UNIT 5 AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY URBANISM*

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest cities in the Indian subcontinent were those of the Bronze Age, going back to the third millennium BCE. This phase of civilisation is also called as the ‘Harappan culture’ or ‘Mature Harappan culture’. The Bronze Age itself is a term used to refer to communities utilizing bronze for their major tools but more importantly imply urban societies. The term is also used in a sense different from chalcolithic societies, which essentially meant village farming societies. Several early Bronze Age societies in the Old World are known, which include Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, other than the Harappan. Slightly younger contemporaries of the Mesopotamian cities, the Harappan settlements were distinctly urban, aspects of which we shall discuss in this Unit. But before that, we also need to understand what we mean by the terms ‘urban’, ‘urbanism’ and ‘urbanisation’. The term ‘urban’ is used in the context of a city and connotes a condition which contrasted with that of ‘rural’. An urban condition can be best explicated by V. Gordon Childe’s criteria for the early city which he outlined in 1950. These criteria were size of settlement and density of population, occupational specialisation, the presence of surplus in the economy, monumental public buildings, a ruling class, systems of recording and exact sciences, writing, art, “foreign” trade and a state organisation. While these criteria need not be considered as invariant in every urban context, it was the linkages that existed between them, and were first pointed out by Childe that were theoretically seminal. The term ‘urbanism’ refers to the state of being urban, while the term ‘urbanisation’ refers to the process of becoming urban.

5.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY URBANISM

A dense population that was achieved primarily by population nucleation generally marks an urban settlement. The tendency for population to come together or nucleate can be interpreted in various ways. This could be due to the need for defence or due to environmental reasons such as availability of resources or for proximity to a ritual centre. Shereen Ratnagar (1991: 23) emphasised that nucleation occurred ‘…not in order to make food production more efficient, but because of an engagement in non-subsistence activities such as crafts or trade, administration or ritual services.’

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1 Literally, nucleation means to ‘bring together into a nucleus’ (centre). In the context of population, it means that people come to live together in a defined space.
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Thus, an important factor resulting in population nucleation can be explained by the economies of scale that become possible in urban conglomerations. The advantages of population nucleation are marked. A dense population implies a large consuming population and increased demand. Thus, for crafters such as potters, it makes economic sense to live and work in a city where they can specialise in potting and obtain a livelihood solely from that craft. It would be similar for those who worked at trading for a living, or even at construction.

Normally we find that activities requiring heavy expenditures of time, labour and bulky inputs find it profitable to be located close to inputs or resources such as raw materials, fuel or land. This is obvious in most spheres of economic activity, as for example, in agriculture. The more intensively utilized land (such as for food crops) was that nearest the settlement while land further away was allowed to lie unused or was reserved for grazing or for collection of forest products. In the case of non-agricultural activities too, the areas close to bulky inputs (such as metal ore) were favoured for location of production, so as to reduce costs. Other factors such as geographical barriers or fragility of products may also impact on location of production. Yet at the same time, historically, we know that there were other considerations more important than costs, that materials were transported over distances, indicating the working of other significant factors.

The above patterning of land use has its own implications. While small, dispersed settlements can rely on agriculture, large, densely populated settlements would be another matter. A dense compact population ensures an increased availability of labour due to the ensuing pressure on land in an urban society. Unlike in dispersed settlements where the more the number of hands available the more that can be cultivated, in an urban society with increasing pressure on limited land resources the amount of labour that can be put into the same portion of land is limited and ultimately leads to decreased productivity. This available labour can theoretically be used to set up temporary settlements near distant fields during agricultural peak seasons but much more importantly can be diverted to other tasks that hitherto had been undertaken on a part-time basis. Hence, those who could not farm had to undertake other activities, be it craft production or ritual activities, or the performance of municipal functions or trading. Thus, the city, where only a limited proportion of its population could work at agriculture, is in fact known for these latter kinds of activities, which are often called secondary occupations.

For such a state of division of labour to arise, the support of non-food producers was essential, as it is precisely that sector of the population that is not producing its own food that needs support. This support is interestingly viable only with a surplus of agricultural production. The reason for this is because we are dealing with a period where there is no money and hence no wage labour. The term surplus is often understood in the sense of output over and above the minimum required for subsistence. Pearson (1958: 323) considered that the term ‘surplus’ should be used in a relative sense in that ‘a given quantity of goods and services would be surplus only if the society in some manner set these quantities aside and declared them to be available for a specific purpose.’ It was also realized that implicit in the concept of surplus was the necessity for a social centre that was responsible for mobilising it. Thus, Orans (1966: 31) found that ‘it is…not unthinkable that the very first extra production per food producer which went to a full-time non-food producing specialist went via an hierarchical authority.’

