

# ***Beginning of Indian Civilization and Culture***

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India is one of the most populous and largest countries of the world. Only China exceeds India in respect of population. Area wise, it is the seventh country of the world and only Canada, Russia, China, the U.S.A., Brazil and Australia are bigger in size. The vastness of the country with its infinite variety of fauna and flora, races and languages, religions and culture justly entitles it to be called a great sub-continent.

The remote parts of this great country revealed themselves to the observers and explorers of ancient times only gradually and by stages<sup>1</sup>. In view of this, we do not find any comprehensive term to designate the whole country in the earliest records. In the *Rgveda* (VII.24.27) it is referred to as *Sapta-Sindhavas* or '(land of) the Seven Rivers'<sup>2</sup>. This designation undoubtedly corresponds to the term Hapta Hindu found in the Avestan *Vendīdād*<sup>3</sup>. In the famous inscriptions of Darius at Persepolis and Naksh-i-Rustam the entire territory watered by the Indus and its effluents is styled simply Hi(n)du<sup>4</sup>. It should, however, be noted that the Vedic *Sapta-Sindhavaḥ* and the Persian Hi(n)du corresponded only to a particular part of India lying to the north-west<sup>5</sup>.

The exploration of practically the whole country had been completed in or about the fourth century B.C. The people felt the necessity of a comprehensive term for the territory extending from the Himalayas in the north to the sea in the South. The term coined or used was *Jambudvīpa*. In Buddhist literature *Jambudvīpa* figures as one of the four *mahādvīpas* or the four great continents including India with Mt. Sineru (Sumeru) in the center of them<sup>6</sup>. The minor Rock Edict No. 1 of Aśoka mentions *Jambudvīpa*, which denotes the vast country ruled by that great emperor<sup>7</sup>. In the Epics and the Purāṇas *Jambudvīpa* is described as one of the seven concentric islands, encircled by seven *samudras* (seas)<sup>8</sup>. *Jambudvīpa* was considered to be the innermost of seven concentric island-continent into which the earth, as conceived by Hindu cosmographers, was supposed to have been divided<sup>9</sup>. Of these islands-contients<sup>10</sup> *Jambudvīpa* is the most alluded to in various sources<sup>11</sup>. The Puranic account of these insular continents contains a good deal of what is fanciful, but early Buddhist evidence suggests that *Jambudvīpa* was a territorial designation actually, in use from the third century B.C. at the latest, and was applied to that part of Asia, outside China,

throughout which the prowess of the great imperial family of the Mauryas made itself felt<sup>12</sup>. In its narrower sense *Jambudvīpa* is identified with Bhāratavarṣa or the Sub-continent of India<sup>13</sup>, known to the Hindus as the land of Bharata, a king famous in Puranic tradition<sup>14</sup>.

The word 'India' is derived from the name of the river Sindhu or the Indus<sup>15</sup> and was applied to the country by the Greeks<sup>16</sup>. The Chinese also knew the ancient name of India as Shin-tuh or Sindhu<sup>17</sup>. The name 'India' corresponds to the 'Hi(n)du' of the old Persian epigraphs<sup>18</sup>. Like '*Sapta-Sindhavaḥ*' and '*Hapta Hindu*' - the appellations of the country in the *Veda* and the *Vendīdād* - 'India' is derived from the Sindhu (the Indus), the great river which constitutes the most imposing feature of that part of the subcontinent which seems to have been the cradle of its earliest known civilization<sup>19</sup>. Closely connected with 'Hindu' are the later designations 'Hind' and 'Hindustan' as found in the pages of medieval writers<sup>20</sup>.

The early Greek writers regarded the Indus as the western boundary of India, but they knew of Indian settlements in the valley of the Kabul and its tributaries. Accordingly, some regarded the Cophes, i.e. the Kabul river, as the furthest limit of India on its west<sup>21</sup>. The inclusion of *yonas* or *yavanas*, who probably occupied the palace near Kabul, and of the Gandharas, who were located in the region comprising the modern districts of Peshawar in the North-Western Frontier Province and Rawalpindi in the Punjab, both in Pakistan<sup>22</sup>, and also in eastern Afghanistan<sup>23</sup>, among the peoples of *Uttarāpatha* in the Great Epic and the Purāṇas, suggest that India at one time embraced within its boundaries not only the land lying immediately to the west of the Indus but also the north-eastern corner of the Iranian Tableland<sup>24</sup>.

