

Maritime Trade between Gujarat and Mesopotamia: The Need for a Reappraisal

Janardhana Bora (Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU), Amarkantak-India,
Assistant Professor) janardhanab@igntu.ac.in

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to portray maritime trade between Gujarat and Mesopotamia by examining cultural materials during the third millennium BC found in archaeological sites of Indus Valley culture. The early maritime history of the subcontinent commenced with and it confined mainly to trade links between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia, and needed further nuanced by re-examining the role of Gujarat in the light of recent interpretations. In this article, the author reviews some evidence for Indus external trade of maritime archaeology. The possible consequences of such a prominent maritime role are explored. The topic of this abstract fits best within this Session X because observations and deliberations of this study have presented archaeological shreds of evidence pertaining to maritime trade such as pottery, semi precious stone beads, seals and sealing, cubical weights, and other numerous pieces of evidence.

Key words: Gujarat and Mesopotamia, maritime trade, and material archaeology

INTRODUCTION

Maritime trade between Gujarat (India) and Mesopotamia (Iraq) has a long history and has many dimensions-cultural, religious, and commercial. The manifestations of cultural, religious, and commercial interaction between these two regions have been traced from the archaeological investigations in Gujarat as well as Mesopotamia, dated back to the 3rd millennium BCE (Mackay 1928, 29; Marshall 1931). This trade was driven by the substantiated archaeological evidence such as spices, textiles, and precious metals, and played an important role in shaping the economic, political, and cultural connections between the two regions.

The exact nature and scale of this trade have been the subject of much debate among historians, with some suggesting that it was a major factor in the development of the economies and civilizations of both regions, while others have argued that its impact has been overstated (Rao 1974, 70, Dhavalikar 1996, 76, Hegde 1990,152, Sonawane 2003, 4, Bhan 2003, 51-80, Irani 2003, 91-97, Gaur 2003, 57-66, Ansari 1966, Pramanik 2004,133-140). However, it is generally agreed that the maritime trade between Gujarat and Mesopotamia was a crucial factor in connecting these two regions and allowing for the exchange of goods and ideas.

The ships that carried out this trade would have sailed from the ports of Gujarat along the Arabian Sea and then navigated the Persian Gulf to reach the ports of Mesopotamia. Gujarat's coast is punctuated by several creeks and seasonal rivers that facilitate safe harbors all along the coast. The waters around the Gujarat coast are also rich in marine resources, such as shells used as food and export products. Conch shells have been a primary economic source for many fishermen in Gujarat (Pota and Patel 1991, 445-450).

GUJARAT AND ITS HISTORIC CONTEXT

Gujarat is a state located on the west coast of India and has a rich history that stretches back over several thousand years. The region has been inhabited since prehistoric times and has been the site of several important civilizations, including the Indus Valley Civilization. In the ancient period, Gujarat was an important centre of maritime trade and had links with the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and the west coast of India. It was also a hub of trade between India and Mesopotamia, with goods such as textiles, spices, and precious metals being exchanged between these regions. In the medieval period, Gujarat was ruled by several powerful dynasties, including the Solankis, the Vaghelas, and the

Sultans of Delhi. During this time, the region was an important center of commerce and industry, with major cities such as Ahmedabad and Surat serving as important centers of trade and culture.

In the early modern period, Gujarat was ruled by the Maratha Empire and was an important center of trade and commerce, with major ports such as Surat serving as important centers of maritime trade.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Gujarat was one of the centers of the Indian independence movement, with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel playing key roles in the struggle for independence.

Today, Gujarat is one of the most economically developed states in India, with a thriving industrial sector, a strong agricultural sector, and a rich cultural heritage. The state continues to play an important role in the economic development of India, and its rich history and cultural heritage continue to influence the development of the region and the wider world.

MARITIME CONTRIBUTIONS OF GUJARAT

Gujarat has made significant contributions to the development of maritime trade and commerce throughout history. Its location on the west coast of India and its access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf made it an ideal center for maritime trade, connecting India with other regions of the ancient world. Archaeological evidence shows that the Harappans had an extensive network of ports along the Arabian Sea coast of Gujarat, including Lothal, Dholavira, and Gola Dhoro, which were important centers of maritime trade and commerce. These ports played a crucial role in facilitating trade with other regions and were known for their impressive harbor infrastructure, water management systems, and production of valuable goods such as agate beads. Overall, the ports along the Gujarat coast played a significant role in creating a thriving economy and cultural exchange with other regions of the ancient world.

