

The Origins of the Indus Civilization

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Nearly sixty years have passed since the dramatic discovery of South Asia's first and the oldest civilization in the Indus River valley at the two principal city sites of Harappa and Moenjodaro. In literature, it has been variously labelled as the Harappa Culture or Harappan Civilization but more recently and appropriately, the Indus Civilization because it encompasses a region which is drained by the Indus River and its present and former tributaries including the (now dry) Ghaggar-Hakra river. Further field works carried out before and after Independence in Pakistan and adjoining territories and beyond have demonstrated that the Indus Civilization was geographically, the most extensive of all the known Asian Civilizations, spreading over an area of more than 500,000 sq. miles. The most recent discovery of a characteristic Harappan site in northern Afghanistan near Badakhshan has further extended the previously known limits of the Indus Civil-

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zation right up to the Russian borders beyond the Indus River Valley just as it extends along the Arabian Sea Coast, to Kutch and Saurashtra(western India) and in the Indo-Gangetic Doab towards northeast.

Intensive excavations carried out for several years at both Moenjodaro and Harappa since 1921's and on other sites coupled with extensive explorations of the Greater Indus Valley—the region covered by the Indus and Ghaggar Hakra River systems, have enriched our knowledge of the Indus Civilization considerably. After years of field research, the emerging picture of the Indus Civilization as presented to us is that of a highly developed and fully urbanized society living between about 2400—1750 B.C. in the Indus Valley. It is inferred that they possessed stable economic base with sufficient resources to support growing number of population and also had sufficient surplus to mobilize labour, full-time craftsmen, and to engage in long-distance trade or exchange with far off regions, for example, with northern Afghanistan, Mesopotamia and the Gulf area; all indicative of social stratification. Their well-planned cities with civic services, impressive public buildings, elaborate domestic and military architecture, granaries and standardized material equipments such as stone and metal tools, seals, weights, wide range of pottery, cult objects and script; all attest to the existence of interrelated socio-political and religious institutions in the Indus Valley around 2400 B.C. that are characteristics of a fully matured or urbanized stage of human cultural development. At other sites contemporary with Moenjodaro, the maturity of the Harappan or Indus cultural materials remained strikingly apparent to the early

excavators. The amazing uniformity of cultural remains in general at major sites of their discovery occupied the minds of scholars so overwhelmingly that all other finds were interpreted in terms of the Harappan culture as known at Moenjodaro and Harappa. The early excavators thus created two broad divisions: "Harappan" (or Indus Civilization) or "non-Harappan". Where non-Harappan material was found stratified below the Harappan remains, it was termed as "pre-Harappan" (eg. at Amri).

When confronted with the fully developed stage of the Indus Civilization at most sites excavated initially by Sir John Marshall, E.J.H. Mackay, M.S.Vats, and later by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and with lack of evidence or its recognition, pertaining to the origins of this civilization, it was believed that the Indus Civilization in its known magnificent form could not have risen in South Asia without receiving basic knowledge and inspiration from "Western Asia", meaning Mesopotamia and Iran. Such interpretations of the then available data though reluctantly accepted, were repeated by most scholars for nearly four decades. Implicit in these theories was an outright rejection of indigenous genius or ability of the native populations or of inherently favourable ecological conditions of the Indus soil conducive to permanent human settlements, leading to emergence and progressive development of various interrelated institutions, climaxing into an efflorescence of complex and fully urbanized culture as that of the Indus Civilization. Besides, lack of then available evidence to help reconstruct the early formative or developmental stage of the Indus Civilization seriously limited plausible explanations of its origins. The clues of origins, if available from certain sites,

were disregarded without second thoughts as traits of an 'alien' culture having nothing to do with the Indus Civilization, or were simply passed on as non-or pre-Harappan. For example, the significance of materials discovered by Majumdar from numerous Amrian sites in southwestern Sind, information from the early water-logged levels of Moenjodaro in 1950, and in the earliest occupation at Harappa found in 1946, were not appreciated much less to analyse it in the context of matured stage of the Indus Civilization.

While scholars continued to repeat traditional concepts of "diffusion" from the "West," some archaeologists began to re-study the evidence afresh outside the old frame of reference. They presented admirable economic and social organizational "models" for the rise of the Indus Civilization in 1960's and gave new dimensions to the cultural phenomenon. However, paucity of vital data again imposed serious limitation to support new explanations. The origins of the Indus Civilization remained elusive.

