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A Survey on The Harappan Civilization (The Mystery of Language)

Abstract

The study of the world's civilization is significant not only for historians and archaeologists but also for the ordinary man. Harappan civilization is one of the greatest ancient civilizations which had considerable effect on the world's civilization. The improvements made by Harappan- the people of Harappa- can be considered as a basis for modern developments in different domains. The main objective of the present article is to have a survey on the issue of language or means of communication used by Harappan people at that time. The paper first represents a general overview of Harappan Civilization and then, it discusses different views on the formation and development of the so called communication systems, or language.

Keywords: Harappa, civilization, communication system, archaeologists, language

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Introduction

Harappan, the Indus Valley Civilization introduces one of the most important civilizations of the ancient world. The foundations of this civilization have great varieties from hunting and gathering to farming and agriculture (Ghosh 1990). The Indus Valley civilization or alternatively the Mature Harappan began from 2500 B.C. and continued to 1900 B.C.(Possehl 2002: p. 1) . From that early times, besides supplying food, people learnt most importantly how to communicate and interact with others, and to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next to provide them with the cultural patterns.

Unlike the limitations of technology at that time, customs and religious beliefs as well as political relationships among countries have been found. A lot of scripts have been discovered that cannot be related to a later period. Most scholars from different places have tried to uncover the mysteries of the Indus Valley, although they were not able to read what those people wrote about. So, the language of the Indus Valley civilization remains a mystery.

The main purpose of the present paper is to provide an overview of the status of Harappan language, the way people communicated with each other for different purposes.

The history of Harappan Civilization

Knowledge related to the origin of people of The Indus Valley is limited. Different views exist on this subject. According to Shashi (1996) the Harappa people entered India from north-west. Primarily they were hunters like other people of the world. But around 4000 B.C. they began farming and by 2500B.C. they inhabited in the Indus River Valley, where they started to live in cities. More and more people moved to the Indus Valley for there was sufficient amount of water there. Gradually, it got crowded and people built cities. "The Indus Valley or Harappan civilization stretched from Himalayan foothills to almost Arabian sea, enclosing an area of at least 1,600 kilometers from north to south" (Mohiuddin 2007: p.34). The Westernmost Indus site is Sutkagon-dor, near the modern border spreading Pakistan and Iran. The principal regions are Baluchistan and the Northwest frontier, the mountainous eastern end of the Iranian plateau. The following figure demonstrates Harappa domain.



Figure 1. Domain of the Indus Civilization
Adopted from Possehl(2002, p.7).

According to Possehl (2002) , it is said that the ancient cities of Indus were built of baked brick ; however there were houses, walls and drains which were constructed of stone. The stone houses had sewage systems. The people used bronze tools. This was the beginning of urbanism. For the first time in the history of this region, different communities living together in large cities. These early societies were not totally isolated from one another, and there is evidence for trading and other cultural contacts among them.

Harappan Culture

Harappan culture flourished during Indian's Bronze Age of the third millennium B.C. Its peak was also at the same period. It started from its northern capital, Harrapa, in the Panjab, to the southern city, Mohenjodaro, on the Indus in Sind (Piggot,1961).

Some of the most striking aspects of the Harrapa culture are: architecture, seals, religion and language.

1. Harappan Architecture

The Harappans were developed for their time, particularly in architecture. Each city was surrounded by massive walls and gateways. The walls were built to control the trades. The Harappans were great city planners. According to Shendge (2003), the multi-roomed and probably

multi-storeyed houses with rooms arranged around courtyards is a common feature of Harappan architecture.

Streets were positioned east to west. If the drains were not cleaned, the water rain into the houses which had been built. One of the most recognizable features of Harappa is buildings. They were made of sun-dried mud brick. The bricks were so strong that they have stood up for thousands of years. The harappans used different tools mainly made of copper. Saws and weapons have been found at different places of this site. Additionally, the earliest traces of the use of mathematics in South Asia is in the artifacts of the Indus Valley Civilization. The people manufactured bricks whose dimensions were definite. They also used a standardized system of weight. The inhabitants of Indus Valley also tried to standardize measures of length or height Wikipedia (2009).

