

## The role and place of Mehrgarh in the development of South Asian Civilizations

Archaeology & History

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### Abstract

*Before French Archaeological Mission's excavations in Bolan Pass, South Asian Archaeological discoveries were based on defusionist theories of culture and civilizations and the Indus Valley Civilization were lacking indigenous roots for the development of its magnificent and mature period. Archaeologists would think that people in Indus Valley have migrated from Mesopotamia and they (emigrants) have erected the twin cities of Harappa and Mohan-Ju-Daro. But once, the Archaeologists discovered Mehrgarh, it changed the whole perception, as it was the first Neolithic site in South Asia and it provided solid data for the development of an indigenous Civilization and it provided the evidence for first settlement, domestication of agriculture and animal husbandry along with the pottery making and storage system. Mehrgarh provides a complete sequence of development from hunting gatherer society to early Food Producing and Regionalization period. It had never been abundant from early settlement which started around 7000 BC up to Vedic Age around 1500 to 1400 BC.*

*This paper will focus on those aspects which have actually provided the grounds for the Indus Valley Civilizations i.e. farming, livestock, architectural, pottery making and burial rituals. The paper will provide only brief survey of above mentioned aspects and the main focus will be upon establishing link and sequence of indigenous development of Indus Valley and ground providing contribution of Mehrgarh. The research methods in my paper will be mainly qualitative however quantitative method will be applied where it's necessary.*

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## **Introduction**

Balochistan has been one of the richest provinces of Pakistan because of not only its natural resources but history and culture as well. Archaeologists have been documenting the ancient habitations since British Rule. After the independence of Pakistan, this process has not been stopped, rather now this was undertaken by Pakistan department of Archaeology with the help of Foreign Missions. These joint ventures have been able to explore the Ancient History of Balochistan from Jurassic Period down to Pre and Proto-history. During the British Raj, Sir John Marshall (1924) and Sir M. Wheeler (1944) had discovered the Indus Valley Civilization and they were of opinion that the magnificent cities like Mohan-ju-Daro and Harappa were erected by the people who might come from outside of South Asia. This theory was much popular during early and mid-Twentieth Century and this was called as “Defusionist Theory”. Since there was no archaeological evidence that could provide an indigenous development for the Mature Indus Civilization, the Defusionist Theory was generally accepted. But this theory lost its validity once the French Archaeological Mission discovered a Neolithic site in Kachi/Baloch in 1970s. This mission worked in Bolan from 1974 to 1985 (C. R. J.F Jarrige 1995). This mission was working in Pirak (another site in Bolan), when they came to know about a site called Mehrgarh which was near Bolan River and the floods and land erosion had exposed the occupational layers. (C. R. J.F Jarrige 1995). This discovery changed the whole perception of South Asian Archaeology because this was the evidence that Indus Valley Civilization had been indigenously evolved rather than being established by the emigrants as was perceived by the Defusionist Thinkers.

## **Geographical Location**

The Kachi/Bolan Pass is one of the famous passes which connect highlands and lowlands of South Asia and this region has been a transit route for people moving from and in Iran, Central Asia and South Asia. Bolan Pass separates Indus Valley from Central Asia through its Suleiman and Kirthar mountain ranges. The Kachi region is thus made up of an immense cone that has been filled in by fluvial and Aeolian deposits, transported from the surrounding mountains: the Marri and Bugti hills to the east and the Brahui and Kirthar ranges to the west (J.F Jarrige 2013). Bolan region is watered by Two Rivers i.e. Bolan and Nari Rivers. The region is mostly rocky and there are plane lands which are annually flooded by the Bolan River during the rainy sessions. A few of these outcrops consisting mostly of limestone and puddingstones emerge near the archaeological area of Mehrgarh (J.F Jarrige 2013). The area still has sessional movement of inhabitants from upper to

lower lands and vice versa during winter and summer sessions. The upper lands become very hot during summer while the low lands are pleasant during winter. Once the clouds and rains of autumn and winter pore in, people start moving from low lands to uppers as this is the time of pleasant weather of upper lands. This practice has been continued for thousands of years as we have archaeological evidence from Quetta Valley and Mehrgarh. These seasonal movements had provided the opportunity of sedentarism and the people of ancient times found some places to stay as they themselves and their animals gradually became used to of their environment.

### **Chronology and Culture**

The French Archaeological Mission has worked in Mehrgarh and they have established the chronology of the Neolithic Site from circa 7000 B.C and there are seven phases. This occupation starts from Early Food Production Era to Early Hindu Period around 1500 B.C. Here is given the culture and chronology of Mehrgarh phase wise:

#### **Period I:**

This particular phase starts from c.6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> millennia B.C and the Area MR.3 is the occupational site and it's a Neolithic settlement. The cultural materials on the site were found which include polished hand-axe, chisels, and bowl: small bowl, perforated small disc, scale and shale. The parallels of this period in Balochistan are Killi Gull Muhammad I. (M.Lechevallier 1975).

