

Using Indus Valley expertise to tackle some Current Issues in South Asia

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ABSTRACT:

Among the major problems faced by India and its neighbouring countries are those in the fields of civic administration, agriculture and employment. These are addressed inadequately not only due to the shortage of funds, but also due to the confused priorities of governments. The relics of Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Lothal, Dholavira, Kalibangan, Rakhigarhi and hundreds of smaller sites all over Pakistan, and western and North-West India offer us pretty good peek into how the Indus Valley people or the 'Harappans' resolved those pressing issues four millenniums ago. Instead of wrangling over the cultural past, the Indians and the Pakistanis need to value their predecessors' achievements, and use that as a guideline to improve the future generations' living conditions. This paper examines some ways to do that, and suggests how young minds in certain professions might profitably utilize them for the benefit of the society.

Keywords: civic administration, agriculture, employment, children fiction, cultural tourism, heritage entrepreneurship

1. INTRODUCTION

The last time the social media vigorously debated on Indus Valley Civilization was when Ashutosh Gowariker's film *Mohenjo Daro* was released. Earlier, similarly spirited discussion had happened when Chennai was flooded in 2015, and Mumbai a decade earlier.(1)

If the Harappans could design well-planned cities with adequate drainage facilities in the Bronze Age, why couldn't their descendants do it now?

It is not only town planning, but a couple of other areas too where India has slipped. If the Harappans could provide adequate water for domestic and agricultural use, why do we fail now? If the rural and socially backward communities could earn and prosper then, why do they suffer unemployment now?

This paper discusses only Indian situations because the author is not as familiar with other countries as he is with India. Yet the maladies and the remedies are relevant to the entire South Asia to more or less extent.

2. PRESENT-DAY INDIA v/s ANCIENT INDUS VALLEY

2.1 Civic Administration

Today, entire cities come to a standstill on a day of torrential rains during the monsoons. Sewage lines overflow, and bring in its wake diseases which are often fatal. On the other hand, the ruins of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in Pakistan, and Rakhigarhi in India provide evidence of the world's earliest sanitation system. Underground sewage and storm water channels by the roadside ensured that dirty water was drained away quickly, helping each settlement to remain clean and dry.



Photo credit: Press Trust of India & Harappa.com

Municipalities in most Indian cities are unable to maintain a complex network of snakelike roads and streets. Potholes scale new 'depths' every year. In contrast, Indus Valley towns were designed in a grid pattern with streets crossing at right angles. They were paved with kiln-fired bricks to facilitate a smooth flow of traffic that was mainly composed of heavily loaded ox carts moving on wooden wheels.



Photo credit: Mid-Day Infomedia & Harappa.com

A high percentage of the urban poor and the rural population in India defecate in the open, creating a serious health hazard. The Harappans built houses containing a washing platform and a dedicated waste disposal hole.



Photo credit: Dr. J. M. Kenoyer

Waste could be flushed through a clay pipe into a common brick drain that led to a soak pit. While the solid matter was regularly removed for use as manure, the waste water was directed to covered drains, which lined the major streets.(2)

2.2 Agriculture

Farmers in many parts of India are entirely dependent upon rain for livelihood. Indus Valley Civilization had built a network of reservoirs and channels to conserve rain water. The work on meeting the increasing demand for drinking water and irrigation appears to have been a perpetual activity as evident from as many as 16 reservoirs and several dams excavated at Dholavira which is located in the arid Rann of Kutch.



Photo credit: India Today & Sunil Shanbag

Indian media regularly features the wastage of agricultural produce at market yards and railway stations due to rains and pests. The Harappans had built complex structures, which

some say were granaries, designed with air passages for free circulation of air which could be vital for long storage of cereals and pulses. Although the 'granary' theory remains to be proven, we do know that they managed to transport fish over long distances.(3)

