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## **UNIT 7 HARAPPAN CIVILIZATION-III\***

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### **Structure**

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Decline of Harappan Civilization: The Archaeological Evidence
- 7.3 Theories of Sudden Decline
  - 7.3.1 Floods and Earthquakes
  - 7.3.2 The Shifting Away of the Indus
  - 7.3.3 Increased Aridity and Drying up of the Ghaggar
  - 7.3.4 Barbarian Invasions
- 7.4 Ecological Imbalance
- 7.5 The Tradition Survives
- 7.6 Transmission of the Harappan Tradition
- 7.7 What Survives from the Harappan Civilization?
- 7.8 Summary
- 7.9 Key Words
- 7.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 7.11 Suggested Readings

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### **7.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After reading this unit, you will learn about:

- the problems faced by scholars in understanding the decline of Harappan civilization;
- the theories put forward for the decline of Harappan civilization;
- why over the years, the scholars have stopped looking for the causes of decline; and
- the evidence of the survival and continuities of the Harappan civilization.

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### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous units we have discussed the various aspects of the origin and growth of Harappan civilization. However, the disappearance of the various aspects of its maturity i.e. writing, town planning, uniformity, etc. in the subsequent phase is rather puzzling. In this Unit we will examine the various arguments put forward to solve this mystery.

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### **7.2 DECLINE OF HARAPPAN CIVILIZATION: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE**

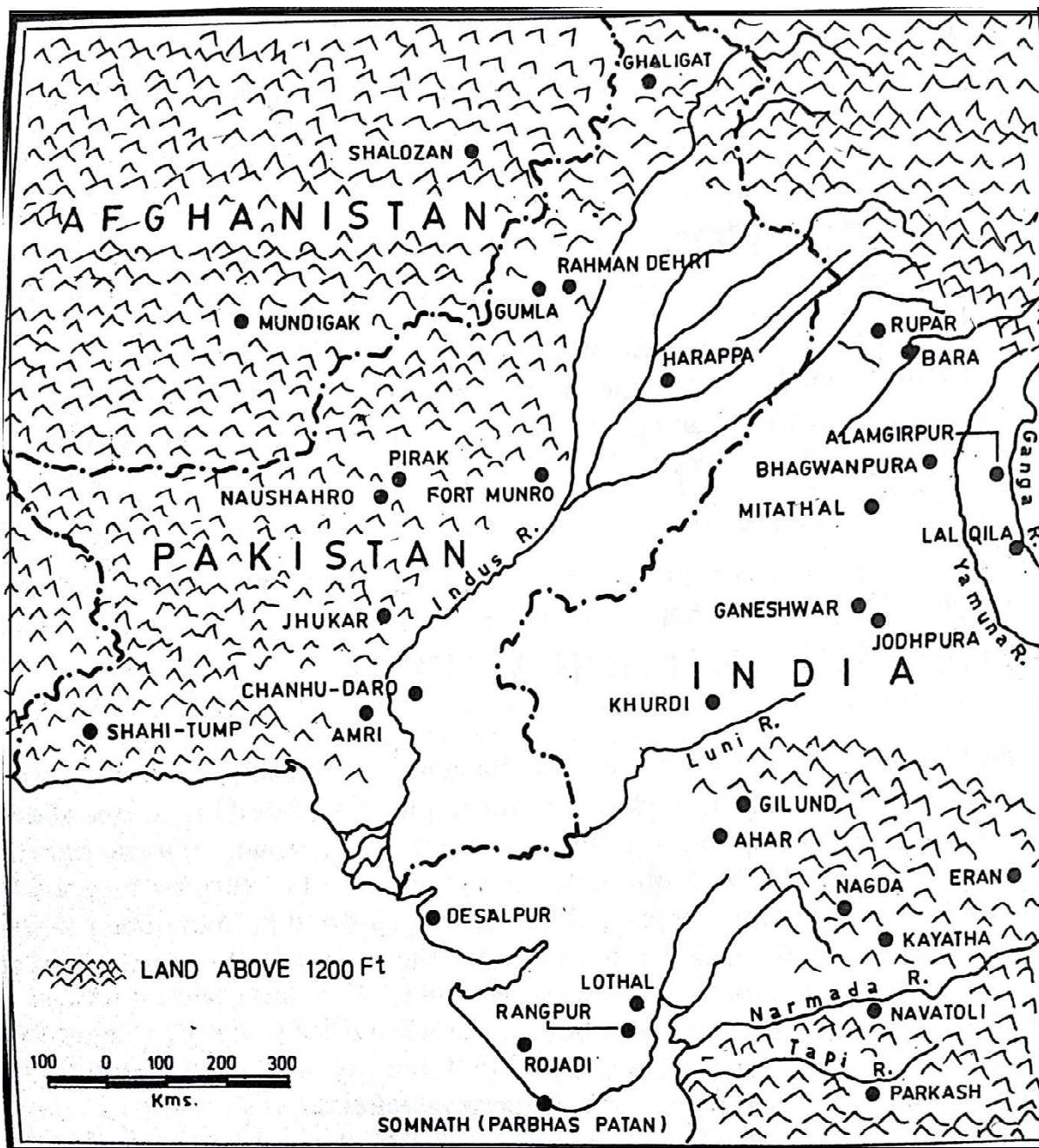
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Cities like Harappa, Mohenjodaro and Kalibangan experienced gradual decline in urban planning and construction. Houses made of old dilapidated bricks and shoddy construction encroached upon the roads and streets of the towns. Flimsy

