

Indus Valley Civilization- Attempting to decipher the symbols

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Introduction

There have been a lot of speculation regarding the existence of any particular religion in the Grand Indus Valley Civilization. Though the inscriptions remain undeciphered but certain things have attracted my interest that had pursued me to write this paper about the possible interpretation of the symbols of Indus Valley Civilization.

Abstract

Indus Valley Civilization is one of the oldest and most renowned civilization of India flourishing around the time of the ancient Egyptian Civilization and Mesopotamian Civilization. Trade was very frequent in these civilizations as there are several instances of seals being found at different places.

Religion- Vaishnavism?

The seals play an important role in describing the fact that there is a scope of being the civilians the follower of Vaishnavism. The fact that the seals contain several instances of the people being a follower of Vaishnavism. Firstly, I would like to begin my indications with a small instance from Amish Tripathi's famous book *Sita- Warrior of Mithila*. In chapter 8 towards the end contains the following symbols that represent Parshu Ram



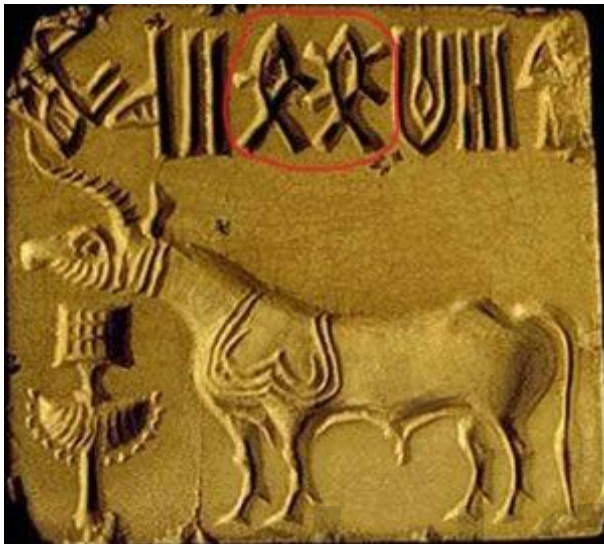
Symbols representing Parshu Ram

In the above excerpt we find that Mr. Tripathi describes the symbols depicted Parshu Ram, the Sixth Vishnu. Though he describes that his work is entirely a work of fiction but he is also very passionate about history, mythology and philosophy. He believes that there is beauty and meaning in all world cultures and religions. Some of his descriptions match with the seals that have been found in Indus Valley Civilization. The “U” shaped



symbol along with an axe and a fish. The fish is an interesting description of Lord Vishnu.

If there is only a fish, it means you are the follower of Vishnu but if there is a roof on the head of the fish, it means you are the Vishnu. Keeping this point in mind, now we look into the seal that was unearthed from Indus Valley Civilization. In this seal, fish is carved out along with certain other symbols



which clearly depicts that the seals are made by the follower of Vishnu. The animal that is carved out is maybe of a bull that may represent some ideas related to fertility, expressive, strength, courage, procurement and hasty. In most of the seals the symbol of fish is common, which depicts that maybe the people of the civilization had faith that by making a symbol of Vishnu on the seal, Lord Vishnu may ensure safe

delivery of the goods and not attacked by the pirates.

In this seal, there is an inscription of fish and also the fish with roof over it, which depicts the avatar of Vishnu. Interestingly, the animal that has been carved out is also of a Boar which represents Varaha, the Third Avatar of Vishnu. Maybe this type of seals were used for long distance trade as it might be the belief that Lord Vishnu himself is the



protector of the cargo and hence the safe journey of the goods is ensured. Also in this seal, there is a carving of a wheel like structure resembling a Hogan, the symbol used for permanent homes which might depict that the delivery of the goods to people of permanent residence. Also what is worth mentioning is that just below the structure of the wild boar or Varaha, there is a carving



resembling a Barge, a kind of cargo-carrying vessel designed to transport passengers or goods through rivers or canals. Normally, these shipping

vessels are long, flat-bottomed boats that do not have a self-propelling mechanism. A barge needs to be pulled by tow or a tug boat. This is only depicted in this seal and not any other seals that were discovered till date. So this brings a possibility that the Indus Valley Civilization use these seals for international trade as barges were mostly used for long distance trade. The carving indeed looks like a ship like structure. It might bring up the possibility that trade might have been conducted through roads for inland trade of goods as such structure was missing from other seals discovered till now.

This is another seal that was discovered from the Indus Valley Civilization. In this seal as well, the symbol of Parshu Ram, the Sixth Avatar of Lord Vishnu is depicted. But in this seal no fish are depicted so there is a possibility that these seals were used for inland trade that involved less danger of being looted by the pirates and also this type of seal maybe used for short distances transport of goods. Also, the animal in the image might represent Kamdhenu, which might be the symbol for the worship of Mother Nature.