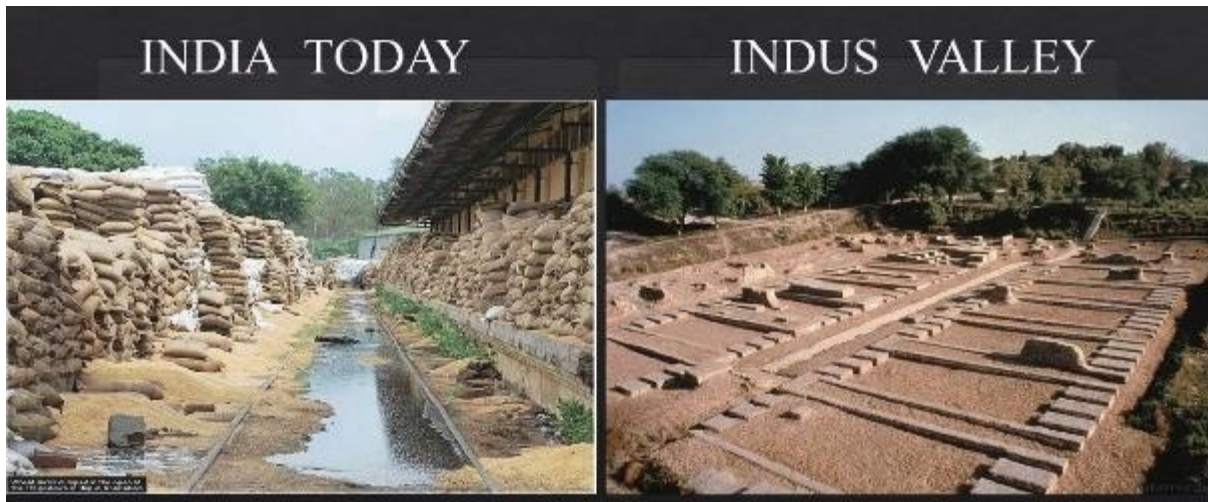


Photo credit: HT Media & Dr. J. M. Kenoyer

2.3 Employment

The demand for jobs outstrips their availability as the population increases faster than the national growth. The employment situation changed drastically after the industrial revolution, and might deteriorate with the info-tech revolution. Indus Valley holds a lesson especially for creating employment opportunities for the socially backward and rural communities. Every Indus Valley settlement has shown evidence of organized manufacturing like conch bangles, precious stone beads and necklaces, terracotta pottery and toys, and bronze and copper tools. Besides meeting the local demand, they were exported to Mesopotamia and beyond.(4,5)

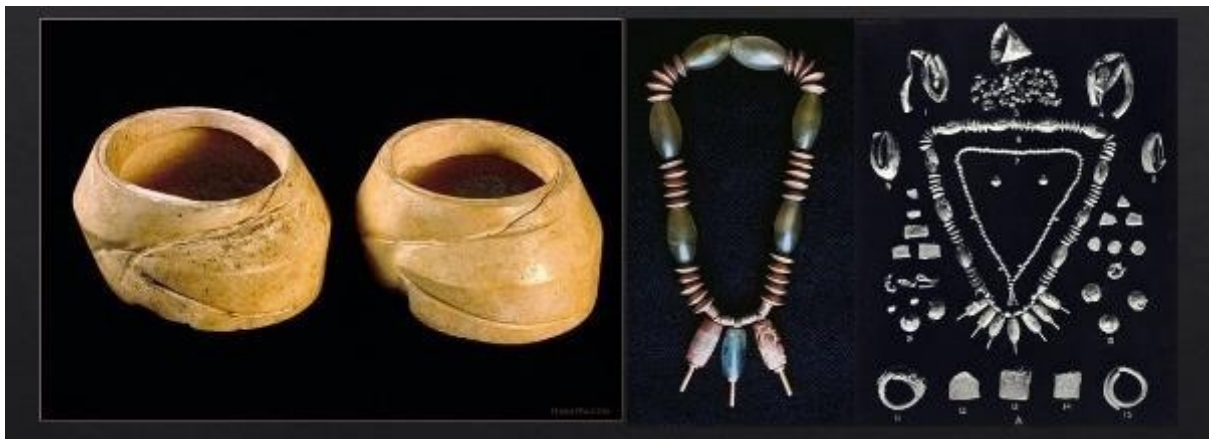


Photo credit: Harappa.com

3. CAUSES OF DECLINE

Naturally the question arises, 'Then what are the causes of the decline from the great Indus Valley to the India of today?'

3.1 Cultural decay

It is a far cry for India to learn from its past successes and failures because a vast majority of Indians are incapable of appreciating their historical heritage. Throughout India, most of the people trusted with the upkeep of historical places are square pegs in round holes. They seem to be ignorant of the value of culture and aesthetics.



