
DECIPHERING AUTHORITY: REVISITING THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilisation in 1921 AD was nothing less than a wonder to human beings, especially to archaeologists and researchers. It was the discovery of an advanced civilisation that was far ahead of its time. It was one of the oldest civilisations of the world, which stretched from present-day Pakistan to India, featuring an urban civilisation with rich culture, sophisticated knowledge, skills and technology. The developed form of town and planning, advanced international trade and commerce, usage of seals, weights and measures and the presence of cultivation and food storage alongside religious practices, division of labour and class make us wonder what may have been the system of administration to control all these and whether there existed a state in the civilisation? This paper tries to decipher the political landscape and the type of authority that may have existed in the civilisation.

Keywords: State, Governance, Central Administration.

Introduction

Till early 20th century the origin of Indian civilisation has been traced since the arrival of the Aryans in India and bringing the Aryan or Vedic culture in India. However this notion witnessed a huge change with the excavation of the Indus Valley civilisation also known as the Harappan civilisation during 1921 by an archaeologist named Daya Ram Sahni in Harappa and another in 1922 in Mohenjo-daro by R.D. Banerjee. It was found that the civilisation comprised of a huge area covering sites in present day India and Pakistan and is one of the largest ancient civilisations in the world which existed from around 2600 BCE to 1750 BCE (Allchin, 2025) (Sharma, 2018). It is considered to have existed during the Bronze Age (Sharma, 2018). Moreover the civilisation can be subdivided into the Pre Harappan phase (4th BC -2600 BC), Mature Harappan phase (2600-1900 BC) and Late Harappan Phase (1900-1750BC) (Sharma, 2018). Although there existed many big towns in the civilisation, the most important cities were the Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. (Sharma, 2018). Kenoyer suggests that there were four phases of evolution of the Indus Valley Civilization. The first phase was the 'Early food producing era' which existed from around 7000 BC to 5500 BC. In this phase people lived nomadic lives and depended on nature for sustenance. The excavation of Mehrgarh revealed many features of the earliest phase. These included mud houses and use of earliest forms of crafts in pottery, metals and jewellery making. Then came the 'Regionalisation Era' (5500 BC-2600 BC) where developed methods of craft can be found and people started developing agriculture for more food supply. During this period better technology in pottery, metallurgy was used. Seals were also used. The next phase was the integration era (2600-1900 BC). Trade started during this phase. Nomadic lifestyle came to an end. Communities started integrating under one political entity. The last phase was termed by him as the 'Localization' phase (1900-1300BC). During this phase the erosion of the community integration started slowly leading to the downfall of the civilisation. (Kenoyer, *Cultures and Societies of the Indus Tradition*, 2007)

The civilisation was situated mostly around the Indus River and had a very fertile land which facilitated surplus food production (Thapar, 1996). The city is significant as it is considered to be one of the earliest urban civilisations (ibid) comprising well planned towns, a system of taxation, trade and commerce with the other regions like the Mesopotamia, Afghanistan, Iran and the Persian Gulf (Sharma, 2018). Evidences of Pottery, art, seals, religion and a common Harappan script were also excavated from the sites (Sharma, 2018). All these compel us to

reflect on whether there existed any form of governance or a State during that period?

This paper tries to study the relevant literature on this subject and suggest if there existed a State? What was the type of State that existed? And what were the tools of governance used in the civilization?

Objectives of the Study:

1. To know about the Indus Valley civilisation
2. To explore if there existed any form of state, government, and polity that existed in the civilisation
3. To study about the tools of political identity and control used during that period
4. To draw a conclusion based on the findings.

Research Methodology

The study is historical and descriptive in nature. The study is based on qualitative data collected from secondary sources like websites, research articles and books.

Definitions of state:

According to Henri J. M Classen an early state was that which regulated the social relations between the rulers and the ruled. An early state comprised of seven features. Those were – a) A sizeable populations who were divided on the basis of their specialisation of work, b) Citizenship provided to people on the basis of their birth and area of residence, c) A centralised government which administered the land by imposition of rules and through fear of punishment, d) Sovereignty of State, e) A system of social stratification, f) Developed system of production which generated surplus produce and g) A common ideology. (VELDE, 1994) (Sen, 1992)

Kautilya in his renowned book *Arthashastra* where in in his *Saptanga theory* , he mentioned State having seven organs- the King, the ministers, forts, territory& population, wealth/treasury, army, friendly states.

Whether there was a State in the ancient civilization?