Historically, the earliest specialists may have been religious functionaries. In fact, the role of the temple in Bronze Age Mesopotamian society may have led to early ideas of religion as a prime mover in the context of urbanism. However, most discussions of

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2 In Economics, the term implies that per unit cost of production depends upon the quantity produced; the greater the quantity produced, the lower would be the cost of production.
specialisation have tended to focus on the economic sphere. In some cases economic specialisation might have been necessitated by environmental factors. Communities located in resource-rich zones may have been impelled to marginalize agriculture and look for other alternatives. For this to occur, however, the need for specialised goods must be available.

Population nucleation would impact on social relations too. In less complex pre-urban societies kinship played a predominant role while in urban societies the logic of nucleation, involving the settling together of populations, at least some of which were unrelated by kinship, implied relations between diverse social groups. Wirth (1964: 71) has noted that superficiality, anonymity and a transitory character epitomize social relations in a city. The sense of belonging in a city came more from the fact that one resided there, rather than from kinship, or of belonging to a particular group or community. In fact, heterogeneity of population enabled the mobilisation of surplus. As Orans (1966: 30) wrote, it would be ‘easier to establish and maintain wide differences in prestige and privilege in a large society than in a small one where all relationships tend to be based on kinship and/or face to face.’

At the same time, this is not to say that kinship did not impact on social relations within a city. Robert Adams (1966) when discussing the early Mesopotamian society has delineated the role of lineage groupings in landholding, craft production and other occupations that the texts show were clearly grouped into lineage and clan modes of organisation. In fact, much of the public work undertaken in Egypt, such as the construction of pyramids, was done through the mobilisation of communities or kinship groups to work on state projects for short periods. Yet, lineage groups seem to have lost much of their autonomy in the heterogeneous background of the city and were perhaps no longer liable only to themselves but to a higher extra-kin authority.

Some scholars consider that despite the obvious presence of heterogeneity persons of similar status and kin relations might have settled in discrete clusters within early cities. For this, archaeologists like Jonathan Kenoyer took as a model or template the idealized representation of the later early historic city in the Indian subcontinent, where ‘castes’ lived segregated in separate areas (Kenoyer, 1997: 68-69). To some extent, this suggestion may have been due to the spatial segregation of the Citadel area as distinct from the Lower Town section in some of the major Harappan cities like Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The segregation was seen to embody a separation of the elite from the other sections of the population, in other words, of incipient classes. However, we will show later that analyses of the plan of structures at Mohenjodaro do not indicate large complex structures as limited to the Citadel mound, but these were also found in the Lower Town area too. Also, there is very little evidence of continuity of craft production over generations suggesting occupational heredity, which is an intrinsic feature of the caste system.

5.3 URBAN ORIGINS

The question that has often arisen is of urban origins in the Greater Indus Valley. Some archaeologists like to take the discussion back to Mehrgarh in the Kachi Plain, a Neolithic-Chalcolithic settlement at the foot of the Bolan Pass. Located in one of the fertile plains in the Kirthar Ranges, Mehrgarh was occupied right from 7000 BCE up till about 2600 BCE but not including a Harappan occupation. While Mehrgarh was located in a hilly region, the earliest settlements in the Indus plain were those that preceded the Harappan cities. Archaeologists have long known of these settlements or occupations that were earlier to the Harappan cities that have been variously called Early Harappan, pre-Harappan or Early Indus, dated from about 3500-2600 BCE. Archaeologists call
these groupings as ‘cultures’, envisaged in terms of their material culture. In the Greater Indus Valley, prior to the Harappan, there were four such cultures, called as Amri/Nal, Kot Diji, Sothi/Siswal and Damb Sadaat (see Figure 5.1). These differ from each other primarily in terms of geographical loci and materially in terms of pottery. Most of the distinctive features of the Harappan civilisation, such as weights, seals, certain unique metal tools as well as carnelian and steatite bead types, a particular ratio for making bricks, distinctive shapes of pottery containers and the black painted designs on them, and so forth were entirely absent. Not only this, monumental architecture, a feature of urban spaces, is not a feature of Early Harappan settlements. These also seem to be more local societies with locally available materials being utilized. What was, however, common between the Early and Mature Harappan was the basic subsistence base (of wheat, barley, sesameum, linseed, dates, sheep, goat and cattle), the use of brick for construction, the cart for transportation, the use of terracotta cakes and terracotta and stone missiles and a few designs on pottery. These few similarities make the use of the terms ‘Early Harappan’ or ‘Early Indus’ more suitable than ‘pre-Harappan’ that would imply a completely different material culture.