Photo credit: Rajendra Aklekar/DNA

Unfortunately, neither the government nor the public is concerned about the gradual deterioration of our invaluable legacy.

Consider for instance the case of a 17th century temple in Southern India. The office of treasurer of the temple trust is located on one of the wide corridors inside the sprawling temple. The entire corridor is lined with intricately sculpted stone pillars. The wall by the side of the 'office' is carelessly whitewashed, and one can detect the vestiges of a beautiful old wallpainting underneath. The other three sides are made up of thick steel rods grouted in the stonepaved floor, and running up to the high ceiling, creating the perception of a prison cell.

3.2 Pseudo priorities

Democracies elect such governments which they deserve.

Some elected representatives magnify trivial issues to sweep their failures under the carpet. They receive unwavering support from substantial portion of the electorate which is poorly educated and highly charged with sentiments. The media aggravates the situation by allotting them undue space and time as compared to the constructive contribution of the silent councillors, legislators and parliamentarians. Under such a cosy situation, there is little incentive for the loudmouths to be professional in the decision-making process.

In order to assuage the social disturbance of their own making, such politicians fritter away scarce public resources on white elephant projects which boost the people's ego, but achieve little towards their well-being.



Photo credit: Associated Press of India

4. SUGGESTED ROADMAP

4.1 Elect the performers

The ruins of the Indus Valley towns have revealed well planned drainage systems, paved roads, flush toilets, large water reservoirs and granaries. Surprisingly, they have not thrown up any structure which could be identified as a palace, a pyramid, a mausoleum or a statue. In fact, the 'biggest statue' discovered was that of the Priest King, which was about the height of a cell phone.

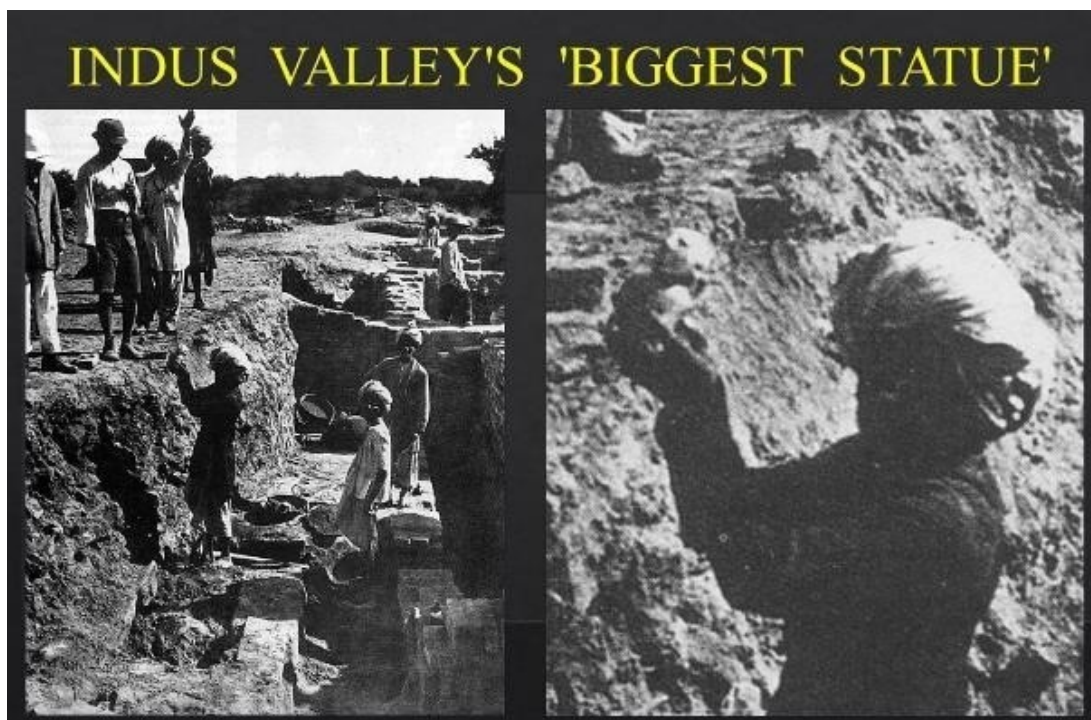
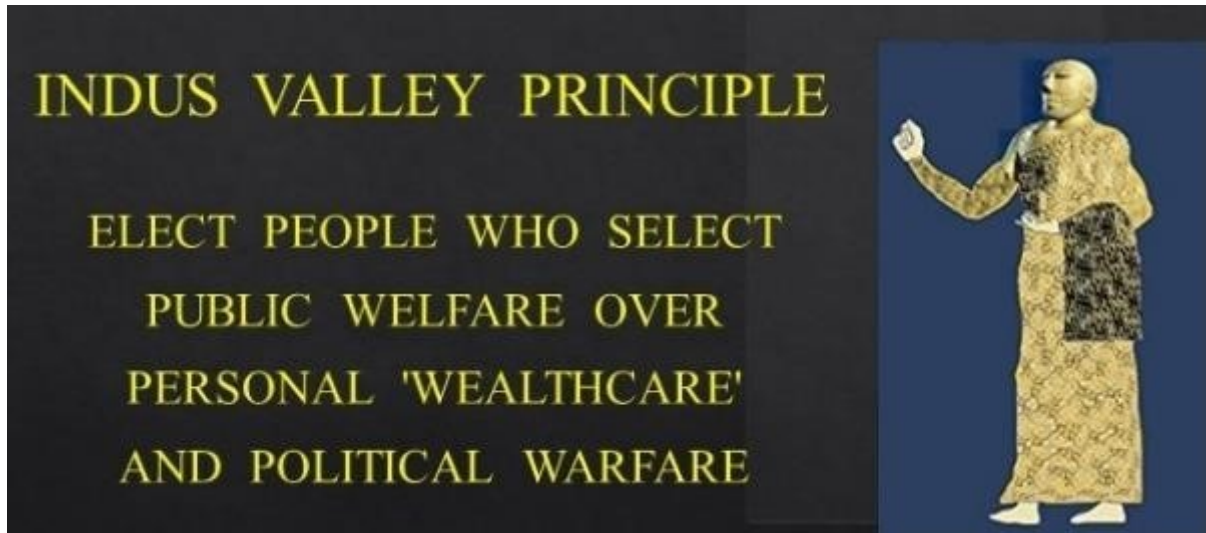