Many scholars and researchers argue that there was no state in the Indus Valley Civilisation. Syed A. Naqvi states that the developed town planning and the standardised patterns of trade and evidence of seals and weights and measures signify presence of rule of law although there seems to be absence of any centralised authority or state as there were no palaces or such structures which symbolise presence of a central authority. (SyedA.Naqvi, 1993) Sarah Umer concluded from her study that there was no state. instead, it was governed by a 'single strong ideology' and 'greater force of religion' (Umer, 2016) Adam S. Green in his research found that there existed egalitarian governance in the civilization and there was 'collective action'. Although he did not deal with the question on if there was a state? (Green A. S., 2022)

There was a state in the civilization

The places reveal a great deal of planning and proper maintenance. There was proper drainage system, house planning, well-constructed roads, fortification of the cities, burials, granaries, a system of trade and commerce, a developed system of trade and commerce, seals, weights and measures which definitely gives indication towards a developed system of administration. However there remains many theories regarding whether there existed a State or not in that civilization? According to Upender Singh, the existence of a kind of social division, food resources and their administrations, presence of craft and technology indicate the existence of a State (Singh, 2008) (Capacity Building Commission, Government of India, 2025). A central authority might have been present in the civilisation who could rule the large area. Moreover some of the essential elements of a state as identified by Kautilya in his 'Arthashastra' was found in the civilisation. There was a citadel area where the bureaucrats lived; some cities like Dholavira were fortified. There was probably a treasury; taxes were collected in the form of grains. Although there was no evidence of army found in this state (Sharma, 2018) It has been argued by Fitzsimons too that the Civilisation had a State and the two cities from where it was administered were Harappa and Mohenjodaro (Fitzsimons, 1970) (Capacity Building Commission, Government of India, 2025)

Kenoyer in his report argues that although the civilization was quite different from other civilisations like those in Mesopotamia or Egypt, yet there existed a state system which had gradually evolved from the starting of food processing system. He argued that although many theories state that it was a stateless society on the ground that there were no structures found

of palaces and no proper sign of any governing class of elites, there did exist administration at the local level by local chiefs which later on integrated into one governing structure centred in the cities. This happened due to growth of trade, technology, social differentiation and urbanisation (Kenoyer, 1994). Dr, Ibrahim and others in their paper argue that there must have been a centralised state like structure which had maintained and administered the well managed towns and public work system (Dr. Shakeela Ibrahim, 2023).

Subodh Kumar Mukhopadhyay after a study across the various theories analysing the possibility of existence of a state in Indus valley too concluded that there must have existed a state there as there was no sharp economic differentiation, there was presence of a good system of communication, production of goods, common script, system of weights and measures and a unanimity in culture. (Mukhopadhyay, 2012)

According to Jane R. McIntosh, there was uniformity in the seals used in the Indus valley with only little minor variation in their styles. This similarity in the seals were used across the civilization suggests that there must have been a unified system of governance in the valley. Jane deciphers that the use of seals with unicorn motive indicates that these seals were probably used by the bureaucrats. Moreover stoneware bangles of same size were used in the big cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. They were probably worn as badges by people holding high positions or ranks. Similar stoneware bangle was found in the head band and upper arm of a structure called 'Priest King' indicating him of holding a significant position in those times. The system of organised craft production, distribution and trade indicate a large amount of bureaucratic supervision and control. (McIntosh, 2008)

Although many scholars and researchers believe that there definitely was no state as there was no structure similar to palaces. There was also no strong evidence indicating the presence of king, officials or any standing army. We may conclude that although there was no presence of all the modern day symbols of coercion and governance, but it is hard to believe that such planned administration and management of goods and services would have been possible with lack of any central authority. Then to whom were the taxes paid? Who made and implemented the norms or rules? Who enforced the class system that existed? Moreover why did the community accept a social division which was clearly evident from the division of the city into upper and lower part? The items discovered from the burial sites too revealed the existence of a class divided society. There definitely has been a central system of governance. This is proved

by the discovery of system of seals, developed form of trade and commerce, a Harappan Script, a class system with division of labour, seals, a developed system of production and conservation of food, advanced town planning, well managed drainage and sewage system and industrial goods. Moreover, the excavation of a bearded man statue with half closed eyes and his body covered with a shawl has been described as the statue of a 'Priest King'. However it can be said that the state that existed has been evolved and it came into being in the mature Harappan stage or in the words of Kenoyer, the 'Integration Era', when cities grew and the trade and economy flourished. Now we need to discuss what kind of state existed in this civilisation?

The features of the Indus State:

A State without warfare:

According to Kautilya, an ideal state must have an army. However from the excavations done in the site there appears to have been no standing army in the state which reflects that it was a peaceful state without any warfare. According to Fitzsimons, there was no discovery of weapons like spears and arrows which gave the impression that the people underestimated warfare. (Fitzsimons, *The Indus Valley Civilization*, 1970) There was no evidence of killing and violence. Trade regulations were used to exert political control in the civilization (Green A. S., 2006) Green's study revealed that unlike the contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian Civilizations, Indus valley was peaceful in its domestic policy as well as its relations with other countries. (Green A. S., 2020).

