

Harappan Cultural Elements in South Indian Cultures – Studying Aftermath of the Harappan Decline in South India

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Abstract: Decline of great Indus tradition is an unfortunate truth and theories for decline are numerous. There is a debate on the decline that goes on but at the same time we are preoccupied with other facets of this civilization, interesting among them is the aftermath of decline i.e. inquiring into the question as to which way people migrated and more importantly trace the path they followed and to see what impact they have left on the cultures of the region they visited. This paper is an attempt in that direction. Here we search for Harappans in the South India and see how they have reshaped the cultural milieu of the land and represent themselves in the cultural ethos and ideas, even today.

Keywords: Harappan Civilization, South India/Peninsular India, Cultural Elements, Harappan Legacy

Diamabad (Sali, 1986) a Late Harappan settlement, 1880-1330 B.C (Sali, 1984), in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, is one of the finest examples of Harappan intrusion into peninsular India. Mud bricks of ratio 1:2:4, terracotta seals bearing Indus signs and some fine quality bronze figurines-one of chariot and other three of animals (Habib, 2002), Indus graffiti on pottery, is the evidence that confirms Harappan nature of the settlement. Nonetheless, Harappans had already knocked at the doors of south India by moving into peninsula of Gujarat (Dhavalikar, 1995), which is abode of various Mature and Late Harappan settlements (Habib & Habib, 2012; Sonawane & Ajithprasad, 1994; Rao, 1962-63). However before the date provided for Late Harappan settlement at Diamabad, south India as has been proposed by the archaeologists was known to the Mature Harappans of Indus valley. One of the suggestions in this regard is that Harappans were procuring gold from Kolar gold fields of Karnataka (McIntosh, 2008) and J.P. Joshi after the analysis of stone tools from Surkotada- a Mature Harappan settlement in Gujarat, has proposed that chert blades at some Harappan sites in Gujarat including Surkotada show

resemblance to the ones found at a factory site in upper Krishna basin of northern Karnataka, however this hypothesis has not been worked further (Joshi, 1990).

Besides Diamabad, explorations in Dhule district of Maharashtra (Tapti Valley) showed that Harappans ventured into the region and made settlements here, which indicates that Harappans had penetrated Deccan deep into Tapti and Godavari valleys (Sali, 1970). That in turn suggests the migration of large groups of Harappans into the area under discussion. It is noteworthy that none of these settlements was permanent, even the Late Harappan settlement at Diamabad was abandoned for reasons not yet clear (Sali, 1984, pp.235-242), which instigates us to investigate further to the south east of Maharashtra that as a consequence brings us into the region that is referred to as south India. Nevertheless Maharashtra is a “connecting link” for tracing the movement of Harappans from north western India to the regions of southern India. However further explorations and excavations that could reveal a clear picture of the phenomenon are needed in this direction.

South Indian Neolithic cultures, characterized by

hand made pottery and ground stone axes (Shipton, *et al.* 2012) in addition to other peculiarities, are late in appearance as compared to the Neolithic cultures of rest of the India. The earliest of which begins somewhere around 2000 B.C (Fuller, 2011), a date when civilization in north western Indian subcontinent was about to complete its term (Mughal, 1980). This Neolithic phase in peninsular India, at a stretch has continued to flourish much after the decline of Indus Valley Civilization and even smoothly transformed itself to much advanced Iron Age cultures (Gurumurthy, 1999). These south Indian Neolithic cultures, in the earliest phases of their occupation show cultural traits that are typical of these cultures and distinct from rest of the country. However, their cultural milieu incorporates change with the passage of time particularly after the demise of civilization in north western Indian subcontinent. What is the nature of such changes and where do they come from, is somewhat interesting and fascinating.

Neolithic sites of Utnur (Allchin, 1966), Kodekal and Pallovoy clearly show the appearance of new traits, the noteworthy among them are applied ring feet and hollow pedestals in ceramics resembling those of Pre-Harappan Amri and Kalibangan (Allchin & Allchin, 2003). At Piklihal II (Allchin, 1960) (upper Neolithic), Brahmagiri II, Sanganakallu II (Rao, 1967), Tekkalakotta I (Rao & Malhotra, 1965), and Hallur II A, the metal objects of both bronze and copper appear with increasing frequency (Allchin & Allchin, 2003, p.287). The metal icon discovered from megalithic burials of Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu dated to 800 B.C bears broad resemblance in head dress to the mother goddess terracotta from Indus valley (Ray & Sinopoli, 2004, pp.242-243). Besides appearance of metals like copper and bronze, at the above mentioned places, there also appear new elements in pottery among which are perforated and spouted vessels, as well the

