

# Review Essay

## Owning a civilization

Supriya Varma  
Jaya Menon

### The Earliest Civilization of South Asia

by B. B. Lal

Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 1997; xxi+308 pp+plates; Rs. 2250

### India 1947-1997: New Light on the Indus Civilization

by B. B. Lal

Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 1998; xix+135 pp+plates; Rs. 950

The continuing obsession of Indian archaeology with the Harappan civilization has resulted in archaeological research focusing almost entirely on Harappa. Hence, the average reader associates archaeology only with the images of Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Lothal and, more recently, Dholavira.

This preoccupation seems to have begun with the partition in 1947, and as part of the agenda for an 'Indian' archaeology. Note, for instance, the way B. B. Lal broaches this problem in his 1998 book: '[O]nly two very insignificant sites, Kotla Nihang in Punjab and Rangpur in Gujarat remained within the Indian border... Indian archaeologists accepted the challenge and by 1984 placed on the map of present-day India as many as 800 sites associated with various stages of [the Harappan] civilization... The number incidentally is greater than that of such sites in Pakistan' (p. 3).

#### Distorted View

It goes without saying that modern political boundaries are not really relevant in archaeological or historical terms. In Lal's case, the attempt to discover Harappan sites within the boundaries of post-partition India and the highlighting of the discoveries made on the 'Indian' sites culminates in a book which totally negates the Harappan sites in Pakistan (1998). The result is a distorted view of the past.

The other book (1997) has been divided into three unequal parts roughly covering the rise, maturity and decline of the Harappan civilization. The second part, the largest, gives details on most of the excavated sites. It has chapters on the economy, script and language, disposal of the dead, religion, social stratification and the political set-up. Considering

that the book is meant for the serious reader, it is surprising that about half of it summarizes data from excavation reports. The book mirrors a general malaise in Indian archaeology. Data from excavation reports are laid out as facts. These 'facts' are then said to speak for themselves. Interpretations are made from the point of view of contemporary society. For instance, reviewing the evidence on burials, Lal suggests that 'the Mediterraneans and Caucasoids may have dominated the scene while the Australoids, who represent the population from central parts of India, may have been incorporated into the Harappan fold, perhaps as artisans/workmen. The Mongoloids, who evidently hailed from the Himalayan region, also landed up in the Harappan cities as domestic helpers as they do even now' (221). Not only is Lal sanctioning racial categories long thrown out by anthropologists, he is equating race with class.

Lal uses the concept of class in two other contexts. One in relation to occupations, the other when he tries to divide the Harappan society into three classes: a priestly class inhabiting the citadel, an agriculturist-cum-merchant class occupying the lower town, and a workers' class living outside the two fortified areas (1997, pp. 235 and 230). He then equates these three classes with castes: the 'Harappan priestly class' with the brahmins; the merchant-cum-farmer class with the vaishyas; and the 'underprivileged lower working class' with the shudras. He writes: 'In the Harappan civilization, there is not much evidence of military equipment and therefore it would be unwarranted to visualize a separate warrior class in it. The kshatriya class may have come into being later on as and when the need

arose' (p. 277). It is difficult to say if the archaeological data would support such an interpretation.

There are other methodological problems with both books. For instance, Lal notes the occurrence of circular silos at Kunal in the third sub-period and concludes that grain production had increased (1998, pp. 8-9). In another context, we find a reference to mass production of beads at Chanhudaro on the basis of the discovery of drills, lumps of raw material and unfinished beads (1997, p. 260). This kind of evidence does not really support Lal's claims. One may come up with hypotheses regarding quantification, etc., but this would require a rigorous use of data recovery techniques and a sophisticated analysis.

Lal rejects the idea of the Harappan civilization as an empire because there is no evidence of a conqueror coming from elsewhere, sweeping over the north-western parts of the subcontinent, establishing his rule and along with it imposing upon the conquered the culture of his home country' (1997, p. 233). If Lal were right, how would we account, let's say, for the Mauryan empire? Did Chandragupta Maurya come from outside, sweeping over the north-western part of the subcontinent?

