



The Economic Opulence And Stratification During Indus Valley Civilization: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The economic opulence and stratification during Indus Valley Civilization is so much enormously baffling and enigmatic that it requires a thorough exploratory study to examine the implications and ramifications associated with the subject concerned. The present Paper attempts to illuminate beyond the conventional thinking patterns by analysing the mutual interdependence and crucial linkages between several determining factors which ultimately leads to urbanization, stratification and the economic prosperity of unprecedented levels during proto-historic period in Indian subcontinent. Although there is no mutual consensus among the scholars because the Boustrophedon method written Indus Script has not yet been deciphered. However the archaeological remains, artefacts, secondary data concerning with the materialistic outlooks and fundamental researches of prominent importance significantly contribute to acquire the penetrating insights to find those elements which influenced the socio-economic structure of this great civilization.

Keywords: Economic opulence, Stratification, Indus Valley Civilization.

1. Introduction

The Indus Civilization represents the earliest manifestation of urban development in the plains of the Indus Valley and its extension along the Arabian sea-coast. (A H Dani and B K

Thapar, UNESCO, 1996). The Indus Valley Tradition refers to the long cultural trajectory leading to the first urban state level society in South Asia (Kenoyer 1991a; J.G. Shaffer 1992). This trajectory is divided into four Eras, beginning with the Early Food Producing Era (c.7000-5500 BC), when domestic plants and animals are first exploited by semi-sedentary communities in the Indus Valley region. The Regionalization Era (5500-2600 BC), is a period of cultural development on a regional scale with the emergence of distinctive artefact styles, burial practices, and settlement organization. At the site of Harappa there is new evidence suggesting the emergence of an Early Indus State around 2800 BC, but the major urban phase begins around 2600 BC during the Harappan Phase of the Integration Era (Kenoyer 1994a; Meadow and Kenoyer 1999). A great deal of research has been done on various aspects of the Indus Civilization since its discovery fifty years ago, but much remains to be accomplished to enhance our understanding of this highly developed, fully urbanized and most extensive civilization of South Asia. During the last fifty years, most research in the Indus Valley proper, and the adjoining Indian territory, was oriented towards further elaboration of certain specific aspects of the Indus Civilization. With new discoveries, the interest of scholars has been further intensified and they are now offering fresh interpretations of both old and new data, and are asking many new questions about cultural and chronological reconstructions. In this process of healthy debate, we may agree or disagree with any or none of the views expressed, but it is all indicative of the world-wide interest which the Indus Civilization has aroused. (M. Rafique Mughal).



2. Crucial Insights Through Prominent Findings

Different types of Pottery and its uses, several types of jewellery items such as bangles, necklace, ornaments, diversified types of beads, terracotta seals etc throw light on the socio-economic life of Indus people. During the Early Harappan Phase increasing social stratification is reflected in the overall hierarchy of settlement sizes (Mughal 1982, 1990) and the internal divisions of sites into neighbourhoods with localized craft activities. Perhaps

most important is the creation of massive walls and gateways to protect the settlements and control movement into and out of the occupation areas (Kenoyer 1991a, 1991b).

During the Early Harappan Phase this mechanism for creating wealth items appears to have become well established at Harappa and a similar process was probably going on at other major settlements such as Nausharo (J F Jarrige 1988, 1990), RehmanDheri, and Mohenjodaro. More specifically, the basic types of ornaments associated with wealth and stratification that begin to emerge in the Early Harappan Phase set the foundation for the creation of unique forms of wealth that were necessary to reinforce the socioeconomic stratification of the Harappan Phase as seen in the Indus State. (Kenoyer 2000)

