

*Research Article*

## Some Important Aspects in the Social and Cultural Life of Indus Valley Civilization

**Dr. Deepak Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of History, B.S.S. College, Supaul, Bihar, India

**Corresponding Author:** \* Dr. Deepak Kumar

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### Abstract

Approximately 4,500 years prior to the modern era definitely called great Indus valley civilization existed on the Indian subcontinent. That civilization not only contributed to the development of its own sophisticated urban infrastructure, social order, and rich culture, but also paved the way for the evolution of civilised societies across the globe. This civilization spanned the region encompassing present-day India, Pakistan and Afghanistan; when compared to its contemporaries, it was remarkably advanced for its time. It is considered truly unique because—despite operating with limited resources (specifically, it is believed that they have made minimal use of iron)—it remained far ahead of its era. Serving as a beacon of excellence, this civilization propelled its work culture forward and demonstrated exceptional standards across Administrative, Political, Cultural, and religious spheres. What is needed today is to intensify the exploration of this magnificent civilization so that its legacy and influence may reach and inspire a wider audience.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) was a Bronze Age civilization (3300–1300 BCE; mature period 2600–1900 BCE) that was located in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent, consisting of what is now mainly present-day Pakistan and northwest India. Flourishing around the Indus River Basin, the civilization extended east into the Ghaggar-Hakra River valley and the upper reaches Ganges-Yamuna Doab; it extended west to the Makran coast of Balochistan, north to northeastern Afghanistan and south to Daimabad in Maharashtra. The civilization was spread over some 1,260,000 km<sup>2</sup>, making it the largest ancient civilization. The Indus Valley is one of the world's earliest urban civilizations, along with its contemporaries, Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. At its peak, the Indus Civilization may have had a population of well over five million. Inhabitants of the ancient Indus river valley developed new techniques in handicraft (carnelian products, seal carving) and metallurgy (copper, bronze, lead, and tin). The civilization is noted for its cities built of brick, roadside drainage system, and multistoried houses.

The Indus Valley Civilization is also known as the Harappan Civilization, as the first of its cities to be unearthed was located at Harappa, excavated in the 1920s in what was at the time the Punjab province of British India (now in Pakistan). Excavation of Harappan sites has been ongoing since 1920, with important breakthroughs occurring as recently as 1999. There were earlier and later cultures, often called Early Harappan and Late Harappan, in the same area of the Harappan Civilization. The Harappan civilization is sometimes called the Mature Harappan culture to distinguish it from these cultures. Up to 1999, over 1,056 cities and settlements have been found, out of which 96 have been excavated, mainly in the general region of the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra river and its tributaries. Among the settlements were the major urban centres of Harappa, Lothal, Mohenjo-daro (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Dholavira, Kalibanga, and Rakhigarhi.

The Harappan language is not directly attested and its affiliation is uncertain since the Indus script remains undeciphered. A relationship with the Dravidian or Elamo-Dravidian language family is favored by a section of scholars. The ruins of Harappa were first described in 1842 by Charles Masson in his *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, and the Punjab*. Around 1800 BCE, signs of a gradual decline began to emerge, and by around 1700 BCE, most of the cities were abandoned. Today, many scholars believe that the collapse of the Indus Civilization was caused by drought and a decline in trade with Egypt and Mesopotamia.

## 2. Town Planning and Urban Architecture: -

One of the most remarkable features of the Indus Valley Civilization was its extraordinarily planned urban infrastructure. The cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro reveal a level of civic planning that was unparalleled in the ancient world. Streets were laid out in a grid pattern, running north-south and east-west, dividing the cities into well-defined blocks. This systematic urban layout indicates the presence of a strong central authority that oversaw the design and construction of these cities.

The buildings were constructed primarily of standardized, kiln-fired bricks, which were uniform in size across all major Harappan cities. Houses were generally built around a central courtyard and had flat roofs. Multi-storied structures were common in larger cities. Notably, most houses had private wells and bathrooms connected to a sophisticated drainage system. The drainage network, which ran beneath the streets, was arguably the most advanced of any ancient civilization, featuring covered brick drains with inspection holes to allow cleaning.

