

## The Sarasvati Flows on



*The Sarasvati Flows on:  
The Continuity of Indian Culture*  
by B.B. Lal

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Figs and 20 maps, 50 col. plates, 50 b/w plates

Schliemann was probably the first archaeologist who tried to identify the Greek tradition in its archaeological remains in the eighth decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the scholastic jeers of the contemporary academics, Schliemann continued his search and identified the 'Golden Mycenaea' of Homer and had a 'gaze upon the face of Agamemnon' in 1876. Thereafter Sir Arthur Evans identified the Palace of Minos in 1900 at Knossos and Sir Leonard Wooley could discover the 'Royal Tombs of Ur' in 1926. Many other excavations in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria were carried out with a specific mission of locating the Biblical cities or sites leading to appreciable results (Albright, 1966).

In India such an effort started quite late. Prof. B B. Lal was probably the first archaeologist to embark on the adventure of testing Indian tradition on the crucible of archaeology, although Pargiter, a great proponent of the value of historical traditions, had asserted in 1922 'the general trustworthiness of the tradition ... whenever it has been possible to test tradition by results of discoveries and excavations' (Pargiter, 1972, p. 6). The process once started by Lal has been carried out by other historians and archaeologists in India and *Puratattva* no.8 is very largely devoted to the discussion on the theme 'Archaeology and Tradition'.

Ever since the reviewer's book *Archaeology and Tradition* (Tripathi, 1988) was published, where it has been argued, on the basis of archaeological data, that the Vedic civilization is an indigenous phenomenon, a number of important publications have appeared arguing on the same line (K.D. Sethna, 1992, 1997; S.R.Rao, 1993; Bhagawan Singh, 1995; S.P.Gupta, 1996; George Feuristein, David Frawley and Subhash Kak, 1999, et al.). Most of these publications suggest that

the dichotomy between the Indus and the Vedic cultures suggested by Western scholars and followed by some Indian scholars is now no more tenable in view of the latest researches and archaeological findings. The book under review is the most authoritative documentation of the archaeological discoveries in this area in the last two decades and gives a scientific basis for all those who have any doubt in their minds about the indigenous origin of the Vedic and Harappan cultures and the continuity of the Indian culture and tradition right from the days of the Harappan-Vedic civilization till date. It is therefore a welcome addition to this series.

History is the visualization of the past by the historian. The past is not available to him for direct perception. It is seen through the facts that come down to him. The historian cannot claim to have the past in its totality for reconstruction. His picture has always to be conditioned by the evidence that he can collect. In any historical research of hoary past archaeology enjoys a prestigious position on account of its scientific basis and methods. The coordination between archaeology and tradition is unquestionably highly desirable. But the real question is the extent to which it is feasible. We have to find out whether, in the context of the realities of the situation of India's past, such an effort is expected to yield rewarding dividends. It is heartening to find that scholars have not been deterred by the difficulties involved in the task. Some archaeologists and historians alike have sought synthesis between archaeology and tradition in India. Keeping their eyes open to the limitations of the available evidence, they have traced parallels. It will not be fair to the literary tradition to expect a complete representation in archaeology.

One has to be clear about the nature of archaeological confirmation of tradition that is expected in such cases. Naturally, it cannot be hoped that all the specific objects associated with any person or event will be forthcoming. If such objects were made of perishable materials the chances of such a recovery become still dimmer. The grounds of corroboration in many cases have to be circumstantial. If one part of the narrative receives confirmation, it becomes likely that the tradition has elements of historicity. Even with our most fervent wish, we cannot expect to get confirmation of all the details mentioned in the text.

The book is divided into five chapters. First two chapters – The Sarasvati in the *Rigveda* and The Sarasvati on the Terra Firma – deal with the identification of the great river of the Vedic period with the existing river Sarasvati-Ghaggar combine in India. On the basis of its references in the *Rigveda* Lal has successfully and conclusively refuted the claims of all those scholars who identify this river with Helmand in Afghanistan. He asserts that there are compelling geographical data in the *Rigveda* itself which unambiguously show that the *Rigvedic* Sarasvati is none other than the present-day Sarasvati-Ghaggar combine which flows through Haryana and Punjab. Though now it dries up near Sirsa, the dry bed, sometimes as much as 8 kilometers in width as picked up with Landsat imagery, shows that anciently it continued all the way down to the Rann of Kachcha.

