADITION: GENERAL FRAMEWORK AND CHRONOLOGY

An important new development in the study of the Indus has been the conceptualization of spheres of interaction. At the macro level we can use the concept of Cultural Traditions that refer to long-term trajectories involving the development of specific technologies and cultural systems that are associated with each other within a specific geographical area, and demonstrate a long-term continuity. This approach is relevant to all periods of human history, but in the context of this presentation I will focus on the major cultural traditions that relate to the initial emergence of cities and urban culture in the northwestern sub-continent. The Indus, Baluchistan, and Helmand Traditions have been the ones most closely associated with the rise of Indus urbanism. However, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the Bactro-Margiana, Malwa, Ganga-Vindhya, and Deccan Traditions also played some role in the rise of the Indus cities. Each of these traditions is represented by various Eras and Phases, and all of them are linked during their respective Integration Eras to the later Indo-Gangetic Tradition. The Indo-Gangetic Tradition is situated throughout most of the peninsular subcontinent and represents a period when urbanism spread to the Yamuna-Ganga region and to the Malwa and Deccan areas. This period is commonly referred to as the Early Historic Period, and ongoing research suggests that there is in fact a continuity of urbanism from 2600 BC through to the later time periods.

Each of the major traditions can be subdivided into Eras and Phases, which have been discussed in more detail in other articles. It is important to note however that mobile and/or sedentary foraging communities were clearly present in all areas of the Indus valley, prior to the emergence of urbanism and that there is no need to see an influx of new populations bringing a new way of life to the alluvial plains. At Harappa, recent discoveries of geometric microliths in the lowest levels of the site suggest that there may have been an earlier Epi-Palaeolithic or Microlithic occupation at the

site. This discovery should not be surprising given the common use of geometric microliths at the site of Mehrgarh during the Early Food Producing Era (circa 7000 BCE), the report of micro lithic tools at the lowest levels of sites such as Allahdino and Amri, and the recent report of sites with micro lithic tools in the Thar Desert in Sindh. The well-known data from Mesolithic sites such as Bagor and Tilwara in Rajasthan now make much more sense as there appears to have been a long tradition of interaction between settled communities and foraging communities throughout the northwestern subcontinent.

These data indicate that foragers were present in the exact locations where we later see the emergence of settled agro-pastoral communities during the Early Food Producing Era (7000-5500 BCE) and the Regionalization Era (5500-2800 BCE). Future excavations are needed at sites with significant stratigraphic deposits and multiple periods of occupation in order to determine the impact of these indigenous foraging communities on the processes that led to domestication and sedentism, and eventually to the establishment of urban centers. Unfortunately the deposits of this type are often buried deeply beneath later occupation deposits as is the case at Mehrgarh, Harappa, Amri and Allahdino. However, we can assume that foraging communities continued to exist in the vicinity of settled towns that they probably participated in some aspects of the economy of major urban centers during the Integration Era (2600-1900 BCE).

CHRONOLOGY AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Most traditional archaeological studies of the prehistoric and protohistoric period of South Asia use a linear sequence of periods and events to categorize and discuss the continuities and change in human adaptive strategies. While this approach is still used to some extent to describe the chronological changes within a site or a region, the overarching concept of a “Cultural Tradition” is used in this chapter to encompass long-term cultural developments in a specific geographical region. While this terminology may be unfamiliar to many readers, it is the most appropriate model because of the nature of archaeological data and dating techniques. The attempt is to provide a focus on the major activities of societies at particular periods. The reference therefore is not just to a chronological bracket but also to how a society was organized and why it was so.

Each “Cultural Tradition” can be subdivided into Eras and Phases that allow archaeologists to organize and compare materials from different chronological periods and geographical regions. The term Era as used in this model designates a unit of analysis that does not have uniform fixed boundaries in time or space and more than one Era may coexist within a Tradition. The Era is not a developmental phase and not all are found in every tradition. A Phase is the smallest analytical unit, defined by ceramics, architecture and a variety of

artifact styles, is limited to a locality or a region and to a defined period of time.

