Origins of Bronze Age Cultures in the Indus Basin

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Indus Basin—a geographic perspective

PAST CONCEPTS

We have been studying the problems of the Bronze Age Cultures in the Indus Basin for almost half a century. Since the discovery of Mohenjo-daro we have been trying to get a better understanding of these metal-using peoples. The early use of metals at once persuaded scholars to view the rise of these cultures in the perspective of the already known West Asian civilizations. Mesopotamia—the cradle of human activity in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, even Egypt of the Pharaohs and Asia Minor of the Hittites were looked to for possible explanations. Neearer still, Iran could be the best intermediary and what other
channel could there be than the intervening upland of Baluchistan, a geographic zone seen as a continuation of the Iranian plateau? Thus the picture of the complete of a culture—be it from the known Indian or the Somali—would be an inherently incomplete picture. But the trend in which the people of the region have been following would have the same emotional feeling of the socio-political life of the country down to this day.

What has this to say to us about the origin of the Bronze Age Cultures? Can we examine the pattern of the Indus Basin from the known traditional Indus Valley into the different cultures or out of the Ganges? At least one great Indian scholar, the lateutured Dr. B. Subbarao who presented for the first time a cultural perspective of the Indus Valley, has explained his own reconstruction of the different patterns of cultural distribution in a way that the Indo-Ganges plain does not play any significant part. This trend makes it very hard to explain why the little Ganges Valley of the Ganges does not attract people. After all, Bronze Age Cultures in other parts of the world also spread over large areas with different economic factors, along with others, some of which were not understood to define a region in the known technology of the time. If we look at the geopolitics of the world, whether they lie in the “divide” or they are spill-over, in an attempt to draw outside resources into our country, the coastal area of Gujarat is concerned, that must be viewed in the natural direction of advance of these people who are the main carriers of this knowledge of sea faring. Thus we can picture the Arabian coast as the base to which the Indo-Basins joined like a perpendicularly shaped coastal area. The coast provided the seafarers traffic while the interior of the Indus stood like a great support in the form of the hinterland. It is therefore a mistake to think that these highly developed people were rooted in the Indus River system. But Gujarat opened up a new world of contact with which these highly developed people could establish some relation with the under-developed peoples in its neighborhood.

REGION AND REGIONALISM

While we talk in terms of the Indus Basin, we cannot afford to allow the limitation of regionalism to prejudice our judgment. The activity being carried out by the region is based on the resources of the environment, the technological capability available in that environment, and certainly the will and the manner of the people that go to harness them to their best advantage.

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Endnotes

1. The Indo-Ganges plain is a region that is not far different from the vision of the classic Indian region. Blasia states that the Indo-Ganges plain is a cultural concept of king's dominion as recorded in the Mahabharata. As a pillar of inscription, King Chandrika in Dhalal presents a picture of the physical canvas that is not far different from the vision of the classic Indian region.

2. The Indo-Ganges plains, the Peninsular South and the coastal belt facing the open seas. While the Himalayas were the northern invaders, the coast opened sea traffic to the west and further, the alluvial plains with their rich farmlands could be contrasted with the rocky surface of the Deccan and its poorly led rivers. This classification in far different from the picture of the four seasons, the four castes, the four stages of life born out of the environment of the holists. The trend in which the Indus Basin follows the core of the Ganges pattern that forms the basic foundation of the Indian cultural life and that has only developed a very definitive role in the socio-political life of the country down to this day.

3. Following the line of Dr. Subbarao, let us re-examine the explanations given so far. By now we have no doubt succeeded in defining the various Bronze Age Cultures and following one another in sequence and convert them into a coherent picture of the different regions. This picture is the one that has been followed in various lines of approach. For one, we call the orthodox and the other is just emerging in another form. The classic pattern has been laid by such British anthropologists as Marshall, Wheeler, Pigott and, in recent years, A. Ll. Allen. The style of architectural patterns in the different regions. How a particular tradition inheres in a particular region and is possible to define social patterns of the different regions.

4. A recent study of the Indo-Ganges plain does not play any significant part. This trend makes it very hard to explain why the little Ganges Valley of the Ganges does not attract people. After all, Bronze Age Cultures in other parts of the world also spread over large areas with different economic factors, along with others, some of which were not understood to define a region in the known technology of the time. If we look at the geopolitics of the world, whether they lie in the “divide” or they are spill-over, in an attempt to draw outside resources into our country, the coastal area of Gujarat is concerned, that must be viewed in the natural direction of advance of these people who are the main carriers of this knowledge of sea faring. Thus we can picture the Arabian coast as the base to which the Indo-Basins joined like a perpendicularly shaped coastal area. The coast provided the seafarers traffic while the interior of the Indus stood like a great support in the form of the hinterland. It is therefore a mistake to think that these highly developed people were rooted in the Indus River system. But Gujarat opened up a new world of contact with which these highly developed people could establish some relation with the under-developed peoples in its neighborhood.
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The practice of jade carving is said to have been brought from the east or south during the historical period. At the same time the Baluchis are no less in number in Sind. In fact the Baluchi in Sind outnumber their own population in their own home of Baluchistan. Also having a zone in eastern Iran, they are a scattered population cut up into different parts of settlement as the nature of the earth has permitted.