2. Harappa Seals

Seals were generally used to imprint documents or bundles of goods to verify the legal right of possession. The people who used seals in their early settlements controlled the access and distribution of essential resources. The earliest seals were made as cylinders instead of squares and were rolled on a lump of clay (Kenoyer 1998 :p. 45). Archeologists have discovered thousands of seals with beautiful figures of animals such as unicorn bull, tiger, elephant, goat, buffalo, etc. Figure 2 demonstrates one sample of Harappa seals.



Figure 2: Harappan Seal
Adopted from Kenoyer (1998, p. 84)

According to Gupta (Igncanic,2009) every seal was engraved in a pictographic script. It seems the scripts are representations of animals, gods, or humans. The seals were used as amulets, carried on the persons of

their owners, perhaps as modern day identity cards. Seals were made of, ivory, or blue or white. The seals in a way reflected accurate pictures of Harappan life for they represented human or animal motifs.

3. Harappan religion

Keays (Geocities,2009) stated that no site has been identified as a temple. They ate beef and buried their dead. Most of the assumptions about sacrificing fires and religious objects, rest on doubtful references from Hindu practices centuries later. Such inferences may be related to Islamic astronomy for an explanation of the orientation of the pyramids. In short, these theories are all fanciful and do not bear scrutiny.

The Harappan seals depicting the sitting man wearing horned headdress bears no similarity to Hinduism's Shiva. Figure 3 demonstrates the comparison.



Harappa Seal



Hinduism Shiva

Figure 3: Harappa Seal and Shiva
Adopted from Geocities(2009)

It is the cow that worshipped in Hinduism whereas bull had a minor role in Harappa. Bull was much more sacred in ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures similar to the popular Harappan bull. This is further supported by Encyclopedia Britannica: "The Bull cult was a prehistoric religious practice that originated in the eastern Aegean sea and extended from the Indus Valley of Pakistan to the Danube River in eastern Europe... . The Bull cult continued into historic times and was particularly important in The Indus Valley and on the Grecian island of Crete. In both places, the bull's horns of consecration were an important religious symbol."

Hines (Geocities,2009) states that similar to the cultures of ancient Middle East, it appears that The Indus Valley religion recognized some

type of life after death. Unlike Hindus who practices cremation, Indus people carefully buried their dead in wooded coffins with their heads facing north and the feet pointing south. Included in the graves were pottery jars containing food and weapons for use in the afterlife. As inferences show Harappan religion was not Hinduism, on the other hand Gupta (Ignnic,2009) asserts that from the Pashupati seal, it is certain that they worshipped Shiva. There is an image of Shiva, seated on a stool flanked by an elephant. Nature worship must have been part of their virtual as revealed in the seals. Numerous pottery figures of Mother Goddesses have also been found.

Some others believe that since Harappans were geographically a distinct people having no relationship with Gangetic Valley and the rest of most India where Hinduism was born in later centuries, they are not Hindu.

4. Language of the Harappa

Language is a means through which people express their ideas and group identities. An understanding of the language used by the Harappan Civilization requires distinguishing how they perceived the world. Unfortunately a few symbols on the ceramics of the Harappan civilization have not been decoded. Durrani (Utexas, 2009) suggests that these symbols may be the beginning of writing in The Indus Valley.

There are, however, several probabilities that have been suggested for the language of the Harappan Civilization: Sumerian, Dravidian, Indo European, Vedic Sanskrit, and unknown languages.

Marshall was the first to suggest a linguistic link between the Harappans and Dravidians (Marshall, 1931). His theory was based on the idea that the Indo-Aryan dialects found in modern India are invasive. This invasion was from other sources which followed the Harappan Civilization. Dravidian language spoken even now in part of Balochistan, maybe the original Harappan language. Some scholars such as Faridkoti (Utexas,2009) claims that if the Harappan language was Dravidian, then the first languages of the area of present-day Pakistan were not Indo-Aryan but Dravidian. Other scholars have used the theory of linguistic “transfer” or “interference” to explain the presence of Dravidian elements in the languages of present-day Pakistan which are generally said to be the daughters of Sanskrit, an Indo-Aryan language. “Transfer” or “interference” refers to the influence of the rules of one's first language on

another language one learns later. At times an old language disappears and a new language is learned by its speakers. But the way they use this language is influenced by the rules of their old language. The new language, then, has a “substratum” of the old language. If we apply this theory to old Indo-Aryan we can hypothesize that the Harappan language, which was probably Dravidian, influenced old Aryan. Thus Pakistani languages have a Dravidian substratum. The evidence for the presence of this substratum, according to Tikkanen (Utexas,2009) is the presence of retroflex consonants which do not exist in Iranian or European members of the Indo-European family of languages.

