

Chapter Four

Religion of India

“Early Civilisations of the Northwest”

Objectives:

1. Understand the progression of religion in India from the Indus Valley civilizations to Hinduism
2. List other early cities of the Indus Valley discovered after 1958
3. Explain the evolution of the Indus civilization
4. Explain what conclusions can be derived about the Indus civilization from evidence found in the great cities.

EARLY CIVILISATIONS OF THE NORTHWEST

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PREHISTORY AND THE INDUS CIVILISATION

When the great cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were discovered in the 1920s the history of the Indian subcontinent attained a new dimension. The discovery of these centres of the early Indus civilisation was a major achievement of archaeology. Before these centres were known, the Indo-Aryans were regarded as the creators of the first early culture of the subcontinent. They were supposed to have come down to the Indian plains in the second millennium BC. But the great cities of the Indus civilisation proved to be much older, reaching back into the third and fourth millennia. After ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, this Indus civilisation emerged as the third major early civilisation of mankind.

Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro show a surprising similarity although they were separated by about 350 miles. In each city the archaeologists found an acropolis and a lower city, each fortified separately. The acropolis, situated to the west of each city and raised on an artificial mound made of bricks, contained large assembly halls and edifices which were obviously constructed for religious cults. In Mohenjo-Daro there was a 'Great Bath' (39 by 23 feet, with a depth of 8 feet) at the centre of the acropolis which may have been used for ritual purposes. This bath was connected to an elaborate water supply system and sewers. To the east of this bath there was a big building (about 230 by 78 feet) which is thought to have been a palace either of a king or of a high priest.

A special feature of each of these cities were large platforms which have been interpreted by the excavators as the foundations of granaries. In Mohenjo-Daro it was situated in the acropolis; in Harappa it was immediately adjacent to it. In Mohenjo-Daro this architectural complex, constructed next to the Great Bath, is still particularly impressive. Its foundation, running east to west, was 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. On this foundation were 27 compartments in three rows. The 15-foot walls of these are still extant. These compartments were very well ventilated and, in case they were used as granaries, they could have been filled from outside

the acropolis. At Harappa there were some small houses, assumed to be those of workers or slaves, and a large open space between the acropolis and these buildings.

The big lower cities were divided into rectangular areas. In Mohenjo-Daro there were nine such areas, each about 1,200 by 800 feet. Broad main streets, about 30 feet wide, separated these parts of the city from each other. All the houses were connected directly to the excellent sewage system which ran through all the numerous small alleys. Many houses had a spacious interior courtyard and private wells. All houses were built with standardised bricks. The width of each brick was twice as much as its height and its length twice as large as its width.

But it was not only this excellent city planning which impressed the archaeologists, they also found some interesting sculptures and thousands of well-carved seals made of steatite. These seals show many figures and symbols of the religious life of the people of this early culture. There are tree deities among them and there is the famous so-called 'Proto-Shiva' who is seated in the typical pose of a meditating man. He has three heads, an erect phallus, and is surrounded by animals which were also worshipped by the Hindus of a later age. These seals also show evidence of a script which has not yet been deciphered.



*Figure 1.1 Mohenjo Daro, the so-called 'Priest King', late third millennium BC
(Courtesy of Georg Helmes, Aachen)*

Both cities shared a uniform system of weights and measures based on binary numbers and the decimal system. Articles made of copper and ornaments with precious stones show that there was a flourishing international trade. More evidence for this international trade emerged when seals of the Indus culture were found in Mesopotamia and other seals which could be traced to Mesopotamia were discovered in the cities on the Indus.

Before indigenous sites of earlier stages of the Indus civilisation were excavated it was believed that Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were merely outposts of the Mesopotamian civilisation, either constructed by migrants or at least designed according to their specifications. These speculations were strengthened by the mention in Mesopotamian sources of countries such as Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha. Dilmun has been identified as Bahrain and Magan seems to be identical with present Oman. Meluhha may have referred to the Indus valley from where Mesopotamia obtained wood, copper, gold, silver, carnelian and cotton.

In analogy to the Mesopotamian precedent, the Indus culture was thought to be based on a theocratic state whose twin capitals Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro obviously showed the traces of a highly centralised organisation. Scholars were also fairly sure of the reasons for the sudden decline of these cities since scattered skeletons which showed traces of violent death were found in the uppermost strata of Mohenjo-Daro. It appeared that men, women and children had been exterminated by conquerors in a 'last massacre'. The conquerors were assumed to be the Aryans who invaded India around the middle of the second millennium BC. Their warrior god, Indra, was, after all, praised as a breaker of forts in many Vedic hymns.

However, after the Second World War, intensive archaeological research in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India greatly enhanced our knowledge of the historical evolution and the spatial extension of the Indus civilisation (see Map 1.1). Earlier assessments of the rise and fall of this civilisation had to be revised. The new excavations showed that this civilisation, at its height early in the late third millennium BC, had encompassed an area larger than western Europe.

In the Indus valley, other important cities of this civilisation, such as Kot Diji to the east of Mohenjo-Daro and Amri in the Dadu District on the lower Indus, were discovered in the years after 1958. In Kathiawar and on the coast of Gujarat similar centres were traced. Thus in 1954 Lothal was excavated south of Ahmadabad. It is claimed that Lothal was a major port of this period. Another 100 miles further south Mahwan was also identified in 1967 as a site of the Indus civilisation. It is located close to Surat and so far marks, together with Daimabad in the Ahmadnagar District of Maharashtra, the southernmost extension of this culture. The spread of the Indus civilisation to the east was documented by the 1961 excavations at Kalibangan in Rajasthan about 200 miles west of Delhi. However,



Map 1.1 Indus civilisation

Alamgirpur, in Meerut District in the centre of the Ganga–Yamuna Doab, is considered to mark the farthest extension to the east of this culture. In the north, Rupar in the foothills of the Himalayas is the farthest outpost which is known in India. In the west, traces of this civilisation were found in Baluchistan close to the border of present Iran at Sutkagen Dor. This was probably a trading centre on the route connecting the Indus valley with Mesopotamia. Afghanistan also has its share of Indus civilisation sites. This country was known for its lapis lazuli which was coveted everywhere even in those early times. At Mundigak near Kandahar a palace was excavated which has an impressive façade decorated with pillars. This site, probably one of the earliest settlements in the entire region, is thought to be an outpost of the Indus civilisation. Another one was found more recently further to the north at Shortugai on the Amu Darya.

This amazing extension of our knowledge about the spatial spread of the Indus civilisation was accompanied by an equally successful exploration of its history. Earlier strata of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa as well as of Kalibangan, Amri and Kot Diji were excavated in a second round of archaeological research. In this way continuous sequence of strata, showing the gradual development to the high standard of the full-fledged Indus

civilisation, was established. These strata have been named Pre-Harappan, Early Harappan, Mature Harappan and Late Harappan. The most important result of this research is the clear proof of the long-term indigenous evolution of this civilisation which obviously began on the periphery of the Indus valley in the hills of eastern Baluchistan and then extended into the plains. There were certainly connections with Mesopotamia, but the earlier hypothesis that the Indus civilisation was merely an extension of Mesopotamian civilisation had to be rejected.