technique of roughening the outer surface in a manner distinctly reminiscent of that employed in Indus and Baluchistan in early Indus levels (Allchin & Allchin, 2003). Such changes are also clearly visible at Takkalakotta where there is clear difference between ceramic traditions of earlier and later phases among which appearance of black and red ware, completely absent in the earliest phases, is prominent (Rao, 1967, p.29). The tool typology at Maski studied by Thapar has revealed Harappan elements such as long blades which the said author finds similarities with Harappan ribbon flakes (Sali, 1984, pp.235-242). At Hallur IIA the changes in cultural milieu are indicated by the appearance of copper implements which include miniature bifacial axes and fish hooks in addition to a newly incorporated blade industry using crested ridge guiding technique (Rao, 1967, p.30). It again needs to be emphasized that the cultural traditions of the earliest levels at these sites are completely unconnected with that of Indus or Baluchistan. It is clear from the above evidence that the Harappans whose trails have been found in Tapti and Godavari valleys not only moved into south but also amalgamated with the cultures already established there and have left a profound mark of their presence at such sites. The excavated sites in this region of Indian subcontinent showing some essential marks of the Indus civilization, also provide evidence of transitional or succeeding phases (Thapar, 1984). The evidence from the prehistoric cultures of peninsular India mentioned above has been included from the phases that are chronologically later than the decline of Indus valley civilization. The above discussion is the shortest possible description of the immediate aftermath of Harappan decline in peninsular India.

One of the hotly debated issues about Harappan civilization among historians and archaeologists is the nature of Harappan legacy i.e., whether the

Harappan socio-religious traditions continued in one or other form in later periods or not (Jain, 2014). The above mentioned evidence about the appearance of Harappan cultural elements in south Indian cultures can provide answers to such questions but needs a good amount of painstaking investigations in a scientific manner. However the evidence enlisted above is not enough to establish the view that South India is the bearer of Harappan legacy. In order to support such conclusions, few more instances related to the above discussion are given below.

In the above context, mention may be made of the recent discovery of pictographs of Harappans on rocks at world famous Hampi¹, (Fig.1) and their identification by Moti Ravan Kangale and Sri Prakash Salame as Sindhu (Harappan) culture based script in Gondi dialect, has two important implications, one the intrusion of Harappans deep into south and second the incorporation of Indus based symbols into regional scripts or the evolution of Harappan symbols into a different language that is today spoken in the contemporary south India. Just taking Hampi evidence case in point to draw such conclusions will be without any doubt overemphasizing the evidence.

The above mentioned evidence of Hampi is here further supplemented by the evidence of graffiti found on south Indian pottery. Before dealing with this evidence it becomes here imperative to present a brief background of the graffiti in Indian subcontinent. Graffiti have been used on a large scale in the Pre-Harappan cultures of Indus Valley (Parpola, 1986), which were replaced by the script on seals during mature Harappan times. Mehrgarh Periods IV-VII have produced 850 graffiti, similarly graffiti have also been found from various Pre Harappan

cultures like Amri, Damb Sadat, Periano Ghundai, Balakot, Rehman Dheri, to name a few (Parpola, 1986, p.404). However, with the decline of Indus cultural tradition the use of script was discontinued and the graffiti resurfaced again. Late Harappan settlements at Rangpur (222 graffiti) and Diamabad (172 graffiti) show reemergence of graffiti culture. It is interesting that south Indian Neolithic/Iron Age cultures provide us with ample amount of evidence regarding graffiti which appear on potsherds, first lot of such potsherds comes from Arikamedu (Wheeler, 1946). The important find in this connection, besides graffiti on potsherds, is the four Harappan symbols inscribed on stone axe at Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu (McIntosh, 2008, p.162). There are two interesting parameters of South Indian graffiti, one that the inscribed potsherds/artifacts carry distinguished Indus signs, second the origin of south Indian graffiti almost coincides with the decline of Indus valley civilization. A detailed and a comprehensive analysis of pottery from Neolithic and Iron Age cultures of south Indian has been carried out by S. Gurusurthy (Gurusurthy, 1999). His remarks with respect to the subject under discussion are as,

“Recent researches on the pottery fabrics, and types of the iron age culture and that of Neolithic culture in Tamil Nadu by the present author [S. Gurusurthy] having brought to the surface that majority of them are the carriers of Indus culture and the Script.” (Gurusurthy, 1999, pp.13-14)

The quantity and quality of graffiti un-earthed from south India brings this region closer to the Pre-Harappan zones in western Pakistan and Afghanistan which have yielded a wide range of potter's marks and graffiti in large quantity (Gurusurthy, 1999, p.36). It is noteworthy to mention here that the direction of writing/scratching graffiti signs on south Indian

¹ Anonymous, “*The Hindu Daily*”, Dated 05-11-2014, p. 18. See also “*The Hindu Daily*”, Dated 17-12-2014.

pottery is same (Gurumurthy, 1999, p.22) as shown by B.B Lal and others in case of Indus script. (Lal, 1974-75) One more important facet of these potsherds, here to be mentioned is that besides being carriers of graffiti, some potsherds were also used as spindle whorls after being grounded and cut to required circular size (Gurumurthy, 1999, pp.20-21). Numerous such spindle whorls have been reported from excavations at lower Kaveri valley (Gurumurthy, 1999, pp.20-21). Such spindle whorls are already known from Indus valley sites (Rao, 1985).