The Dravidian hypothesis becomes even further stronger if we know that it is presently spoken by many native speakers of South Asia. Two isolated groups of spoken Dravidian can be found in Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan and Northeastern India. These isolated dialects seemed to support the strife that in the distant past Dravidian existed as a major if not the dominant language group.

The incoming of Indo-Aryan Languages

According to Parpola (Wikipedia,2009) a small wave of Aryan-speaking nomads from the northern steppes arrived in this region and adopted the local non-Aryan culture while retaining their own Aryan language.

Unlike what had been accepted as a myth in Pakistan, the Aryans did not move the northern mountains with Dravidians before them. According to some scholars they came in at least two major movement in Pakistan. The first movement came around 2000 B.C., and the second some six centuries later. After the second wave, when they became dominant, their language too spread over northern India. The chart given in Figure 4, based on Grierson's (Utexas,2009) classification, may be useful in illustrating the hypothesized relationship.

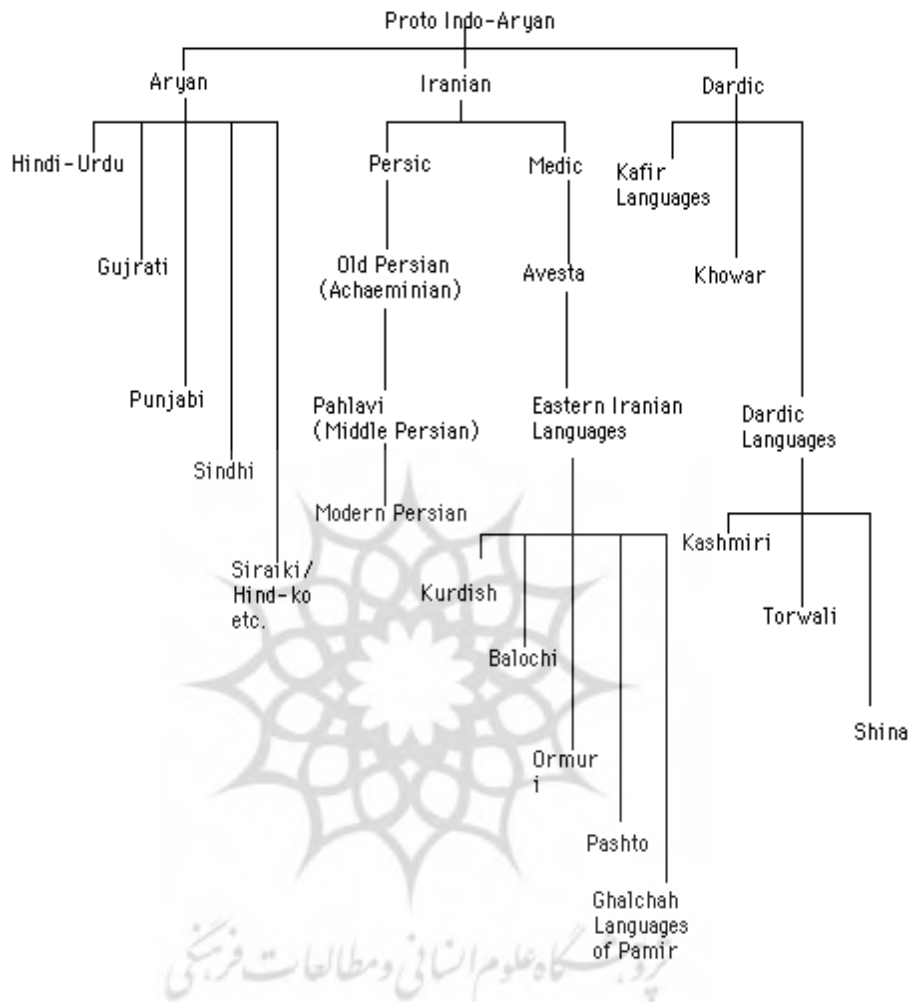


Figure 4. Hypothesized Relationship

Adopted from Grierson (1967, Vol. 1, p. 120)