The third chapter – The Most Ancient Civilization of the Sarasvati Valley – has been written with a view to showing that oft-repeated theory of the extinction of the Harappan Civilization by an Aryan invasion is not only misconceived and completely contrary to the archaeological

evidences available in India, because there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest any invasion, much less by the Aryans. On the contrary, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the excavated Harappan sites in the dried up beds of Sarasvati-Ghaggar combine in India and Hakra valley in Pakistan show continuity of the Early Harappan phase into the Mature Harappan phase. He has specifically taken into account the excavations conducted at Kunal, Banawali, Rakhigarhi in Hissar district of Haryana, Dhalewan in Mansa district of Punjab and Kalibangan in the Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan. He rightly concludes that in the 'entire area occupied by the Harappan Civilization we have a scenario of continuity and not of any break' (p. 76). In order to fortify his assertion Lal has rightly quoted the archaeo-biological evidences which conclusively prove that there was 'biological continuity of the people themselves even after the decline of the Mature Harappan cultural stage' (pp. 76-77). Hemphill (1991:137) and his colleagues have conclusively proved that there was no biological discontinuity between 4500 BC and 800 BC. He is of the opinion that after drying up of the great *Rigvedic* Sarasvati in about 2000 BC the great cities vanished as the source of trade and commerce was extinct. However, we do find the traces of non-urban features of the Harappan Civilization, which were deep-rooted in the masses continuing throughout the subsequent millennia (p.81). He is of the opinion that after the drying up of the Sarasvati these people migrated to the uppermost reaches of the Sarasvati and Ghaggar, where water was still available, and further east in the upper plains of the Ganga-Yamuna *Doab*. Lal has correctly taken into consideration the two most important sites of U.P., viz. Hulas in the Saharanpur district and Alamgirpur in the Meerut district which clearly show the transition from Mature Harappan to the Late Harappan stage.

The fourth chapter –The Cultural

Stream Flows on – is really very illustrative and draws the rapt attention of its reader. He has clearly shown that the tradition of ornaments, make-up and toiletry of the Harappan period still continues for which he has given us some parallel modern evidences. In the field of games and recreation, house and town planning, cooking and associated items, agriculture and water-management, transport, on land and water, folk tales, religion and social hierarchy, he has given some interesting parallels. He thinks that the writing terracotta tablets of Mohenjo-daro have parallels in the form of wooden *takhtis* being used by primary school children in some of the far-off modern village schools.

Lal's conclusion in the final and fifth chapter – In Retrospect – that 'the great civilization of the Indian subcontinent, which had its roots deep in the antiquity, some seven to eight thousand years ago, and its flowering in the third millennium BC, still lives on, not as a fugitive but as a vital organ of our socio-cultural fabric,' (p. 135) is certainly nearer to the truth.

Scholars working in India have largely come to realize that the Indus and the Vedic civilizations 'were one and the same' and that the 'Indus-Saraswati civilization was not pre-Aryan but essentially Vedic' and 'sacred hymns (of the Vedas) were the product of the religious genius of the people who created the urban civilization of the Land of Seven Rivers' (George Feurestein et al., 1999, p.125). However, the way Lal has described the identity of the two civilizations and its continuity in the Indian cultural tradition for the last over five thousand years is really convincing and praiseworthy.

