



COMMERCE, URBANISM, AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY: RE-ASSESSING SHEREEN RATNAGAR'S INTERPRETATION OF THE HARAPPAN STATE

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ABSTRACT

The Harappan or Indus Civilization remains one of the most significant urban traditions of the ancient world. Among modern scholars, Shereen Ratnagar has offered influential interpretations concerning the nature of Harappan commerce, urbanism, and political authority. Her works emphasize the interconnectedness of long-distance trade, urban administration, and early state formation within Bronze Age South Asia. This study critically reassesses Ratnagar's interpretation of the Harappan state by examining archaeological evidence from major Harappan urban centres, trade routes, craft production zones, and ideological structures. It argues that while Ratnagar successfully highlighted the economic foundations of Harappan civilization, recent archaeological discoveries suggest a more complex and regionally diversified political system than a centralized state model alone can explain. The paper evaluates primary excavation reports, colonial archaeological surveys, modern historiography, and archival repositories to reinterpret the relationship between commerce, urbanism, and authority in the Indus world.

KEYWORDS

Harappan Civilization- Shereen Ratnagar- Urbanism- Trade Networks- Political Authority- State Formation- Archaeology- Bronze Age South Asia- Commerce.

INTRODUCTION

The Harappan Civilization, also known as the Indus Valley Civilization, emerged during the third millennium BCE across the northwestern regions of South Asia and developed into one of the earliest urban civilizations in human history.¹ Extending across present-day Pakistan and northwestern India, the civilization encompassed an enormous geographical territory stretching from Baluchistan to Gujarat and from the Makran coast to the Gangetic margins.² The civilization's sophisticated urban planning, standardized weights and measures, long-distance trade systems, and craft specialization have attracted sustained scholarly attention for more than a century.³

The discovery of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro during the colonial archaeological expeditions of the early twentieth century transformed understandings of ancient Indian history.⁴ Excavations conducted under the supervision of Sir John Marshall revealed advanced urban settlements characterized by baked brick architecture, drainage systems, granaries, and extensive craft production.⁵ These discoveries challenged colonial assumptions that urban civilization in South Asia began only with the Aryan period.⁶

Among modern scholars, Shereen Ratnagar occupies a central place in Harappan historiography. Her writings focus particularly on commerce, trade networks, urban structures, and the emergence of political authority within the civilization.⁷ Ratnagar argued that the Harappan state derived its strength from control over trade and craft production, particularly through interaction with Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf.⁸ According to her interpretation, the urban centres functioned as nodes in an integrated commercial system governed by elite administrative mechanisms.⁹

Ratnagar's analysis emerged partly as a response to earlier diffusionist and culture-historical interpretations that emphasized external influences rather than indigenous socio-economic developments.¹⁰ She introduced a materialist framework that linked surplus extraction, craft specialization, and trade regulation to early state formation.¹¹ Her work also contributed to debates concerning whether the Harappan polity was centralized or constituted a network of interacting regional authorities.¹²

However, subsequent excavations at sites such as Dholavira, Rakhigarhi, Ganweriwala, Farmana, and Bhirrana have complicated earlier assumptions regarding political centralization.¹³ Archaeologists increasingly argue that Harappan urbanism was regionally diverse and environmentally adaptive rather than politically uniform.¹⁴ Moreover, recent studies on settlement hierarchies, water management systems, and rural-urban interactions suggest that political authority may have operated through negotiated economic and ritual structures rather than coercive state mechanisms alone.¹⁵

This study reassesses Ratnagar's interpretation by examining the relationship between commerce, urbanism, and political authority in the Harappan Civilization. It evaluates the strengths and limitations of her arguments while incorporating newer archaeological evidence and historiographical developments. Particular attention is devoted to the nature of trade organization, the role of craft specialization, urban planning mechanisms, and the ideological dimensions of authority. The study also situates Ratnagar within broader debates concerning early state formation in world archaeology.¹⁶

Study Area.