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\*This Unit has been adopted from EHI-02, Block 2.

partitions sub-divided the courtyards of the houses. The cities were fast turning into slums. A detailed study of the architecture of Mohenjodaro shows that many entry points to the 'Great Bath' were blocked. Sometime later the 'Great Bath' and the 'Granary' fell into total disuse. At the same time the late levels (i.e. later habitations) at Mohenjodaro showed a distinct reduction in the number of sculptures, figurines, beads, bangles and inlay works. Towards the end, the city of Mohenjodaro shrank to a small settlement of three hectares from the original eighty-five hectares. Before its abandonment Harappa seems to have witnessed the arrival of a group of people about whom we know through their burial practices. They were using a pottery which was different from that of the Harappans. Their culture is known as the 'Cemetery H culture'. Processes of decline were in evidence also in places like Kalibangan and Chanhudaro. We find that buildings associated with power and ideology were decaying and goods related to the displays of prestige and splendour were becoming increasingly scarce. Later on, cities like Harappa and Mohenjodaro were abandoned altogether.



Map: Sites of Late Harappan Period. Source: EHI-02, Block 2.

A study of the settlement pattern of the Harappan and Late Harappan sites in the Bahawalpur area also indicates a trend of decay. Along the banks of the Hakra river the number of settlements came down to 50 in the Late Harappan period from 174 in the Mature Harappan period. What seems likely is that in the last two-three hundred years of their life, the settlements in the core region of the Harappan civilization were declining. The population seems to have either perished or moved away to other areas. Whereas the number of sites in the triangle of Harappa, Bahawalpur and Mohenjodaro declined, the number of settlements in the outlying areas of Gujarat, East Punjab, Haryana and upper *Doab* increased. This indicates a phenomenal increase in the number of people in these areas. This sudden increase in the population of these regions can be explained by the emigration of people from the core regions of Harappa.

In the outlying regions of the Harappan civilization, i.e. the areas of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Punjab people continued to live. But life had changed for them. Some of the important features associated with the Harappan civilization—writing, uniform weights, Harappan pottery and architectural style had disappeared.

The abandonment of the cities of the Indus is roughly dated to about 1800 BCE. This date is supported by the fact that the Mesopotamian literature stops referring to Meluhha by the end of 1900 BCE. However, even now, the chronology of the end of Harappan cities remains tentative. We do not as yet know whether the major settlements were abandoned at one and the same time or at different periods. What is certain, however, is the fact the abandonment of the major cities and the de-urbanization of other settlements indicate the decline of the Harappan civilization.