Besides all that has been said above, the description at certain points seems to be too simplistic to be accepted by serious students of Indian history and archaeology. To enumerate a few of these, I would simply quote the following:

- (a) Correlating the narration of the folk tales available in the *Panchtantra*, which is a work of about three thousand years later than the representations (pp.114-116) in question, seems to be quite fanciful. Particularly when the fuller version of the story could not be seen in its representations.
- (b) On the basis of terracotta female figurines from Nausharo (Fig. 4.1a & b) and Mehrgarh, both in Pakistan, (p.83) Lal has surmised that the practice of putting vermilion (*Sindur*) in the medial parting-line between plaits of the hair by married ladies continues even today in Hindu families. A simple question may naturally arise in the mind of an archaeologist is that why has this representation been not available in the terracotta figurines of the same period in the repertoire of so many female figurines found in the Sarasvati valley or even in the later period?
- (c) The *kamandalu-shaped* vessel in the Harappan repertoire (Fig.4.29) has led Lal to conclude (although with hesitation) that we can 'envisage some *sadhuis* as well in the Harappan population.' We know that *kamandalus* are never made of pottery. Moreover, only on the basis of the shape of a terracotta vessel no religious association can be attributed to it. A considerable number of vessels were given unusual shapes in the third phase of the Palace period in the Minoan civilization (2100-1900 BC), evidently because they were intended for ritualistic purposes (George A. Christopoulos, 1974, p.124). The colored photograph of one of such a ritualistic vessel clearly shows similar vertical strap-handle. However, it is made in the shape of a bull with small figures of bull jumpers on it. It was found in the *tholos* tomb at Koumasa in the plain of Mesara in Crete.

- (d) Lal is not very sure if the 'Hindu way of greeting, viz. the *Namaste* (Fig.4.65) is merely a social observance or a religious practice.' However, he is of the opinion that 'this form has come down to us from the Harappan times, as indicated by the terracotta figurine of that period (Fig. 4.66).' It may be interesting to point out here that a stone figurine of a man from either the last phase of the Pre-Palace period (2400-2100 BC) or the beginning of the Old-Palace period, found in a *tholos* tomb at Porti in the plain of Mesara, is also shown in the same posture.
- (e) It seems to be simply a fancy to surmise that the later concept of *Mahisāsūrmardini* in the Purāṇic Hinduism emerged from the Harappan period (p.119). Lal himself is quite aware of the fact that it will 'remain a conjecture unless we come across evidence from the intervening period.' We have several scenes of lion, bull, and buffalo hunting in the Upper Palaeolithic phase from Europe and Western Asia. In the Bronze Age Greece also such scenes were very common.
- (f) Lal has discussed a terracotta *kernos* (p.55, Fig.3.18) from the mature Harappan phase at Kalibangan as an evidence of the Western Asian contact/influence. It may be added here that a complete terracotta *kernos* (ceremonial vessel in which various offerings were placed) is reported from the Early Cycladic Period (3000-2000 BC) and is displayed in the National Archaeological Museum at Athens (George A. Christopoulos, 1974, p.108).
- (g) Lal has suggested that the apsidal structure associated with 'fire-altars' at Banawali may be some kind of a 'temple' (p. 63, Fig. 3.23). No one knows better than Lal that the concept of temple architecture is quite late in India. Even in other ancient civilizations we come to know of sanctuaries in this period and not of temples.
- (h) Lal has discussed at length the *yogic* posture of the Mohenjo-daro limestone statue of a 'priest' (p. 128, Fig. 4.68) but has failed to make any comment on the trefoil symbols on its clothes. It may be mentioned here that Asko Parpola (1985) has compared the trefoil symbol on the cloak of the 'priest-king' of Mohenjo-daro with the 'sky-garment' of the Vedic god Varuna. It would be worth considering this as a cosmogonic symbol, which gave rise to the *triratna* or triskelion of the later period.
- (i) Lal has rightly discussed the swastika symbol as of Harappan origin. In fact this symbol has survived (both *vama-avarta* and *dakshina-avarta*) on the Indian epigraphs. It continued to appear on the Indian inscriptions right up to fourteenth century AD, and still continues to be an auspicious mark in any of the religious rites in India among the Hindus. (p. 124, Fig. 4.62). However, one has to seriously think about the similar symbols in earlier contexts in the Western Asian Semitic civilizations.
- (j) Lal is correct in his assertion that 'tree-worship' has come down to us from the Harappan times on the basis of a seal (Fig.4.61) from Mohenjo-daro (p.124). However, it may be pointed out here that tree-worship has been a common phenomenon in ancient civilizations. Great importance was attached in the Minoan religion to sacred trees; and pre-eminently the sacred tree was the olive (George A. Christopoulos, 1974, p. 233). Many representations of tree-worship are found in the archaeological remains of the Minoan period.
- (k) Lal is of the opinion that '*karma*-(profession)-based Harappan society fossilized in the course of time into a hereditary one, as seems most likely, that the Harappan priestly class may have given rise to the Brahmanas, the agriculturist-cum-merchant class to the Vaishyas and the labor class to what came to be known as Shudras. The warrior class, viz. that of Kshatriyas, may have also come into being as a separate entity as and when the need was felt for defense against an enemy in an organized manner' (p.132). He has discussed the social stratification on the basis of the archaeological remains in different areas in the Harappan sites, viz. Citadel, Lower Town and small tenements in an area that was never fortified (p.130). A student of social history and political thought would fail to appreciate his hypothesis that the warrior class came into existence if and when the need for defense arose. Does he mean that there was no such need during the Harappan period? Then what for were the fortified citadels?
- (l) Lal, while discussing "the myth of 'Aryan Invasion' and the 'Extinction' of the Harappan civilization" (pp.67-77), has very ably exploded this myth on various grounds. However, when he says that the 'Vedic Aryans were nomads is misleading' as we get various references in the *Rigveda* itself of *sabha*, *samiti*, *rajan*, *rajaka* etc. which gives a fine distinction of governance which is not possible in a nomadic society (p. 70), requires to be examined a bit carefully. It may be mentioned here that this great text was not composed at a particular period of time. It refers to social environments of different periods when man was living like nomads to the period when he settled at one place and built for himself not only permanent settlements in the form of villages but also *puras* (forts/cities/citadels). This is clearly reflected in the word *rathakshayah* (RV.6.3.5). We find references to *ratha* and *gartta* as the abode of people moving from place to place (nomadic). *Pastya* and *vrijana* refer to the temporary