During the Harappan Phase (2600-1900 BC), the cities of Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Dholavira, Ganweriwala, and Rakhigarhi appear to have been relatively independent city-states that would have had direct control over a limited hinterland .The absence of centralized palaces or temples suggests that these cities were not organized as monarchies or theocratic city-states, but were probably more similar to the republics and oligarchies of the Early Historic Period (Kenoyer 1994a, 1997b). Rulers or dominant elites in the various cities would have included traders and merchants, ritual specialists, and individuals who controlled subsistence resources. The elites at each of the major cities appear to have shared a common ideology and economic system as represented by symbolic objects such as seals, ornaments, pottery, and other artefacts. Occupational specialists and service communities (such as sweepers, porters, etc), who appear to have been organized in loosely stratified groups, were also actively integrated into the overall ideology and contributed to its legitimation through the continued production of symbolic objects and wealth items that were used by the different social classes. In contrast to the large cities, the rural settlements may have been less rigidly

stratified and segregated, and would have included larger numbers of farmers, pastoralists, fishers, miners, hunters, and gatherers, etc. The precise degree of political integration probably fluctuated over time, but trade and exchange of important socio-ritual status items demonstrates that the cities and villages were economically integrated, and therefore appear to be integrated on a general ideological level as well. (Kenoyer 2000). Other indicators of social stratification are seen in the creation of new styles of wealth indicators which include decorated pottery, ornaments, metal tools, and symbolic objects such as seals. Of central importance is the fact that many of the same basic styles of objects were being created in materials of different relative value (as defined above). Presumably this pattern reflects socioeconomic stratification and some degree of ideological integration. It has been possible to identify specific examples of the type of artefacts that were being developed into symbols of status and wealth during the Early Harappan Phase. Some of these objects, such as painted pottery motifs, beads, bangles, and carved seals may also have served as symbols of ethnic and/or ideological identity. (Kenoyer 2000). All seals can be considered wealth indicators because of their use in the identification of individuals or commodities, but they also served as symbols of ideology and legitimation. The use of intaglio seals appears to have been limited to a relatively small proportion of the population who would have included merchants or political administrators, and in some cases possibly ritual elites. Current research at Harappa has demonstrated that although discarded seals became distributed throughout the settlements, the people who controlled and used the seals were probably living in distinct areas of the cities (Dales and Kenoyer 1990).

Regardless of the actual meaning of seals, we can suggest that the visual impact of a seal worn openly by an individual or the impression of a seal on a commodity, would serve to reinforce the social and economic hierarchy of the society. Furthermore, the ritual symbolism

of the animal or geometric designs might serve to legitimize the social order. The presence of seals throughout the extent of the Indus State indicates that the individuals who used them were widespread and were present at both large urban centers as well as at smaller villages and outposts. This widespread presence of administrative elites or literate merchants may indicate an important mechanism that was used to support the Indus State. The lack of evidence for overt military coercion would indicate that the state was legitimized primarily by economic and/or ritual coercion. (Kenoyer 2000). The Allchins provide the conventional view that “there are many indications that the Mature Indus period urban society had evolved considerable social stratification and division” (Allchin and Allchin 1982: 222-223).

3. Unravelling The Mysteries

The overall decrease in the heterogeneity or variability of painted pottery designs and the general uniformity of other symbolic objects such as seals and weights probably indicates ideological integration. On the other hand, the increase in variability of ornament styles and raw materials could be the result of several factors, such as diversification of subsistence practices, development of new technologies, and fragmentation and agglomeration of social groups, all of which contributed to the establishment of more stratified social organization. Preliminary comparisons between Indus sites in different geographical regions suggests that there are distinctive regional patterns in certain artefact categories, such as pottery (Dales and Kenoyer 1986) and Seals (Rissman 1989), but due to limitations of space it is possible to discuss only a few of the most important categories of artefacts that reflect the wealth and socioeconomic hierarchies of the Harappan Phase. Distinctive seals with Indus script and cubical stone weights represent the important new types of objects that reflect wealth and order. Pottery and ornaments provide examples of socioeconomic stratification, ideological integration, and legitimation. (Kenoyer 2000). With the rise of the Indus cities around 2600

BC, technology and crafts appear to have become an essential mechanism for creating unique wealth objects to distinguish socioeconomic classes and reinforce the hierarchy of these classes in an urban context. Many of these wealth objects have strong ideological associations and appear to have been used as symbols that served both to unite as well as to differentiate socioeconomic classes living in the cities (Vidale 1989a; Kenoyer 1992a; Bhan et al. 1994).