The study area includes the major geographical zones associated with the Harappan Civilization. These regions extend across the Indus River basin, Baluchistan highlands, Cholistan desert, Gujarat peninsula, and northwestern India.¹⁷ Important urban centers examined in this study include Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Dholavira, Kalibangan, Lothal, Rakhigarhi, Banawali, Chanhudaro, and Ganweriwala.¹⁸

The study also considers Harappan maritime and overland trade networks extending toward Mesopotamia, Oman, Bahrain, and Central Asia.¹⁹ These interregional connections are essential for understanding Ratnagar's emphasis on commerce as the basis of political organization.

Objectives of the Study:-

- 1.To critically reassess Shereen Ratnagar's interpretation of the Harappan state.
- 2.To examine the relationship between commerce and urban development in the Harappan Civilization.
- 3.To analyze archaeological evidence concerning political authority and governance.
- 4.To evaluate the role of trade networks in state formation.
- 5.To compare Ratnagar's interpretation with recent archaeological findings and historiographical debates.

Sources of Study:

Primary Sources

The study primarily relies on archaeological evidence from major Harappan sites such as Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Dholavira, and Lothal. Excavated materials including seals, standardized weights and measures, pottery, beads, urban structures, drainage systems, and warehouse complexes provide evidence for trade, urban administration, and political organization.²⁰ In addition, Mesopotamian cuneiform references to Meluhha offer valuable information regarding long-distance commercial interactions between the Harappans and West Asia.²¹

Secondary Sources

The secondary sources include the works of Shereen Ratnagar, particularly *Understanding Harappa* and *Trading Encounters*, which emphasize the role of commerce in the formation of political

authority.²² Other important studies by Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Gregory L. Possehl, and Rita P. Wright provide alternative perspectives on Harappan urbanism, state formation, and economic organization.²³

Methodology of the Study.

This study employs a historical-archaeological methodology combining textual analysis, material culture studies, and comparative historiography. Archaeological evidence from urban settlements, craft workshops, seals, weights, trade goods,²⁴ and architectural structures is examined comparatively.²⁵

The study also adopts an interdisciplinary framework integrating economic archaeology, urban studies, and political anthropology. Ratnagar's interpretations are analyzed critically alongside competing models of Harappan state formation proposed by processual and post-processual archaeologists.²⁶

Primary excavation reports are compared with modern reinterpretations in order to identify historiographical shifts in the understanding of Harappan political structures. Environmental and regional archaeological data are also considered to reassess assumptions regarding centralization and administrative uniformity.²⁷

Review of Existing Studies.

Early interpretations of the Harappan Civilization emerged from colonial archaeological investigations led by John Marshall and later expanded by Mortimer Wheeler.²⁸ Marshall emphasized the remarkable urban sophistication of the civilization, while Wheeler stressed military organization and possible external invasions.²⁹

During the mid-twentieth century, scholars increasingly focused on economic and social explanations for urbanization. Stuart Piggott and B.B. Lal emphasized technological advancement and regional cultural development.³⁰ Processual archaeologists later interpreted the Harappan Civilization within broader models of state formation and urban complexity.³¹

Shereen Ratnagar significantly transformed Harappan studies through her emphasis on trade and political economy.³² In *Encounters: The Westerly Trade of the Harappa Civilization*, she argued that external commerce with Mesopotamia and the Gulf region stimulated urban expansion and elite control mechanisms.³³ According to Ratnagar, standardized weights, seals, and craft specialization indicate organized administrative authority associated with an early state system.³⁴

Gregory Possehl challenged excessively centralized interpretations by emphasizing regional diversity and heterarchical organization.³⁵ Jonathan Mark Kenoyer highlighted ideological integration and craft specialization rather than coercive monarchy.³⁶ Rita Wright emphasized production systems, labor organization, and environmental adaptation.³⁷

Recent archaeological studies at Dholavira and Rakhigarhi further complicate older centralized models by demonstrating regional urban variation and localized governance mechanisms.³⁸ Scholars increasingly argue that Harappan authority may have been corporate rather than dynastic.³⁹

Potential Gap.

