

Public Administration System in Indus–Sarsvati Civilization: A Study

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ABSTRACT

The **Indus Valley Civilization** was a cultural and political entity which flourished in the northern region of the Indian subcontinent **between c. 7000 - c. 600 BCE**. Its modern name derives from its location in the valley of the Indus River, but it is also commonly referred to as the **Indus-Sarasvati Civilization** and the Harrapan Civilization. The first signs of an administrative system in Indian history are found in the archaeological material remains that are known for its cities based in urban settings that must have surely required a network of public administration system. Anthropological studies of ancient societies suggest that the story of urbanization is one of increasing cultural complexity, a widening food resource base, greater technological sophistication, expanding craft production, social stratification, and the emergence of a level of political organization that can be described as a state. Even a century after the discovery of Indus-Sarasvati civilization, no clear evidence of a ruling class has been recovered in spite of considerable growth in our knowledge of this civilization and its technologies. This led to the emergence of the “stateless” paradigm,^[10] according to which, the absence of any substantial evidence of priest-kings, slaves, standing armies, or court officials does not qualify Indus-Sarasvati civilization to be put into the category of State or Empire.

KEYWORDS: INDUS, SARSVATI, MEHNJODARO, HARAPPA, DRAVIDIANS, ARYANS, VEDAS, CENTRALIZATION, ADMINISTRATION, DECENTRALIZATION.

INTRODUCTION

The **Indus Valley Civilization** was a cultural and political entity which flourished in the northern region of the Indian subcontinent **between c. 7000 - c. 600 BCE**. Its modern name derives from its location in the valley of the Indus River, but it is also commonly referred to as the **Indus-Sarasvati Civilization** and the Harrapan Civilization.

These latter designations come from the Sarasvati River mentioned in Vedic sources, which flowed adjacent to the Indus River, and the ancient city of Harappa in the region, the first one found in the modern era. None of these names derive from any ancient texts because, although scholars generally believe the people of this civilization developed a writing system (known as Indus Script or Harappan Script) it has not yet been deciphered.

All three designations are modern constructs, and nothing is definitively known of the origin, development, decline, and fall of the civilization. Even so, modern archaeology has established a probable chronology and periodization:

- Pre-Harappan – c. 7000 - c. 5500 BCE

- Early Harappan – c. 5500 - 2800 BCE
- Mature Harappan – c. 2800 - c. 1900 BCE
- Late Harappan – c. 1900 - c. 1500 BCE
- Post Harappan – c. 1500 - c. 600 BCE

The **Indus Valley Civilization** is now often compared with the far more famous cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but this is a fairly recent development. The discovery of Harappa in **1829 CE** was the first indication that any such civilization existed in India, and by that time, Egyptian hieroglyphics had been deciphered.

Archaeological excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization, therefore, had a significantly late start comparatively, and it is now thought that many of the accomplishments and “firsts” attributed to Egypt and Mesopotamia may actually belong to the people of the Indus Valley Civilization.

The total population of the civilization is thought to have been upward of **5 million, & its territory stretched over 900 miles (1,500 km) along the Indus River.**

The two best-known excavated cities of this culture are Harappa and **Mohenjo-daro** (located in modern-day Pakistan), both of which are thought to have once had populations of between **40,000-50,000 people**, which is stunning when one realizes that most ancient cities had on average 10,000 people living in them. The total population of the civilization is thought to have been upward of 5 million, and its territory stretched over 900 miles (1,500 km) along the banks of the Indus River and then in all directions outward. Indus Valley Civilization sites have been found near the border of Nepal, in Afghanistan, on the coasts of India, and around Delhi, to name only a few locations.

Between c. **1900 - c. 1500 BCE**, the civilization began to decline for unknown reasons. In the early 20th century CE, this was thought to have been caused by an invasion of light-skinned peoples from the north known as Aryans who conquered a dark-skinned people defined by **Western scholars** as **Dravidians**. This claim, known as the Aryan Invasion Theory, has been discredited. The **Aryans** whose ethnicity is associated with the **Iranian Persians** are now believed to have migrated to the region peacefully and blended their culture with that of the indigenous people while the term Dravidian is understood now to refer to anyone, of any ethnicity, who speaks one of the Dravidian languages.