Another problem with Lal's studies is that he treats pottery as diagnostic of an archaeological culture. Lal states in relation to Gumla: 'In so far as the pottery is concerned, black on red became dominant, though the chocolate on white (or buff) lingered on suggesting that the earlier people had not completely disappeared but seemed to have rejoined the newcomers' (1997, p. 54). Similarly, in the context of Dholavira, despite differences in settlement morphology and house types along with a break in stratigraphy, the similarity of pottery is seen as reflecting a continuity of the same population/stock (1997, p. 139).

However, pottery is only one of the artefact-types that is likely to be found in a culture, for 'culture' in archaeology comprises, as David Clarke (1978) reiterated, 'of a polytheistic set of specific and comprehensive artefact-type categories, which consistently recur together in assemblages within a limited geographical area.' An assemblage, in turn, is an associated set of artefact-types which occur contemporaneously. An artefact-type consists of homogenous artefacts which share a recurring range of attributes.

A few artefacts are taken by ar-

chaeologists to be diagnostic of the Mature Harappan phase, and depending on the stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates sites are categorized as Pre, Early and Late Harappan. Clarke, in fact, emphasized that a culture be characterized by a range of artefact-type categories which represent 'as many material aspects of cultural activity as survive—not simply a sample from a single socio-cultural aspect like weapon assemblages, bronze artefact assemblages or pottery assemblages.' We find that a site like Daimabad is considered by Lal to be 'associated with the Harappan culture' (1997, p. 156) solely on the basis of some motifs on pottery, 'dishes and cups... stands and vases', 'a button-shaped terracotta seal with Harappan script', and a few potsherds bearing Harappan signs. Similarly, at the site of Kunal, artefacts are considered as Harappan on purely impressionistic grounds: 'a multi-spiralled armlet reminding [our emphasis] us of a similar armlet worn by the famous dancing girl from Mohenjodaro... Copper objects included axes, fish-hooks, spearheads, inverted "V" shaped arrowheads, coiled cones and coiled finger-rings, most of which remind [our emphasis] us of their Mature Harappan counterparts' (1998, p. 9).

#### Culture: Phase/Change

Thus, finding a few similarities in artefacts does not qualify a site to be classified as Late or Early. The distinction between culture phase and culture change is never clearly understood nor brought out here. According to Clarke, in the case of culture phases, the changes are likely to be in small numbers of essential artefact-types; however, successive archaeological cultures can be distinguished on the basis of changes in most of the essential and key artefact-types. Why then are sites like Daimabad and Alamgirpur considered as Late Harappan, or Kunal as Pre Mature Harappan? In fact, sites like Daimabad and Alamgirpur, while being categorized as Late Harappan, are seen as constituting the southernmost and easternmost sites of the Harappan civilization (1998, pp. 50, 52). On what basis can the Harappan limits be fixed through Late Harappan sites? To quibble over this point, why are not the Early Harappan sites being taken into consideration? Is it because the boundaries of the Harappan civilization would then incontestably extend into the western parts of present-day Pakistan?

It is obvious that there will be elements of continuity in successive cultures. We cannot really expect total transformation of material culture, for we are not dealing with wholesale massacres of populations. Thus, the occurrence of a painted motif on pottery or a generic artefact cannot imply the continuation of an archaeological culture.

There also seems to be some confusion over the use of the term 'Bronze age' (1997, pp. 155, 180). The distinction between a Copper or Chalcolithic age and the Bronze age has not been made. The classification into the Chalcolithic and Bronze ages should not be merely on the basis of the occurrence of copper or bronze objects. The term 'Bronze age' has to be understood in more than a technological sense, apropos our argument on looking beyond a single dominant artefact-type.