One of the most prominent Indus Valley sites in Gujarat is Lothal, located in the modern-day Bhal region. Lothal was a thriving port city and a center of maritime activity. It had a dockyard, which was a marvel of engineering, with a system of locks and channels that allowed ships to enter and leave the harbor even during low tide. The dockyard also had a warehouse for storing goods and a factory for manufacturing beads and other items made of semi-precious stones.

The people of Lothal were skilled sailors and traders, and they had contacts with several other civilizations in the region, such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Bahrain. Archaeological excavations at Lothal have unearthed evidence of seafaring activities, such as anchors, ship models, and navigational tools.

Another significant Indus Valley site in Gujarat is Dholavira, located in the Kutch region. Dholavira was a well-planned city, with a sophisticated water management system, and it had access to the sea through the Rann of Kutch. The people of Dholavira were also involved in maritime activities, and they traded with other civilizations in the region, such as Sumeria and Oman. Archaeological excavations at Dholavira have unearthed evidence of a dockyard, warehouses, and a marketplace.

Rangpur and Surkotada are two other Indus Valley sites in Gujarat that have provided insights into the maritime activities of the Harappan people. Rangpur was a center of bead-making, and it is believed that the beads were exported to other parts of the world. Surkotada was a fortified settlement, and it had a water tank that was connected to the sea.

These ports were strategically located to facilitate trade with other regions, including Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. The Harappans were known for their maritime skills, and their seafaring activities played a significant role in their economic and cultural development.

Textiles

Gujarat was known for its production of textiles in the Indus Valley Civilization, and archaeological evidence suggests that the production of textiles was an important economic activity in the region. Some of the major Harappan textile centers were located in present-day Gujarat.

The excavations at sites like Lothal, Dholavira, and Rangpur have revealed evidence of cotton cultivation and the production of cotton textiles. The Harappans used spindle whorls, weaving frames, and other tools to spin and weave cotton fibers into fabrics. One of the most notable finds related to Harappan textiles in Gujarat is the discovery of a large number of spindle whorls at the site of Dholavira. These spindle whorls were made of terracotta, steatite, and faience, and they indicate that the Harappans were skilled spinners. The Harappans also produced other types of textiles, such as woolen fabrics made from the wool of sheep and goats, as well as silk fabrics made from the cocoons of silk moths. However, the production of cotton textiles was the most prominent and widespread in the region. The Harappans used a range of techniques to decorate their textiles, including dyeing, printing, and embroidery. The use of indigo for dyeing cotton fabrics was particularly widespread, and the Harappans were known for their skill in creating intricate patterns on textiles. The textile industry played an important role in the economy and culture of the Harappan civilization, and their textiles were highly valued in the ancient world.

Shipbuilding

Shipbuilding was a significant activity during the Harappan civilization in Gujarat, as evidenced by the discovery of several ship-related artifacts and structures at various Harappan sites in the region. The Harappans were skilled maritime traders who established trade links with other regions, and shipbuilding played a vital role in facilitating their seafaring activities. The ships built by the Harappans were primarily used for the transportation of goods, including textiles, metals, and agricultural produce. One of the most significant discoveries related to Harappan shipbuilding was made at the site of Lothal in Gujarat. The excavations at Lothal revealed a well-planned dockyard, which was equipped with a number of features such as a basin, a wharf, and a tidal lock. The dockyard was connected to a channel that led to the Arabian Sea, and it is believed that ships were built and repaired at this site. In addition to the dockyard, several ship-related artifacts were also discovered at Lothal, including anchors, cargo seals, and fragments of boats. These artifacts suggest that the Harappans were skilled in designing and building ships. Other Harappan sites in Gujarat, such as Dholavira and Balakot, have also yielded evidence of shipbuilding activities. At Dholavira, a large tank was discovered, which is believed to have been used for testing ships. At Balakot, the excavations revealed a well-planned harbor, which was used for loading and unloading ships.

