

---

## Book Reviews

Indian Historical Review  
43(2) 326–361  
© 2016 ICHR  
SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0376983616663430  
<http://ihr.sagepub.com>  


**Andrew Robinson, *The Indus, Lost Civilizations*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015, 208 pp., £15.00, ISBN 9781780235028.**

Andrew Robinson is a much respected scholar for his researches on Rabindranath and Satyajit Ray. This book, however, is a brief but excellent introduction to the Indus Civilisation. In a field of study as loaded with different nuances of the socio-politics of the past as this civilisation, there is enormous scope of disagreement with the author, but in the present review I shall put these disagreements aside and focus simply on some emerging possibilities which have not yet taken much positive shape.

One of these relates to the extent of literacy in the Indus Civilisation. It is generally understood that only a limited number of the individual signs occur frequently, while the occurrence of many of them is admittedly rare. A plausible explanation of this phenomenon is that a great portion of the written material of this civilisation is lost to us. This is likely to have happened because this material, on the model of the Indian situation valid till the nineteenth century, was inscribed on perishable materials, such as palm leaves or birch leaves. The census employees of the first British Indian census in the late nineteenth century filed their returns in many cases on palm leaves. The second point to note in this context is what B.B. Lal has pointed out in his publications on the continuity of this civilisation on the basis of an illustration of two terracotta objects in John Marshall's Mohenjodaro report. These two terracotta objects are identical replicas of wooden *takhtis* or tablets which may still be in use in the village schools of the interior parts of India. In the late 1970s, I myself had seen such *takhtis* in the hands of the students of the government primary school in my north Delhi locality. It may also be worth remembering that many wooden tablets were found inscribed with Kharosthi writing in Aurel Stein's excavations in the Tarim basin. The suggestion that wooden tablets of a particular type were used during the time of the Indus Civilisation suggests in turn that it had a regular schooling system. In view of the fact that there was a regular schooling system both in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, it is not inherently implausible that the Indus Civilisation too had a regular schooling system. This hypothesis has some serious implications in the study of ancient India. The last phase of the Indus Civilisation continued up to about 1200 BC at Harappa and this is corroborated by the finding of Indus seals in the fourteenth to thirteenth-century Kassite context in Mesopotamia and the Gulf. On the other hand, the date of the NBP, the distinctive early historic pottery of the Ganga–Yamuna valley is now found to go back to c. 800 BC, if not earlier. The beginning of the early historic

writing, especially the Brahmi script, is now found to extend back to the same period in the Ganga–Yamuna plain on indirect archaeological evidence and to at least 500 BC in Tamil Nadu on direct archaeological testimony. The point is that the possibility of a continuous literary development in India since the beginning of the Indus writing has justifiably emerged, considering that now there is only a gap of about 400 years between the Indus end and the beginning of the literate early historic India. A related question is: Can we really postulate a cultural stage without writing in the post-Indus context? The idea may go against orthodox Indological assumptions but this should not deter us from going in the direction pointed out by archaeology.

Second, what has further emerged in recent years is the vast spread of this civilisation between the line of the Ghaggar-Hakra on the one hand and the Siwaliks on the other. Those who have done fieldwork in this vast region will realise that the sites are particularly dense on the ground in all the relevant sections of this stretch—the Ghaggar-Hakra course, Panjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. In the last-mentioned state, the sites lie between the Yamuna and the Siwaliks. There is no reason to believe that Alamgirpur is the furthest eastward site in Uttar Pradesh. The pottery of the Harappan tradition has been picked up from a village lying in the shadow of the Manasa Devi hill of Haridwar. I remember that in a particular section of Saharanpur, the relevant type of pottery could be picked up in the outskirts of virtually every village, including a village sacred grove where at the time of our visit the performance of a Hindu ritual was going on. Eastward, Aligarh certainly lies in the belt of the Harappan tradition and so does Bulandshahr where the pottery of the site of Lal Qila belongs to this tradition. There is pottery of this tradition also between Aligarh and Mathura. A site reflecting Late Harappan tradition has recently been located in Etah. Equally significantly, the so-called Ochre-Coloured-Pottery tradition with its assemblage of copper hoards is now linked to the Harappan tradition and has been found as far as Sringaverapura near Allahabad. Taking a wider point of view, it is difficult to deny that the Harappan tradition does not form a significant base of the later historic development in the Ganga valley and elsewhere. The Indus Civilisation is unlikely to stand for a monolithic development but the fact that it formed a very significant cultural ground element between Baluchistan and the central Ganga plain around Allahabad is undeniable. This simple fact puts it on a ground completely different from the interpretative schemes offered by the traditional Indologists on the basis of entirely subjective linguistic assumptions.

