

Novelizing the ancient Indus Valley

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ABSTRACT

Fourteen novels have been set in Indus Valley aka Harappan Civilization. It is much less than those set in Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. People of the ancient Indus Valley culture had developed expertise in urban planning, water conservation and ship building. They were bold mariners and enterprising merchants. Most likely, their women were as liberated as those in contemporary Mesopotamia. Those novels which highlight these inspirational aspects of the Indus Valley society could raise awareness about it and enhance respect for it. In the absence of adequate archaeological evidence, the culture is subjected to various controversies, which have one positive aspect to it because they provide innumerable story plots. Since each author commands a specific readership, all the 14 novels hold the potential to promote travel and tourism to Indus Valley archaeological sites in Pakistan and India, and thus, to indirectly help both the Governments in creating one out of every eleven jobs in their respective economies.

Keywords: novel, globalization, culture, tourism, employment

1. INTRODUCTION

In our childhood, many among us might have read *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. How many of us know that Great Britain runs a tourist circuit connected with Alice's imaginary world? Tourists flock to see the treacle well in Binsey village, and the Jabberwocky tree in Christ Church.(1) The British shrewdly imparted historical importance to common places mentioned in Carroll's narrative in order to reap sterling pounds from travel and tourism.

On the other hand, South Asia has inherited a Bronze Age culture in which people lived in well-planned cities, harvested rain water in giant reservoirs, and travelled overseas. It carried out maritime trade with its contemporary civilizations of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Despite all that, hardly fourteen novels based on Indus Valley Civilization have been written so far.

While the British have 'created History from Fiction', Indian and Pakistani novelists have failed to create enough Fiction from our rich History. By novelizing the ancient Indus Valley culture, both our countries could reap huge economic benefits from the global travel and tourism industry.

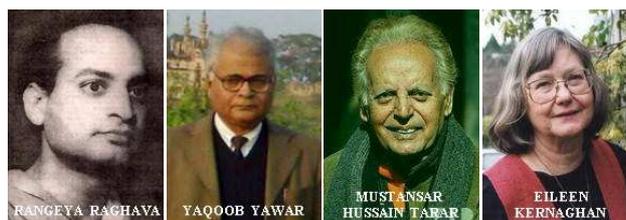
2. NOVELS SET IN ANCIENT INDUS VALLEY

2.1 History

Almost 200 years ago, a soldier deserted the army of British East India Company. His name was James Lewis. Wandering through the countryside, he came across the ruins of Harappa. He was the first European to see them. Writing under the pseudonym 'Charles Masson', he described them vividly in *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan & the Panjab* which was published in 1842.(2) It was only in 1921-22 that systematic excavation at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro brought the ancient Indus Valley Civilization to light.

Even the most exciting information which these ruins threw up could not attract any novelist to write on their impressive past for over 25 years. Its narrative value was first recognized by Hindi and Urdu novelists. In 1948, Rangeya Raghava wrote *Murdon ka Teela* in Hindi. Its gloomy title meaning 'Mound of the Dead' signifying Mohenjo-daro, was hardly one that would attract many readers. No novelist dared to write on the great civilization for half a century, till Yaqoob Yawar boldly came out with *Dilmun* in 1998.

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In 2004, Mustansar Hussain Tarar wrote *Bahao*, which was recognized as an Urdu classic by the B.B.C. In the same year, the first English novel set in Indus Valley Civilization, *Winter on the Plain of Ghosts*, was written by Eileen Kernaghan.

Amish Tripathi's *Immortals of Meluha* (2010) and *Secret of the Nagas* (2011), both written in English and translated in several Indian languages, created a record in the Indian book market.

My novel *Trade winds to Meluhha*, was published as an e-book in January, 2012. It was seventh in chronology. In May that year, my article entitled 'Why I love to write about Indus Valley Civilization' was published in *Historical Tapestry*(3). It drew considerable interest among readers in English-speaking countries.

In the three years since then, seven more novels have been published. The latest three are written by authors from the U.K. and the U.S.A. It indicates that readers in America and the Commonwealth countries have discovered the joy of experiencing the Indus Valley just as Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. At last, the Indus Valley Civilization is internationally recognized as an apt setting for Historical novels.