#### **Period II:**

This period starts from the end of 5<sup>th</sup> to beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C and archaeologically it's divided into two Phases i.e. A and B. The area of occupation is MR.4. The appearance of potsherds is found in the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (phase A) is found here. The period A is parallel to Killi Gull Muhammad II. While the phase B (beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> millennium and area MR.4) has the evidence that the people of area started the use of Wheel-turned ware with painted geometric motifs, straw-tempered and hand-made ware were found and its parallel to Killi Gull Muhammad III, Mundigak I, 1-3 (M.Lechevallier 1975).

#### **Period III:**

This period started in first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C and the area of occupation was MR.2. The cultural materials included Wheel-turned ware with painted caprids and geometrical motifs and the parallels of this period

are Killi Gull Muhammad III; Mundigak I, 3; Togua A. (M.Lechevallier 1975).

#### **Period IV:**

This period shows the more advancement and change in culture and religious beliefs of the people. The period starts from Middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C and its area is MR.1 (main mound). The wheel-turned ware with painted monochrome and polychrome geometrical motifs are found and there appeared terracotta female figurines too. The parallels of the period were Damb Sadaat I; Togua B and C; Amri AI (M.Lechevallier 1975).

#### **Period V:**

This period has very small but very important differences from previous period in cultural context. The period starts from third quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C and area is MR.1. The potteries found here are with white pigment, monochrome with geometric motifs, human figurines, first grey ware pottery is also found in the end of the period. The parallels of the period are Togua D; Mundigak II. (M.Lechevallier 1975).

#### **Period VI:**

This period started in the end of 4<sup>th</sup> millennium and remained till the beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. The area is MR.1 and there is drastic change in the cultural material i.e. the appearance of Black-on-grey ware, Quetta ware, Nal polychrome ware, red with painted pipal leaves, human figurines, compartmented stamp seals and lapis lazuli are found here. The period has parallels in Damb Sadaat II; Mundigak III; Shahr-i- Sokhta I; Rehman Dheri I; and Amri IIA (M.Lechevallier 1975).

#### **Period VII:**

This period started in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC and the area of occupation was MR1. The archaeological remains here consists of Black-on- Grey ware, late Quetta style, mass production of male and female figurines, monumental platform and upper layers have the evidence of Zhob figurines, a few Kot Dijian-style sherds are found. The parallel of the site are Damb Sadaat III; Mundigak IV; Shahr-i- Sokhta II; Kot Dij; Amri IIB (M.Lechevallier 1975).

After this period there was shift of archaeological occupation in Bolan Pass and the new site was Nausharo which is six kilometers from Mehrgarh and this site was main area during the early and mature Harappan period (Jarrige 1991). The sites of the Mehrgarh was not abandoned completely but know it was not the center of activities as was earlier until late Harappan

period around middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC when we have the last phases of Mehrgarh around 1500 BC.

### **Agriculture and Animal Husbandry**

One of the major historical developments in human past has been sedentarism, when men had decided to settle down and left the hunting gatherer habitats. When and why men decided to do so, we do not know but archaeologist and anthropologists have several theories of explanations for this major development but so far no two great thinkers have agreed upon a single theory or explanation of leaving nomadic and adopting sedentary life by archaic human beings in world at large but they all give an interesting explanation for this turning point in human history as man at that period of time was developing a perception of its environment and was trying to use his environment for the benefit of himself. It's interesting to note the sedentary life was adopted in different parts of the world at a same period of time around 10<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC because of reasons unknown and it's called the "Neolithic Revolution". In South Asia we have the first agricultural settlement in Mehrgarh and here the adaptation of cultivating land and animal husbandry was evolutionary. The increase and varieties in the diet of the people and domestication of various animals were not sudden rather these developments were spread over period of time. As was case with cultural development, same we witness in the development of domestication of plants and animals here too. The chronological domestication of plants and animals start from the first period of the occupation at Mehrgarh and as time elapsed the variety in domestication increased too. The traces of such domestication have been found in the site which gave archaeologist clear data for establishing the chronology of plants and animal domestication as wheat, barley - 7000 - 6000 BC, sheep/goat - 7000 - 6000 BC, cattle (*Bos indicus*) - 7000 - 6000 BC, water buffalo - 2500 BC? (Kenoyer 1998). Apart from these animals like dog and pig were also domesticated and fruits like jujubes and dates were found in wilderness and domesticated too.