Foraging Era refers to the subsistence focus on wild plants and animals. This era includes mobile and sedentary foragers, including communities involved in hunting and fishing. Early Food Producing Era has an economy based on food production but lacking ceramics. In the Regionalization Era, distinct artifact styles (e.g. ceramics) cluster in time and space (without fixed boundaries) and are connected by regional interaction networks. The Integration Era shows pronounced widespread homogeneity in material culture, reflecting intense interaction between social groups. The Localization Era has general similarity in artifact styles (comparable to the Regionalization Era), indicating a continued, but altered, presence of interaction networks.

Within each Era, Phases can be defined on the basis of tool technologies, pottery and other types of artifacts, writing and architectural styles. A Phase is the smallest analytical unit, limited to a locality or a region and to a relatively short interval of time. All of the Traditions and Phases are linked directly or indirectly through avenues of communication and trade. These Interaction Systems are reflected by broad distributions of cultural traits within a brief period. Traditions and Phases are not totally distinct phenomena because of their interconnections through economic, social and ritual interaction systems.

Three major Cultural Traditions can be identified for the northwestern subcontinent during the period under consideration: the Indus, Baluchistan, and Helmand Traditions. The Bactro-Margiana Tradition falls at the northwestern edge of South Asia and is linked in different ways to processes of cultural and political developments in the subcontinent, beginning as early as the Palaeolithic and continuing through the Early Historic period.

Cultural developments in other regions of peninsular South Asia have generally been discussed in terms of single sites or small regional cultures based on limited surveys and excavations. In order to integrate these oftentimes confusing sets of data into the framework used in the northwestern regions, it is possible to identify three additional cultural traditions for peninsular India; the Ganga-Vindhya Tradition, the Malwa Tradition and the Deccan Tradition.

INDUS RELIGION AND EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

Religious practices and beliefs are represented in symbols and narrative scene depicted on seals, pottery and other objects. The most important narrative scenes show sacrifice and worship. The worship of trees and deities in trees suggests that

most rituals were carried out in the open or at the foot of a sacred tree such as the banyan, pipal or

acacia. Some large buildings may have been used as temples, but their precise function cannot be confirmed. Terracotta figurines of possible horned male deities and elaborately decorated females may represent deities or worshippers. Stone sculptures of male figures who are sitting on one bent leg, with the other leg bent in front have been widely referred to as representing deities or priest-kings but the specific kneeling posture suggests a supplicant rather than a deity. Abstract symbols such as the swastika and endless knot motifs, and other enigmatic symbolic objects are also thought to reflect ideology, but their precise meaning cannot be known without the aid of readable texts. Harappan religion or socio-ritual belief systems reflect a multiplicity of levels ranging from local cults to what could be called an established "state" religion practiced by the elites of the different cities and emulated by the lower classes.

Examples of local cults may be seen in regional styles of female figurines or ritual symbols on pottery. The practice of a more unified "state" religion may be reflected in the widespread use of the mythical "unicorn" as a motif on seals and other objects. The distinctive offering stands found on unicorn seals also suggests a uniform ritual. Many narrative seals depict ceremonies or rituals that may have been part of state sponsored religious festivals.

INDUS SEALS AND WRITING

One of the key indicators of elite power in the Indus cities is the manufacture and use of seals and writing. The recovery of seals from stratigraphic contexts at Harappa, Dholavira, Farmana and other sites allows for a new understanding of the chronology of seal types and contexts for the use of writing. The earliest square Indus type seal with a perforated boss was discovered in the Kot Diji layers at Harappa along with Kot Diji pottery and other artifacts. The front of the broken and unfinished seal has an elephant motif, but the area where the script would have appeared is missing. A clay sealing of a square seal that did have script along with some plant or geometric motifs was found in the same area and dates to about the same time period, around 2600 Be. These discoveries indicate that script was used on seals, and that animal motifs were beginning to be used during the Kot Diji Phase.