Photo credit: Harappa.com

Therein lies the secret of the Indus Valley administrators' success spanning over seven centuries of 'Mature Harappan period'. They followed an unflinching policy to utilize the resources available to them on people-centric projects only.

Therefore, what we might term the 'Indus Valley Principle' could well be: 'Elect people who select Public Welfare over Personal 'Wealthcare' and Political Warfare.'



4.2 Support self-motivators

Occasionally, an individual takes upon oneself to execute the government's obligation. Fired by an utmost sense of social duty, such persons do not need any incentive from the state to achieve their goal.

One such example was recently set by a businessman who financed the digging of a 100-acre artificial lake to harvest rain water in arid parts of western India(6). The prospective beneficiaries, some 80,000 people living in twenty-two villages, joined him by providing the necessary land and labour. During the monsoon season of 2017, the reservoir was filled to the brim, ending decades of water scarcity. As a bonus, it would also replenish the 150-metre deep ground water to rise to an economically viable depth for irrigation throughout the year.

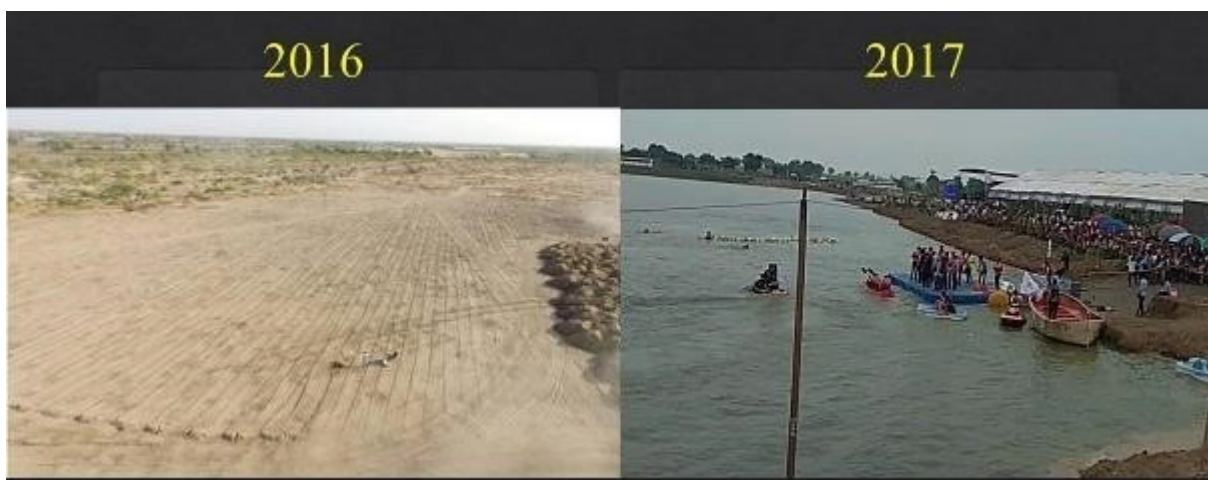


Photo credit: Savji Dholakia

4.3 Catch them young

Good education of all citizens is the basic need to build a vibrant and progressive democracy. In order to address the issues mentioned earlier, it is essential to make children better aware of Indus Valley Civilization and how it flourished.

At present, the examination system in India encourages rote learning. So the ancient culture simply remains one of the topics in the school syllabus.