### **Architecture**

Another major feature of the Neolithic period was the emergence of architecture. Men since beginning have been leaving in shelters which were made by nature in shape of rock shelters and caves or made by human beings themselves. The archaeological evidence for the architecture in Mehrgarh is found as they would build houses or store rooms for the living or storage of grains. The French Archaeological mission has found the layers of multiple houses from First Occupation. The buildings were rectangular in shape made up of clay, smaller in size and these were not build in a planned way and the

there is no evidence of doors and its assumed that rooms were approached from top and these were used for storage rather than as living rooms (C. R. J.F Jarrige 1995).

### **Arts and Crafts**

Man since beginning has the sense of arts, aesthetics and appreciates the nature. Because of this aesthetic sense the cave man would paint the nature and try to reconstruct their imaginations. This has been true throughout the human history. During the Neolithic Mehrgarh we find the advancement in arts and crafts with the passage of time. As we have seen in evolution of pottery, first we find simple pots but in latter stages the images of geometrical, plant and animal motifs appear on pottery too (M.Lechevallier 1975). Similarly the development of arts and crafts was evolutionary in designs and Materials. In the beginning the ornaments were made of terracotta/clay material with simple designs. Similarly in the latter stages we find the appearance of precious and exotic goods which make ornaments and other useable items included lapis lazuli, cornelian beads, sea shells and other precious and semi-precious materials. The evolution of arts and craft technology is based upon a systematic procedure which includes local material with simple technology at first stage, than local material with complex technology in designing and shape, at third stage exotic materials with simple technology and at final stage exotic material with complex technique is employed (Kenoyer 1998). The society also evolves on the bases of possession of knowledge and raw materials. Those who had the either possession or skill would differentiate themselves from common people; this would create stratification in the society. Archaeologists have found the materials used in ornaments made up of terracotta, lapis lazuli, sea shells and other exotic materials in Mehrgarh (M.Lechevallier 1975).

### **Dental morphology**

The most interesting feature of the Neolithic Mehrgarh would have been the discovery of the stone tools which were used for the dental treatments and this was verified by the remains of small stone pieces in the teethes of the nine dead bodies excavated at Mehrgarh (Lukacs 1986). This shows the people of the Neolithic Mehrgarh were able to make that much sophisticated stone tool which could be used for the treatment of the teeth. The tools were polished and the made with much care and skill, these shows there were specialists who would make and use these tools.

## **Burial rituals**

Religion has been one of the oldest institutions of human history and it has been commonly present in all cultures of the world. Religion actually depicts in the common beliefs of the people not only in this world but life here after too. The archaeological materials associated with religious believers of people in Mehrgarh are clearly present in the seals, burial rituals and these rituals had also witnessed the evolutionary process. The graves were found mostly in a complex but the conditions of the graves were badly eroded and flexed skeletons. In the initial stages (c.7000BC\_5500BC), the burials had some animal sacrifices including goats, sheep and other precious and exotic items i.e. lapis lazuli and sea shells (M. U. J.F Jarrige 1985). This was actually buried along with the dead as offerings along with other daily useable items and it was believed that the dead would use them in life here after. But after 5500 BC, such items disappeared from the graves for reasons unknown. This shows a change in social or religious patterns. Along with this, the burials would contain pottery even in the late periods; the potteries would have some animals, plants and geometric motifs. The burials are even found in the residential areas but scholars are of opinion that these graves were earlier than the occupation of the area by latter people.

## **Conclusion**

The site of Mehrgarh has provided the stepping stone for the Indus Valley Civilization. The discovery of Mehrgarh has proved the solid data for the rejection of defusionist theory which would claim that the magnificent twin cities of Harappa and Mohan-ju-Dharo were established by foreigner who might have migrated from Mesopotamia. Apart from this, Mehrgarh also gives the ground for the cultural evolution of the Indus Valley Civilization in terms of arts and crafts, pottery making, architecture, religion, trade and planning for the city buildings as we have clear connections and associations on similar materials found Early, Mature and post-Indus Period. By the discovery of Mehrgarh we have the complete sequence from settlement (7000 BC) proto-historical, historical period and till present day. This clearly depicts that this part of the South Asia (Pakistan) would have been the cradle of Culture and Civilization which gave birth to a long historical march, starting from Mehrgarh to Indus and passing into Gandhara Civilization and Islamic Period down to present day. The need of the time is that we the people of the area should be aware of our rich cultural history and we should protect the Archaeological and Cultural monuments through campaigns of awareness. It's recommended that our syllabus at schools, colleges and universities should contain chapters and topics pertinent to our Ancient

Culture and History so that the past should not be forgotten rather transferred to our coming generations.

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