Why the Indus Valley Civilization declined and fell is unknown, but scholars believe it may have had to do with climate change, the drying up of the **Sarasvati River**, an alteration in the path of the monsoon which watered crops, overpopulation of the cities, a decline in trade with Egypt and Mesopotamia, or a combination of any of the above. In the present day, excavations continue at many of the sites found thus far and some future find may provide more information on the history and decline of the culture.

Harappa & Mohenjo-daro

The Hindu texts known as the Vedas, as well as other great works of Indian tradition such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, were already well known to Western scholars but they did not know what culture had created them. Systemic racism of the time prevented them from attributing the works to the people of India, and the same, at first, led archaeologists to conclude that Harappa was a colony of the Sumerians of Mesopotamia or perhaps an Egyptian outpost.

Harappa did not conform to either Egyptian or Mesopotamian architecture, however, as there was no evidence of temples, palaces, or monumental structures, no names of kings or queens or **stelae** or royal statuary. The city spread over **370 acres** (150 hectares) of small, brick houses with flat roofs made of clay. There was a citadel, walls, the streets were laid out in a grid pattern clearly demonstrating a high

degree of skill in urban planning and, in comparing the two sites, it was apparent to the excavators that they were dealing with a highly advanced culture.

Houses in both cities had **flush toilets, a sewer system**, and fixtures on either side of the streets were part of an elaborate drainage system, which was more advanced even than that of the early **Romans**. Devices known from Persia as “**wind catchers**” were attached to the roofs of some buildings which provided air conditioning for the home or administrative office and, at Mohenjo-daro, there was a great public bath, surrounded by a courtyard, with steps leading down into it.

As other sites were unearthed, the same degree of sophistication and skill came to light as well as the understanding that all of these cities had been pre-planned. Unlike those of other cultures which usually developed from smaller, rural communities, the cities of the Indus Valley Civilization had been thought out, a site chosen, and purposefully constructed prior to full habitation. Further, they all exhibited conformity to a single vision which further suggested a strong central government with an efficient bureaucracy that could plan, fund, and build such.

What amazed all these pioneers and what remains the distinctive characteristic of the several hundred Harappan sites now known, is their apparent similarity: “Our overwhelming impression is of cultural uniformity, both throughout the several centuries during which the Harappan civilization flourished, and over the vast area it occupied.”

The ubiquitous bricks, for instance, are all of standardized dimensions, just as the stone cubes used by the Harappans to measure weights are also standard and based on the modular system. Road widths conform to a similar module; thus, streets are typically twice the width of side lanes, while the main arteries are twice or one and a half times the width of streets. Most of the streets so far excavated are straight and run either north-south or east-west. City plans therefore conform to a regular grid pattern and appear to have retained this layout through several phases of building.

Chronology

Wheeler's work provided archaeologists with the means to recognize approximate dates from the civilization's foundations through its decline and fall. The chronology is primarily based, as noted, on physical evidence from Harappan sites but also from knowledge of their trade contacts with Egypt and Mesopotamia. Lapis lazuli, to name only one product, was immensely popular in both cultures and, although scholars knew it came from India, they did not know from precisely where until the Indus Valley Civilization was discovered. Even though this semi-precious stone would continue to be imported after the fall of the Indus Valley Civilization, it is clear that, initially, some of the export came from this region.

- **Pre-Harappan – c. 7000 - c. 5500 BCE:** The Neolithic period best exemplified by sites like Mehrgarh which shows evidence of agricultural development, domestication of plants and animals, and production of tools and ceramics.
- **Early Harappan – c. 5500-2800 BCE:** Trade firmly established with Egypt, Mesopotamia, and possibly China. Ports, docks, and warehouses built near waterways by communities living in small villages.
- **Mature Harappan – c. 2800 - c. 1900 BCE:** Construction of the great cities and widespread urbanization. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro are both flourishing c. 2600 BCE. Other cities, such as Ganeriwala, Lothal, and Dholavira are built according to the same models and this development of

the land continues with the construction of hundreds of other cities until there are over 1,000 of them throughout the land in every direction.