dwelling of the cow-herds and *durova* (houses with doors) to permanent settlements (*dhruva-kshiti*). It is clearly seen in the *Rigveda* that the people in that period of time were dwellers of caves and mountains (*guha*- and *parvata-nivasa*), dwellers in the jungles (*aranya-nivasa*) and permanent dwellers of villages in an area (*Kshetra-nivasa*). The evidence of pit-dwellings from Kunal (Ia and Ib) evolving into over-ground houses in the sub-period Ic (pp.29-30) clearly testifies to the above description available in the *Rigveda*. It may also be mentioned here that we find references to the objects made of stone (*ashman*) and copper (*ayas*) in the *Rigveda*. There are about 28 references of the objects made of stone (*ashman*) and 34 of copper (*ayas*). Axe is referred to be made both of stone (*ashmanmayi-vasi*) and copper (*ayasivasi*). Will it be too far off the mark to conclude that the Rigvedic civilization refers to a chalcolithic stage of culture?

The text is an exercise in the construction of meaningful hypotheses to assist a problem-oriented research based upon multi-disciplinary approach. I enjoyed the book immensely and this review copy is a welcome addition to my library. The book is decidedly user-friendly as well. The narrative is succinct without being cryptic. The text is well integrated; coverage of a topic in one section is cross-referenced whenever the subject appears in another chapter. The thorough index is laudable and bibliography at the end of the text is quite helpful. The most apparent glory of this book is its graphics. Of particular value are many diagrams, maps, photographs (both colored and in black-and-white) and schematics used to illuminate the narrative. The student (or keen-eyed connoisseurs of Indian history, culture and archaeology) who diligently reads every paragraph in this text will enjoy some of the novel approaches of the book.

The publisher has to be congratulated

for such a magnificent publication. Since it is a very useful book not only in putting the course of ancient Indian history on a right track but also for removing many of the misconceptions about it, it is suggested that a popular and low-priced paperback edition of this book may also be immediately published. Every library and students of history should immediately acquire this important publication written by one of the most eminent archaeologists of this country.

#### Further Readings & References

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