However, some dedicated educationists do enable children enjoy learning with fun outside the school environment. For instance, Sharma Centre for Heritage Education in Chennai, India, raises public awareness and education in archaeology by conducting regular workshops and programs for children and teachers.(7)

To stimulate children's interest, we also need to expose them to fiction, cartoon films, and class activities which they can directly relate to Indus Valley Civilization.

4.3.1 Children's fiction

Motivating children to learn the history of a dead civilization is a challenging task when it lacks some basic elements of a story such as kings and battles. That is why they prefer to study Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt rather than its contemporary culture of Indus Valley.

Mulk Raj Anand, an Indian writer in English, was the first to draw the youngsters to Indus Valley Civilization through fiction. Nayanjot Lahiri, a historian and archaeologist, has succinctly expressed its impact on her career. In the introduction of one of her books, she writes: "As a girl of ten, I read Mulk Raj Anand's tale of the Indus world. I still remember that story's beginning ('It was five thousand years ago...'), and how much I identified with little Maya. As far as I can remember, my curiosity about things Harappan began with that book."(8)

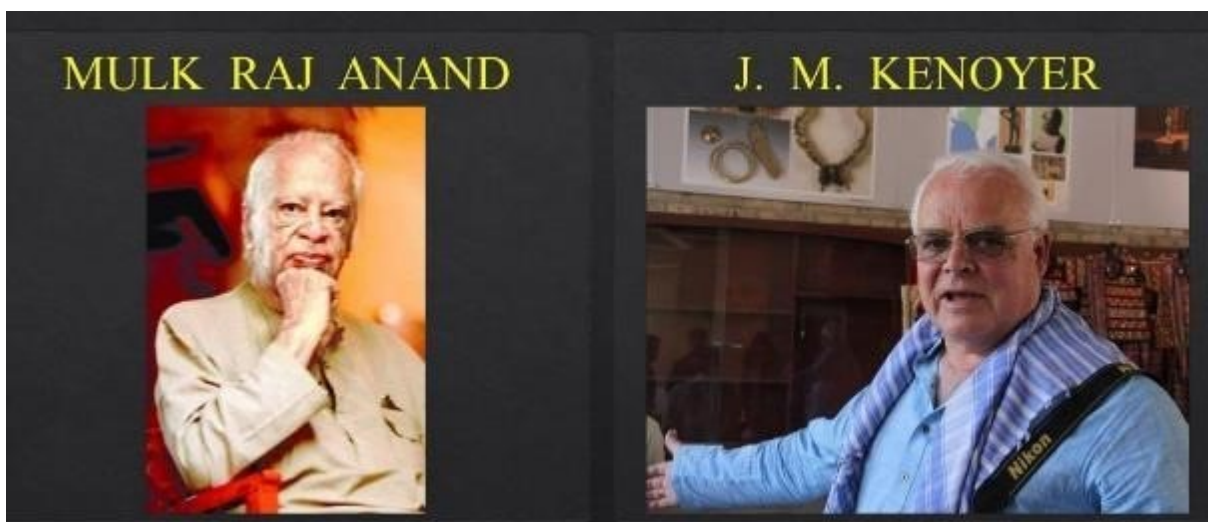


Photo credit: Sahitya Akademy & Ayesha Mir/Express

Dr. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, an expert on Indus Valley Civilization, is involved in ongoing research on the ancient culture in Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Oman. He too has contributed to children's literature with child characters named Sarang and Jeevai.