Cultural Exchange

The Harappans were known for their advanced urban planning, trade, and maritime activities, and they established cultural contacts with other regions through their trade networks. Gujarat was an important center of cultural exchange during the Harappan civilization, as it was strategically located on the Arabian Sea coast and served as a hub for maritime trade. The Harappans had trade links with other regions, including Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, and they exchanged ideas, technologies, and cultural practices with these regions (Gensheimer 1984, 65-73, Kenoyer 2008a, 19-28). One of the most significant examples of cultural exchange during the Harappan civilization was the spread of the Indus script, a writing system used by the Harappans. The Indus script was found on seals, tablets, and other objects, and it was used for record-keeping and administrative purposes. The script has not yet been fully deciphered, but it is believed to represent a Dravidian language spoken by the Harappans.

Another example of cultural exchange during the Harappan civilization was the spread of technology and crafts. The Harappans were skilled in metallurgy, pottery, and textile production, and they exchanged these technologies and crafts with other regions through their trade networks (Possehl

1990, 261-282; Ratnagar 1981). For example, Harappan pottery has been found in Mesopotamia, indicating that the Harappans traded their pottery with this region.

The Harappans also exchanged cultural practices with other regions, including religious beliefs and practices. For example, the discovery of figurines of Mother Goddesses in the Harappan sites suggests the presence of a fertility cult. Similar figures have been found in other regions, including Mesopotamia, indicating the exchange of religious beliefs and practices.

IMPLICATION OF GUJARAT'S ROLE

Gujarat played a crucial role in the Harappan civilization, both as a center of cultural exchange and as a hub of maritime trade. The Harappans developed sophisticated techniques for shipbuilding and navigation, which allowed them to establish trade links with other regions, including Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Gujarat's location on the Arabian Sea coast made it a vital center for this trade network, as ships could dock at its ports and exchange goods and ideas.

The implications of Gujarat's role in the Harappan civilization are significant. The maritime trade routes established by the Harappans facilitated the exchange of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices between different regions, which contributed to the development of a vibrant and cosmopolitan culture in South Asia. The Harappan civilization was one of the earliest urbanized cultures in the world, and its achievements in urban planning, metallurgy, and other areas had a lasting impact on the region's development.

Today, the legacy of the Harappan civilization can still be seen in the cultural traditions and economic practices of Gujarat and other regions of South Asia. Gujarat continues to be an important center of trade and commerce, and its ports are still a vital link in the region's maritime trade networks. The region's rich history and cultural heritage also make it an important destination for tourism, as visitors can explore the remnants of the Harappan civilization and other historical sites.

INDUS VALLEY LINKS WITH OTHER MARITIME TRADE MESOPOTAMIA

The Indus Valley Civilization had extensive maritime trade links with other regions beyond Mesopotamia as well. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Harappans established trade links with regions such as Oman, Bahrain, and the Persian Gulf. The Harappans traded a variety of goods, including textiles, precious stones, metals, and agricultural products.

One of the most important commodities traded by the Harappans was cotton, which was grown extensively in the region. The Harappans were known for their skill in producing high-quality cotton textiles, which were in great demand in the ancient world. These textiles were exported to other regions via maritime trade routes, and have been found in archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other regions.

The Indus Valley Civilization also had significant trade links with the Persian Gulf region. Archaeological excavations at the site of Dilmun, located in present-day Bahrain, have revealed the presence of Harappan artefacts such as pottery, beads, and seals. These artefacts indicate that the Harappans had a significant presence in the region, and were involved in a thriving trade network that spanned the Persian Gulf.

The exchange of ideas and technologies was also an important aspect of the Indus Valley Civilization's maritime trade links. The Harappans were skilled in metallurgy and produced high-quality copper and bronze items, which were exported to other regions. The exchange of

knowledge and technologies in metallurgy, as well as in other areas such as agriculture and urban planning, facilitated the growth of a vibrant and cosmopolitan culture in the ancient world.

Overall, the maritime trade links established by the Indus Valley Civilization had a significant impact on the development of trade, culture, and technology in the ancient world. The exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies facilitated the growth of a vibrant and cosmopolitan culture in the ancient world, and laid the foundations for the development of modern-day South Asia and the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Indus Valley Civilization's maritime trade links between Gujarat and Mesopotamia have been the subject of much scholarly debate and speculation. While there is no doubt that the Harappans engaged in extensive maritime trade with Mesopotamia and other regions, the exact nature and extent of these trade links remain a matter of interpretation and conjecture.

