

ANCIENT INDIA—PART 1



Flooding along the Indus River during the Rainy Season: 2010

Unit Overview

While the Egyptians were building the pyramids at Giza, the inhabitants of the Indus River Valley were constructing large, well-planned cities. What do we know about these people who mastered indoor plumbing and engineered efficient sewage systems? How did geography impact the ways in which their civilization developed? Why were their cities eventually abandoned? You will soon know the answers to these questions as we explore life in ancient India. Let's get started!

The Geography of the Indian Subcontinent

In southern Asia, a large land mass juts out into the Indian Ocean. This peninsula is so large that it is often referred to as a **subcontinent**. Today, it is home to the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and most of Pakistan. Off the tip of South Asia, the island of Sri Lanka is believed to have been part of this landform at one time.

Geographers think that the Indian subcontinent used to be an island. It slowly moved north until it collided with Asia. This crash caused the formation of the **Hindu Kush Mountains** and the **Himalayas**, the world's highest mountain range. **Mount Everest**, the tallest mountain on the globe, is located in the Himalayas. The subcontinent is surrounded on three sides by the **Bay of Bengal**, the **Indian Ocean** and the **Arabian Sea**.



The mountains and the seas have a major impact on the subcontinent's climate. The peaks of the Himalayas keep the extremely cold winds from sweeping down from the north. However, seasonal winds, called **monsoons**, bring rainy and dry seasons. This happens because they blow in one direction during the winter and in the opposite direction during the summer. Beginning in October, winds from the northeast bring in hot, dry air. In late May or early June, the summer winds from the southwest pickup moisture from the Indian Ocean. This causes heavy rains and very warm temperatures. Look carefully at the images below. They were taken at the same spot in the Western Ghats Mountains in southern India. Can you see the differences created by the monsoons?

Western Ghats in the dry season (above)
Western Ghats in the rainy season (below)

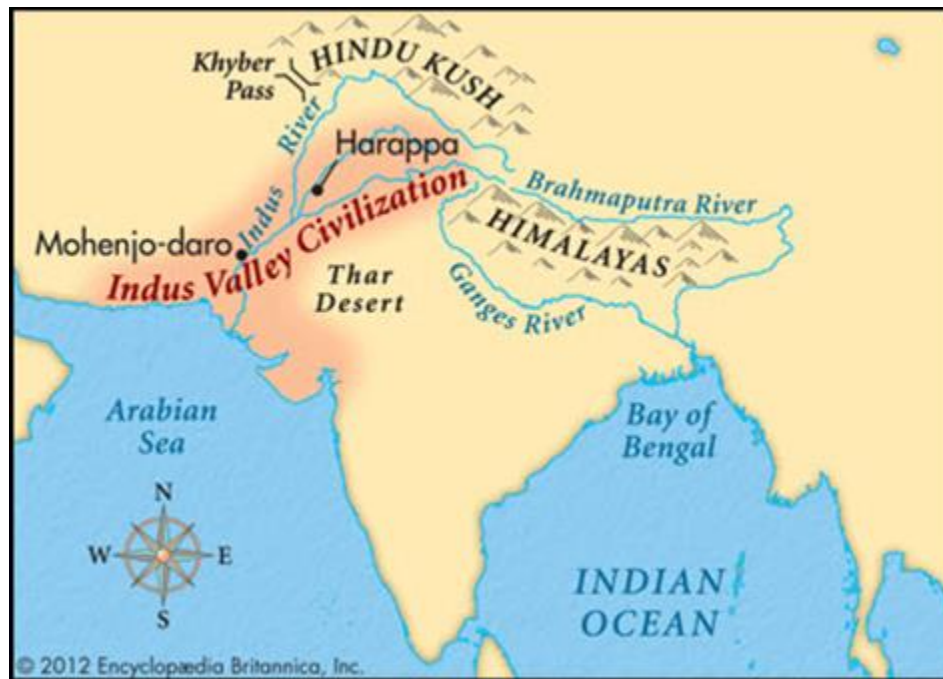


Images courtesy of Arne Huckelheim

Monsoons occur in other spots around the globe, too. Parts of Australia, Africa and Asia also experience them, but the ones in India produce the most extreme weather conditions. Meteorologists, or experts that study the weather, consider the Indian village of **Mawsynram** to be the rainiest place on Earth. On average, it receives 467 inches of rain annually. Today, the monsoons, as they have been for centuries, are a major part of life on the Indian subcontinent.