According to Wheeler although there was no strong evidence found of military usage during that time, its possibility cannot be completely discarded as such a huge civilisation could have been established through force although there is no evidence revealing so. However, we are yet to excavate much evidence about the earliest phase of the civilization. Moreover there have been discovery of tools like 'spears, knives, short swords, arrowheads and axes' from the sites. There was also found baked clay missiles. The two cities Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were fortified which might be a form of defence structure or protection from floods. (Wheeler, 1968)

The cities were not intensely fortified nor there were places found where arms were stored. The figures excavated do not indicate any relevance to warfare. Moreover the skeletons discovered do not bear the expression of fear. (Kenoyer, 1991)

The military culture came along the Aryans in India. The Assemblies in the Vedic culture performed military functions. There was no battle chariots used in the Pre Vedic age. Moreover the weapons found during the excavations were not of much importance in the culture. (Sharma R. S., 1999)

Majority of the studies reveal that the Indus Valley was a peaceful civilization. There was no evidence found of warfare or army used in the civilization. The small weapons found might be for daily work or food processing. The use of military was a post Indus development as has been rightly observed by Ram Sharan Sharma.

Presence of Aristocracy

The presence of class difference was evident from the town planning. The upper town known as the citadel consisted of bigger houses and more courtyards while in the lower parts of the town houses were smaller. Rooms were less in number and there was only one courtyard. In Mohenjo-Daro, the granary, the great bath and buildings which might have been used for religious or administrative purpose have been discovered. Although there was no palace like structure found in the citadel but there were some differences noticed in the buildings in the citadel from those discovered in the lower part of the city. (McIntosh, 2008)

Tools of administration:

1. Seals and miniature tablets- The compliance of norms was maintained through certain tools during the Indus Valley Civilization. The wide presence of inscribed objects like seals and miniature tablets (Mukhopadhyay B. A., 2018) indicates that they were widely used by the people to mark the identity of goods.

2. System of weights and measures- weights made with stones was widely used in the civilization. They were standardized. It also symbolised coordination of production and trading activities (Green A. S., 2022). Few measurement scales were found while a good number of weights were found everywhere in the civilization. (McIntosh, 2008)

3. Stone bangles to mark official control- some stone bangles were discovered of same diameter and inscription on it. Same size of these bangles reveals that they were not used as ornaments but were used as symbols to mark authority. A statue often referred to that of a Priest King also had this ring stitched on his head band. Such rings were found in the neck of

containers. All these indicate that they were used as symbols to demarcate religious or political authority. (McIntosh, 2008)

4. Religion as a tool of control- There was no tool of coercion or military power to control the people. Rather there was greater cooperation among the various groups of people. This makes one wonder about what may have been the tool of social control then? According to Jane McIntosh, it might have been done through religion. According to her the social and religious norms may have been important tools for ensuring compliance and social control. (McIntosh, 2008). Many research papers also emphasize on shared ideology that must have been followed in the civilization which is evident in similarity of seals, weights, weights and measures, attire and livelihood pattern. This shared ideology also might have evolved from a common religion.

6. Taxation- It is believed that the public officials and priest took care of administration of production, infrastructure and goods while the others paid them taxes in return of their services, Taxes were paid in kind with the produces (food grains or artefacts and crafts) of by working as labourers in exchange. (McIntosh, 2008)

7. Town planning and management- There were a lot of evidences discovered to prove that there was a well developed system of planning in the civilization, well constructed roads favourable for bullock carts to move, street lights, dustbins at regular intervals, same pattern of houses, covered drains, division of the cities into two parts- the citadel and the lower part accommodating the nobility and the working class respectively. There were also structures for public use like the granary, the great bath, a structure like town hall for gatherings all these reflect that there was elaborate planning for building the towns and also so many structures must have needed a lot of minute administration which might only have been possible under a centralised rule.

8. Well regulated system of trade and commerce: The excavations done on these sites have revealed that there was widespread system of trade and commerce in the civilization, there was trade with other regions like Afghanistan, Mesopotamia, Iran and the Persian Gulf. This also strongly indicates presence of a strong authority that must have overseen and managed such large scale of trade especially with the outside world.

Conclusion

There is no proper evidence to establish the fact that there existed a State or any kingship in

Indus valley Civilization and many scholars suggest that there existed no state but there was community rule or maybe there was a common ideology that ruled. However it is hard to accept that the community could rule a civilization which existed for 1000 years over such a huge territory that extended from present day Pakistan to India. The civilization was much organised and ahead of its time having a complex and developed town planning, a well devised system of taxation, class division, presence of multiple professions, international trade and commerce, a system of weights and measures, public places for meetings, developed technology for food production, irrigation and also system for storage of food crops. There was also presence of seals, weights and measures, a common script and a common religion across the civilization. All these only indicate towards the existence of a State and central system of administration.

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