Indo-Aryan languages arrived in India only after 1700 B.C. Certainly, speakers of the incoming Indo-Aryan languages would have communicated with speakers of Harappan and the earliest Vedic Sanskrit should show traces of Dravidian borrowings, which it does not.

The Vedic Sanskrit Language

From about 1000 B.C. Sanskrit became the superior language of The Indus Valley and remained in use till the Muslim conquest when Persian took its place. Language was holy and any change was considered as corruption. So sacred was the language of the religious texts, while Sanskrit was that of the grammar which acquired a central and almost sacrosanct place in the education system of the Indus Valley Aryans (Stall, 1972).

Some scholars believe that Vedic Sanskrit could not be the language of Harappa since there are not ample evidence from archeology, linguistics and other fields. In fact, they believe Vedic Sanskrit did not exist until some two thousand years after the start of Harappan culture.

There are some pieces of evidence which confirm the fact that Vedic Sanskrit was not native to South Asia but has come from another place. Their origins seems to be located in the steppe belt to the north of Iran and northwest of India. These early Indo-Aryan speakers could have mingled with others in the towns and cities of Harappan civilization, which were probably just as multilingual as any modern city in India.

The Influence of Persian

The Indus civilization artifacts demonstrated the trade networks, economically, integrated a huge area, including portions of Afghanistan, the coastal regions of Persia, northern and central India, and Mesopotamia.

Surprisingly, the Gandhara region was ruled by the Persians some time in the sixth century B.C. This is evidenced in the inscriptions of Darius in which “clear mention has been made of Hi (n) du, that is, the Punjab territory, as a part of the realm” Gupta (Ignca.nic,2009).

In 518 B.C., Darius I of Persia joined the states of Sind and Punjab in northern India. Since that time the people of the Indus Valley respected the Persian king maybe because of precious local resources. After Alexander the Great overcame the Persians and conquered the region in 326 B.C., Greek culture would be a major influence for over three hundred years, with Indo-Greek kingdoms founded in the North West Frontier,

Afghanistan and the Punjab. But because of the close relation between Old Persian and Sanskrit, the influence of Persian language and culture in the northwest of the subcontinent never diminished until the collapse of the Persian-speaking Mughal Empire in the 19th century.

Alexander's invasion of this area and the extent of his journey again boldly highlight the fact that Pakistan's present boundaries were almost the same in those days. From Hindu Kush, Dir and Swat to the banks of the Beas and down to Karachi - this entire area was one single geographical, political and cultural region ruled by the Persians. It will also be recalled that this was the same area as covered by the Indus Valley Civilization which continued to remain separate from India through the ages.

"The sphere of Persian influence in these early times can hardly have reached beyond the realm of the Indus and its affluent. We may assume, accordingly, that when Alexander reached the river Hyphasis, the ancient Vipac, and modern Beas, and was then forced by his generals and soldiers to start upon his retreat, he had touched the extreme limits of the Persian dominion over which he had triumphed throughout." The Aryans could not close northwestern gate behind them, and were followed in due course by a succession of further invaders from Central Asia and the Iranian plateau. Most of these were speakers of Indo-European or even more closely related Iranian languages and for the earlier period it is difficult to sort out their linguistic impact (Masica 1993: p.47).

The Decline of Harappan Civilization

Around 1900 B.C. Harappa and other urban centers started to decline as people left them to move east to what is now India and the Ganges; and the different regions began to diverge from the unified culture. The reasons for the decline of the Harappan culture are not clear. Probably, changing climate, drying up of the Saraswati, collapse of trade, recurrent floods caused by tectonic earth movement, soil salinity, desertification and other factors may have played a role.