From the accounts of the Greeks it would appear that the ancient Indians had a very accurate knowledge of the true shape and size of their country<sup>25</sup>. Alexander's informants gathered their knowledge from the people of the country and described India as a rhomboid or unequal quadrilateral in shape, with the Indus on the West, the mountains on the north, and the sea on the east and south<sup>26</sup>. In the *Mahābhārata*, the shape of India has been described as an equilateral triangle divided into four smaller equal triangles<sup>27</sup>. This shape corresponds very well with the general form of the country, if we extend the limits of India to Ghazni on the north-west, and fix the other two points of the triangle at Cape Comorin, and Sadiya in Assam<sup>28</sup>.

Coming to recent times, the territory constituting undivided India extended from the Himalayas in the north to the Indian Ocean in the South, and from the

borders of Iran and Afghanistan in the West to the border of Myanmar (Burma) in the east. Pakistan, which was carved out of British India in 1947, consisted of North Western Frontier Province, Baluchistan, Sindh, West Punjab and East Bengal, including the Sylahat district of Assam<sup>29</sup>. East Bengal separated from Pakistan in 1971 to become the sovereign State of Bangladesh.

As a consequence of its partition in 1947, India located in South Asia, stretches from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to the Indian Ocean in the South and from the Punjab in the West to Arunachal Pradesh in the east. Ancient Indian literature contains reference to a fivefold division of India<sup>30</sup>. The division of India into five provinces was also adopted by the Chinese<sup>31</sup>. In the official records of the Thang dynasty in the seventh century A.D., India is described as consisting of 'Five Divisions' called the East, West, North, South, and Central which are usually styled the 'Five Indies'<sup>32</sup>.

The Chinese, undoubtedly, with some modifications, borrowed their system of a five-fold division of India from the Hindu works on the subject<sup>33</sup>. The five-fold division of India as embodied in the Chinese works of the Seventh Century A.D. is as follows :<sup>34</sup>

1. Northern India, comprising the Punjab proper including Kashmir and the adjoining hill states with the whole of Eastern Afghanistan beyond the Indus, and the present Cis-Sutlej states to the West of the Sarasvatī river<sup>35</sup>.
2. Western India, comprising Sindh and Western Rajputana, with Kacch and Gujarat, and a portion of the adjoining coast on the lower course of the Narmadā river<sup>36</sup>.
3. Mid-India or Central India, comprising the whole of the Gangetic provinces from Thaneshvar to the head of the Delta, and from the Himalayan mountain to the banks of the Narmadā river<sup>37</sup>.
4. Eastern India, including Assam and Bengal proper, including the whole of the Gangetic Delta, together with Sambhalpur, Orissa and Ganjam<sup>38</sup>.
5. Southern India, comprising the whole of the Peninsula from Nasik on the West and Ganjam on the east, to Cape Comorin (Kanya Kumari) on the south, including the modern districts of Berar and Telanganam, Maharashtra and Konkan, with the separate states of Hyderabad, Mysore and Travancore- Cochin i.e. very nearly the whole of the Indian Peninsula to the south of the Narmadā and the Mahanadī rivers<sup>39</sup>.

At present (in 2002 A.D.) India consists of twenty-eight states and seven union territories. These states are: (1) Jammu and Kashmir, (2) Himachal Pradesh, (3) Punjab, (4) Haryana, (5) Rajasthan, (6) Gujarat, (7) Maharashtra, (8) Karnataka, (9) Kerala, (10) Tamil Nadu, (11) Andhra Pradesh, (12) Madhya Pradesh, (13) Chattisgarh (recently carved out of Madhya Pradesh), (14) Uttar Pradesh, (15) Uttaranchal (recently carved out of Uttar Pradesh), (16) Bihar, (17) Jharkhand (recently carved out of Bihar), (18) West Bengal, (19) Orissa, (20) Assam, (21) Arunachal Pradesh, (22) Manipur, (23) Meghalaya, (24) Mizoram, (25) Nagaland, (26) Sikkim, (27) Tripura, and (28) Goa.

The seven Union Territories are as follows : (1) Chandigarh, (2) Delhi, (3) Pondicherry, (4) Dadra and Nagar Haveli, (5) Daman and Diu, (6) Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and (7) Lakshadweep.

History is a record of the achievement of man. The history of India, like the history of every other country, should therefore begin with an account of the times when men first settled in this land. Archaeological remains point out to the hoary antiquity of Indian civilization and culture.

The Indian sub-continent abounds in archaeological remains of every period from the Lower Palaeolithic to the early historic<sup>40</sup>. Numerous prehistoric sites have been recorded and materials collected since. In Central India, Upper Paleolithic tools, perhaps going back as far as 4000 B.C., have come to light, and rock paintings of animals are associated with them<sup>42</sup>.