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## 7.3 THEORIES OF SUDDEN DECLINE

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Scholars have given different answers to the question as to why did the civilization end? Some scholars, believing in a dramatic collapse of the civilization, have looked for evidences of a calamity of catastrophic proportions, which wiped out the urban communities. Some of the more plausible theories for the decline of the Harappan civilization are:

- a) that it was destroyed by massive floods.
- b) that the decline took place because of the shift in the course of rivers and the gradual drying up of the Ghaggar-Hakra river system.
- c) that barbarian invaders destroyed the cities.
- d) that the growing demands of the centres disturbed the ecology of the region and the area could not support them anymore.

Let us discuss these explanations on their merits.

### 7.3.1 Floods and Earthquakes

Among the causes spelled out for the decline of the Harappan civilization, scholars have used the evidence of flooding in Mohenjodaro. It appears from the records of the principal excavators that in Mohenjodaro various periods of occupation were separated by evidences of deep flooding. This can be inferred from the fact that the houses and streets of Mohenjodaro were covered with silty clay and

collapsed building material many times in its long history. This silty clay seems to have been left by the flood waters which had submerged the streets and houses. The people of Mohenjodaro again built up houses and streets on top of the debris of the previous buildings, after the floods had receded. This kind of catastrophic flooding and rebuilding on top of the debris seems to have happened at least thrice. Borings in the occupation deposit indicate successive phases of occupation levels spanning a vertical distances of 70 feet which is equivalent to the height of a seven storied building. Many occupation deposits were divided by silt deposits. Thick silt deposits have been noticed at points as high as 80 feet above the present day ground level. Thus, many scholars believe that the evidences are indicative of abnormal floods in Mohenjodaro. These floods led to the temporary desertion and reoccupation of the city throughout its history. That these floods were catastrophic is shown by silt deposits 80 feet above the present ground level, meaning that the flood waters rose to such height in this area. The Harappans at Mohenjodaro tired themselves out, trying to out top the recurring floods. A stage came when the impoverished Harappans could not take it anymore and they simply abandoned the settlement.

### **Raikes's Hypothesis**

The theory of catastrophic flooding has been carried further by a famous hydrologist R.L. Raikes. He argued that such flooding which could drown buildings 30 feet above the ground level of the settlement could not be the result of normal flooding in the river Indus. He believes that the Harappan civilization declined because of catastrophic flooding causing prolonged submergence of the cities located on the bank of the river Indus. He has shown that geomorphologically speaking the Indus area is a disturbed seismic zone. Earthquakes might have raised the level of the flood plains of the lower Indus river. This uplift of the plain along an axis roughly at right angles to that of the river Indus blocked the passage of the river water to the sea. This led to the ponding of the waters of the river Indus. A lake was formed in the area where cities of the Indus had once flourished. And thus, the rising water levels of the river swallowed up cities like Mohenjodaro.

It has been pointed out that sites like Sutkagendor and Sutka-koh on the Makran Coast and Balakot near Karachi were seaports of the Harappans. However, at present, they are located far away from the sea-coast. This has happened because of the upliftment of the land on the sea-coast possibly caused by violent tectonic uplifts. Some scholars believe that these tectonic uplifts took place somewhere in the second millennium BCE. These violent earthquakes, damming rivers and burning the towns destroyed the Harappan civilization. This led to the disruption of the commercial life based on river and coastal communication.

*Criticism:* This grand theory of the catastrophic fall of the Harappan civilization is not accepted by many scholars. H.T. Lambrick points out that the idea that a river would be dammed in such a manner even by tectonic uplifts is incorrect due to two reasons:

- i) Even if an earthquake artificially raised a bund downstream, the large volume of water from the Indus would easily breach it. In recent times in Sindh, a swell of ground raised by the earthquake of 1819 was breached by the first flood it faced from one of the smaller streams of the Indus called Nara.

- ii) Silt deposition would parallel the rising surface of water in the hypothetical lake. It would take place along the bottom of the former course of the river. Thus, the silt of Mohenjodaro might not be the deposition of a flood. Another criticism of this theory is that it fails to explain the decline of the settlements outside the Indus system.

