

## **North Indian Protohistory and Vedic Aryans**

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### **Introduction**

During the last two decades, some eccentric attempts have been made to identify the Indus Civilization with the Rig Vedic culture. Their conclusions are based on wrong assumptions claiming that (1) the Harappan sites have recently yielded the evidence of fire altars, sacrificial pits and true horse, so well known to the Rig Veda, (2) that the Rig Vedic Saraswati was a mighty perennial river system parallel to the Indus and was the nucleus of Indus Civilization, (3) that the date of the Rig Veda goes back to the third millennium BC, the era of the Indus Civilization before the desertion of Kalibangan around 1900 BC and (4) that the Rig Vedic Aryans knew fortified cities, sea trade and state-based society. The protagonists of the thesis are selective in using only a fragment of the Vedic literature and comparing it with untested archaeological evidence. Their interpretation of the Rig Veda is based on distorted understanding of myths and metaphors of the ritual text. The present article is an attempt to take a holistic view of Protohistoric archaeology of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and of the Vedic literature as a whole for a broad and more trustworthy cultural correlation. The approach here is to give an over view of the protohistoric cultural manifestation in the sub-continent and to outline the cultural pattern known from the Vedic literature. It will be followed by a discussion to correlate the Vedic evidence with archaeological cultural evidence in chronological, geographical and cultural context.

### **I**

The archaeological investigations carried out in northern India and Pakistan over the last five decades or so have brought to light two distinct cultural patterns between c. 3000-600 BC. The first cultural cycle is marked by the advent of agro-pastoral communities in the Indus plains from north Baluchistan around 3000 BC. The culture is distinguished by the use of Hakra ware and dwelling pits. It was followed by the emergence of regional Chalcolithic peasant-pastoral cultures identified as the Kot Diji, Amri-Nal and the Sothi-Siswal cultures using related ceramic traditions. The discovery of moderate fortified settlements and mud brick structures at Kot Diji, Kalibangan, Banawali etc perhaps suggests the rise of chiefdoms around c. 2800-2500 BC. This in fact marked the peak of the pre-Harappan socio-economic formation in the Indus Valley.

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The historical process initiated by surplus production, social stratification and the rise of state led to the growth of craft specialization and trade and the rise of urban centres at Harappa, Rehman Dheri and Nausharo in mid Indus Valley about 2500 BC. The Indus state seems to have quickly established its towns or administrative head quarters all over the territory occupied by the surplus yielding peasant communities. The class character of Indus civilization at the peak was characterized by the growth of fortified urban centers, town planning and drainage, monumental architecture using sun dried and fired bricks for storage of grains and water, long distance trade and sea faring, use of seals and script, standard weights and measures, bronze tools and weapons, a typical pottery tradition and burial customs.

The Indus state disintegrated around 1900 BC perhaps as a consequence of internal conflicts and revolts led by urban elites or chiefs. This resulted in the decline and desertion of cities and towns and dispersal and migration of town's men and peasant pastoral communities. The new leadership re-organized the late Harappan people into regional chiefdoms using uninscribed seals as tokens of authority. The new social formation included regional cultures such as the Cemetery H culture, Jhukar culture and other late Harappan cultures in the Sutlej -Ganga Divide and in Gujarat. The more marginalized communities like the Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) culture occupied the south-eastern periphery of the late Indus culture. Their settlements have been discovered in south-eastern Haryana, north-eastern Rajasthan, central Ganga-Yamuna Doab and the Ganga Valley.

The process of complex interaction between the migrating late-Siswal Chalcolithic communities perhaps displaced by Harappan and later by Late Harappan colonization and the indigenous microlithic people led to the beginning of settled agricultural- pastoral life in central and eastern Rajasthan and also in central Indian plateau which soon developed regional cultures based on chiefdoms at Balathal, Gilund, Nagda, Kayatha etc. The growing politico- economic strength of Banas (Ahar) culture led to its expansion at Sur Kotda (period IC) in Kutch and in Kayatha (period II) in central India. Similarly the rise of Malwa chiefdom of Navda Toli (period III) marked a cultural dent into Deccan. The succeeding Jorwe culture a chiefdom best known from Inamgaon, expanded its area of colonization and suzerainty further north and south. None of these cultures seem to have attained statehood and the level of urbanization. In the era of Malwa - Jorwe conflicts for appropriating land and water resources perhaps some clans or communities spread into the mid Ganga Valley who gradually moved into the lower Ganga Valley or West Bengal.