Mesolithic communities continued in many parts of the sub-continent, regionally or continentally in parallel with early settlements such as Mehargarh, and with Harappan and post-Harappan cities<sup>43</sup>. The way of the life associated with them probably represents many lifestyles, ranging from hunting and gathering and various kinds of fishing, through combinations of these with forms of simple agriculture and animal husbandry, to that of highly organized trader-pastoralists<sup>44</sup>.

At some Mesolithic site remains of huts and hearths have been found, and there are also burials and shrines of mother goddesses<sup>45</sup>. An example of a mixed hunting-agricultural economy is provided by Bagor in eastern Rajasthan which is contemporary with the Harappan period<sup>46</sup>.

The inhabitants built permanent dwellings; small quantities of copper were used alongside stone tools, and studies of the animal bones indicate an increasing predominance of domesticated species over wild species<sup>47</sup>. In Central Indian rock shelters Mesolithic industries are associated with a whole range of rock paintings or

crayon drawings showing animals, people, hunting scenes, lines of dancing figures and many other subjects, a number of which have close parallels in modern folk art<sup>48</sup>.

The earliest evidence of the beginning of agriculture in South Asia comes from the Western borders. At Mehargarh at the junction of the Indus plains and Baluchistan hills a settlement has been excavated which shows continuous development from the seventh millennium B.C. through to the mature Indus Civilization<sup>49</sup>. Already at the beginning of the period barley and wheat were cultivated, and sheep and goats were present along side many wild animals<sup>50</sup>.

By c. 5000 B.C. humped Indian cattle came to form the most common domesticated species, and were probably recently domesticated<sup>51</sup>. Pottery made its appearance by c. 5000 B.C., and increased in frequency until around 3500 B.C. when the introduction of the potter's wheel led to its mass production<sup>52</sup>. By this time the presence of numbers of compartmented mud-brick storehouses, presumably for grain, suggests a considerable concentration of population<sup>53</sup>. Beads and ornaments of sea shells, turquoise and lapislazuli indicate long distance trade<sup>54</sup>.

From around 3500 B.C. an expansion of agricultural settlements began to take place throughout a great part of the Indus system<sup>55</sup>. The basic crops and domesticated animals remained as in the earlier period, but the stone and bone tools were augmented by increasing use of copper and bronze<sup>56</sup>. Regional varieties of fine painted pottery and terracotta figurines became prominent<sup>57</sup>. There is also evidence of growing craft specialization<sup>58</sup>.

From c. 3000 B.C. onward agricultural settlements also began to appear in many parts of South Asia east of the Indus system<sup>59</sup>. These 'cultures' as they are often called seem to have arisen largely independently of the developments in the Indus valley<sup>60</sup>. They may be regarded as the first clear manifestations of local Indian cultural developments<sup>61</sup>.

The Indus Valley Civilization, now called Harappan Civilization, and the Indus-Sarasvati Civilization by some scholars, reached its climax 'around 2500 B.C.'<sup>62</sup>. The total area covered by the distinctive sites related to this civilization is considerably larger than Pakistan, and greater than the states of Egypt and Mesopotamia at their height<sup>63</sup>.

The social and political structure which created and maintained this cultural unity over so large an area and for many centuries is still not clearly understood<sup>64</sup>. But its existence is demonstrated by, for example, the promulgation of a single

script (and presumably language) throughout<sup>65</sup>. The distinctive stone seals, bearing carved subjects and in some cases still unread inscriptions, are evidence of this<sup>66</sup>.

Indus seals have been found along with imported trade commodities in contemporary Mesopotamia<sup>67</sup>. Some bear representations of what appear to be religious symbols or mythological scenes<sup>68</sup>. Occasionally, identical scenes are found at widely separated sites<sup>69</sup>. A number of the symbolic motifs appear to derive from those of the previous period, and some survive into later Indian art, and even into modern times<sup>70</sup>.

Scholars have invested much time and labour in classifying the people of India into various 'races'. On the basis of physical type and language some scholars have divided the people of India into four broad classes or races - Aryans or Indo-Aryans, Dravidians, primitive types and people with strong Mongolian features<sup>71</sup>.

It must, however, be observed that neither archaeology nor physical anthropology, although both are scientific disciplines with a distinguished intellectual pedigree in South Asia, have been able to produce more than very tentative suggestions as to the evolution of racial types within India's population<sup>72</sup>.