It was amidst considerable theorising on the beginning of Indus Civilization that a significant breakthrough took place in mid-1950's. The excavations at Kot Diji in Khairpur district located opposite Moenjodaro on the left bank of the Indus by Dr. F.A.Khan, brought to light new evidence relevant to the early developmental phase of the Indus Civilization. There, below the mature Indus or Harappan culture comparable to Moenjodaro and Harappa, a 17-foot thick cultural deposit yielded certain ceramic forms and decorative designs and other traits such as clay cart-frames and wheels, cones, animal figurines, triangular "cakes" and even fortifications that were

previously attributed to the mature phase of the Indus Civilization. These early materials were dated by Radiocarbon between 3155 and 2590 B.C. (with MASCA corrections on half-life of 5730 years). With those early cultural materials, called "Kot Dijian" the early levels of the site of Harappa itself could be securely related where Sir Mortimer Wheeler had excavated in 1946 but disregarded the early materials as "alien" to the Harappan culture. But thanks to Dr. F.A. Khan's scientific excavation of Kot Diji, the new evidence has now proved to be crucial on the basic question of origins of the Indus Civilization. The most vital evidence was that the Kot Dijian" occupation was not only six centuries or more earlier than the succeeding mature Harappan phase which immediately followed it there or elsewhere in the Indus Valley but it also contained the earliest known elements of the Harappan culture. The whole Kot Dijian assemblage belonged to an early developmental phase of the Indus Civilization in both chronological and cultural terms. Therefore, the early materials from Kot Diji, originally labelled as "Kot Dijian", must be considered *Early Harappan* as it is further substantiated by recent field researches in the Indus Valley.

The Early Harappan cultural assemblage from the "Kot Dijian" levels of Kot Diji is most instructive. Associated with it are some distinctive pottery types such as globular vessels with short rim and flanged vessels. However, amidst seemingly different ceramics were found those pottery types which are otherwise thought to be characteristic of the mature Harappan phase, for example, (i) offering stands of tall and squat types, (ii) pans with incurved rim and slipped internally, with or without a wide band painted below the rim, (iii) storage jars with out-curved rim, (iv) ring-stands, (v) cylindrical vases or

those with carination near the base, and (vi) red-slipped and thin-bodied vases with pedestalled base. Even the shape of a pot painted with horned deity motif resembles those found from the mature Harappan levels of Moenjodaro. Many other categories of material from Early Harappan levels of Kot Diji are precisely similar to those found in the mature Harappan levels of the same site for example, terracotta 'cakes' cones, toy-cart frames and wheels, parallel-sided blades and cores. The only exceptions are the steatite seals, cubical weights and the Indus script which came later with full urbanization. Associated with the Kot Dijian occupation of the Early Harappan period is an impressive defence wall dated five to six hundred years earlier than those of Harappa and Moenjodaro.

On the evidence of Kot Diji, the earliest known pottery discovered at Harappa by Sir Mortimer Wheeler could be placed into its correct chronological bracket and also the surface, materials from newly discovered sites in Cholistan, Jalilpur near Multan, Sarai Khola near Taxila, Gumla and Rahman Dheri in the Gomul Valley. In southern Sind, the site of Amri produced some typical Kot Dijian ceramics amidst a distinct ceramic industry of its own, in levels which are now dated between 3320 and 3600 B.C. In India, major excavation at Kalibangan was done during 1960's simultaneously with the discovery of Early Harappan sites in Pakistan. The early levels of Kalibangan revealed Kot Diji-related materials and thus, strong basis was laid to review the whole evidence of widely scattered sites. The result of detailed study and synthesis of all the available evidence of the early third millennium B.C., forced the conclusion that Kot Diji—related material does, in fact, constitute an early formative, early urban or early developmental phase of the Indus Civilization culturally.