When the Harappan civilization declined, some features of the culture did not pass on to its successors. Writing vanished for almost 1400 years. So did city planning. So did the specific forms of the Harappan religion and literature.

It is in this context of the aftermath of a civilization's collapse that the Indo-Aryan migration hypothesis into northern India is discussed. In the early twentieth century, this migration was forwarded in the guise of an

"Aryan invasion", and when the civilization was discovered in the 1920s, its collapse at precisely the time of the invasion was seen as an independent confirmation. It is however far from certain whether the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization is a result of an Indo-Aryan migration, if there was one. It seems rather likely that, to the contrary, the hypothesized Indo-Aryan migration was as a result of the collapse, comparable with the decline of the Roman Empire and the incursions of relatively primitive peoples during the Migrations Period. A third possibility is that Indus Valley Civilization collapsed primarily due to natural reasons and that there was no Indo-Aryan invasion that took place. Swastika, a symbol associated with the Indo-Aryans by early historians, has been found in large numbers over several Indus Valley Civilization sites. This is a symbol closely related to the Hindu religion (even to the present day), indicating continuity of the Indus Valley Civilization rather than a complete collapse or destruction. The discovery of Swastikas have put to question the theory of an Aryan invasion of Indian subcontinent.

A possible natural reason of the Indus Valley Civilization decline is connected with climate change. In 2600 B.C., the Indus Valley was green, forested, and full of wildlife. It was wetter, too; floods were a problem and appear, on more than one occasion, to have overwhelmed certain settlements. As a result, Indus civilization people supplemented their diet with hunting. By 1800 BC, the climate is known to have changed. It became significantly cooler and drier.

The crucial factor may have been the disappearance of substantial portions of the Ghaggar-Hakra river system. A tectonic event may have diverted the system's sources toward the Ganges Plain, though there is some uncertainty about the date of this event. Such a statement may seem dubious if one does not realize that the transition between the Indus and Gangetic plains amounts to a matter of inches. The region in which the river's waters formerly arose is known to be geologically active, and there is evidence of major tectonic events at the time the Indus civilization collapsed. Although this particular factor is speculative, and not generally accepted, the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, as with any other civilization, will have been due to a combination of a variety of reasons.

It is likely that the center of civilization moved from the drying Sarasvati river to the Sindhu (Indus) river during this time. The Sarasvati river theory hypothesises that the Rig Veda was composed before the peak of Indus Valley Civilization, which would render the Aryan invasion theory inapplicable. Like all Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda was passed on primarily in an oral fashion. Most researchers believe that Rig Veda was

composed around 1500 B.C., but many Ideologists agree that the scripture could possibly have been composed earlier than that, and passed on orally. The theory is supported by later compositions such as the Mahabharata, which mentions that the Sarasvati river ends in a desert (modern day Rajasthan area).

Kenoyer (1998) stated that in the course of the 2nd millennium B.C., remainders of the Indus Valley Civilization culture will have combined with that of other peoples, likely contributing to what eventually resulted in the rise of historical Hinduism. Like Hindus today, Indus civilization people seemed to have placed a high value on bathing and personal cleanliness. The houses of Mohenjo-Daro usually had a private well and bathing platforms were often near the well.

Unlike other ancient civilizations, the archaeological record of the Indus civilization provides practically no evidence of armies, kings, slaves, social conflict, prisons, and other oft-negative traits that we traditionally associate with early civilization, although this could simply be due to the sheer completeness of its collapse and subsequent disappearance.

Conclusion

The Harappan civilization is one of the most important civilization of the world. The rise and fall of this civilization rest on the environmental as well as linguistic factors. Languages used which were part of the culture of the people of this region have ancient roots. As the region was subject to a variety of languages, its vocabulary is also varied. As it was explained before, the language of Indus Valley or Harappa is not clearly identified. At each period the people of this region encountered different conditions under which the language had been changed. The changed language along with the old culture of the old language will provide variety and at meantime difficulty in language interpretation.

Linguistically, this region faces two directions: India - because the roots of its languages are Dravidian as well as Indo-Aryan; and the Middle East - because its scripts and vocabulary are Arabic and Persian.

The language mystery of the Harappan civilization still exists because the scripts which could be of help in language identification can not be deciphered.

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