The uses of copper seals were also present in Indus Valley Civilization as the use of the metal was quite

prominent. The copper seals neither do have any symbols of Vishnu or the Avatars of Vishnu, so the question arises why were the seals made of copper was deprived of such symbols? Did the carvers ran out of space? Or it was deliberately done? It might have been possible that these seals were used for products that are not of much importance. It can also mean that the goods might be transported to nearby towns or villages and hence not much carvings are needed because it needed to cover a very short distance.

The seals might also reveal the social status of the society of Indus at that time. The Indus Valley Civilization was divided into two parts mainly, the Citadel and the Lower Town. It's quite possible that the rich Lived in upper Citadel and Middle-class lived in Lower Citadel and finally the poor lived in Lower Town. So the carvings of fish representing Lord Vishnu's Avatar himself, it might be made for the rich of the upper Citadel and the few symbols of Lord Vishnu might be used by the middle-class people in Lower Citadel. The seals with no such symbols of Lord Vishnu might be indicative of the poor being deprived of the royalty of using symbols of lord Vishnu or they could not afford to pay for the high quality seals with Symbols of Lord Vishnu and hence just a mere caricature of carvings on the seals issued for poor people.



Another carving that was discovered in Mohenjo-Daro is the image to the left, it resembles like Gandaberunda, the two-headed bird in Hindu Mythology, believed to possess immense magical strength. Later Vaishnava traditions hold it to be a form of Vishnu to fight Sharabha, who is a form of Shiva, taken to pacify Lord Vishnu's



Narsimha Avatar. Moreover, what is more interesting is that this carving too contains the symbol of fish which is the ideal representation of the carving's relation with Lord Vishnu. Again, this might reflect to the fact that the people of the Indus Valley Civilization were an ardent worshipper of Lord Vishnu and their forms. Another seal that can be very interesting is that of a boy similar to the story of Bharat, son of King Dushyant and Shakuntala. We are all familiar with the story of the brave Bharat. Dushyant had forgotten his wife Shakuntala and had no idea that he had a son. Once, Dushyant happened to pass by the ashram. He



watched a little boy playing with a lion cub. The boy opened the lion's jaws by his hands and said, "O king of the jungle! Open your mouth wide, so I can count your teeth." Dushyant was very astonished by the child's bravery. Later Shakuntala came there and Dushyant realised that Bharat was his son. He was overjoyed at this and hugged Bharat lovingly.

Dushyant took Shakuntala and Bharat along with him to Hastinapur. So there is a similar depiction in this seal that the stories of mythology was quite popular in the Indus Valley Civilization and its depiction on the seals prove that it indeed was something to think about. Moreover, there are presence of symbols related to Lord Parshu Ram as maybe to indicate to the fact that it was a mythological story and is divine in nature so using divine symbols to depict the story of Bharat.

Alchemic symbols for representation of Elements?



Symbol of Gold in Alchemy

If we are to define this diagram by following the Alchemical symbols, then this inscription of The Indus Valley Civilization (image to the right) is similar to representation of Gold. We are quite familiar that metals such as



copper, lead, gold, bronze and silver were used by the metallurgists of Indus Valley. Several crucibles of copper slag are discovered here, which marks the beginning of metallurgy. In this era, Gold and silver were employed as ornaments. Moreover, gold was imported from the northern parts of Karnataka like Mysore, while northwestern India (Rajasthan and Gujarat) provided a more local source for copper than Afghanistan and faraway Oman (ancient Magan) on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula. So it is quite possible that the people of Indus Valley used symbols which was used to restrict the knowledge of Alchemy only to a handful of people. In Alchemy gold is one of the most important metal in the main 7 metals of Alchemy.

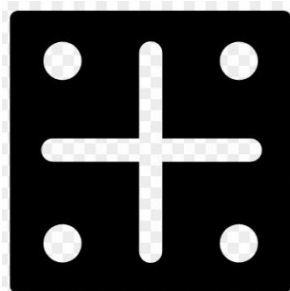


Symbol Of Silver in Alchemy

Another symbol from alchemy is for silver. The inscription on the seal as depicted in the image (to the right) is quite similar to the structure of the silver. It is quite possible that the symbols that we are trying



to understand as something that related to words of the language of the Harrapans but it is also possible that it might depict the metals that were traded among the countries.



Symbol of Acetic Acid in Alchemy

Another carving that was found in excavation is this plus kind of sign with 4 dots. This is a symbol which Alchemists used for representing Acetic Acid. The symbol of potassium is also very close to this carving but potassium contains only one dot on the right side. So, if adding three more dots might be the creation of K_3 or three times of potassium but there are



less chances of it as vinegar might be more probable substance for use.