### 7.3.2 The Shifting Away of the Indus

Lambrick has offered his own explanation for the decline. He believes that changes in the course of the river Indus could be the cause of the destruction of Mohenjodaro. The Indus is an unstable river system which keeps shifting its bed. Apparently, the river Indus shifted about thirty miles away from Mohenjodaro. The people of the city and the surrounding food producing villages deserted the area because they were starved of water. This kind of thing happened many times in the history of Mohenjodaro. The silt observed in the city is actually the product of wind action blowing in lots of sand and silt. This, combined with disintegrating mud, mud brick and baked brick structures, produced what has been mistaken for silt produced by floods.

*Criticism:* This theory too cannot explain the decline of the Harappan civilization in totality. At best, it can explain the desertion of Mohenjodaro. And if the people of Mohenjodaro were familiar with those kinds of shifts in the river course why could not they themselves shift to some new settlement and establish another city like Mohenjodaro? Obviously, it appears that some other factors were at work.

### 7.3.3 Increased Aridity and Drying Up of the Ghaggar

D.P. Agarwal and Sood have introduced a new theory for the decline of the Harappan civilization. They believe that the Harappan civilization declined because of the increasing aridity in this area and the drying up of the river Ghaggar-Hakra. Basing their conclusions on the studies conducted in the U.S.A., Australia and Rajasthan they have shown that there was an increase in the arid conditions by the middle of the second millennium BCE. In semi-arid regions like those of the Harappa, even a minor reduction in moisture and water availability could spell disaster. It would affect agricultural production which in turn would put the city economies under stress.

They have discussed the problem of the unstable river systems in western Rajasthan. As stated earlier the Ghaggar-Hakra area represented one of the core regions of the Harappan civilization. The Ghaggar was a mighty stream flowing through Punjab, Rajasthan and the Rann of Kutch before debouching into the sea.

Rivers Sutlej and Yamuna used to be the tributaries of this river. Because of some tectonic disturbances, the Sutlej stream was captured by the Indus river and the Yamuna shifted east to join the Ganges. This kind of change in the river regime, which left the Ghaggar waterless, would have catastrophic implication for the towns located in this area. Apparently, the ecological disturbances brought by the increased aridity and the shift in the drainage pattern led to the decline of the Harappan civilization.

*Criticism:* Interesting though this theory is, it has some problems. The theory about the onset of arid conditions has not been fully worked out and one needs

more information. Similarly, the drying up of the Ghaggar has not been dated properly as yet.

### 7.3.4 Barbarian Invasions

Wheeler believed that the Harappan civilization was destroyed by the Aryan invaders. It has been pointed out that in the late phases of occupation at Mohenjodaro there are evidences of a massacre. Human skeletons have been found lying on the streets. The *Rigveda* time and again refers to the fortresses of the *Dasas* and *Dasyus*. The Vedic god Indra is called '*Purandara*' meaning 'the destroyer of forts'. The geographical area of the habitation of the *Rigvedic* Aryans included the Punjab and the Ghaggar-Hakra region. Since there are no remains of other cultural groups having forts in this area in this historical phase, Wheeler believed that it was the Harappan cities that were being described in the *Rigveda*. In fact, the *Rigveda* mentions a place called Hariyupiya. This place was located on the bank of the river Ravi. The Aryans fought a battle here. The name of the place sounds very similar to that of Harappa. These evidences led Wheeler to conclude that it was the Aryan invaders who destroyed the cities of Harappa.

*Criticism:* Attractive though this theory is, it is not acceptable to a host of scholars. They point out that the provisional date for the decline of the Harappan civilization is believed to be 1800 BCE. The Aryans on the other hand are believed to have arrived here not earlier than a period around 1500 BCE. At the present state of knowledge it is difficult to revise either of the dates and so, the Harappans and the Aryans are unlikely to have met each other. Also, neither Mohenjodaro nor Harappa yield any other evidence of a military assault. The evidence of the human bodies lying exposed in the streets is important. This, however, could have been caused by raids by bandits from the surrounding hilly tracts. In any case, the big cities were already in a state of decay. This cannot be explained by the invasion hypothesis.

#### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) The decline of the Harappan civilization could not be explained by flood and earthquakes theory because
  - a) It explains the decline of settlements outside Indus Valley. ( )
  - b) It cannot explain the decline of settlements outside the Indus Valley. ( )
  - c) The Harappans knew how to face floods and earthquakes. ( )
  - d) none of the above. ( )
- 2) The increased aridity in the Harappan area cannot explain the decline of Harappa because
  - a) It is a fully worked out theory ( )
  - b) It is not a fully worked out theory ( )
  - c) Drying up of river Ghaggar is not dated yet ( )
  - d) both (b) and (c) ( )
- 3) Discuss in about 50 words the evidence for and against the theory of Barbarian invasions having destroyed Harappan Civilization.

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## 7.4 ECOLOGICAL IMBALANCE

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Scholars like Fairservis try to explain the decay of the Harappan civilization in terms of the problems of ecology. He computed the population of the Harappan cities and worked out the food requirements of the townsmen. He also computed that the villagers in these areas consume about 80% of their produce leaving about 20% for the market. If similar patterns of agriculture existed in the past, a city like Mohenjodaro, having a population of about 35 thousand, would require very large number of villages producing food. According to Fairservis's calculation the delicate ecological balance of these semi-arid areas was being disturbed because the human and cattle population in these areas was fast depleting the scanty forests, food and fuel resources. The combined needs of the Harappan townsmen, peasants and pastoralists exceeded the limited production capacities of these areas. Thus, a growing population of men and animals confronted by scanty resources wore out the landscape.

With the forests and grass cover gradually disappearing, there were more floods and droughts. This depletion of the subsistence base caused strain on the entire economy of the civilization. There seems to have been a gradual movement away to areas which offered better subsistence possibilities. That is why the Harappan communities moved towards Gujarat and the eastern areas, away from the Indus.

*Criticism:* Of all the theories discussed so far Fairservis's theory seems to be the most plausible one. Probably the gradual deterioration in the town planning and the living standards was a reflection of the depleting subsistence base of the Harappans. This process of decline was completed by the raids and attacks of the surrounding communities. However, the theory of environmental disaster also has some problems.

- The enduring fertility of soils of the Indian sub-continent over the subsequent millennia disproves the hypothesis of soil exhaustion in this area.
- Also, the computation of the needs of the Harappan population is based on scanty information and a lot more information would be needed to make a calculation of the subsistence needs of the Harappans.

Thus, any theory based on such scanty information will remain a hypothesis, unless substantiated by more evidence in its favour.

The emergence of the Harappan civilization involved a delicate balance of relations between cities, towns and villages, rulers, peasants and nomads. It also means a fragile but important relationship with the communities of the neighbouring areas who were in possession of minerals crucial for trade. Similarly, it meant maintenance of contact with the contemporary civilizations and cultures. Apart from this, we have to take into account the ecological factor of relationship with nature. Any breakdown in these chains of relationships could lead to the decline of the cities.

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## 7.5 THE TRADITION SURVIVES

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Scholars working on the Indus civilization no longer look for the causes of its decline. This is because of the fact that the scholars who have studied the Harappan civilization right up to the 1960s believed that the collapse of the civilization was sudden. These scholars concentrated their work on the studies of cities,

town planning and large structures. Such problems as the relationship of the Harappan cities with the contemporary villages and the continuity of various elements of the Harappan civilization were ignored. Thus, the debate about the causes of the decline of the Harappan civilization became more and more abstract. It was towards the end of the sixties that scholars like Malik and Possehl focused their attention on various aspects of the continuity of the Harappan tradition. These studies have yielded more exciting results than the debate about the causes for the decline of the Harappan civilization. It is true that Harappa and Mohenjodaro were abandoned and the urban phase came to an end. However, if we take a perspective covering the entire geographical spread of the Harappan civilization, quite a few things seem to continue in the old style.