Figure 5.1: Early Harappan Cultures (After McIntosh, Jane R., (2008) The Ancient Indus Valley: New Perspectives, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Map 1.)

For difference in ‘cultures’ and ‘civilisation’ see Course MHI-05, Block 2, Unit 6, Section 6.7 ‘Keywords’.
Despite the different terminology, some archaeologists have considered that there was a long gradual process of urbanism, covering a millennium from the middle of the fourth millennium BCE. In fact, a long development was propagated by Rafique Mughal as ‘cultural processes involving social stratification, complexities of architecture, inter-regional contacts and communication, craft-related activities and availability of economic surplus appear to have begun or emerged, even earlier, perhaps by the fifth millennium B.C.’ (Mughal 1990: 187) This, for Mughal, constitutes his first phase of development while the Early Harappan period comprises his second phase. He attributed this continuity to similarities in artefacts earlier thought to be solely diagnostic of the Mature Harappan, such as terracotta toy-cart frames and wheels, terracotta cakes, cones and pottery objects like offering stands as well as certain painted designs on pottery, that as pointed out earlier were seen to occur from the Early Harappan levels. To investigate continuities or discontinuities, Mughal hence concentrated on the presence of certain artefact-types to delineate an organic link between the Early Harappan and Mature Harappan cultures.

How do we theoretically understand urban origins? Urbanism can be interpreted in terms of a slow organic growth, where small villages eventually due to population nucleation (or people gravitating towards a centre) grew into cities. This has been termed as the ramp approach to urbanism. On the other hand, one can also conceive of a rapid state of urbanisation, where a settlement may very quickly grow into a city, termed as the step approach to urbanism.

In ancient Mesopotamia, it was the northern part of the alluvial plain of the Euphrates river that saw a population expansion around the beginning of the fourth millennium BCE. Before this date the area was hardly populated and it seems that there was either a massive influx of immigrants into the region or the settling down of erstwhile mobile populations (such as of pastoralists) or both. Gradually, by the end of the fourth millennium, large-scale population shifts took place into the southern part of the Euphrates alluvium, which became the focus of several urban centres. Among these urban centres in the south, Uruk gradually acquired a premier position growing explosively in size to 400 hectares by the beginning of the Early Dynastic period or 3000 BCE. Ancient cities like Ur and Uruk, however, show organic growth in the form of physically expanding settlements and burgeoning populations.

How do we understand Harappan urbanism? Archaeologically, this can be ascertained by studying the kinds of societies encapsulated by what we have called ‘Early Harappan’ and ‘Mature Harappan’, as well as the links between them. We have already seen earlier the absence of urban features like monumental architecture, or infrastructural elements like weights and seals. However, there has been a general tendency among archaeologists to concentrate on the continuities between the two occupations, but it may be more useful to take note of the disjunctures. There is evidence of burnt layers between the Early and Mature Harappan periods at sites such as Kot Diji that suggest a violent changeover in society. Moreover, changes in settlement histories in many cases also mark the shift to the Mature Harappan. For example, out of a total of 52 Early Harappan sites in Sind, 29 were abandoned. The picture is far starker in the case of the Cholistan where out of 37 Early Harappan sites, as many as 33 were abandoned. Similarly, in the Cholistan again, out of 136 Mature Harappan sites, 132 were set up in new locations. Recent surveys in the Upper Indus region by Rita Wright (2010: 128) have also shown that all the seven pre-urban settlements along the Chenab and four out of nine along the Ravi River were abandoned in the Mature Harappan period. There thus seems to be a preference for new locations in the Mature Harappan period, or a rejection of the older settlements. The transition should not be seen as the replacement of Early Harappan by the Mature Harappan. At the same time, no single Early Harappan
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culture can be seen as the progenitor of the Mature Harappan. Moreover, the Early and Mature Harappan did co-exist, as can be seen at Rahman Dheri in the northern Punjab, where from 2500 to 1900 BCE, the material culture remained Kot Dijian. If we put these disjunctures between the Early and Mature Harappan together with the absence of elements indicative of urbanism, we would have to suggest a rapid onset of urban growth in the Indus Valley.