Certain lacunae occurring in both books need to be pointed out. We find that the site of Nageshwar on the northwestern coast of Saurashtra has been unjustifiably left out. It has also been suggested (1997, p. 199) that camel could have been used as a pack animal during the Harappan period. Although dromedary was domesticated in the Arabian peninsula towards the end of the third millennium BC, for several centuries it was mainly herded but not used either for riding or as a pack animal. On the whole, evidence based on pictorial representations and osteology suggests its use as a pack animal from around 1500 BC (J. Zarins, 1989, pp. 144-49).

The Ghaggar river has been projected by Lal (1997, pp. 73, 103, 199; 1998, pp. 4, 5) as a mighty, independent river flowing into the Rann of Kutch. Does a wide extant bed indicate the amount of water originally held by a river? Can not a shifting river reveal the same picture? Lal himself admits (1997, p. 73) that there is no conclusive evidence that the Ghaggar flowed into the sea or joined the Indus. Yet, maps have been presented in both books (1997, p. 103; 1998, pp. 4, 5) showing the Ghaggar with its own independent existence. Further, the author comments that the Ghaggar 'dried up and rejuvenated three times' (1997, pp. 9-10). The evidence cited is the occurrence of Mature Harappan, Painted Grey Ware, Rangmahal and Medieval sites around it, implying that in the intervening periods the river had dried up. First, can we make the generalization that the absence of sites means a river had dried up? Second, the absence of sites need not

necessarily mean depopulation of a region. We do have, as pointed out by M.S. Mate (1990, p. 247), the case of a hiatus of 7 or 8 centuries (fifth to thirteenth centuries AD) at the excavated sites in the Deccan. The epigraphic evidence clearly indicates the presence of well established dynasties like the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas of Malkhed and the Yadavas of Devagiri, which have left no material remains. Third, even if the river had dried up after the Rangmahal period, how do we (using Lal's logic) account for the occurrence of medieval sites here?

We feel that the contents of the appendix in *The Earliest Civilization* and chapter XVII in *India 1947-1997* need detailed attention, because of the attempt to equate the Harappan culture with Indo-Aryan speakers. Lal, in a footnote (1997, p. 181), accepts that Dravidian and Indo-Aryan are now considered as linguistic terms and not as racial categories. Yet, it seems clear from these two chapters that the discussion revolves around racial categories. On p. 287 of the same book, he uses data from B. E. Hemphill, J. R. Lukacs and K.A.R. Kennedy which notes that there was a biological continuity in the population at least between 4500 BC and 800 BC 'In such a situation, how can one envisage the entry of hordes and hordes of Vedic Aryans who are supposed to belong to an alien, non-Harappan biological group around the middle of the second millennium BC?'

Lal seems to think that a new language can only come in through conquest or invasion, resulting in a mass exodus of people (1997, pp. 282, 283, 284; 1998, pp. 116-117, 118). He visualizes that if the Indo-Aryans invaded the Dravidian speaking Harappans, then necessarily the latter would have been pushed to South India where Dravidian languages are now spoken. In that scenario, he notes, one should expect to find Harappan sites in South India. However, no one now disputes the idea of an invasion or of the Indo-Aryans invading the Harappans: *that theory has long ago been discarded.*

#### Literary Evidence

Continuing his argument, the author wonders why there are no Dravidian speakers in the Indus-Sarasvati valleys or in Gujarat if Dravidian was the language spoken by the Harappans (1997, p. 284). We would like to draw the author's attention to

studies done on kinship patterns in Saurashtra which reveal that cross-cousin marriage, a practice associated with the Dravidian kinship system, is customary among some communities like the Kathis, Grasia Rajputs and the Mers (T. R. Trautmann, 1995 [1981], pp. 111, 124-33). Further, suffixes of some present-day villages in Saurashtra and the Gujarat plains have a Dravidian origin (H. D. Sankalia, 1949, pp. 53-4, 117, 138, 162, 167). According to W. A. Fairservis and F. C. Southworth (1989, pp. 133-34), there are also elements of linguistic convergence between Gujarati and Dravidian languages.