One of the striking characteristics of India's vast population, is its apparent homogeneity<sup>73</sup>. The term Indian immediately evokes the picture of a recognizable physical type, most obviously distinguished by a brown pigmentation of the skin, additionally by such secondary physical characteristics as full black hair and typically prominent dark brown eyes<sup>74</sup>. A closer observation reveals that the people of the Indian sub-continent are differentiated in physical appearance from one another by regional tendencies rather than by absolute traits<sup>75</sup>. Thus, as a consequence of their geographical location, people in the north-west tend to be relatively light-skinned and heavily built, and those in the north-east tend to exhibit Mongoloid traits with rounder faces and high cheekbones<sup>76</sup>. South Indians, by contrast, tend to be darker in complexion than people from the north, and are more slightly built<sup>77</sup>.

Although physical anthropologists have made significant discoveries about such invisible characteristics of the South Asian people as a whole, such as the markedly low ratio of A-type blood, their attempts to construct schemes of racial groups within the population have proved less satisfactory<sup>78</sup>. These schemes tend to rely upon an uneasy mixture of reconstructed prehistory, usually postulating the gradual infiltration of dark skinned 'Dravidian' primitive stocks by fairer 'Aryans' from the north of heavier build and narrower skulls with historical extrapolation

from modern social attitudes, notably the almost universal association in South Asian society between lightness of skin colour and high social status<sup>79</sup>.

Many scholars do not agree with this approach. They hold that except in special cases of extremely isolated primitive groups (themselves now largely extinct or assimilated) such as the Andaman Islanders or the Veddas of Sri Lanka, the present existence of radically distinct racial types within the South Asian population may therefore be discounted<sup>80</sup>. Their opinion is that the internal groupings within the immensely complex societies of the region actually stem far more from cultural factors rather than from the facial or bodily appearance with which these may be associated in popular imagination<sup>81</sup>. The pertinent query at this stage is: which people laid the foundation of Indian culture? The next question, and one of greater practical importance, is the relationship of the Indus Valley or the Harappan civilization with the Vedic civilization of the Indo-Aryans. Another allied question is the relationship of the Harppan culture with West Asian cultures.

The study of the Harappan civilization has raised many interesting problems of both general and particular nature. This civilization offers a striking resemblance to the ancient civilizations i.e. West Asian civilizations in Sumer and Mesopotamia proper<sup>82</sup>. The question, therefore naturally arises: Did these three civilizations develop independently, or was any of them an offshoot of the other? This very question can be put in a different form: Did civilization spread from the Indus Valley to West Asia or vice versa?

These questions have formed the subject of much discussion. It has already been said that at the present state of our knowledge, the earliest remains of the Harappan civilization, called the Indus-Sarasvati civilization by some scholars, can be assigned to 3500 B.C.<sup>83</sup>

Though the exact relationship of the Harappan culture with the pre-existing culture or cultures in the Indian sub-continent has not been established so far, its emergence as a result of a West Asian stimulus is being widely discounted now<sup>84</sup>. There are two major views regarding the race of the Harappan or the Indus Valley people. Many scholars regard the Harappan civilization as an indigenous development among peoples of mixed origin and diverse racial types who had resided in the Indus Valley for long<sup>85</sup>. But some others hold that the Indus Valley people were Dravidians<sup>86</sup>. It may be hoped that further researches will some day lead to a general agreement on these subjects.

The Harappan civilization is usually regarded as different from and anterior

to the culture of the Vedic period<sup>87</sup>. It has already been said that in 1859, Max Muller put forth the view that the Aryans came to India as invaders from outside around 1500 B.C., and that the *R̥gveda* was compiled around 1200 B.C.<sup>88</sup> His view was challenged by many Indian and foreign scholars<sup>89</sup>, and is still being challenged. It has also been pointed out that the Harappan civilization and Vedic civilization should not be treated as one because of many striking dissimilarities between the two<sup>90</sup>.

These questions are indeed not free from difficulties. The points of difference may lead us to the conclusion that the Harappan civilization and Vedic civilization represent two different types of culture, but the arguments for the priority of the one to the other are not conclusive. The points of difference between the two are also not completely convincing. As a result of the facts brought to light by recent researches on the subject, many scholars now hold that like the Indus-Sarasvati people the Indo-Aryans or Vedic Aryans were indigenous people<sup>91</sup>.

Some scholars are firm in their conviction that the Vedic Aryans and the people of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization were not ethnically different people who lived in India in different periods and practiced different cultures<sup>92</sup>. They hold that in spite of some socio-cultural dissimilarities, the *R̥gvedic* Aryans and the people of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization were parts of a bigger social complex<sup>93</sup>.

It were these people who not only laid the foundation of Indian culture but also handsomely contributed to its growth and development.

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