Civilization Developed in the Indus River Valley

Along with mountains and seas, the Indian subcontinent has several great river systems. One of these is the **Indus River**, which begins in the Himalayas and flows into the Arabian Sea. The earliest Indian civilization was built in this river valley. It was located in what is now modern **Pakistan**. In ancient times, farmers began planting wheat and barley here. By 3000 BCE, they were also growing cotton and producing cloth. Like Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the people of the Indus Valley depended on rivers with their annual floods to water their crops and to deposit a new layer of fertile soil.



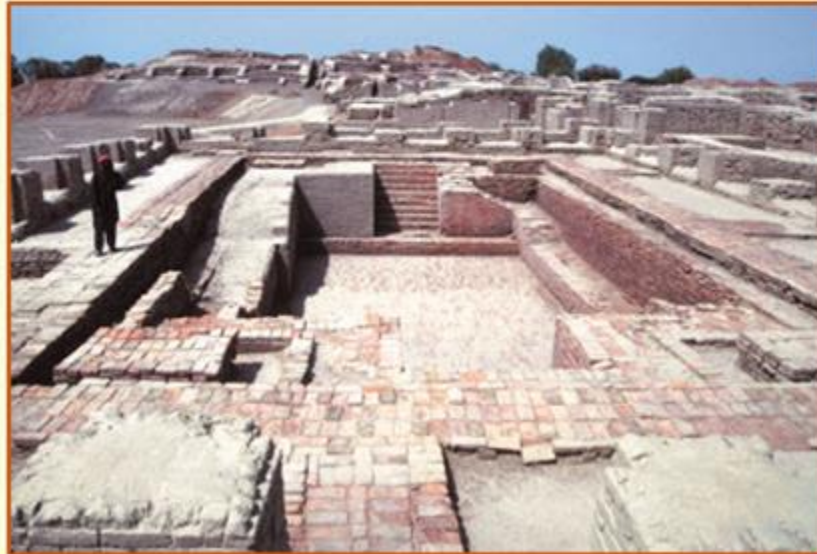
As the food supply increased, not everyone needed to farm. Workers were able to do other things, such as making tools and building homes. Specialization led to the constructions of villages and towns. People also began to trade their extra food and products up and down the river valley. Eventually, merchants and traders built boats that could withstand ocean travel and longer trips. These ships, loaded with grain, cotton cloth, ivory, pearls and copper, made their way to lands as far away as Mesopotamia. They exchanged these goods for silver, tin and woolen cloth. A few ambitious traders even found their way through the mountains and established trade routes overland.

The Great Cities of the Indus Valley

Trade brought wealth to the Indus Valley. This offered the means to build not only towns but great cities. Archaeologists have found the remains of almost one hundred cities within this river valley. The largest and most famous are **Harappa** and **Mohenjo-Daro**. Both cities were surrounded by high walls and had **citadel**, or fort on high ground, inside. They had large warehouses to store grain. Each one was home to over 35,000 people. The Indus River provided the water for extensive irrigation systems that supplied water during the dry season for farming outside the city walls.



Ruins of the ancient city of Mohenjo-Daro



The most amazing thing about these two cities is how well-planned they were. They were laid out in blocks in a grid pattern similar to those followed by modern cities. There were wide, main streets and narrow, side streets. All the buildings were constructed with uniform, oven-fired clay bricks. Homes had indoor plumbing with baths and drains that led to underground sewers. They also included garbage chutes that were connected to bins on the street.

What We Know about the Indus Civilization

The **Indus civilization**, also called the **Harappan civilization**, was spread out over an area larger than ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia. Yet, we know much less about it in comparison to other ancient civilizations. Because the Harappans cremated, or burned, the bodies of their dead, there are no tombs filled with articles for the afterlife and no mummies to study. There are no clay tablets filled with cuneiform or scrolls inscribed with hieroglyphics to help us understand daily life in this ancient culture.