This sudden onset of urbanism can be seen through other features. Settlements such as Mohenjodaro show a high level of planning in their layout, with roads and streets, a drainage system and construction on mudbrick platforms. This is completely unlike the case with Mesopotamian cities that seem to have expanded outwards from the centre. At Kalibangan in Rajasthan, a new settlement with a typical Harappan pattern of a division into two units lay over an earlier (Early Harappan) settlement with a different pattern. The settlement of Lothal was set up with an entirely new and planned layout over an earlier chalcolithic village.

5.4 ‘URBAN’ AND ‘RURAL’ AS CATEGORIES

The category of ‘urban’ is clearly a broad one, which should include several kinds of settlements. After all, even in modern contexts, we can distinguish between city and town. For earlier periods, written sources sometimes indicate several categories of urban centres. In ancient India, for example, an urban centre was variously termed as ‘nagara’, ‘pura’, ‘durga’ and so forth. In Bronze Age Egypt, too, there were several terms for urban centres that can be gleaned from the written sources. But it is difficult in the Harappan case in the absence of written information to be able to differentiate different types of urban centres. Hence, we have to rely on the archaeological evidence alone.

The problem then arises of assuming hierarchies or gradations among urban settlements solely on the basis of size, which is often done by archaeologists when they survey a region and document ancient sites. However, as pointed out at the beginning, size is not the only criterion for determining the urban character of a site. Density of population and the concomitant specialisation of tasks are more useful. Thus, even a settlement small in size could qualify as urban or semi-urban, if it had varying functions and its population was diverse in structure and tasks. In the Harappan case, even comparatively small settlements, such as Chanhudaro or Lothal, may have fulfilled particular defined purposes and seem to have been deliberately established for those purposes. But once we have established the predominance of non-agricultural occupations at a settlement, then we could use size to differentiate cities from towns, such as Mohenjodaro and Chanhudaro. However, we still may not know how many tiers of urban centres may have existed.

It is not just differences between urban settlements that are difficult to discern. While modern distinctions between urban and rural are very sharp these have been considered problematic for cases in the past. This is particularly so for early rural settlements that may archaeologically present an urban picture. That this was not limited only to very early societies is seen by medieval rural settlements in the Middle East that very often had marked urban features. Often, archaeologists go by site sizes to make claims that ‘large’ meant ‘urban’ and ‘small’ implied ‘rural’, which can be deceptive. This can be seen from the example of Rangpur, which was large in spatial extent but whose archaeological assemblage or supposed functions hardly qualify it to be urban. We can understand sites such as Rangpur by what is called as ‘lateral stratigraphy’, where the entire area now seen as an archaeological site may not all have been occupied at the
same time. Instead, the population may have shifted spatially over time giving the false impression of a much larger settlement.

Small settlements may also have isolated examples of complex architecture making urban-rural differentiation somewhat tricky. At Balakot in southern Sind, for example, excavated by George Dales, a floor, still surviving, of baked square tiles impressed with the intersecting circle design may indicate ‘an elaborate, perhaps monumental building’. (Dales, 1979: 260) While no walls are presently left standing, another well-paved floor was found in an adjoining area, plastered with white lime in which there was a circular depression with charred remains of a wooden column. Further, small rooms were found nearby with very large storage jars, all this in the eastern sector of the High Mound. In the same context, we can point out that more than any other settlement, Kalibangan most resembled Mohenjodaro, but the two vastly differed in terms of size.

One of the reasons why we have not a very clear picture of villages is because archaeologists generally tend to concentrate on, and excavate, what they judge to be urban centres. This is because of a fascination for the complexity of an urban centre and the urge to recover larger quantities of artefacts than would be available at a rural settlement.