## II

The second major cycle of cultural movement of agro- pastoral tribes is discovered by excavations in the Swat, Dir and Chitral valleys of North West Frontier Province, in the Gomal valley, in Bolan Valley at Pirak and at Sarai Khola near Taxila to the east of the Indus around 1600 B.C. At Pirak the new comers largely adopted pottery and architecture of the indigenous people, but they introduced horse, Bactrian camel and rice from the north-west. Horse burials along with the dead is unmistakably a central Asian custom. They also used thin painted grey pottery perhaps in the later phase. The culture has been dated between 1700-700 BC.

In the northern Indus Valley and near Taxila were discovered settlements and cemeteries of the new comers. The culture was termed as the Gandhar Grave Culture by A.H. Dani, who dated it between 1700-200 BC. The culture is distinguished by small settlements and use of copper. Some of the Graves yielded considerable quantities of Grave goods than others, perhaps suggesting social hierarchy. The most characteristic features of the culture are wheel made burnished grey ware and horse burial associated with humans at Katelai in Swat. The culture has been identified with Vedic Aryans for its affinities with central Asian culture. The Gandhar Grave Culture in course of time grew into a regional culture of north-west Pakistan extending as far east as the Chenab. It seems to have been based on chiefdoms. Iron was introduced in the culture by the close of second millennium BC. By around 500 BC the Gandhar Grave Culture seems to have transformed into a state based urban society or Mahajanapada at Taxila in the Gandhar region. The Gandhar Grey ware survived for a few centuries in the early historic Northern Black Polished Ware period.

The grey ware using people next entered the Ghaggar- Hakra and Saraswati basin and the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. Here the pottery is distinguished by black paintings over the grey ware and hence termed the Painted Grey Ware (PGW). The regional PGW culture has been discovered from a few vertical excavations mostly undertaken in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. It has been generally dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the first millennium BC. The pottery is painted in black linear designs and has more developed forms of dishes, basins and bowls than the Gandhar Grey Ware. The PGW culture has been discovered from a number of sites at Hastinapur, Ahicchatra, Mathura, Indraprastha, Bairat, and Kausambi, which later transformed into Mahajanapadas around 600BC. It is clear that the Painted Grey Ware chiefdoms were succeeded in the region by Kuru, Panchala, Matsya, Surasena and Vatsa Mahajanapadas or states. The thin wheel made grey ware is associated with similar types of black slipped, black and red and red wares. Some of the terra-cotta figurines and grey ware dishes and bowls have family likeness with the Gandhar Grave Culture. In its later phase the unpainted grey ware continues to survive side by side with the Northern Black Polished Ware in the early historic era. In the absence of large-scale excavations at suitable PGW sites it is not possible to examine the phases of its cultural development. The Saraswati valley perhaps represents the earlier phase of the culture as the excavation at Hat, in Kurukshetra region of Haryana has brought to light a unique evidence of dwelling pits in the PGW culture. The settlement was protected by a V shaped moat. Similar evidence of moat has been unearthed at Jogna Khera and Kunal on the Saraswati. A limited number of PGW potsherds were observed on the top of both these mounds. The presence of the moat perhaps suggests a chiefdom-based society. The peak of the PGW culture reached in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab before the rise of Mahajanapadas in the NBPW period.

The region in the mid Ganga Valley to the east of Allahabad and Kannauj is distinguished from the PGW zone by a related Black Slipped Ware (BSW) culture in the pre NBPW period. The BSW people penetrated into the region already occupied by the Chalcolithic people using painted black slipped ware. But the BSW is distinguished from the painted black slipped ware of the Chalcolithic Period by shapes so typical of the PGW and pre-PGW levels at Atranjikhhera (Pd. II&III). The black and red ware, red ware and grey ware associated with the BSW are other variant products of the firing technique and are no