However, archaeologists have found over 2,000 **seals** in their excavations of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. They believe that these objects were used by merchant families to label products and to identify who made them. They served the same purpose as bar codes and trademarks do today. These seals include carvings of animals and other symbols whose meanings are unknown. From these pieces, scholars have collected about 500 different pictographs and symbols. Unlike hieroglyphics and cuneiform writing, no one has yet cracked the code to decipher the language. Once someone does, we may have a greater understanding of life in the Indus Valley.

Seals Found at Mohenjo-Daro



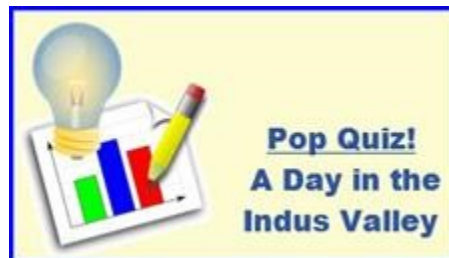
Because the inhabitants of the Indus Valley did not leave us government documents or written records, we know very little about their leaders and their laws. We can only make reasonable guesses based on the evidence that we have. Most historians agree that the Harappan civilization had a well-organized government and strong leadership. How did they reach this conclusion? For one thing, we do know the merchants used a standard system of weights and measures. This had to have been ordered and enforced by someone. The uniform size of bricks is another clue. It indicates that construction projects had to follow exact building codes. There also must have also been specific standards for the layout of cities in the Indus Valley because all urban areas were designed the same way. These, too, had to have been ordered and enforced by someone.



Our knowledge of Harappan society is very limited. Archaeological excavations have revealed that most homes were about the same size. This seems to indicate that the Harappan civilization may have had a greater sense of equality than ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia. Archaeologists have not uncovered any grand palaces or massive monuments like those built by the Egyptians. Nonetheless, some evidence that there were three main social classes does exist. This is based on ruins that reveal where certain people lived within the city. The ruling class, made up of rulers, priests and nobles, lived in the center of the city. Merchants and craftsmen, who made tools, pottery, jewels and cloth, occupied homes outside the city center. Unskilled workers and farmers made up the largest group in Harappan society. They were poor and lived in small huts.

A Day in the Indus Valley

The story reminds us of the importance of trade to the people living in the Indus Valley. Click on the graphic below. What do you remember about the events that were described in the story?



Statues and artwork found in the ruins of the Indus Valley give us some insight into the religious practices of those who once lived there. We know that the people were polytheistic in their beliefs. The Mother Goddess, the source of all creation, and the Great Male God were worshipped throughout the region. The Harappans believed in magic and, as we said previously, burned the bodies of their dead. They thought that the gods took the ashes that remained to heaven.

A History Mystery

For a long time, the cities built in the Indus Valley grew and prospered. About 1750 BCE, things began to change. Archeologists tell us that the cities no longer operated under strict standards. Bricks, pottery and jewelry did not have the fine quality of those produced in earlier times. Eventually, these cities that were once filled with people were abandoned and forgotten. Click on the graphic below. The video offers some theories that may explain why this happened.

The Indus River Valley Civilization Explained



What caused these cities to decline? What happened to the inhabitants? How could they just disappear? No one knows for sure, but scientists and archaeologists have several ideas. For example, mud and debris in the streets of some excavated cities could mean that a volcanic eruption devastated the river valley. Severe earthquakes may have blocked or changed the flow of the Indus River leaving some cities without water and causing serious flooding in others. It is also possible that the soil simply wore out because farmers planted the same crops year after year. The final blow to these cities came in 1500 BCE. Large numbers of Aryans, a nomadic people from the north, swept into the Indian subcontinent. Although they looted and destroyed what was left of the Indus civilization, they would later build their own civilization along the banks of another great river.

Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 15, review the names and terms found in Unit 14. Be sure you can answer the “Can I” questions with a loud “yes”.

Can I

...identify the geographic features of the Indian subcontinent?

...cite the benefits of living near rivers?

...explain how crop surpluses influenced the growth of cities?

...explain how climate is used to define the Indian subcontinent?

...give examples of how humans modified the environment of the Indian subcontinent?

...explain the impact of trade on the Indus Civilization?

...describe the government, religion, technology and economic system of the Indus Civilization?



Additional Activities and Resources

[Unit 14 Organizer](#)

[Revealing India and Pakistan's Ancient Art and Inventions](#)
(article with quiz)