- **Late Harappan – c. 1900 - c. 1500 BCE:** Decline of the civilization coinciding with a wave of migration of the Aryan people from the north, most likely the Iranian Plateau. Physical evidence suggests climate change which caused flooding, drought, and famine. A loss of trade relations with Egypt and Mesopotamia has also been suggested as a contributing cause.
- **Post Harappan – c. 1500 - c. 600 BCE:** The cities are abandoned, and the people have moved south. The civilization has already fallen by the time Cyrus II (the Great, r. c. 550-530 BCE) invades India in 530 BCE.

Public Administration in Indus–Sarasvati Civilization

The first signs of an administrative system in Indian history are found in the archaeological material remains that are known for its cities based in urban settings that must have surely required a network of public administration system. Anthropological studies of ancient societies suggest that the story of urbanization is one of increasing cultural complexity, a widening food resource base, greater technological sophistication, expanding craft production, social stratification, and the emergence of a level of political organization that can be described as a state. The urbanization of **Indus-Sarasvati civilization** is no exception in this regard. The debate on the nature of the **Indus-Sarasvati political system** has revolved around two questions: first, whether a State existed or not, and second, if so, what sort of state it was.

- The government divided the region into city states
- Governed by powerful Priests-kings
- The religion was the basis for their government, with all of their laws coming from their religious beliefs.
- Just like the Sumer civilization of Mesopotamia and the Egyptian civilization, the government of the Indus Valley was ruled by religion
- The Indus government was well organized. The government in the Indus Valley was a monarchy.
- The Indus Valley people called their kings, rajas.
- The rulers governed through trade and religion, instead of military strength.
- The king did not have the highest class or power as the kings did in other civilizations, the priests did.
- A citadel is a barrier of a civilization to protect it from invasions and natural disasters. In Mohenjo-Daro their was a fortress within the citadel. This deals with government because the kings and rulers of the Indus valley used these citadels to their advantage to gain authority. This is where the rulers held their authority from
- When the Aryans invaded this civilization, elders became the head of the society.
- Kings and rulers in this civilization were upper class and the people of the Indus Valley liked and followed them

Indus-Sarasvati Civilization as a Stateless Policy

Despite the cultural uniformity found in the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, it cannot be inferred that it had political unification as well. It is well known that **Mesopotamian** and **Egyptian civilizations** were

complex societies that entail inequality, stratification in the distribution of wealth, and hierarchies of power.

Whereas cities of **Indus-Sarasvati civilization** indicate that resources and production activities were not monopolized by the social and political class, and then, the cities also lack the tombs, palaces, and dynastic art that characterize other early complex societies. Their absence in the Indus-Sarasvati civilization suggests that the forms of inequality and power hierarchies that existed in other ancient civilizations where a class of nobles used to manage administration were limited or absent in **Indus-Sarasvati cities**.

There is nothing that we know of in prehistoric Egypt or Mesopotamia or anywhere else in Western Asia to compare with the well-built baths and commodious houses of the citizens of Mohenjo-daro. In those countries, much money and thought were lavished on the building of magnificent temples for the gods and on palaces and tombs of kings, but the rest of the people seemingly had to content themselves with insignificant dwellings of mud. In the Indus Valley, the picture is reversed, and the finest structures are those erected for the convenience of the citizens. **Temples, palaces, and tombs** there may of course have been, but if so, they are either still undiscovered or so like other edifices as not to be readily distinguishable from them.

Even a century after the discovery of Indus-Sarasvati civilization, no clear evidence of a ruling class has been recovered in spite of considerable growth in our knowledge of this civilization and its technologies. This led to the emergence of the “stateless” paradigm, according to which, the absence of any substantial evidence of priest-kings, slaves, standing armies, or court officials does not qualify Indus-Sarasvati civilization to be put into the category of State or Empire.

In such a case a question arises, who used to manage and control well-planned cities, residential and public buildings, a **water management system, seals, unique script, uniform weights and measures, production of standardized crafts, internal** and maritime trade, and distribution of agricultural products and pottery over an extensive area.

Such extensive activities of a complex society can only be possible in an efficient administrative setup. Archaeologists and historians of the “stateless” paradigm contended that the Indus-Sarasvati civilization was an amalgam of complex chiefdoms that look after the administration of the city as well. They argued that the sort of control reflected in this civilization could have been exercised by an elaborate village administration.