In chemical reactions, antimony is used in the creation of alloys and also in jewellery making so there is a chance that antimony was used in Dholavira for creation of different products. An interesting signboard that was found in Dholavira was of different symbols in a straight line. Some scholars believe that it is a kind of symbols used in rituals or it was some symbols representing the King funding the signboard. Some believe it was put up on the burial ground which might be on the entry to the crematorium.



Signboard of Dholavira

In the above signboard, there are ten characters in a



Symbol of Arsenic in Alchemy (Original)

straight line with 7 different symbols. Scholars are of a view that the Indus script was read from right to left so starting from right there is a triangle kind symbol which in Alchemy represents Arsenic. Though it is horizontal but if we rotate it to vertical position,



Symbol of Arsenic in Alchemy (Rotated)

then it creates a similar structure which might mean that the following symbols represent the reactions that would take place for the creation of the final product. Many

archaeological findings have revealed that Dholavira was the site of production so it is quite possible that these symbols might represent the instructions given to the workers for the creation of the finished product. In short, this might mean the process of manufacturing any product which by following the steps used in the diagram as symbols might help in reaching the finished product. Moreover, this symbol is widely used in many seals which might depict that the products are to be transported for further manufacturing or transporting the finished products. Arsenic was mostly used as an alloying agent as well as in the processing of glass. In Dholavira glass beads were manufactured for jewellery purposes so it might be an indication as the manufacturing site.



Next symbol that is presented is that of a wheel like structure, which again using the Alchemic symbol for Copper Acetate. Along with arsenic, there are two symbols of Copper Acetate which might represent Copper (II) Acetate. And again, just beside the “X I” symbol, there is again the symbol of Copper Acetate beside the rhombus which in Alchemy represents Copper Soap. Copper soap had its uses like control fungal diseases such as powdery mildew and downy mildew on vegetables and rust

on ornamentals. So, it is quite possible that instead of engaging in just manufacturing products, maybe it was also the place for manufacturing farming essentials as pesticides, fungicides were mostly used to protect the crops from failing. The symbol “X” in Alchemy represents Tallow

While interpreting the signs, it is quite evident that all symbols do not mean to define any formulaic expressions, some are maybe the symbols of good luck or symbols related to astrology like the triquetra like symbol on the signboard (third from left), maybe it was used to represent the Almighty or the power of Trinity as in Indian Mythology is that of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahadev.

Finally, the beginning two symbols might represent Copper Cyanide which can be used for electroplating copper on the tools used for manufacturing the goods. So, ultimately by putting all the symbols in literal meaning, we might say that the signboard reads as follows and I should mention here that this can be a probable interpretation as it is an attempt to decipher the symbols and there is no assurance that it is the best way of interpreting the symbol-

“This is a manufacturing and pepairing site using various chemicals like Arsenic and Copper Acetate for the extraction and manufacturing of goods [and also] repairment [of old jewellery, or other products] with help of Copper Soap. [And also here] pesticides, fungicides [are available] for preventing crops damage. [And finally] Tallow is used for manufacturing soaps. [Here all are] workers who work in the name of the Trinity- Brahma, Vishnu and Mahadev [and with their blessings], we perform our work with our most important substance Copper Acetate.

Respecting Culture of the International Traders?

This is the most widely renowned seal around which there has been a lot of speculation that ii is represented to be the unicorn but there is also a



possibility that it might not be an Unicorn but rather a wolf. But it raises the question that how can a wolf have the horns? In Alchemy, the square like structure represents antimony (though it also has other

symbols of representing it, this symbol is one of the symbols used), which was often used to symbolize



The metal antimony symbolizes animal nature or wild spirit of man and it was often symbolized by the wolf

wild spirit of man (apart from the substance Antimony) and often symbolized by wolf. In Babylonian Mythology, The Calopus or Chatloup is a Medieval mythological creature, said to have a wolf-like body with horns on its cat-like head, and spikes on its back. Its image was and is used on hereditary coat of arms and can be seen on some shields used in the Middle Ages (mostly in 12th Century England). They were said to have come from Babylon and were strong enough that one ramming of their head into a tree would bring it down.

Conclusion

The Indus Valley Civilization can be considered as one of the most interesting and one of the grandest civilizations in the world. The wonderful inscriptions on the seals might be undeciphered but certain symbols that are used frequently represent the idea of Lord Vishnu and also an indication that though they were the followers of Hinduism no doubt but their inclination towards Lord Vishnu and their Avatars. The symbols that remain undeciphered maybe because it is not a language but rather the symbols of chemicals used in various manufacturing processes. Though the residents may not have spoken these languages because they would not speak using chemicals but it is quite possible that this was their work language i.e., symbols used only at the places of work or in more simple terms, medium of instruction at workplace.

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