Table 1 – Novels set in the ancient Indus Valley

Year	Title	Author	Language
1948	Murdon ka Teela	Rangeya Raghava	Hindi
1998	Dilmun	Yaqoob Yawar	Urdu
2004	Bahao	Mustansar Hussain Tarar	Urdu
2004	Winter on the Plain of Ghosts	Eileen Kernaghan	English
2010	Immortals of Meluha	Amish Tripathi	English
2011	Secret of the Nagas	Amish Tripathi	English
2012	Trade winds to Meluhha	Vasant Davé	English
2013	Oath of the Vayuputras	Amish Tripathi	English
2013	Tri-shapath-ga	Iravati	Hindi
2013	Lure of Soma	Shankar Kashyap	English
2014	Fall of Shurupak	Shankar Kashyap	English
2014	Bhator	R. E. J. Burke	English
2014	Maati	R. E. J. Burke	English
2014	Fire Seer	Amy Raby	English

The first commercial film set in Indus Valley Civilization is scheduled to be released in mid-2016. In a recent interview, Indian producer Ashutosh Gowariker claimed that his film entitled *Mohenjo-Daro*, which he is currently shooting at Dholavira, is based on considerable research on the ancient culture.

2.2 Broad canvas of themes

Perhaps no other culture is mired with multiple controversies such as geographical spread, religious link, ethnic origin, and linguistic relation as the Indus Valley Civilization. The combination and

permutation of these opposing views offer innumerable opportunities to novelists to create unique fictional plots. They also hold the potential to raise robust debates, which is what some publishers and media houses seek.

Arising from the common genre of Historical Fiction, each of these Indus Valley novels branch out to different subgenres like Adventure, Thriller, Suspense, Romance, Mythological and Paranormal. For instance, authors Amish Tripathi and Shankar Kashyap use the characters from ancient scriptures like Rig Veda to create their plots in Indus Valley environment. On the other hand, Eileen Kernaghan and Amy Raby use the Indus Valley setting to tell their stories of the occult and the paranormal.

Since each subgenre commands certain readership, all these novels together go a long way in creating interest in the Indus Valley Civilization.

2.3 How *Trade winds to Meluhha* was conceived

You might wonder: 'How could anyone extract thrill or romance from what we see of this ancient culture? Ruins – skeletons – broken pottery.'

Let me share with you how I conceived my novel.

As an engineer, I was first drawn by the Indus Valley people's proficiency in all matters technical. I was awed by the ancient port of Lothal near Ahmedabad, and storm channels at Dholavira in the Rann of Kutch. Perceiving urban India as depicted in Danny Boyle's Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, who would ever believe that the Bronze Age ancestors of the Indians and the Pakistanis followed rigorous town-planning and had perfected underground drainage?

Discovery of strikingly similar jewellery on several sites in Pakistan and India (Indus Valley), Oman (Magan), Bahrain (Dilmun) and Iraq (Sumér / Mesopotamia) proved that trade flourished among those countries during the 3rd millennium BC. Seals found at Ur, now known as Tell al-Muqqayar site in Iraq, indicated the existence of a colony of Indus Valley merchants over there.(4,5) Those brave entrepreneurs from South Asia practised 'globalization' ages before the word was invented.

But many people would not believe that marine travel between Mesopotamia and Indus Valley was possible during the Bronze Age when iron was not yet discovered and the magnetic compass did not even exist. Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl of Kon-Tiki fame took the bull by its horns in his inimitable style. He sailed from River Euphrates to River Indus in an 18 metre long reed-boat named 'Tigris'. Starting from Iraq in 1977, it crossed the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and covered about 3,000 Km. to reach Pakistan.(6)

Hard-baked clay tablets discovered at archaeological sites in Iraq mention that many Mesopotamian women knew reading and writing, and that they had the rights to possess property, and seek divorce.(7,8) Dr. Inez During Caspers' study of all portrayals of Indus Valley people inferred that there was a cosmopolitan population in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. (9) Thus from the point of view of cultural contacts, the likelihood of women in Indus Valley possessing similar skills and rights as the Mesopotamian women cannot be ruled out. Considering the condition of most women in the Gulf countries and South Asia, it is unimaginable that their great great grandmothers were more emancipated 4,000 years ago than they are today.

