

Origin of Harappan Civilization

I. Introduction

The grand Indus Valley Civilization, which flourished approximately between 3200 BCE and 1900 BCE, marks one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the 20th century. Unearthed in 1921, it extended Indian history by nearly 1500 years beyond the Vedic period, positioning the subcontinent among the four major cradles of ancient civilization, alongside Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China.

What distinguishes the Harappan Civilization is its distinct urban character. To comprehend its urbanism, it is essential to understand what constitutes an urban civilization. According to V. Gordon Childe, urbanization is marked by ten-fold criteria: large and dense settlements, concentration of wealth, monumental architecture, writing, specialized crafts, scientific knowledge, long-distance trade, social stratification, and political organization based on residence rather than kinship. While this model may not perfectly fit all civilizations, the Harappan urban complex generally aligns with it.

II. Key features

Key features reflecting Harappan urbanism include:

- Occupational diversification and social stratification
- Standardized and mass-produced crafts and tools
- Uniform pottery styles and production techniques
- Extensive use of seals, script, standardized weights and measures
- Advanced town planning with drainage systems, sanitation, and planned housing
- Presence of granaries and public architecture

III. Theories of Origin

Scholars have proposed various theories to explain the origin of these urban characteristics:

1. Outside Influence (Diffusionist or Foreign Origin Theory)

Proponents: Mortimer Wheeler, D.H. Gordon, E.J.H. Mackay

Argument: These scholars argue that urbanism was introduced by contact with or migration from Mesopotamia and Sumeria, which had earlier urban centres. Wheeler, in particular, suggested the migration of ideas rather than people.

Criticism:

- Differences between Mesopotamian and Harappan features are too significant to support this theory.

- The scripts are entirely different (Mesopotamian cuneiform has been deciphered; Harappan script has not).
- Harappan grid-pattern town planning is absent in Mesopotamia.
- Mesopotamia had an elaborate canal system, unlike IVC.
- Religious structures differ fundamentally.
- Seals vary in shape and symbolism.

2. Sudden Origin (Aryan Theory)

Proponents: S.R. Roy, T.R. Ramachandra, K.V. Shastri

Argument: This theory claims that the Aryans, upon invading and settling near the Indus Valley, established urbanism.

Criticism:

- The Vedic and Harappan cultures differ drastically:
- Harappan culture was urban and trade-centric, while Vedic culture was rural and pastoral.
- Harappans were sedentary and community-based; Vedic people were largely nomadic and tribal.
- Harappans practiced icon worship; Vedic people worshipped nature deities.
- Harappans had sophisticated city planning; Vedic settlements lacked such features.
- Harappans had a script; Vedic people relied on oral traditions.
- Harappans were unaware of iron; Aryans later used various metals.
- Harappans used cotton; Vedic people used wool.
- Burial vs. cremation; different pottery styles and architectural practices.

3. Gradual Evolution (Indigenous Origin or Cultural Evolution Theory)

Proponents: A. Ghosh, M.R. Mughal, Fairservis

Argument: Urbanization was an indigenous development rooted in the gradual socio-economic evolution of local farming communities.

Explanation:

- Settled agriculture began in Baluchistan as early as the 7th millennium BCE.
- The cultural phase leading to Harappan urbanism is referred to as the Pre-Harappan or Early Harappan phase.
- Archaeologist Amalananda Ghosh identified similarities between pre-Harappan Sothi culture and Mature Harappan culture, especially in pottery.

Criticism:

- Ghosh's argument focused on ceramics, ignoring other traits.

The first comprehensive analysis of the evidence from pre-Harappan sites in the greater Indus valley and north Baluchistan was made by M. R. Mughal (1977). Mughal compared the

whole range of evidence (pottery, stone tools, metal artefacts, architecture, etc.) from pre-Harappan and mature Harappan levels. However, his theories were also criticized on the following grounds.

- Not all mature Harappan sites have early Harappan levels.
- Transitional layers often show evidence of disruption (e.g., fire, earthquakes).

In spite of the undeniable evidence of cultural continuity from the early Harappan to the mature Harappan phase, the 'outside influence' factor still sometimes resurfaces in different forms.

1. Lamberg-Karlovsky suggests that the emergence of an early urban interaction sphere in c. 3000 BCE in Turkmenia, Seistan, and south Afghanistan had an important role to play in Harappan urbanism.
2. Shereen Ratnagar suggests that Indus–Mesopotamian trade played an important role in the rise and decline of the Harappan civilization.
3. Apart from the fact that some features of the mature Harappan culture were already in place in the early Harappan phase, what is also visible is a gradual transition from a variety of regional traditions towards a level of cultural uniformity cutting across regions, a process that the Allchins call '**cultural convergence**'.

IV. Conclusion

The urban character of the Harappan Civilization was not the product of sudden external influence or invasion. Rather, it was the culmination of a long, indigenous process of socio-economic evolution, agricultural expansion, technological development, and regional interactions. The most credible explanation is that Harappan urbanism evolved from within the subcontinent through continuous cultural and technological advancement.