5.5 THE END OF THE HARAPPAN CITIES

The Mature Harappan period or the period of urbanism lasted for roughly 700 years. Those 700 years would have seen periods of intermittent upheaval as suggested by the periodic floods that ravaged Mohenjodaro. After 1900 BCE, however, most of the major cities of the Harappan civilisation were abandoned or were clearly in stress. Just like the origins of Harappan cities, the reasons for their end too have been debated. However, here we are primarily concerned with developments in the Greater Indus Valley after the Mature Harappan period. It is not as if the area was completely depopulated or abandoned; in fact, after 1900 BCE, we find settlements with a material culture different from the Mature Harappan but with some continuities in ceramic forms, terracotta cakes and the use of faience to make ornaments. There seems to be a sort of reversal to the situation before the advent of the Harappan cities, with settlements, now mainly villages, having regional affiliations. Most important is that the majority of features that marked Harappan urbanism (such as writing or the use of weights and seals, or adherence to planning in the cities, or to a rich and vibrant material culture) seem to have disappeared. At the large centres, like Mohenjodaro, the collapse of municipal functions and rules can be seen in houses and kilns intruding onto the streets and being built in public spaces.

Four still little studied so-called Late Harappan cultures are now apparent: the Jhukar in southern Sind, Cemetery H in the Cholistan and the southern Punjab, late Siswal in the Sutlej-Yamuna Divide and Rangpur IIB-C in Gujarat and Kathiawar, roughly dated from around 1900 – 1500 BCE (Figure 5.2). The Jhukar is marked by seals in a round shape, pottery head-rests, buff coloured pottery and an apparent re-occupation of Mature Harappan houses. The Cemetery H pottery is a well-made pottery with complex naturalistic designs (realistically depicted birds, animals, leaves and flowers), which is primarily found in burial contexts. The late Siswal shows a clear reversal to the Sothi/Siswal before the Mature Harappan. The Rangpur IIB-C sites in Gujarat and Kathiawar show a remarkable increase in number but with drastic reduction in sizes which has been understood as reflecting changes in subsistence strategies with a greater reliance on pastoralism as opposed to agriculture.
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Figure 5.2: Late Harappan Settlements and Cultures (After McIntosh, Jane R., (2008) The Ancient Indus Valley: New Perspectives, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Map 4.)

There seems to have been a movement of population towards the east and southeast in the period after 1900 BCE. This has also long been considered as a period that lay between two urban axes, what have been earlier recognized as the first and second urbanisations. Recently, archaeologists such as J.G. Shaffer have tried to suggest that there was no interregnum or gap in urbanism, that cities continued to exist even after 1900 BCE and that the first and second urbanisations were not separate phenomena but represented a continuous history of urbanism in the subcontinent. This he suggested on the basis of surveys in the eastern Punjab that revealed evidence of spatially large settlements. He preferred to call this tradition as the ‘Indo-Gangetic Cultural Tradition’. (Shaffer, 1993: 59) However, until excavations are undertaken at these seemingly large
sites, it is problematic to suggest urbanism solely on the basis of size, or to accept the theory of continuity.

Thus, what is useful to learn is that urbanism can end too. The dynamism of the past ensured that what were centres and peripheries at a certain stage could change over time. While the Punjab and Sind appeared to be the centre and Gujarat and the Ganga-Yamuna doab as peripheries in the Mature Harappan period, the peripheries were eventually to become the focus of settlement in the Late Harappan period.

5.6 SUMMARY

While there may be various criteria to delineate an urban situation, we have preferred to focus on activities not primarily concerned with food production but with non-subsistence. This is not to imply that non-subsistence activities such as trade or craft production were not performed earlier in non-urban contexts, but that the focus varies in an urban situation. Changes must be seen qualitatively rather than only quantitatively. Moreover, the evidence for change is noted through various features such as shifts in habitation areas. Out of 132 Early Harappan sites for which there is data, only 21% (28 sites) continue at the same site in the Mature Harappan period. Also, only about 21% of 130 Mature Harappan settlements continued at the same Early Harappan locus. The relocations of population, accompanied by changes in material culture, must imply a considerable re-organisation of society, economy and probably polity.

5.7 EXERCISES

1) What do you understand by ‘urban’ ‘urbanism’ and ‘urbanisation’? Discuss the characteristics of early urbanism.

2) In what ways did the early Harappan ‘cultures’ differ from the Harappan ‘civilisation’? Do you agree with Rafique Mughal’s view that there may have been a long gradual process of urbanism?

3) What are the ways in which historians and archaeologists define and differentiate between a ‘rural’ and an ‘urban’ settlement? Explain in the context of Harappa.

4) Study Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 6.1. Write an essay on the picture that emerges over time from these maps.

5) Do you agree J.G. Shaffer’s view that there was no ‘interregnum’ between the first and the second urbanisms?