Despite extensive scholarship, important gaps remain in the interpretation of Harappan political authority. Ratnagar's model places strong emphasis on commerce and elite regulation but provides comparatively limited discussion regarding ideological structures, ritual integration, and regional environmental diversity.⁴⁰

Moreover, earlier debates often framed the Harappan state within binary categories such as centralized versus decentralized authority. Such approaches risk oversimplifying the complexity of Harappan governance structures.⁴¹ Recent archaeological discoveries necessitate a reassessment integrating regional autonomy, ecological adaptation, and symbolic authority alongside economic organization.⁴² This study seeks to bridge these gaps by synthesizing economic, urban, and ideological dimensions of Harappan civilization within a broader interdisciplinary framework.

Major Findings:

The study identifies several major findings concerning commerce, urbanism, and political authority in the Harappan Civilization.

First, commerce played a crucial role in the emergence and maintenance of urban centres. Archaeological evidence demonstrates extensive exchange networks involving lapis lazuli, carnelian beads, copper, shell objects, and cotton textiles.⁴³ Trade connections with Mesopotamia, Oman, and Bahrain indicate sophisticated maritime and overland commercial systems.⁴⁴

Second, standardized weights, seals, and urban planning reveal strong administrative coordination across Harappan settlements.⁴⁵ The widespread use of standardized brick ratios suggests cultural integration and regulated architectural practices.⁴⁶ These features support Ratnagar's argument regarding organized political authority.

Third, recent archaeological findings indicate substantial regional variation in settlement patterns and governance mechanisms. Dholavira's water management systems differ significantly from the urban layouts of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.⁴⁷ This suggests flexible administrative adaptation rather than rigid centralized bureaucracy.

Fourth, political authority in the Harappan Civilization appears to have been corporate and managerial rather than monarchic.⁴⁸ The absence of royal palaces, monumental kingship iconography, or large military structures distinguishes Harappan civilization from Mesopotamia and Egypt.⁴⁹ Authority may have operated through merchant elites, ritual specialists, and urban administrators collectively.

Fifth, ideological integration likely played an important role alongside commerce. Shared religious symbols, ritual motifs, and standardized seals indicate cultural cohesion across geographically dispersed regions.⁵⁰

Discussion and Interpretation:

Shereen Ratnagar's interpretation of the Harappan state represented a major historiographical intervention because it shifted attention from diffusionist theories toward internal socio-economic processes.⁵¹ Her emphasis on trade networks and craft specialization successfully demonstrated that Harappan urbanism cannot be understood without examining systems of surplus production and exchange.⁵²

Ratnagar argued that commerce generated social stratification and enabled the rise of administrative elites who regulated production and distribution.⁵³ This interpretation remains valuable because archaeological evidence clearly indicates large-scale craft specialization and interregional exchange. Excavations at Lothal and Chanhudaro reveal extensive bead-making industries and standardized production systems.⁵⁴ Similarly, Mesopotamian references to Meluhhan merchants support the existence of organized external trade.⁵⁵

However, Ratnagar's interpretation has limitations when applied to the entire Harappan world. The enormous geographical spread of the civilization makes centralized administration difficult to demonstrate conclusively.⁵⁶ Settlement archaeology increasingly reveals regional ecological adaptations and diverse urban forms.⁵⁷ Dholavira's unique reservoirs and citadel organization differ substantially from Mohenjodaro's layout, suggesting local administrative experimentation.⁵⁸

Moreover, the absence of monumental kingship imagery complicates models based on hierarchical state authority. Unlike Egypt or Mesopotamia, the Harappan Civilization lacks obvious evidence of dynastic rulers, royal tombs, or centralized military institutions.⁵⁹ This has led scholars such as Kenoyer and Possehl to propose heterarchical or corporate political systems.⁶⁰