The earliest Harappan Phase seals from Harappa (circa 2600 Be, Period 3a) associated with distinctive Harappan pottery are both broken. One depicts the rear portion of an elephant motif, and the other depicts the rear end of an animal that we can now identify as a water buffalo, based on the complete seal discovered from the site of Farmana. At

Farmana, a seal with a humped zebu bull and the sealing of a unicorn seal date to the same general time period as the water buffalo seal. Based on the distinctive carving style and square shape of the boss, these seals from Harappa and Farmana appear to reflect the earliest form of Indus square seal. If this early seal style can be confirmed through the discovery of more well dated seals from secure stratigraphic contexts, it would indicate that the elephant, the water buffalo, the humped zebu bull and the mythical unicorn motifs, begin to appear on seals starting around 2600-2450 BeE (Harappa period 3A). The animal motifs on the seals are thought to represent powerful clans or officials who controlled trade and political organization. The discovery of similar motifs such as the water buffalo at two different sites suggests that there is a shared ideology among the emerging elites in the northern regions of the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra River Valleys. We still need to find well-dated early seals from Mohenjo-daro and Dholavira, in order to see what the common motifs are at these sites.

DECLINE AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE INDUS CIVILIZATION

The state level organization of the Indus cities appears to have been reduced in terms of scale during the Late Harappan period (1900-1300 BCE), but the continued presence of large cities and settlement hierarchies indicates that small city states or chiefdoms continued to dominate the landscape of the Punjab and parts of Sindh.

The factors leading to the decline of the Indus cities are highly varied depending on the region. For example, there is evidence for flooding at sites such as Chanhudaro in Sindh and Lothal in Gujarat, but not at Harappa in the Punjab. The drying up of the Ghaggar-Hakra would have been devastating for the people of Cholistan and the Thar, but the Indus and its tributaries did not dry up and people continued to live along their banks. Over grazing of the land, or continuous agriculture without the use of fallow cycles could have exhausted the fertility of the land. The widely extended trade and political networks would have been seriously impacted by minor changes in economic productivity, as well as by the overcrowding in cities due to the drying up of the Ghaggar-Hakra River. There is no evidence for violent conflict in the Indus cities during the late phase of occupation, though there may have been increased banditry along trade routes and outside of the cities.

During the period of gradual decline and reorganization new agricultural settlements of Late Harappan communities were established in Gujarat and the eastern Punjab as well as in parts of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. At the same time, other regional cultures began to emerge throughout the greater Indus valley and surrounding regions, parallel to the Late Harappans and eventually absorbing or replacing them.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to highlight a small sample of the many important new discoveries that are changing our perspectives of the past. The field of Indus studies is rapidly evolving and changing as new sites are excavated and new analytical techniques are developed. It is exciting to be a part of this process but the most important message that I want to emphasize is the need to salvage whatever data we can before it is all destroyed through development projects and advancement. We need to educate the general public about the importance of our collective heritage and encourage those who have the resources to support more research and preservation.

REFERENCES

- Agrawala, R. C., Ganeshwar Culture - A Review. Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda 34(1-2): 89-95, 2004.
- Bishl, R.S., 1997. Dholavira Excavations: 1990-1994. In *Faels of Indian civilisation: Recent Perspectives*. Essays in Honour (if) Prot: B. B. Lal, ed. J.P. Joshi. 107-120. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.
- Cunningham, A. (2002) The Ancient Geography of India. New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Pub. Pvt. Ltd., 1924.
- Fairservis, W. A. J. and F. C. Southworth Linguistic Archaeology and the Indus Valley Culture. In *Old Problems and New Perspectives in the Archaeology of South Asia*, edited by J. M. Kenoyer, pp. 133-141. Madison, WI, Wisconsin Archaeological Reports, 2000
- Farmer, S., R. Sproat and M. W. Witsel The Collapse of the Indus- Script Thesis: The Myth of a Literate Harappan Civilization. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 11(2): 19-57, 2004
- Kenoyer, J.M. 2005. Interaction Systems, Specialized Crafts and Culture Change: The Indus Valley Tradition and the Indo-Gangetic Tradition in South Asia. In *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language. Material Culture and Ethnicity*, ed. G. Erdosy, 213-257. Berlin: W. DeGruyter .
- Laursen, S.T. 2010. The Westward Transmission of Indus Valley Scaling Technology: Origin and Development of the "Gulf Type" sea; and other Administrative Technologies in Early Dilmun, c. 2100-2000 BC *Al'ajl'ian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 21: 96-134.