Several more story books as listed below have been written since then, and helped to raise awareness among school children compared to what my generation had at their age.

Table 1 – Children's story books set in Indus Valley Civilization

Title	Author <i>Illustrator</i>	Year
A Day in the Life of Maya of Mohenjo-Daro	Mulk Raj Anand <i>Pulak Biswas</i>	1968
Clues in the Desert	Emmett Davis <i>Julie Downing</i>	1983
Sarang and Jeevai: A boy from Harappa & a girl from Mohenjo-daro	Dr. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer	1998
Indus Valley Quick Reads	Helen Cannam <i>Robin Lawrie</i>	2003
The Adventure of the Missing Dancing Girl	Sunila Gupte	2009
Indus Investigators – Mohenjodaro Mystery	Ilona Aronovsky	2010
Indus Valley Adventure	Reena Ittyerah Puri <i>Artists at Amar Chitra Katha</i>	2012
A Harappan Adventure	Sunila Gupte <i>Hemant Kumar</i>	2013
Chasing Playlulu through History: Indus Valley Civilization	Tavishi Choudhary	2016

How effectively these stories have involved the children is evident from the last book in the list. It was written by a grade four student who got so carried away by the preceding books that she sat down to write her own imaginary adventure wherein she discovered the ancient culture while pursuing a character she called Playlulu.

4.3.2 Cartoon films

If we compare Indian cartoon films with some popular ones made elsewhere, we find that they excel in three vital aspects of animation, viz. the content, the expressions and the

visual appeal. India could exploit this inherent strength in creating cartoon films with plots set in Indus Valley Civilization. A beginning could be made with one of the stories mentioned above. It could be developed into a regular television serial over a period of time.

4.3.3 Class activities

Involvement is a strong motivation to learn about a new topic. For instance, Ilona Aronovsky has filmed a CD that guides children on how to model numerous Indus Valley artefacts such as the clay toy cart.(9) While such educational aids are used in the Central Board schools in India, most others including local-government schools lack the will to utilize them.

Universities could help if, like their counterparts in the West, they could organize an occasional workshop on Indus Valley Civilization for school teachers, especially for those teaching at the government schools.(10)

4.4 Promote passion among youngsters

Dr. Kenoyer's workshops on the hands-on method of studying the Indus Valley technologies go a long way in promoting the passion for the ancient culture throughout the world.(11)

4.5 Show the colour of money

If the Indus Valley heritage is developed further commercially, it could create hundreds of entrepreneurs and millions of jobs.

4.5.1 Cultural tourism

According to a recent survey, Travel and Tourism contributed over 10% to GDP, supporting one out of every 10 jobs in the world.(12) Cultural tourism related to Indus Valley still possesses vast untapped potential in both India and Pakistan. Interesting teaching methods in schools, the fascination for ancient cultures, adventurous spirit, and prosperity combine to motivate tourists from all over the developed world to visit the Indus Valley archaeological sites.

The least India could do is to remove some basic hardships from the tourists' programme. A beginning could be made by offering a total package to visit the Indus Valley sites, taking care of timely flights and safe conveyance, hygienic hotel accommodation, healthy meals, and services of professional guides.

Most Indus Valley sites are located in rural areas with rampant unemployment. A steady flow of tourists would encourage the local communities to offer a glimpse of their culture through music, song and dance, recipes, handicraft, and activities like henna painting and camel riding. Each of them can generate income for the villagers.