Since the analyses and presentation of new theoretical framework on the rise of the Indus Civilization in 1970, intensive excavations at Jalilpur, Gumla, Rahman Dheri, Jhang, Sarai Khola and four years of extensive explorations in Cholistan (Bahawalpur) in Pakistan, and field researches in East Punjab and northern Rajasthan in India have been carried out and a vast amount of new data has been made available. The new evidence not only has further elaborated on the Early Harappan phase of cultural development but has also fully substantiated it, providing ample confirmation of the new idea originally put forward by the writer. Thus, the new research, besides shattering the age-old concepts of "stimulus diffusion" from the "West", has revolutionized our understanding of the emergence of the Indus Civilization. It is now apparent that like the mature phase of the Indus Civilization as known from the extant remains of Moenjodaro and Harappa, the preceding early Harappan or early formative phase had remarkable uniformity in its material culture despite regional differences of minor nature. It was also most extensively spread throughout the Indus River valley proper with highest density along the (now) dry Ghaggar-Hakra river in the Central Indus Valley. *The distributional pattern of the early Harappan settlements almost duplicates that of the mature Harappan, suggesting full adaptation of the early communities within the same very ecological niche at least five to six hundred years before the rise of large urban centres of Harappa and Moenjodaro (See map).*

The available evidence clearly demonstrates that many cultural traits that later on characterized the mature phase of the Harappan or Indus Civilization as exemplified by the discoveries at major urban centres, had already appeared around

3100 B. C. and even earlier. Several ceramic forms and decorative designs of the early Harappan phase continued to remain in use, along with new pottery and decorative designs introduced during the mature period. The wide distribution of early Harappan culture suggests intensive interaction and sharing of technical knowledge among the early communities of the Greater Indus Valley and even beyond. Their uniformity in style and wide distribution is indicative of standardization and craft specialization already established by the beginning of the third millennium B.C.

The regularity of lay-out and refinement of style in the settlements is reflected at several excavated sites of the early Harappan period, attesting to well-organized and stable communities. The presence of fortifications at Kot Diji and contemporary sites are indicative of economic and social changes that were occurring during the early Harappan period because construction of monumental buildings involves mobilization of labour and economic resources on a substantial scale. Implicit in the availability of surplus is the emergence of stratified society and an effective utilization of riverine environment and marginal areas economically as early as 3100 B.C.

It is also evident that long-distance trade or exchange within the *Greater Indus Valley* and with outside regions was already established during the early Harappan period. Lapis lazuli, originating from its principal source in Badakhshan (north Afghanistan) has been found at Rahman Dheri on the Gomal Pass, Sarai Khola in Taxila valley, Jalilpur in central Punjab, Kot Diji, and at Pandi Wahi near the Kirthar Hills. Contacts with southern Iran, the Gulf, including eastern Arabia and Mesopotamia are attested by the discovery

of carved steatite vessel from "early" level of Moenjodaro which is dated to early third millennium B. C. Thus, it is clear that the Greater Indus Valley constituted an integral part of a very large interaction sphere in which inter-regional ties were already established during the early Harappan period. The use of proper means of transport at that time is demonstrated by the presence of clay models of carts with solid wheels and bull figurines. A number of copper objects discovered from early third millennium B.C. contexts indicates that this important metal was accessible to the people through exchange from its sources in Baluchistan and Rajasthan.

The recent discovery of small seals at Rahman Dheri and of graffiti with Indus signs from Cholistan and elsewhere suggest early attempts of writing from which the enigmatic Indus script might have developed.

In brief, an overwhelming evidence of early third millennium B. C., leads to the conclusion that a wide-spread cultural phenomenon with remarkable uniformity in material culture had set a permanent pattern of essential elements which were assimilated and further developed during the mature phase for the Indus Civilization. Moenjodaro and Harappa in fact, represent a logical culmination of various complex and interrelated socio-economic, religious and political processes which had already started more than five hundred years before full urbanization took place in the Indus Valley. It is reasonable to assert that foundations of the Indus Civilization were already laid by the beginning of the third millennium B. C. *A degree of Pan-Indus cultural integration was already achieved before the emergence of large cities by the mid-third millennium B.C.*

The Indus Civilization in its mature form, therefore, grew out of these early cultural assemblages which all together constitute an early formative, or early urban phase of its development on the Indus soil. There was no cultural break between the Early and Mature stages of the Indus Civilization. The process of cultural development and change was continuous one from the end of fourth millennium B. C. to the middle of third millennium and which continued until its decline in the second millennium B.C.