The Indus weight system is one of the most highly standardized weight systems in prehistory (Marshall 1931). The use of cubical stone weights can be seen as an economic indicator of wealth and a symbol of ideology regarding the economic systems of the Indus State. In the absence of evidence for military coercion, the economic system was most probably supported by a common ritual ideology that legitimized the enforcement of such rigid standards. The ideology that legitimized economic coercion appears to have been reinforced through a wide range of symbols that are found distributed throughout most Indus sites and were apparently accepted and used by all segments of the population. Of these, pottery vessels and ornaments are the most easily identified and were used by numerous different hierarchical segments of the population, reflecting the vertical integration of the ideology. (Kenoyer 2000)

Indus society was highly stratified as is evident by the sizes of houses- from coolie barracks to 30- roomed houses. Stratification reveals the Sophistication of the elite section and economic patterns of the society. During the Harappan Phase, new styles of bangles and beads were created using different raw materials and in many cases different technologies. Many of the same basic styles of beads and bangles were made with raw materials or technologies of relatively different values. In contrast with painted pottery, which reflects horizontal integration, Harappan phase ornaments reflect the distribution of identical, shared

symbols along the vertical socioeconomic axis. At the same time that these shared symbols reinforce the shared ideology through symbols, the ornaments have different values due to the nature of the raw material or technology. Such ornaments reinforce the stratification of Indus society by the fact that only certain classes of merchants or land owners could afford beads of high value. (Kenoyer 2000). Although many of the basic bead types are found distributed horizontally among many different sizes of settlements throughout the Indus Valley, there is a greater range of raw materials and a higher degree of stylistic variation within the larger urban settlements of Mohenjodaro and Harappa (Kenoyer 1992b), or specialized settlements such as Chanhudaro (Vidale 1989a). This would suggest that the larger urban centers contained a more diverse set of consumers representing a greater number of social strata than was present at rural settlements. Current studies at Harappa are focused on determining if these different communities lived in different areas of the city or in distinct neighbourhoods. (Kenoyer 2000) The presence of stylistically similar private ornaments and amulets in widely distributed settlements is an important indicator of a shared ideology among elite communities that helps to define the general order of the social hierarchy and also integrate the society. These examples of both private and public ornaments illustrate the hierarchical use of wealth items which in turn reflect the stratification and social order of Indus society. (Kenoyer 2000) MICHAEL JANSEN has written in the paper, "Mohenjo-Daro, city of the Indus Valley" --- "Today, one may be critical of the archaeological methods used at that time. Nonetheless, results were obtained over the entire site, culminating in the publication of two lengthy reports which are still our main source of reference material. One of the main criticisms which may be made concerning the methods then used is the lack of interest in any detailed study of stratigraphy; that is, the chronological succession of different layers of strata representing different periods of occupation. This method was introduced and applied on a wide scale only much later by Sir

Mortimer Wheeler, the last Director of Archaeology in India, who excavated at Mohenjo-Daro in 1950. At Mohenjo-Daro excavations continued until 1964, but work carried out since the 1920s has not yet been published. The findings of Mortimer Wheeler and George Dales, the last archaeologists to excavate the site, have not yet been published.

4. Conclusion

The total geographical area over which this civilisation flourished is more than 20 times of the area of the Egyptian civilisation and more than 12 times of the area of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations combined. It covers an area of about 12,99,600 sq.km. These settlements are mostly located on river banks. The presence of the Indus river facilitated trade and transport. Inland trade was with Rajasthan, Kashmir and southern and eastern India. The cities undoubtedly traded with the village cultures of Baluchistan where exports of the Harappan culture have been traced. Harappan trade links extended to the cities of Mesopotamia where some two dozen Harappan seals have been discovered. From the Indus territory cylinder seals of Mesopotamian origin have been found. The archaeological evidence of trade with West Asia is thus scant. But Mesopotamian literature speaks of merchants of Ur in Mesopotamia as carrying on trade with foreign countries. The prevalence of close contact with Mesopotamia is also proved by other evidence. The Harappans practised navigation on the coast of the Arabian sea, the trade outposts being scattered from the Gulf of Cambay to Sutkagendor on the Makran coast. The route of communication was by both land and sea. The present exploratory paper illuminates the crucial elements of domino effect which led to the economic opulence and stratification. The paper has opened new vistas and nexus to see a new horizon beyond the threshold.

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