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RISE AND FALL OF INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The theories regarding the origin of Indus Valley Civilization reflect the differences in interpretations among various archaeologists around the world. The difference in opinion is caused by the state of information available to archaeologists who advocated these theories. For e.g Mortimer Wheeler had suggested about the sudden emergence of this culture due to foreign influence but the thinkers of 20th century have rejected this theory and came up with the theory of indigenous-combination of various village settlements into Harappan Civilization.

Similarly the gradual fall of Harappan Civilization should not be attributed to one specific cause. The reasons like Aryan invasion, changes in the course of the river, decline in rainfall, tectonic changes, drying up of Ghaggar-Hakra region, alkaline soil and destruction of forests, epidemics etc did not suffice to the cause. But, can a civilization or culture come to an end? The end of Harappan Civilization means the end of its urban phase only. Archeological evidences proved that some of the sites were abandoned and the tradition of literacy, seals and sealings were lost. But at the same time some sites continued to exist and showed a remarkable stylish continuity from the mature Harappan phase.

My effort in this paper is to carefully and critically examine various archaeological interpretation (given by archaeologists) to solve the puzzle of the rise and fall of the most urbanized civilization of ancient world.

Keywords: Indus Valley Civilization, Mortimer Wheeler, Harappan Civilization, Aryan, Ghaggar-Hakra, seals, archaeologist.

ORIGIN

In 1968, Mortimer Wheeler said that the Indus Valley Civilization has little in common with the people which lived in these areas in the preceding period. As such the ideas came from outside, probably from Mesopotamia--“Ideas have wings”. This idea of Wheeler made Indus Civilization more or less a colony of Mesopotamian Civilization. But this theory had been rejected by most of the archaeologists. The view of the Wheeler was based on the linkages between the Sumerious and the Indus valley Civilization. The Gilgamesh in figure, Enkidin, the ball man and companion of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamian exploits, dockyards and terracotta imprints on seals and ships, segmented breads at Lothal resembling those of sea-fearing creton community in Mediterranean, reference to Indus basin as Meluha in Mesopotamian literary evidence were used to support his theory. Before the discovery of Sothi Culture by A. Ghosh in 1964, this theory of sudden origin of a mature urban civilization in Indus Valley was the most popular and well accepted view.

Marshal was the first who propounded that Harappan culture originated in Mesopotamia. He drew this conclusion on the basis of Mysinian pictographic and cylindrical seals from Mohan-jodaro. But there is other side of the coin too.

The basic features of Harappan civilization and Mesopotamian culture were quite different. Harappans have grid system of town planning and most of the towns have two parts---the lower eastern and higher western with criss-cross roads intersecting each other at right angles. Their houses were made of bricks--- sun-baked and fire-baked. The Harappans have efficient sewage and drainage system. They have made such deep drains that even an adult could run through it--- --relevant from point of view of flood waters being flushed out. The script is pictographic boustrophedon and is peculiar to the extent that it has not been deciphered. The Harappan people were the first to produce cotton and had an advanced and prosperous textile industry. They exported these textiles to Mesopotamia and other regions. Last but not the least is that, in the period of Akkad and during pre-Sargon era we find Harappan Culture in full bloom stage. Chronologically, Harappan mature stage comes earlier than that of Mesopotamian and thus cannot be recognized as the mother of the former.

The proponent of another view regarding the origin of Harappan civilization was Fairbairn. He has tried to compromise his stand between that of Wheeler and Alchin. According to him, Indus Valley civilization had local roots and it evolved indigenously but various stages of its evolution clearly demonstrate Iranian influence--- use of fire-altars and sun worship. But at the same time it must be said that the Harappan civilization achieved its characteristics indigenously; its elaboration may be the result of Iranian Influence. However, it cannot be said that its origin in any way divorced from the obvious line of development in Baluchistan and Afghanistan. On the present evidence it seems reasonable to assume that the Harappan civilization stemmed from the developing village complex characteristic of much of the Iran in third millennium before Christ. Apparently, economic advantages inherent in Indus Valley motivated the production of surpluses, the proliferation of population, the amplification and multiplication of non-farming specialists, and in turn, the improvement or elaboration of traits already possessed or received by that population.

However, new archaeological explorations and excavations of new sites have raised numerous doubts on this theory. It has now been argued that Harappan culture was wholly an indigenous one. It originated, developed and matured locally. The roots of Harappan culture can be seen in the agricultural Neolithic settlements of Mehargarh. The socio-economic changes which took place in 3rd millennium B.C were responsible for the transformation of villages into urban centers. Afghanistan was considered as the meeting point of all the civilizations of the world. In those days the weather of Afghanistan was wet---conducive for agriculture production, which in turn produced surplus of farm goods. This surplus formed the basis of trade between different villages across Indus and various villages of Afghanistan resulting in people to people contact and formation of civilization. In the later phase of Mesolithic Age, the climate of Afghanistan

started changing, it became dry, resulting in more rainfall in the eastern portion (areas around Indus River) and hence the migration of the communities towards more greener pastures (convergence theory). This convergence must have been seen primarily as a dynamic socio-economic process taking place on Indian soil and not as something planted from outside.