different from BSW and PGW in types. Since the BSW as well as the associated ware occurs along with PGW at a number of sites in Haryana, northern-eastern Rajasthan and central Ganga-Yamuna Doab all these ceramic industries seem to be the by products of the inverted firing technique used in the production of the PGW. While moving into the Chalcolithic zone the PGW culture people seem to have adopted the colour scheme of the black slipped and black and red wares of the indigenous Chalcolithic cultures. They however continued to use their original PGW types like the dish, bowl and basin. Thus the PGW and the BSW cultures are related regional cultural entities. The BSW has remote similarities with the Gandhar Grey Ware. The BSW culture like the PGW culture is also associated with iron tools and weapons, glass beads and bangles, bone points, Ghata shaped terracotta beads and horse. The continuity of chalcolithic pottery in the BSW cultural levels at some of the sites suggests coexistence of the two cultures in the region. But the BSW is dominant in pre-NBPW levels at a number of sites such as Narhan, Sarai Mohana, Archa, Rajghat, Prahladpur, Manjhi, Lahuradeva, Jhusi, Chechar, etc. in mid Ganga valley. The culture is chiefdom based and non urban. Although the stratigraphical context and chronology of iron is not beyond doubt at Malhar and Dadupur sites including Lahuradeva. It is most likely that it was the BSW culture, which introduced iron, glass and horse for the first time in eastern India. In course of my study of the BSW from Pandu rajar Dhibi and Mangal Kot at the Kolkota University museum I saw the occurrence of the typical dish of the ware in the late levels of chalcolithic period. I was also shown a photograph of a typical dish of burnished BSW from the transitional phase of Mangal Kot by Dr. Ashok Datta. At Lucknow while examining the collection from Lahuradeva I could distinguish the BSW period from the Chalcolithic on the basis of its typical pottery types. Thus there is no doubt that the BSW people penetrated eastern India a few centuries before the rise of urbanization. The BSW people better equipped as they were with iron weapons and horse could establish their hegemony over the indigenous chalcolithic communities. In course of time the BSW culture transformed into the Northern Black Polished Ware culture marked distinctive stamp on the emergence of urbanization and Mahajanpada states, which first arose in the region of Magadha and eastern U.P. around 600 BC.

In central India too a similar situation is obtained in the pre-NBP period. Iron and horse associated BSW/ PGW culture has been attested from several excavated sites in the Chambal, Sipra and Betwa river valleys in Madhya Pradesh. The discovery of typical dish and bowl of BSW /PGW from the excavations at Nagda, Kayatha, Ujjain Vidisha etc. is the proof of their settlements in the region. . The BSW /PGW chiefs seem to have established their hegemony over the indigenous communities here too. This must have resulted in the emergence of plural and in pockets of composite culture. The process of social integration hastened with the growth of Mahajanapada states and urban centres of Avanti (Ujjain), Chedi and Asmaka. Some related though distinct agro-pastoralist communities using iron and horse and distinguished by megalithic burial customs colonized parts of the Vindhyan and Vidarbha regions about this time. Shinde has rightly held the (possibly the chiefdom based) megalithic people responsible for the desertion of parts of Maharashtra by the Jorwe people around 700 BC.

A brief summary of the cultural developments and social formations in northern India and Pakistan reveals that the post-Indus 2<sup>nd</sup> great movement of the Gandhara Grey Ware, PGW, BSW and the Megalithic people were widely distributed. They established their chiefdoms all over the Indo-Gangetic plains and central Indian plateau between c. 1600-600 BC. But they had no roots in the Indus, Late Indus or chalcolithic cultures in the subcontinent. They developed rather exclusive regional cultures by dislodging the indigenous population from the northern plains between the Indus and the Ganga. They, however, had to adjust with the indigenous people in eastern India and central India after establishing their hegemony. Thus the process of colonization of northern India by the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of post-Indus new comers was complex. The Neolithic, Microlithic and Chalcolithic communities formed the substratum in urban societies and existed individually in pockets in the plural cultural mosaic of the subcontinent.

### III

The Vedic literature is broadly classified into early Vedic (Rig Veda) and later Vedic literature (Atharva Veda, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishadas). The literature reveals a continuous growth of culture characterized by Sanskrit language, varna system of society and polytheistic and monotheistic ideas and rituals including yajnas, animal sacrifices and cremation of the dead. They had known the use of copper in the early Vedic and also iron in the later Vedic phases. The earlier time bracket of the Vedic literature can be placed in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC on the basis of inscriptional evidence from Boghaz Koi in Syria and affinities with the culture and language of Avesta. The later limit of the later Vedic literature coincides with the beginning of Buddhist literature (c. 500 BC). The Vedic society gradually evolved from agro-pastoral to settled agrarian society. The early Vedic era was distinguished by tribal assemblies while the later Vedic Janapadas were controlled by chiefdoms. A simple division of labour had evolved in the Vedic society suggesting regional exchange networks though it still continued to be a non-urban society having no knowledge of writing. The Vedic society was horse centered and the chiefs performed horse sacrifices. The common practice of disposal of the dead among the Vedic people was cremation. The geography of the Rig Veda was the Sapta Sindhu region or northern Indus valley. But later on the Vedic people extended into the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. The region between the Sutlej and the Ganga became the nucleus of the later Vedic culture. The ambitious chiefs gradually penetrated into eastern and central India as known from the Vedic and later literature.