These three evidences, straight out of Ripley's 'Believe it or not', convinced me that South Asian youngsters needed to be enlightened about the past achievements of their society. Some effort was needed to pick out the hard facts from the academic tomes and present them to the common people in the form that they can understand and appreciate. Fiction could provide an effective vehicle to create such awareness.

It struck me that Heyerdahl's validation offered a remarkable setting for a narrative based on adventure, love and strife among ancient people belonging to two diverse cultures. That is how my novel *Trade winds to Meluhha* was written. It was published as an e-book on Amazon and Barnes & Noble in early 2012.

3. DELIVERABLES

3.1 Creating wealth through cultural tourism

According to a recent survey, travel and tourism contributed almost 10% to GDP, supporting one out of every 11 jobs in the world.(10) Every Government in South Asia is concerned about the millions of unemployed youth, and therefore prefers to exploit the full potential of travel and tourism industry. Novelists could create interest in Indus Valley Civilization among people. That would significantly

help the Governments of India and Pakistan to attract more tourists.

3.2 Getting the local population involved in conservation

Rising number of tourists motivates local communities to conserve their heritage. Once the people who reside around the archaeological sites benefit from tourism through increased employment and income, they would do everything to preserve all that brings it about.

4. SUGGESTED ROADMAP

4.1 Translation

Yaqoob Yawar's *Dimun*, which is written in Urdu, has been translated in Hindi under the title *Pralay Sindhu*. That has made the novel available to a wider readership throughout Northern India. On the other hand, Mustansar Hussain Tarar's *Bahao* is available only in Urdu. In order to realize its full potential towards creating interest in Indus Valley Civilization, it needs to be translated in more languages, commencing with Hindi.

4.2 How Universities could help

Jordan practises an innovative concept to involve local communities in conservation of its heritage sites, and to attract more tourists to those places. Oral History Project at Udruh archaeological site collects local perceptions, ideas and oral traditions about the archaeology of the region to create a perspective on the site. It intends to publish the stories with the aim of increasing the number of tourists visiting the region.(11)

That course is not available to the archaeological sites of Indus Valley Civilization due to their complete absence from public memory for several centuries. Nevertheless, an initiative on similar lines is possible. A university could start an annual short story competition whose subject matter is Indus Valley Civilization. A collection of the top ten or so entries could be published as a book and circulated widely. Selected stories could also be scripted and shot as short films by students of mass communication. They could then be broadcast over national television, private TV channels, and social media like YouTube.

4.3 Assign a specific project to an author

Hong Kong Tourism Board noticed that among half a million Indian visitors every year, young urban professional couples exceeded all other categories. It retained an author to write a story of an Indian protagonist visiting Hong Kong and falling in love with a local girl who takes him for site-seeing. Cynthia Leung of HKTGB said, "People tend to emotionally paint pictures of the places they read about in a novel and are more attracted to it as compared to what they see in a travel guide."(12)

Ministry of Tourism in India could take a leaf out of HKTGB's promotional strategy, and hire an eminent author to write a novel highlighting Indus Valley sites in the country. Pakistan is fortunate that a recipient of the Pulitzer award is so overwhelmed by the archaeology of the Indus Valley Civilization and the familial values of the Pakistani people, that she has taken upon herself to project them through fiction. Lorraine Adams was on a visit to Pakistan earlier in 2015 to work on a novel she is currently writing. (13)

5. CONCLUSION

Four millenniums ago, our ancestors envisioned what might have been known as 'smart cities' in today's parlance. With determination, they turned that vision into reality by building cities like Harappa, Mohenjo-daro and Dholavira.

Today, let us dream that every Indus Valley site will be developed on the lines of Xi'an in China. It is the place where an entire army of terracotta warriors is preserved. It sounds too optimistic to come about because the governments in India as well as Pakistan have more pressing priorities.

However, two factors do compel a government to act in a democracy, viz. Public opinion and Income to the treasury. An upsurge in tourism can dramatically raise local employment. That would bear directly upon people's opinion about the government. Increased tourism can also generate higher revenue for the government treasury through taxes on tourism-related services.

Thus in order to achieve a meteoric rise in tourists visiting our archaeological sites, we need to generate more interest in Indus Valley Civilization through whatever expertise that we possess.

Towards that goal, I intend to set all my forthcoming novels in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization.

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