As far as the dating of the *Rigveda* is concerned, perhaps it would be best to leave the task to specialists in historical linguistics and not base it on astronomy. Lal (1998, p. 121) tries to date the *Rigveda* using another piece of evidence. According to him, two radiocarbon dates from the late levels of Kalibangan, which occur around 1900 BC, prove that the site was abandoned about that time. He further makes the quite unjustified claim that the site was abandoned due to the drying up of the Ghaggar. To him, this means that the *Rigveda* antedates 1900 BC. Can we date literary texts on the basis of such evidence?

Let us shift to the geographic locale of the Rigvedic texts. Quite clearly, the areas included are Punjab and its surroundings: eastern Afghanistan, the valleys of the Kabul, Kuram, Gomai, Swat, and probably Herat rivers; also the valleys of the rivers of Seistan—Sarasvati and Helmand (M. Witzel, 1995, p. 317). Some names of the North Indian rivers are found in Iranian forms, such as Sarayu as Haraxvaiti in the Herat area, Sarasvati as Haraxvati in Scistan Helmand, Gomati as Gomai, and Sindhu as Hindu/Hendu (Witzel, p. 105). A relatively late hymn of the *Rigveda*, the Nadistuti, enumerates the western and eastern tributaries of the largest stream, Sindhu. Among the eastern tributaries is mentioned the Sarasvati (Witzel, p. 318). It seems that the *Rigveda* mentions Sarasvati in more than one geographical context. Thus, a more careful usage of the literary evidence seems necessary.

Finally, we come to the issue of the horse in Indian archaeology. Essentially, we are concerned with the identification of horse remains from Harappan sites. Lal cites S. Bokonyi's identification of horse bones from Surkotada (1997, p. 185). Yet, he fails to inform the reader that

other specialists disagree on this identification. R. H. Meadow and Ajita Patel (1997) warn us that in most cases one could possibly identify only the genus and not the species. Merely identifying bones as belonging to the Equus family is not enough, as these could belong to either the E. Hemionus (the Asiatic half-ass) or the E. Caballus (the true horse). Moreover, the discovery of one or two bones from the Harappan sites does not have the same importance as the reference in the *Rigveda*.

Using more or less the same body of evidence, Lal (1955) had put forward the hypothesis that the Indo-Aryans were the same as the Painted Grey Ware culture. Since then, the only new piece of evidence appears to be the terracotta horse figurines from Nausharo in modern Pakistan. Now at the end of the 1990s, we find a new hypothesis being proposed.

As mentioned in the beginning of this review, the attempt of Indian archaeologists since partition has been to discover sites of the Harappan civilization within the Indian borders. We have already noted that sites which can hardly be categorized as Harappan are labelled so, precisely because of the aura attached to this civilization. Not only this. We now find the origins of 'megalithism' and 'stupaism' rooted in the Harappan (1998, p. 108). On the other hand, we have the literary evidence of the Vedas, seen as the 'fountainhead' of 'Indian civilization'. Further, there have been moves towards locating the original home of Indo-Aryans within the borders of modern India. It is the linkage of all these elements that is most disturbing.

Archaeology can at best give us only a partial picture of the past. Similarly, literary evidence too is selective. Hence, trying to fit the two together is almost a futile task. For example, there have been efforts to identify the Indo-Aryans with a number of diverse archaeological cultures, ranging from the Late Harappan Copper Hoards to the Painted Grey Ware, and now with the Harappan. We feel that in trying to correlate literary and archaeological evidence, the discipline of archaeology has to some extent ended up as a political tool to prove the 'authenticity' of certain literary traditions.

Supriya Varma teaches at the Department of History, and Jaya Menon at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, M. S. University of Baroda, Vadodara.