Recent scholarships pushed the “stateless” **paradigm of Indus-Sarasvati civilization** to the assumption that it was perhaps the world’s most egalitarian early complex society.

Comprising a great degree of **nonhierarchical, non-coercive, and non-elite social and political formations**. This defies long-held presumptions about the relationships between urbanization and political and social inequality. Some scholars think that the public administration of Indus-Sarasvati cities was looked upon by the hierarchical corporate groups with minimal coercion or exclusionary politics.

It has been argued that these corporate groups drove the urbanization process, which necessitated the creation of numerous generalized “**public goods**” streets and drainage systems, large and small buildings with public access, and informational and regulatory technologies such as weights and seals that would have maintained by the collective action of the groups.

Indus-Sarasvati Civilization as a State system: Centralized or Decentralized

Another hypothesis of Indus-Sarasvati polity is termed as “state-level” paradigm which suggested that this civilization had a highly centralized empire ruled by autocratic priest-kings from the twin capitals of Harappa and Mohenjodaro.

This viewpoint was supported by several characteristics, such as the degree of uniformity in material characteristics, the use of a **standard script, standardized weights** and measurements and efficient public administration system. The public buildings at Mohenjodaro and Harappa exemplified to fit with the idea that the rulers had a high level of control over everything, including the administration of the cities. The absence of perceptible internecine conflict between the settlements implied that they were governed by a single authority.

In fact, in the view of the adherents of the state-level paradigm, craft specialization alone was sufficient to classify the Indus civilization as a state.

If to believe in a highly centralized “state-level” paradigm, the administrative machinery of Indus-Sarasvati civilization must be very effective considering the uniform weight and measures, the size of bricks, and the **street layouts**. The cities were governed efficiently as can be testified by proper management of public buildings and well-planned layouts. New houses were built almost exactly at the same site as the old with only minor variations in the planning of the houses. It appears that there was continuity in governance throughout the civilization.

Within a “**state-level**” paradigm, arguments for a decentralized state system have also been proposed. Historians belonging to this standpoint rather than attributing the civilization's apparent uniformity to a powerful central government suggests that it may have resulted from the advanced system of internal trade that the civilization fostered.

The absence of monumental royal tombs, palaces, and temples, as well as the lack of pronounced social stratification like that seen in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, suggests that **Indus-Sarasvati civilization** was neither the empire nor a centralized state. We also see artifacts of various types are distributed throughout the occupational levels at Indus-Sarasvati sites rather than clustered in elite residences or structures. Jewelry made from precious metals and semiprecious stones, seals and sealings, and the script all turn up in small-town settings. This runs counter to the idea of a unified empire because it implies that people in both rural areas and urban centers have equal access to material goods and status symbols.

CONCLUSION

Indus-Sarasvati civilization as an early state characterized by a sovereign or sovereigns closely linked to a mythical character and seen as benevolent; a military component lacking which is the essential feature of more mature states; and loosely developed economic stratification.

The speculation that Indus-Sarasvati state included multiple tiers of urban elites, each with their own spheres of influence and power, including merchants, ritual specialists, and landowners supports the decentralized polity of this civilization. The decentralization hypothesis also makes laudable attempts to postulate a theory of ‘multiple kingdoms centered around major settlements of Indus-Sarasvati civilization.

A large number of unicorn seals in major cities gives the impression that it may be the symbol of the ruling elite or represented the aristocracy or merchants who had an important administrative role.^[4] Many scholars think that a probable function of seals and tablets was to record rations allocated to

porters. Instead of signifying ownership of property, these seals might have been used for economic transactions.

From the seals, we also get to know that the artisans and craftsmen were provided opportunities which show there was a close integration between economic and social processes. This is the mark of a successful administrative machinery. It is also observed that with the **proliferation of Kot Diji culture**, there was a growing use of a new type of stamp seal which may have been used as an administrative instrument.

A collection of Indus-Sarasvati seals. Over 3,000 have been discovered so far, and they appear to have served a wide range of purposes; from commercial tracking of shipments and ownership to religious invocation and protection. Usage of seals as an administrative instrument can also not be ruled out. As archaeologists have discovered Indus seals in Mesopotamian ruins as well.

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