Recent archaeological discoveries and advances in scientific techniques have shed new light on the Indus-Mesopotamia trade links, and there is a growing consensus among scholars that these links were more extensive and complex than previously thought. It is clear that the Harappans were not isolated from the rest of the ancient world, and that they were actively engaged in a vibrant trade network that spanned continents and cultures.

A reappraisal of the Indus-Mesopotamia trade links is needed in order to fully understand the significance of these links for the development of trade, culture, and technology in the ancient world. Such a reappraisal should take into account the latest archaeological discoveries and scientific advances, as well as the insights of scholars from a range of disciplines, including archaeology, history, anthropology, and linguistics.

Ultimately, a deeper understanding of the Indus-Mesopotamia trade links will not only enhance our knowledge of the ancient world, but also provide valuable insights into the workings of global trade and commerce in the present day. As such, it is a subject that deserves further research and investigation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ansari Z.D. and Mate M.S. *Excavations at Dwarka*, Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, Pune, 1966.
- Bhan K.K. and Gowda D. 2003. "Shell working at Nagwada (North Gujarat) with special reference to Shell Industries of the Harappan Tradition in Gujarat." *Man and Environment*, XXVIII, no. 2. (2003): 51-80.
- Dales G.F. & J.M. Kenoyer "Shell Working at Ancient Balakot, Pakistan." *Expedition* no.19/2 (1977): 13-19.
- Dhavalikar M.K., Raval M.R., Chitalwala Y.M., *Kuntasi: A Harappan emporium on West Coast*, Deccan College Post-Graduate Research Institute, Pune, 1996.
- Gaur A.S. and Sundaresh. 2003. "Onshore excavation at Bet Dwarka Island, in the Gulf of Kachchh, Gujarat." *Man and Environment*, XXVIII, no.1 (2003): 57- 66.
- Gensheimer T.R. "The Role of Shell in Mesopotamia: Evidence for Trade Exchange with Oman and the Indus Valley." *Paléorient* no.10 (1984): 65-73.
- Hegde K.T.M., Bhan, K.K., Sonawane V.H., Krishnana, K., Shah, D.R. *Excavation at Nageswar Gujarat: A Harappan Shell working site on the Gulf of Kutch*, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Baroda, 1990.
- Irani A.B. "Mandovi: an Early Historic Sea Port near the Gulf of Kachchh, Western India", *Man and Environment* XXVII, no.1 (2002): 69-72.
- Kenoyer J.M. "Seafaring Merchants of Meluhha." *South Asian Archaeology 1995*, edited by B. Allchin & F.R. Allchin, 87-100. New Delhi, 1997.
- Kenoyer, J.M. "Trade and technology of the Indus Valley: new insights from Harappa, Pakistan." *World Archaeology* no. 29 (1997):262-280.
- Mackay E.J.H. "Excavations at Mohenjodaro." Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, (1928-29): 67-75.
- Marshall J.H. "Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization: Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-daro Carried Out by the Government of India between the Years 1922 and 1927. " A. Probsthain, London, 1931.
- Possehl G.L. "Revolution in the Urban Revolution: The Emergence of Indus Urbanism." *Annual Review of Anthropology* no. 19 (1990): 261-282.
- Pota K.A. and Patel M.I. "Exploitation of Chanks from the Gulf of Kutch." *Bulletin of Centre of Marine Fisheries Research Institute*, no. 42, (1991):445-450.
- Pramanik S. "Hathab: An Early Historic Port on the Gulf of Khambhat", *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology*, no. 1, (2004):133-140.
- Rao *Lothal and the Indus Civilization*, Asian Publishing House, New York, 1974.
- Ratnagar S. *Encounters. The Westerly Trade of the Harappa Civilization*. Delhi, 1981.
- Sonawane V.H., Ajithprasad, P., Bhann, K.K., Krishnan, K., Prathapachandran, S., Majumdar, A., Patel, A.K., and Menon, J. "Excavations at Bagasra-1996-2003: A Preliminary Report", *Man and Environment*, XXVIII, no. 2, (2003):21-50.