Photo credit: Segarin

How simple matching of the demand from Airbnb, a provider of online hospitality services, and the supply from Self-Employed Women's Association, an NGO, could create employment opportunities in rural India is illustrated in Village Bakutra that makes a perfect stopover to Dholavira archaeological site 100 Km. away.(13)

4.5.2 Heritage-based entrepreneurship

At popular tourist sites, one sees rows of shops selling a wide variety of mementos. There are well-stocked showrooms offering classy souvenirs in every five-star hotel and international airport. Obviously, a huge market exists for novel gift items; and heritage-based souvenirs form a good part of it.

Archaeological sites in Pakistan like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro reap the earning and employment benefits of selling the replicas of the 'Priest King' and the 'Dancing Girl', as well as stone bead jewellery. Local craftsmen also sell hard-baked clay impressions of well-known Indus seals like those depicting the 'Pashupati', the unicorn, the bull, and the elephant. However, the Indus Valley Civilization sites in India have nothing similar to offer to the tourists for memories.



Photo credit: COMSATS Institute of Asian Technology

The bronze figurine of the 'Dancing Girl' is the earliest example of lost wax method of casting. It is a technique practised by the Dhokra tribe living in central and eastern India, and the craft is now widely known after their name.(14)

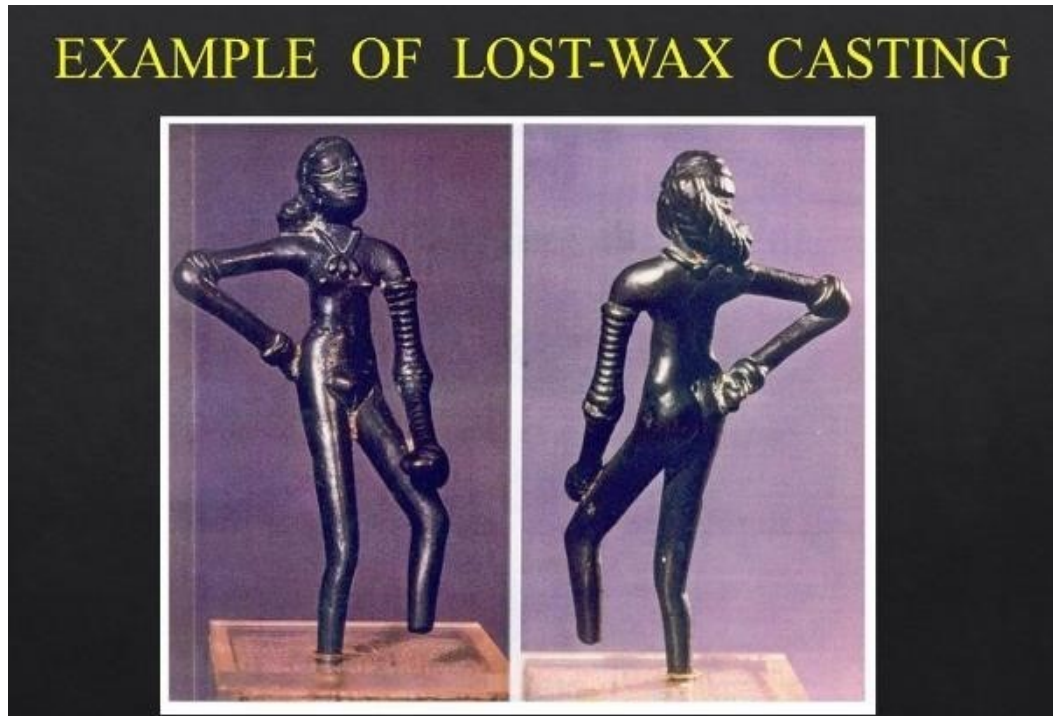


Photo credit: Jennifer Burns

They make decorative pieces and statuettes depicting horses, elephants and Hindu deities. Several non-government organizations market such Dhokra curios and create employment for the rural craftsmen.



Photo credit: S. Harpal Singh

It might be a viable social-service-cum-business plan to introduce the Dhokra craftsmen to the iconic figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization, and market their creations internationally through the Internet.

5. CONCLUSION

Countries in South Asia have quite a few lessons to learn from the ancient Indus Valley in the fields of civic administration, agriculture and employment generation. Two obstacles to putting the Indus Valley example into practice are those of cultural decay and some politicians' focus on triviality. While there is no quick solution to either, electing dedicated representatives to govern, co-operating with self-motivators, and preparing better the future generations would go a long way to improve the situation.

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