FALL

Around 1750 B.C the uniform culture of this great civilization broke up. What was the cause of this break-up? Several causes have been suggested for e.g Childe(1934) and Wheeler (1946) were of the view that the Aryans might have destroyed the civilization and on circumstantial evidences, Indra was convicted. The unburied skeletons lying in the streets of Mohanjodaro are very suggested by radiocarbon dates; envisage yet another possibility---even if a remote one. E.J.H Mackey Lambrick and Sir John Marshal suggested that the decline of Harappan civilization was mainly due to vagaries of river Indus. Marshal suggested that if the river was a beneficent river, it might equally become the author of desolation and ruin. B.K Thapar was of the view that environmental factors, including the behavior of rivers, climate and accessibility resources were largely responsible for the growth and maturity. Paradoxically, it was those very factors which became responsible for the weakening and collapse of the civilization. Vishnu Matre, W.A Fairservice and Kenneth A.R Kennedy blame the decline on the drying of riverbeds, increasing soil salinity and widespread deforestation. Robert Sharer, on the other hand, argued in 1979 that shifts in ancient trade routes caused Harappan cities to lose their key commercial role.

But all these theories do not provide the complete answers. It should be conceded that, for a widespread civilization like that of Indus neither a uniform nor a causative factor for its decay could be postulated. Hence it is generally agreed that the extinction of Indus civilization was not caused by a single dramatic event; it was instead, attributable to a combination of factors.

As far as Aryan invasion is concerned, one civilization attacks another in order to get profits. Aryans attacked the Harappan civilization when the latter was already in declining and how that Harappan people who were enterprising and having trade links with Mesopotamia did not know about the intentions of the Aryan invaders? What is curious however is that in some cases Indra and Agni were responsible for the annihilation of the cities. Why did the Aryans not settled in the cities which they occupy? The reason for regarding these places as evil can hardly be regarded as an attitude of the conquering people who had actually destroyed the cities. There is no substantial remaining of at least the metal parts of the chariots in various excavations. This is in striking contrasts to the evidence from Egypt where the new arrivals in their horse drawn chariots were depicted clearly in reliefs and engravings on stone. The theory of changing of the river course may also appear to be partly true. While some evidence of devastation by floods was to be found at Mohan-jo-daro and Lothal, there was no such evidence in respect of other cities, for example, Kalibangan. Also, as the Indus river was known to be violent and unpredictable, how could the Harappans have been taken unawares? They must have always been prepared to move out when it began flooding.

In Indus Valley civilization, numerous small settlements grew beyond their natural limits, leading to overuse and mismanagement of natural resources. Water requirements of Harappan settlements were conditioned by the vagaries of Indus, erratic rainfall and inexorable drying-up of the area main water source and so the Indus Valley civilization was forced to survive on irrigation. Ironically, the source for survival may have become the cause for destruction as lift-irrigation may have resulted in an over-reaching of its ecological limits. Though the Sutlej has changed the course slightly since the Harappans, it was known even then to be difficult to control, not useful for irrigation and was mainly used for trade purposes.

But discussing too much on the reasons of the decline of this great civilization is a wrong assumption. It simply meant the end of the urban phase. In fact in the areas of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana etc vibrant agricultural communities emerged in larger numbers in the subsequent periods. Thus from the regional perspective the period succeeding the urban phase can be treated as one of flourishing agricultural communities. That is why we always talk about cultural change, regional migrations and modification of intergrated systems of settlements and subsistence. In Sind, the Harappan towns like Amri and Chandudaro etc. people started using a slightly different kind of pottery called Jhukar pottery and new artifacts like cloth fastening pins of copper and buttons seals without inscriptions. In the areas east of Indus in Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan several sites having distinct pottery traditions have been found. The sites of Mitathal, Bara, Ropar and Siswal are well known. In most of the sites people continued to live in same areas in the post urban phase. These places had distinctive pottery traditions continued along with Harappan pottery. In Kutch and Saurashtra, even during the urban phase, they had local ceramic tradition co-existing with the Harappan pottery. Some sites like Rangpur became more prosperous in subsequent phases. They were using potteries called the Lustrous Red Ware

REALITY CHECK

The end of the cities did not mean the end of the Harappan tradition. It might mean the end of the centralized decision making in policy and economy. The folk cultures that survived would have definitely retained the religious tradition. Possibly, the priestly groups of the Indus Civilization merged into the Aryan communities. The folk communities would have the literate urban tradition emerged in early India; it absorbed elements of the folk culture. That is why, the Pasupati, mother goddess (Parvati) and phallic worship cults seem to have come down to us from the Indus traditions. Similarly, the evidence of fire worship in Kalibangan is interesting because it was the most important ingredient of the Vedic ritual.

Many domestic aspects like house plans, disposition of water supply, attention to bathing survived in the settlements. The cults of sacred places, rivers or trees, sacred animals and symbols of myths show a distinct continuity in the later phases of history. The techniques of making potter's wheel, carts and boats in modern India also are similar to those of Harappa. So we can say that the Harappan civilization lives in all of us.

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