Archaeologically speaking some changes are observable- some of the settlements were abandoned but most other settlements remained in occupation. However, the tradition of uniform writing, seals, weights and pottery was lost. The objects showing intensive interaction among the far flung settlements were lost. In other words the activities associated with city-centred economies were given up. Thus the changes that came about simply indicated the end of the urban phase. Small villages and towns continued to exist and the archaeological finds from these sites show many elements of the Harappan tradition.

In most of the sites in Sindh it is difficult to observe any change in the pottery tradition. In fact in the areas of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana, vibrant agricultural communities emerged in large numbers in the succeeding period. Thus, from a regional perspective, the period succeeding the urban phase can be treated as one of flourishing agricultural villages which outnumbered those of the urban phase. That is why scholars now discuss issues like cultural change, regional migrations and modification in the system of settlement and subsistence. After all no one talks about the end of the early Indian civilization in early medieval India when most of the cities of the Gangetic valley declined. Let us see what kinds of archaeological remains survived after the end of the urban phase.

### **Sindh**

In Sindh, i.e. at the Harappan towns Amri and Chanhudaro, Jhukar, etc., people continued to live as of old. They were still staying in brick houses but they gave up the planned lay out. They were using a slightly different pottery called the Jhukar pottery. It was a buff-ware with red slip with paintings in black. Recent studies suggested that this pottery evolved from the 'Mature Harappan' pottery and as such need not be considered something new. In Jhukar certain distinctive metal objects have been found which might be indicative of trade links with Iran or what is more likely — the influx of a migrant population having Iranian or Central Asian influences. A shaft-hole, axes and copper pins with looped or decorated heads have parallels in Iranian settlements. Circular stamp seals of stone or faience and a bronze cosmetic jar are also indicative of contacts with the cultures to the west of the Indus.

### **The Indo-Iranian Borderlands**

The areas to the west of the Indus-Baluchistan and the Indo-Iranian border lands also show the presence of people using copper stamp seals and copper shaft hole axes. Sites like Shahi Tump, Mundigak, Naushahro and Pirak indicate movements of people and contacts with Iran. Unfortunately the dating of these settlements is still not clearly worked out.



### Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan

In the areas of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan several settlements have been reported where people continued to live in the same old way after the decline of the cities. However, the Harappan influences on the pottery tradition gradually declined and the local pottery traditions which were always present along with the Harappa pottery gradually replaced the Harappan pottery altogether. Thus, the decline of urbanism was reflected in the reassertion of regional traditions in these areas (Figure 7.1). The sites of Mitathal, Bara, Ropar and Siswal are well known. Brick houses have been reported from Bara and Siswal. In many of these sites Ochre Coloured Pottery has been found. This pottery underlay many early historical sites in ancient India. As such these village cultures of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan are linked with the Harappan tradition of the past and anticipate the early Indian tradition. In the Upper Gangetic Valley also many agricultural settlements were established. They show remote Late Harappan influences. This area became the heartland of the subsequent phase of Indian civilization.