### IV

It is clear from the above account that the northern Protohistoric archaeology of Indo-Pakistan sub-continent is marked by a cultural break in between two distinct cultural traditions Copper-Bronze and chalcolithic cultural traditions on the one hand and the post-Indus cultural traditions on the other. It however remains to be examined with which of the two traditions the Vedic culture can be broadly correlated. This has to be tested by comparing and contrasting the chronological and geographical frameworks and cultural characteristics of the two archaeological traditions with the Vedic tradition.

As seen above the Vedic tradition extended from Sapta-Sindhu region of the Rig Veda to Madhya Desh between Saraswati and the Ganga, eastern India and Central India in the later Vedic times. The Rig Vedic nucleus in the Sarasvati valley shifted in course of time to the Madhya Desh. In the next stage they moved into mid Ganga Valley and central India. The Magadhan region marked a hybrid culture and surpassed other regions in socio-economic development and rise of powerful states and early historic urban centres towards the end of the later Vedic period. The Vedic culture reveals a continuous development under chiefdoms all over north India right from c. 1600 BC down to the threshold of 2<sup>nd</sup> urbanization and the rise of 16 Mahajanapadas around c. 600BC.

In the light of the above it is evident that the Vedic Cultural Tradition corresponds better with the Post- Indus cultural tradition characterized by the Gandhara Grey Ware culture, the Painted Grey Ware culture and the Black Slipped or Black and red ware culture than with the Indus Civilisation for the following reasons. (1) The cultural formations of the Indus tradition date from 3000-1300 BC, but the Vedic tradition dates between 1500-600BC. (2) The cultures of the Indus tradition spread in the Indus Valley, Ghaggar- Hakra basin and in the Doab and do not extend into middle and lower Ganga valley in the east and central India unlike the Vedic tradition which extends all over northern India and Pakistan. (3) The Indus tradition declined after 2000BC and died out around c. 1300BC, but the Vedic tradition continued to develop down to the early historic era and got transformed into a state-based urban civilisation in the NBPW period c. 600 BC. (4) Culturally speaking the Vedic Tradition corresponds well with the chiefdom -based Post-Indus cultures as they also use rice, horse and iron, but it reveals a glaring contrast with the Indus Civilisation for the absence of fortified cities, town planning and drainage, monumental art and architecture of burnt bricks, advanced specialization and sea trade, use of seals, weights, measures and script and the custom of burying the dead in cemeteries. (5) The identification of fire places as fire -altars, waste pits as sacrificial pits in Harappan sites and the imaginary reading of Sanskrit legends on Indus seals is no less than fabrication of the evidence to support the distorted version of Indian history, viewing the past cultural mosaic not as it actually was, but as they wanted to see it. What is important here is to know why archaeologists do archaeology the way they do? The reason is the archaeologists like historians belong to their age and society. Major social and political movements in the country and the world influence them too. It is for this reason Indian archaeologists revealed colonial / neo-colonial, communal nationalist persuasions ever since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those influenced by the progressive nationalist perspective viewed Indian nation and culture as pluralistic and composite evolving historically. It is the appreciation of national and social need that promoted the values of secularism. But the adherents of the ideology of Hindutva believed that India is a Hindu nation and has Hindu culture in continuity from Vedic Aryans. The mosaic of cultures of the past evolving into composite Indian culture through the process of history was seen by them not as it really was but what they wanted to see in it. They are selective and lack holistic and relative view while collecting or analyzing the data. They even do not hesitate from distorting, manipulating or even forging the mute archaeological evidence to suit their ideology and opportunistic interests. This is what was attempted by some pseudo archaeologists in Indian Archaeology in the recent past.