Some sub-regions have their own forms of cultural expression. To look to the physiognomy we have omitted the northern hilly areas as they played little part during the Bronze Age. It is because of the varying geographic factors that there is differentiation in cultural activity. There are differences in the levels of development and there are complex cultural factors that lead to cultural differences mark out the sub-regions. If this is the situation today, what could it have been during the Bronze Age?

**ROUTES OF MOVEMENT**

If we sit in the beautiful campus of Peshawar University at the mouth of Khyber Pass, we are not too far from the modern town of Quetta in Baluchistan. We can see the head of Bolan Pass, we hear the stories and sense the presence of the people coming from Central Asia. If we go further we wonder if somewhere the story-teller's Bazar is found in Peshawar. The Ganges Valley—the heart of India—is far away. The mountain hilly borderland, which has given a concept of limited geographic horizon to the classic Indian writers, is no barrier for those peoples who have been moving freely up and down the land from time immemorial. The hilly paths are the nearest of the collection which is spread up and down the plains their rendezvous. The Indus Plain is the land of the Abasin—the father river—the holy shrine because it is here that they get food. The valley plains of the Indus can be separated from the traditional Khorasan and_unlock in Multan or the other cities of Punjab. Multan, the route of the Indus can follow a link in the great historical movement of peoples, priests, missionaries and merchants between the Indian plains and the Indus plains. While Quetta opens the route to the smaller valleys in Baluchistan with its own character and setting, it is in the same way the mullahs or the people of Multan have found a way to the plains. The route of the Indus has been a peaceful mission of its socio-cultural and socio-economic resources, but the western forces hold the key to the understanding of the Indus people, and it is these forces which decide whether they should participate in this give-and-take from the east or south, which has been the case of the Baluchis. A study of the Shahanshahis of the Indus Basin presents a unique lesson for the modern Persian.
deltaic Sind; or one can cross over the Salt Range a little beyond the ancient site of Musakhel and pass on to Taxila, the center of activity within this zone. What about Khyber? The earliest recorded evidence of its use comes from the pen of Babur, the first Mogul ruler in India (A.D. 1483-1530). No wonder that the pattern associated with the Indus Civilization has not been traced in Gandhara. The earliest cultural material of the Bronze Age has been found by the Italians in the Ghalegai cave in Swat but that is just a backwater wash from the developed region of the Indus plains. Much later we find here a new complex of the Bronze Age, termed the Gandhara Grave Culture.

**GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE**

The Indus Basin has had overland connections with the west as well as a sea route along the coast. Of the overland routes the Khyber Pass was the least attractive, because of certain physical features in Afghanistan which compelled the converging area to be around the Kandahar-Ghazni Plain. From this station it was possible to push over to Quetta, if the objective was limited to the small Baluchistan valleys or a dash to the Indus delta. On the other hand, the Comal and the Kurrum Passes opened up the vast expanse of the alluvial plain where man could settle down and take advantage of the natural fertility of the soil. We have earlier noted the threefold direction trend in this area. It is along these routes that the earliest archaeological sites of the Bronze Age are now being discovered. If overland contact was responsible for the origin of these cultures, these passes have the first choice. It is on their lines that we have traced the remains of the so-called Kot Diji culture. On the other hand, the overland route through Baluchistan gets bogged down in the labyrinth of hill ranges and numerous hill streams. From here a dash to the Indus delta is rare but a reverse movement from the delta to Baluchistan is more profitable in terms of mineral resources. As opposed to this, the urbanity of the Indus Civilization is well grounded on the Indus plains. It is a stage far ahead of Kot Diji. As the development is seen straight up along the river plains and only later spreads into Baluchistan and the Gujarat area, it seems to follow the pattern of a perpendicular stretch on a coastal base. Where should we start—on the base or over the perpendicular apex? The coast had the advantage of direct sea connection with the west while the perpendicular could root itself on the main resources of the Indus plains. In the earlier case of the Kot Diji culture the overland route was more important, but in the present case of the Indus Civilization the coast opens a brighter pros-

**FUTURE ACTION**

The barren uplands of Baluchistan have held the archaeologists' interest for many years although this area has yielded only small sites. They need not take priority over the good soil of the plains where alone an urban civilization could possibly develop. While the hill plateaus maintained a precarious life, it was the valley plain that forged ahead towards a real stage of urban development. This development shows two trends—one inclines towards the overland route and the second establishes a direct link with the overseas centers in western Asia. As far as smaller isolated human settlements are concerned, they could flourish in the hill plateaus or in the hill slopes. It required a tremendous effort to transform the early agriculturists into a coherent integrated urbanized civilization.

We thus have varying patterns in the Bronze Age Cultures of the Indus Basin. If we desire to trace their origins, this geographic perspective has to be kept in view.

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