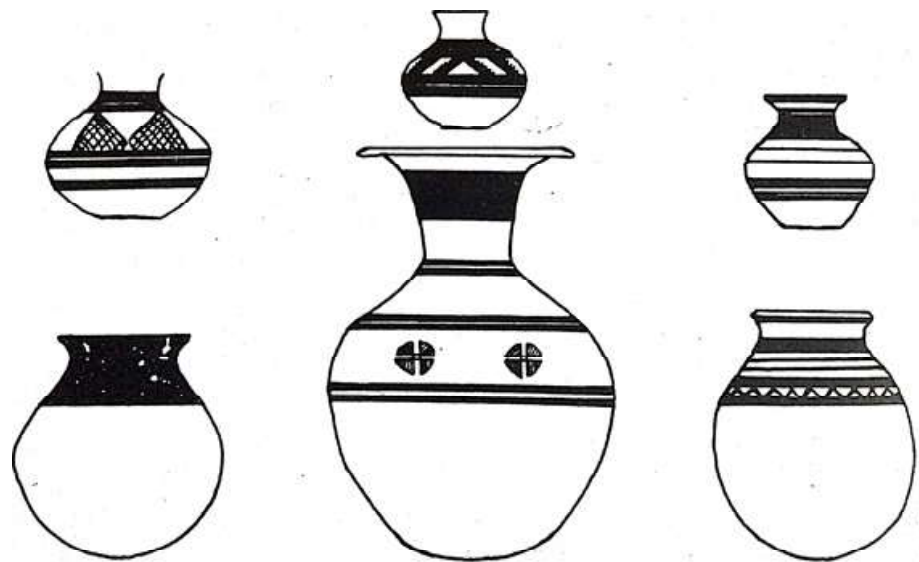
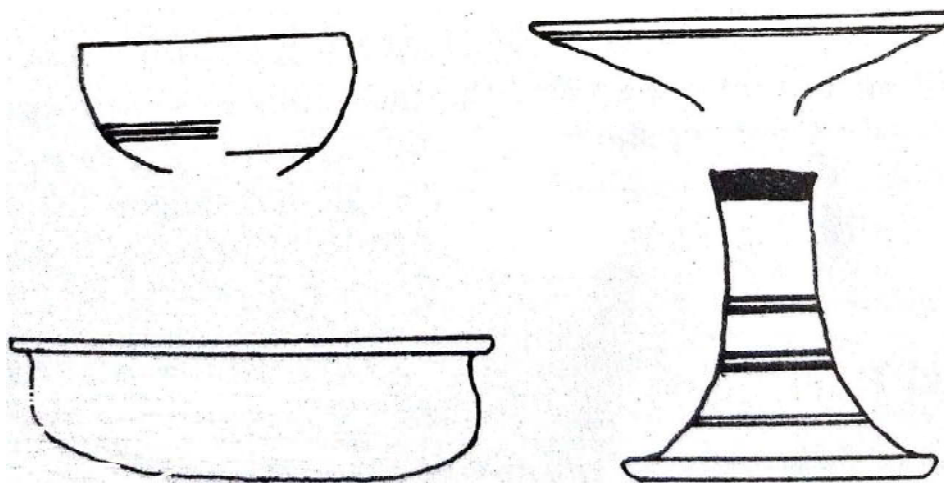


Fig. 7.1: Late Harappan Pottery from Haryana. Source: EHI-02, Block 2.

### Kutch and Saurashtra

In Kutch and Saurashtra the end of the urban phase is clearly documented in places like Rangapur and Somnath. Even during the urban phase they had a local ceramic tradition co-existing with the Harappan pottery. This tradition continued in later phases. Some sites like Rangapur (Figure 7.2) seem to have become more prosperous in the succeeding period. They were using potteries called the Lustrous Red Ware. However, the people stopped using the Indus weights, script and tools imported from distant areas. Now they were using stone tools made of locally available stones.

In the Mature Harappan phase there were 13 settlements in Gujarat. In the subsequent Late Harappan dated to about 2100 BCE, the number of settlements went up to 200 or more. This increase in the number of settlements indicating an increase in population cannot be explained by biological factors. In pre-



**Fig. 7.2: Late Harappan Pottery from Rangpur. Source: EHI-02, Block 2.**

modern societies the population could not increase so much in a space of a few generations that 13 settlements would multiply into more than 200 or more settlements. Thus, there is a distinct possibility that people inhabiting these new settlements came from other areas. Late Harappan settlements have also been reported from Maharashtra where their culture merged into those of the emerging agricultural communities.

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## **7.6 TRANSMISSION OF THE HARAPPAN TRADITION**

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The end of the cities did not mean the end of the Harappan tradition. It is evident from our discussion that archaeologically speaking the Harappan communities merged into the surrounding agricultural groups. However, the centralised decision-making in the polity and economy had ended. The Harappan communities which continued after the urban phase would have definitely retained their older traditions. It is likely that the Harappan peasants would retain their forms of worship. The priests of the Harappan urban centres were part of a highly organised literate tradition. Even if literacy ended they are likely to have preserved their religious practices. The dominant community of the subsequent early historic period called itself 'The Aryans'. Possibly, the priestly groups of the Harappans merged into the ruling groups of the Aryans. As such the Harappan religious tradition would be transmitted to historical India. The folk communities also retained the traditions of craftsmanship as is evident from the pottery and tool making traditions. Once again when literate urban culture emerged in early India it absorbed elements of folk cultures. This would provide a more effective channel of transmission of the Harappan tradition.

