

# A search for our lost cities

May 7, 2006

Dear Dr Manmohan Singh-ji,

This pertains to a special project, which I had conceived when I was working as Culture and Tourism Minister. The project, I thought, would have enlarged the dimensions of tourism, provided new insight into the origin of our civilisation, and attracted a number of scholars and archaeologists to study the unexplored layers of our past. Unfortunately, it has since been given up.

Through this letter, I am approaching you with the request to intervene and ensure that the project is viewed in the right perspective and revived. I give below a brief backdrop of the project and the course that it intended to follow.

From the point of view of culture, the project was named as "A search For Lost Cities, A Lost Civilisation and A Lost River", and from the tourism point of view it was titled, "Travels Around Lost Cities, A Lost Civilisation and a Lost River". The river was Sarasvati and the civilisation was the one known as Harappan/Indus-Sarasvati.

There were five major objectives that the project sought to achieve: 1) To undertake extensive excavations of the Harappan settlements in the basin of the now dried-up Sarasvati, and build archaeological museums at the sites. 2) Set up small tourist-centres nearby. 3) Establish documentation-cum-multidisciplinary research units with attached pavilions, showing 5,000 years of Indian civilisation through large panel-photographs, 3-D models etc. 4) Make the newly created complex attractive for residents of the neighbouring towns and villages. 5) Open at each of the centres, a small window to the visitors.

The significance lay in the attempt to provide clear answers to some crucial questions, which I will answer one by one:

## **Was there an Aryan invasion?**

It has been propagated by Western scholars and their Indian disciples that between 1,500 to 1,000 BC, there was an invasion of India by light-skinned nomadic tribes, the Aryans, which gave birth to the Vedic civilisation of India. But this hypothesis has no legs to stand upon. The study of Colin Renfrew, a noted archaeologist at Cambridge University, not only debunks the theory propounded by Mortimer Wheeler but also points at the similarities between the Aryan Vedic civilisation and the Harappan one. Nor can the theory of invasion/migration provide answers to pertinent questions like: How come the 'Aryans', who showed strong attachment to lands, did not carry with them the memories of their previous homeland and nurse no nostalgia about their past? Is it not clear that the Rig-Vedic expressions like 'sabha', 'samiti', 'samrat', 'ranjan', 'rajaka', which indicate the existence of organised assemblies and rulers of different ranks, are relevant not to the nomadic invaders, but to the advanced urban society of the Vedic Aryans who were indigenous inhabitants of Harappan settlements? Was not the evolution of chariot more likely in the flat lands of North India rather than in the uneven terrain of the Central Asia?

The last nail in the coffin of the invasion/migration theory has been hammered in by the recent genetic studies, conducted by scientists in Calcutta with foreign scientists. They analysed the Y-Chromosomes of 936 men and 77 castes, and referred to the work of the international research teams that found that the earliest modern human arrived in India from Africa, trudging along the Indian Ocean coast about 60,000 years ago. They concluded: "Our findings suggest that most

modern Indians have genetic affinities to the earlier settlers and subsequent migrants and not to central Asians or 'Aryans', as they are called".

### **Nature of Civilisation**

When, in 1922, the Harappan civilisation was discovered, only two major settlements — Mohenjodaro and Harappa — had been excavated and that too partially. On this basis, views were formulated about the origin of these advanced urban civilisations. It was given out that its roots lay in Mesopotamia. Subsequent excavations of more Harappan sites have shown that these views and assertions were made without adequate evidence.

John Reader, a noted scholar of anthropology and geography, has pointed out that emergence of cities and civilisations in six widely separated places around the world — Mesopotamia, India, Egypt, China, Central America and Peru — was spontaneous and none resulted from contact with one another.

Excavations carried out by a French team, headed by Jean-Francois Jarrige, during the last 15 years, at Mehrgarh, Pakistan, have pin-pointed the beginnings of civilisation in India and shown that Indus-Sarasvati civilisation had no moorings in Mesopotamia or any civilisation outside India.

It has been rightly observed: "The people in Mehrgarh tradition are the people of India today". There are similarities between the social and religious practices of the Harappan people and the people of present-day India. For example, the spiralled bangles of the type found around the figurine of the Harappan dancing girl can still be seen on the arms of women in Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, etc.

Again, as was the case with Harappan women, 'sindoor' is applied by married women of Hindu families. Some other common features of the two periods are: the practice of worshipping trees, putting of Svastika symbol at the entrance of the houses etc.

### **Did Sarasvati exist?**

There is ample evidence that supports the view that river Sarasvati once existed.

Literary: The Rig Veda mentions the Sarasvati about 50 times, describing it as "the best mother, the best river, the best goddess". The famous Nadi-stuti hymn mentions a set of rivers, including Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati and Sutudori (Sutlej) and places Sarasvati between Yamuna and Sutlej. Its origin is indicated in the hymn that says: "Purest among all rivers and vibrant, the Sarasvati moves on from the mountains to the ocean, manifesting immense riches of the world..." She is also called the seventh "Indus Mother". Ancient literature also talks of when Sarasvati began to decline. The Mahabharata, the Aitareya and the Satapatha Brahmamana refer to its disappearance in the desert.

Archaeological: In 1872, C.F. Oldham and R.D. Oldham undertook a detailed survey of the area where the Sarasvati and its tributaries were said to be flowing in earlier times. They concluded that it was once fed by the Sutlej and the Yamuna, and that it disappeared after the westward movement of the former and eastward movement of the latter.

Geological: A group of scientists led by V.M.K. Puri and B.C. Verma, made a detailed study of the areas from which Sarasvati could have originated. They observed: "This river was in existence during the upper Pleistocene period as it was fed by glaciers that had descended to much lower limits in Garhwal Himalaya than the present day level due to the influence of Pleistocene Ice Age."

Hydrological: After the Pokhran nuclear explosion on May 11, 1998, the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre conducted tests to assess the impact of the explosions on the quality of water in the area around. These tests, interalia, revealed that the water in the area was potable, about 8,000 to 14,000 years old, came from the Himalayan glaciers and was being slowly recharged through aquifers from somewhere in the north. Separately, the Central Ground Water Commission dug a number of wells on and along the dry bed. Out of 24 wells dug, 23 yielded potable water.

If all that I have said is viewed in entirety, this is the picture that will emerge: the period 6,500-3,100 BC saw the growth of pre-Harappan/Indus-Sarasvati civilisation, corresponding broadly to the times when the Rig Veda was composed; that during the period 3,100 to 1,900 BC, the Harappan/Indus-Sarasvati civilisation prevailed and these were the times when the hymns of four Vedas were composed; and that 1,900 to 1,000 BC was the time of the late Harappan/Indus-Sarasvati civilisation which saw the decline and ultimate disappearance of the surface water of the Sarasvati, forcing the people to move eastward towards the Gangetic plain.

While the puzzles of archaeology and ancient Indian history cannot be resolved with certainty, particularly with regard to Harappa where the script has not so far been deciphered, it could be stated with a fair degree of accuracy that the Harappan/Indus-Sarasvati civilisation was born and brought up on the soil of India and its people and Vedic people were one and the same.

A lot of additional work needs to be done to unravel a number of features of one of the most significant civilisations of the ancient world. Hundreds of sites in the basin of now the submerged Sarasvati need to be excavated. It was this need that the special project intended to meet.

This would also be of huge benefit to the tourism sector. I request you to recommence the special project. I am confident that the project, if implemented in the spirit it was conceived, would show new facets of India's past, new initiatives of her present and new visions for her future.

Yours sincerely,

Jagmohan

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