Third, the possibility of climatic changes in various forms both before, during and after this civilisation has been suggested by many scholars, although doubts have also been expressed regarding them. I shall underline only two points in this connection. First, I remember a site in Haryana where the natural soil was underlain by a sand dune and it was also covered by a similar dune, showing clearly that the site flourished and ended in an environment of aridity. Further, a careful reading of the nineteenth-century gazetteer material of Haryana shows that there were extensively flooded and thus agriculturally rich tracts before the modern period. I do not see much reason why the Indus Civilisation could not flourish in the pre-modern agricultural setting of the region. Although the point is generally overlooked, we have to accept the notion that there was an effective canal irrigation system in its general area of distribution. The pre-modern literature on Sind is unequivocal on this.

A proper feel of the Indus Civilisation can be had only by looking closely at the ground and the context, as closely as 'Feluda' of Satyajit Ray studied the crime situations he faced! Here, Indological theories or far-fetched anthropological 'insights' are of no great relevance.

**Dilip K. Chakrabarti**

*Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi  
and Emeritus Professor, Cambridge University, UK*

**A.M. Shah, *Sociology and History: Dialogues towards Integration*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016, pp. xii + 254, ₹375, ISBN 9788125060130.**

DOI: 10.1177/0376983616663442

This anthology of essays by the author though basically dates up to the mid 1980s is of great value for both historians and sociologists. For the latter, it provides a vivid picture of the changes in the discipline from the years before M.N. Srinivas to more contemporary times. The narrative critiques what were once the dominant and cherished ideas, such as evolutionism and diffusionism. The implications of these ideas for the discipline of sociology have been lucidly spelt out and simultaneously the emergence of new issues and methods has been charted with great clarity. These chapters together with those on the Indian villages have relevance for historians as well. For decades, the notion of the self-sufficient, changeless Indian villages in different forms and historical junctures influenced the minds of social scientists in the post-independence period. This study questions the basic foundations of such understandings.

The idea of village autonomy and autarky nurtured from Karl Marx to M.K. Gandhi and as diverse thinkers as Maine and Marx usually took the form of a shibboleth, in spite of the absence of hard evidence to demonstrate it. Research has increasingly shown that Indian villages have always been part of a wider economic, social and political network of interactions. This was as much true of our cultural pasts as it is of the present. The works of B.D. Chattopadhyaya for early medieval India and Jan Breman for the colonial times unmistakably reveal it. The intensity of interactions and the degree of integration were admittedly varied, depending on local situations. This aspect of the argument has been elaborated with reference to the region of Gujarat, especially the interdependence between its different spatial components, as well as the linkages between the village, town and the port. The political dimension is illuminated by historically looking into the relationship between the Rajput chieftains, their allies, the Koli chiefs, and the Mughals and factoring in the rise of the Patidars in central Gujarat in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. Gradually, the Patidars moved on to assert their social competence as a caste. The political activities of the Rajputs, Kolis and Patidars, occupying intermediary positions in the political system, in the villages easily demonstrate that the village was not an inert, passive unit.

In addition, in south India the marriage networks are generally spread over twenty to thirty villages and in the north the same circle is much wider, both operating on the principle of village exogamy. Even today, big villages do not contain all the castes or occupational groups, necessitating inter-village cooperation. Studies by Noboru Karashima of