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## **7.7 WHAT SURVIVES FROM THE HARAPPAN CIVILIZATION?**

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The cults of Pasupati (Siva) and of the mother goddess and phallic worship seem to have come down to us from the Harappan tradition. Similarly, the cult of sacred places, rivers or trees and sacred animals show a distinct continuity in the subsequent historic civilization of India. The evidence of fire worship and sacrifice in Kalibangan and Lothal is significant. These were the most significant elements

of the Vedic religion. Could the Aryans have learnt these practices from the Harappan priesthood? This hypothesis would require more evidence but it is not unlikely.

Many aspects of domestic life like the house plans, disposition of water supply and attention to bathing survived in the settlements of the subsequent periods. The traditional weight and currency system of India, based on a ratio of sixteen as the unit, was already present in the Harappan civilization. It might well have been derived from them. The techniques of making potter's wheel in modern India is similar to those used by the Harappans. Bullock carts and boats used in modern India were already present in the Harappan cities. As such we can say that many elements of the Harappan civilization survived in the subsequent historical tradition.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1) It is difficult to accept the theory of ecological imbalance because: (Mark (✓) the correct statement).
  - a) it does not explain why soil continues to be fertile in the Indus Valley area. ( )
  - b) we do not have adequate data to tell us about the needs of Harappan towns. ( )
  - c) townsmen continued to stay on in Harappan civilization. ( )
  - d) both (a) and (b). ( )
- 2) Mark (✓) the correct statement  
Scholars today,
  - a) are looking for fresh causes of decline of the Harappan Civilization.
  - b) have stopped looking for fresh causes of decline of Harappan civilization.
  - c) are looking for what survived from Harappan civilization in the later settlements.
  - d) both (b) and (c).
- 3) Write in about 50 words about the importance of what has survived from Harappan civilization.

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**7.8 SUMMARY**

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We have seen that scholars have offered various theories of the sudden decline of Harappan civilization. But all these theories had to be given up because of lack of adequate evidence. Gradually scholars have given up looking for causes for the decline of Harappan civilization. Now the focus is on understanding the late phases of the civilization. This is looked into to expose the continuities of

Harappan civilization which might have survived in the flourishing agricultural communities of the time. And no doubt there have been certain characteristics of civilization which transcended down to the historic phase.

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## 7.9 KEY WORDS

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<b>Ecology</b>	: Study of plants or animals or peoples and institutions in relationship to the environment.
<b>Tectonic uplift</b>	: Relating to the process which elevate large areas of earth's surface.
<b>Aryans</b>	: A group of people who spoke the Indo-European languages like Sanskrit, Latin, Greek etc.
<b>Dasa and Dasyu</b>	: Peoples mentioned in the <i>Rigveda</i> . The Aryans were in conflict with their chiefs.
<b>Ochre Coloured Pottery</b>	: A pottery found in the upper Gangetic plains. It has been found at the levels that underlie early Indian historical pottery.
<b>Late Levels</b>	: An excavated archaeological site is divided into layers or settlement levels according to their ages. Accordingly the late or the youngest settlement level will be somewhere near the top of the site and the oldest will be at the bottom most.
<b>Catastrophic</b>	: Disastrous.
<b>Occupation deposits</b>	: At each level of the excavated site there will be evidence in form of pottery etc. to show that the site was occupied. These deposits are called occupational deposits.
<b>Silt</b>	: Material deposit from a flowing river on the banks.
<b>Arid</b>	: Dry.

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## 7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) b)
- 2) d)
- 3) See Sub-section 7.3.4. Your answer should include both the material evidence and the written evidence.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) d)
- 2) d)
- 3) See Section 7.7. Your answer should tell us how this points to the continuity of Harappan tradition.

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## 7.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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