Ratnagar's materialist framework also underestimates ideological and symbolic dimensions of authority. Harappan seals featuring animal motifs, ritual scenes, and script symbols likely functioned not merely as economic instruments but also as markers of social identity and ritual legitimacy.⁶¹ Shared symbolic systems may have helped integrate diverse communities without requiring coercive monarchy.⁶²

Another important issue concerns environmental change. Recent paleo-climatic studies suggest that shifting river systems and

ecological pressures significantly influenced Harappan urban decline.⁶³ Ratnagar's earlier works devoted comparatively limited attention to environmental variables, focusing primarily on economic structures. Yet environmental archaeology now demonstrates that political authority and urban organization were deeply connected to water management and ecological adaptation.⁶⁴

The relationship between urbanism and political authority also requires reconsideration. Harappan cities were not merely administrative capitals but complex socio-economic landscapes integrating residential zones, workshops, ritual spaces, and trade centers.⁶⁵ Urban planning reflected collective civic organization as much as elite political control. The sophisticated drainage systems and standardized construction indicate strong communal regulation and civic ideology.⁶⁶

Furthermore, rural settlements played an important role in sustaining urban centers. Earlier scholarship often privileged large cities while neglecting village networks and agrarian production.⁶⁷ New regional surveys reveal intricate interactions between urban and rural communities, suggesting decentralized economic integration rather than top-down extraction alone.⁶⁸

Ratnagar nevertheless remains crucial for understanding the economic foundations of Harappan civilization. Her insistence on analyzing trade, production, and exchange continues to shape archaeological debates concerning early South Asian urbanism.⁶⁹ Even scholars critical of centralized state models acknowledge the importance of commerce in facilitating social integration and technological specialization.⁷⁰

The Harappan state should therefore be understood not as a rigid bureaucratic empire but as a flexible network of urban centers linked through commerce, ideology, and regional interaction. Political authority likely operated through negotiated systems of economic coordination and ritual legitimacy rather than militarized monarchy.⁷¹ Such an interpretation integrates Ratnagar's economic insights with newer archaeological evidence concerning regional diversity and corporate governance.

CONCLUSION

The reassessment of Shereen Ratnagar's interpretation of the Harappan state demonstrates both the enduring importance and the limitations of her analytical framework. Ratnagar fundamentally transformed Harappan historiography by emphasizing commerce, craft specialization, and trade networks as the basis of urbanization and political authority. Her work challenged diffusionist narratives and introduced a rigorous socio-economic approach to early South Asian archaeology.⁷²

Archaeological evidence strongly supports her argument that commerce played a central role in Harappan civilization. Standardized weights, seals, trade goods, and extensive exchange networks reveal sophisticated economic organization connecting South Asia with Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf.⁷³ Urban centers clearly functioned as nodes of production, administration, and exchange.

At the same time, recent archaeological discoveries indicate that Harappan political organization was more regionally diverse and flexible than earlier centralized models suggested. Environmental adaptation, local urban experimentation, and the absence of dynastic kingship point toward a corporate or heterarchical political structure rather than a single imperial authority.⁷⁴

The Harappan Civilization thus represents a distinctive model of early urbanism in world history. Its political authority emerged through the interaction of commerce, civic organization, symbolic integration, and ecological management. Ratnagar's work remains indispensable for understanding these processes, but contemporary scholarship requires a broader interdisciplinary approach integrating environmental archaeology, regional settlement studies, and ideological analysis.

Ultimately, the Harappan state cannot be reduced either to a purely centralized bureaucracy or to a loose collection of autonomous towns. Instead, it constituted a complex urban civilization sustained by interconnected systems of trade, cultural integration, and negotiated authority across an immense geographical landscape.⁷⁵

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