The cities were divided into two parts: the Citadel, which was a raised platform containing public buildings, granaries, and assembly halls; and the Lower Town, which was densely populated with residential and commercial structures. The Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro, a large public water tank built with watertight bricks and surrounded by a colonnade, is considered one of the earliest examples of a public water structure and likely served ritual or ceremonial purposes. Similarly, massive granaries discovered at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro indicate sophisticated food storage and distribution systems.

## 3. Social Life and Social Structure

The social organization of the Indus Valley Civilization remains a subject of scholarly debate due to the undeciphered nature of its script. However, archaeological evidence offers important clues about its social structure. The relatively uniform size of houses and the absence of large royal palaces or temples suggest that Harappan society may have been comparatively egalitarian compared to contemporary civilizations like Mesopotamia and Egypt, where stark hierarchies were reflected in monumental structures dedicated to kings and gods.

Despite this apparent equality, social differentiation did exist. Some houses were significantly larger than others, and the discovery of luxury items such as ornaments made of gold, silver, carnelian beads, and semi-precious stones indicates the presence of a wealthy merchant or elite class. The existence of craft specialists—potters, weavers, metalworkers, bead makers, and seal engravers—points to an occupational division within society. Artisans likely formed a skilled middle class that served both local consumers and distant trade partners.

The role of women in Harappan society appears to have been significant. Numerous terracotta figurines of females, often referred to as 'Mother Goddess' figures, have been found across Harappan sites. These suggest that women held an important religious and social role in the community. Evidence also indicates that families were the basic social unit, and household goods found in residential areas reflect a stable domestic life with access to cooking utensils, storage vessels, and personal ornaments.

Children's toys—including small carts, whistles shaped like birds, and miniature animals—have been excavated from various sites, revealing that childhood was recognized as a distinct phase of life with its own cultural expressions. The presence of these objects suggests a society that valued play and creative development. Overall, the social life of the Indus Valley people appears to have been organized, prosperous, and culturally rich.

#### 4. Cultural Life: Arts, Crafts, and Script

The cultural achievements of the Indus Valley Civilization were remarkable and diverse. Harappan artisans were highly skilled in a variety of crafts, including pottery, bead making, seal engraving, weaving, and metallurgy. Harappan pottery, typically wheel-made and painted with geometric and animal motifs in black on a red background, reflects both artistic sensibility and technical mastery. The pottery was standardized in form but varied in decorative patterns, suggesting regional identities within a shared cultural framework.

The Indus seals are among the most iconic cultural artifacts of this civilization. These small, square or rectangular objects—made of steatite—were carved with intricate animal figures (such as the unicorn, bull, rhinoceros, and elephant) and inscriptions in the Indus script. The seals were likely used for commercial or administrative purposes, perhaps to mark ownership or authenticate trade goods. The precision and artistry of the seal engravings reveal a sophisticated aesthetic tradition.

The Indus script, consisting of approximately 400 to 600 distinct signs, has not yet been deciphered despite numerous scholarly attempts. The script appears on seals, tablets, pottery, and metal objects. It was likely a logosyllabic system, combining logograms and phonetic signs. The script's undeciphered status remains one of the greatest mysteries of ancient history and continues to challenge linguists and archaeologists worldwide.

Jewelry-making was another important cultural expression. Ornaments crafted from gold, silver, copper, ivory, shell, and semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli, agate, and carnelian have been discovered in abundance. The Dancing Girl, a small bronze figurine found at Mohenjo-daro, is one of the most celebrated artistic achievements of the Harappan civilization. It depicts a young woman in a confident stance, suggesting the presence of dance and performance arts in social and cultural life. Textiles were also an important part of Harappan culture. Evidence of cotton cultivation and the use of a spindle for weaving has been found at various sites. India is widely credited as the first civilization to cultivate and weave cotton, and this tradition appears to have originated in the Indus Valley. The dyeing of fabric, the use of multiple colors, and the depiction of garments on figurines all suggest a sophisticated textile culture.

#### 5. Religious Life

The religious practices of the Indus Valley people are inferred largely from archaeological evidence, as no religious texts from this civilization have been found. The dominant religious symbols and artifacts suggest a complex spiritual life that may have included the worship of nature, animals, and a Mother Goddess figure. The widespread discovery of terracotta female figurines, often with elaborate headdresses and jewelry, is generally interpreted as evidence for the worship of a fertility or earth goddess.