All these features of Indus cultural tradition which have been mentioned and are quite well discernable from the Stone and Iron Age cultures of south India, clearly point towards the movement and amalgamation of Indus valley people with the already established cultures in south India. In the evolutionary line of the “mixed culture” (south Indian + Indus) the Indus factor is quite well traceable up the line and it never fades away, even in the contemporary cultural makeup, as will be apparent from the discussion below.

Languages spoken in contemporary south India show development in the backdrop of Harappan cultural elements or ideas that were prevalent in Indus Valley. The connotation of four cardinal directions in contemporary south Indian languages and their relationship with Indus Valley ideologies has been well explored by R. Balakrishna. (Balakrishnan, 2012) The linguistic formulation of cardinal directions, as shown by the said author, in major south Indian languages has its development in backdrop of the layout patterns followed for Indus valley cities. To quote the extensive study done by R. Balakrishna, is not within the scope of this paper, what needs to be emphasized is that the “high west: low east” dichotomy of the Indus city layouts was not merely a design coincidence (Balakrishnan, 2012, p.53), but the idea that was

followed in these layouts is still encoded in the contemporary south Indian languages. To the scientific study of R. Balakrishna will be added in this paper the “*Pipal* doctrine” of Indus civilization and its legacy in south India. *Pipal* leaves/branches frequently appear on the painted pottery as well on seals of Indus Civilization (Rao, 1979). It is evident from the depiction on seals that *Pipal* tree was held in great veneration and was worshipped by the Indus people (Marshall, 2004). One of the seals (Marshall seal no. 387) depicts the branches of *Pipal* tree associated with the horns of *Passupati*/Proto-siva (Marshall, 2004, pp.48-78) that indicates it could have been symbol of power and authority besides being an important element of religion. The *Pipal* tree continues to be worshipped even today by the non-Aryan tribes of India particularly south India. The non-Aryan Gonds will not shake a tree at night or pluck its leaves for fear of disturbing the sleeping spirit (Marshall, 2004, p.66) and it still continues to be venerated for purposes that suffice the spiritual hunger of the common man. More importantly the linguistic connotation applied to this plant in Tamil is “*Arasa maram*” which means king tree or King’s tree, suggesting authority, power and importance related to this plant, a similar feature already recognized from Indus valley.

Seals are one of the important and interesting finds from Indus sites, the number of seals roughly amounts to more than 3000, majority of which come from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (Possehl, 2002). These seals no doubt played an important part in trade and commerce, there is also a possibility that some seals served as tokens for goods (Habib, 2002, p.47). Sangam texts like *Silpadikaram* and *Pattinapali* refer to the use of clay seals by rulers as well as merchant community (Gurumurthy, 1999, p.79). *Silpadikaram* informs that the export articles were stamped with clay seals of the respective merchant guilds at *Poompuhar*, the port of

Sangam Cholas, which represents the continuing tradition of the Indus Valley Civilization, as seals were also in Indus Valley used for stamping goods meant for trade, which is evident from seal impressions at Mohenjodaro (4 seal impressions), Harappa (4 seal impressions), Banawali (1 seal impression), Kalibangan (5 seal impressions) and Lothal (37, highest seal impressions) (Possehl, 2002, p.130). Further interesting is the match of representations on the seals and coins of Cholas and that of Harappans. *Pattinapali* refers to the royal seal of Cholas with tiger symbol, the Cholas of Sangam age issued a coin with an image of cock fighting an elephant (Mahadevan, 2011), all these representations have their

counterparts already in Indus Valley Civilization (Marshall, 2004).

The construe that follows from the above discussion is that South India covertly and overtly does manifest the Harappan legacy. This has been made unambiguous that after decline of the Harappans they do show their presence in south India and have to a great extent influenced the cultural make up in south India. More importantly peninsular India is a promising land to study the aftermath of decline of Indus Valley Civilization and its evolution into a different cultural entity.

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Fig. 1. Harappan Script in Gondi Dialect found near Hampi (Karnataka) Courtesy "The Hindu"