The Pashupati Seal, discovered at Mohenjo-daro, is one of the most discussed religious artifacts of the Harappan civilization. It depicts a seated figure surrounded by animals—an elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, and buffalo—in what appears to be a meditative or yogic posture. Many scholars identify this figure as a proto-Shiva or a lord of animals, suggesting early origins of concepts that would later become central to Hinduism. This

connection implies a degree of religious continuity between the Indus Valley Civilization and later Indian religious traditions.

Fire altars discovered at sites such as Kalibangan and Lothal indicate that fire worship or ritual sacrifice may have been practiced. These altars, built of brick and arranged in rows, were likely used for communal religious ceremonies. The Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro is also believed to have had ritual significance, possibly serving as a place for ceremonial bathing similar to later Hindu traditions. Trees, particularly the pipal (fig tree), appear on seals and may have been objects of veneration, as the pipal is still considered sacred in Indian religious traditions today.

Animal worship was also prominent. Bulls, serpents, and composite mythological creatures appear frequently on seals and pottery. The unicorn—a mythological animal depicted on the most common type of Harappan seal—may have been a religious or totemic symbol. Overall, Harappan religion appears to have been closely connected to nature, fertility, and a reverence for living beings, forming a spiritual foundation that would influence later South Asian religious systems.

#### 6. Trade and Economic Life

Trade was a vital component of the Indus Valley Civilization's economy, operating at both local and international levels. The civilization maintained extensive trade networks with Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), the Persian Gulf region, Central Asia, and possibly ancient Egypt. Harappan merchants exported goods such as cotton textiles, pottery, carnelian beads, copper and bronze objects, ivory, and timber. In return, they imported raw materials including gold, silver, tin, lapis lazuli, and precious stones.

Evidence of this long-distance trade is found in Mesopotamian texts that refer to merchants from 'Meluhha'—widely identified by scholars as the Indus Valley region. Harappan artifacts have been discovered in Mesopotamian archaeological sites, while Mesopotamian items have been found in Indus Valley excavations. The port city of Lothal, located in present-day Gujarat, India, had a well-constructed brick dockyard, suggesting that maritime trade was a significant aspect of the Harappan economy.

The Indus people used standardized weights and measures for trade, an indication of a regulated economy. Stone weights conforming to a binary system (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64) have been found across Harappan sites, suggesting a uniform system of measurement across the civilization. This standardization was essential for fair commercial transactions and reflects the administrative sophistication of the Harappan state. The seals, likely used as markers of identity or ownership, also played an important role in regulating trade.

Internally, the Harappan economy was supported by agriculture. The civilization cultivated wheat, barley, rice, cotton, sesame, and mustard. Irrigation systems were developed to support agriculture in the semi-arid regions of the Indus plain. Animal husbandry was also practiced, with domesticated animals including cattle, sheep, goats, and possibly elephants. The combination of surplus agricultural production, skilled craftsmanship, and active trade made the Harappan economy one of the most dynamic of the ancient world.

## CONCLUSION

It can be stated with certainty that this civilization met the highest global standards of its time; through its modernization and urbanization, it established a renowned reputation not only across the entire world but also throughout the Indian subcontinent. The social and cultural life of the Indus Valley people was distinguished by remarkable achievements in urban planning, social organization, artistic expression, religious practice, and economic activity. Their sophisticated drainage systems, standardized weights and measures, advanced metallurgy, and long-distance trade networks reflect a civilization that was both practically efficient and culturally vibrant.

It is a direct result of the assimilation of this advanced and magnificent civilization that India, even today, continues to uphold its legacy. Indeed, whenever examples of excellence are cited, this advanced civilization is invariably the first reference point. If one were to discuss social, cultural, political, religious, or medical standards, no other civilization in the entire world is regarded as a comparable exemplar. There is a pressing need to undertake more extensive excavations of this vast civilization and to diligently preserve its ideals, so that future generations may continue to draw inspiration from this extraordinary chapter of human history.

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### About the Corresponding Author



**Dr. Deepak Kumar** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at B.S.S College, Bihar, India. He is engaged in teaching and historical research, with academic interests in Indian history, socio-cultural studies, and heritage studies. He actively contributes to higher education through research, scholarly activities, and student mentorship.