

Stagnation and Change in the Harappan Civilization

Abstract

It is customary in social sciences to explain major changes in a society by taking recourse to certain external parameters like environment, population, technology, etc. A much approved and appreciated method involves the application of systems theory, a 'holistic' one, but the problem lies, more often than not, in the arbitrariness of defining the sub-system, ideology and so forth. This 'outside-in' approach, necessarily a partial one, has been employed by most archaeologists while studying changes leading to the decline of the Harappan civilization.

Keywords: Holistic, Arbitrariness, Archaeologists, Juxtaposition, Antithesis, Certitude, Metaphoric, Prehistoric, Polarity, Analogy, Newtonian Dynamics, Potential Energy, Kinetic Energy, Textual Metaphor, Microscopic,

Introduction

It is important to mention here that the aim of mainstream social sciences has been to reduce the range of interpretation and increase the area of certitude. In metaphoric analysis the aim is not to contribute to the growing mass of certitude but to expand the range of interpretations and thus widen the range of options in an open-ended human future. We will try to see how ideas derived from the critique of ideology, which have recently been applied to the analysis of prehistoric materials may, can be used in the analysis of this early society. This approach is based on the assumption that the prehistoric record can be interpreted not only as passive reflection of a past society but also as a process of representation reflecting social relations.

We have to study stagnation and change in their togetherness and simultaneity. Stagnation and change are understood as deconstructable conceptual polarity. We cannot give preference to one over the other. Such a metaphor of opposites, which has been the norm in western and non-western academic circles, has outlived its usefulness. One need not label either dynamism or stability as 'natural'. Both are properties, which arise alternately from the same basic process. Once this process has been identified one can return to answer the question why the different outcomes arise from it. Perhaps it is not improbable to find an analogy between the dual notions of stagnation and change, on the one hand, and what could be termed as latent and patent, on the other. "An example could be given from our school level text books on physical sciences and Newtonian dynamics where the relationship between potential energy (latent) and kinetic energy (patent) is complementary. The total energy is constant. In a particularly illuminating instance Clifford Geertz (1973), the first American anthropologist to employ a textual metaphor for understanding culture, images culture after an octopus, an organic metaphor which envisions connectedness and integrated movement. The gaps that we find raise more from our own interpretative oversights than from the cultures themselves. According to Geertz, "Discontinuity results from flawed interpretation or the disruption of socio-cultural systems which, eventually disappear." The new concepts in science believe that change and disequilibrium or probably more 'natural' than equilibrium and stasis. Those who can adapt and learn will survive. And this will depend on their 'creativity'. Generally speaking, microscopic diversity resulting from the mixing of cultures, conflicting doctrines, and individual freedom is important. Sources of cultural variation are several, including random errors, which correspond to genetic mutations. As mutation arise from random copying errors in the process of gene replication, random errors of memory and unintentional mistakes in imitation. This idea parallels Weber's view of unintended consequences



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of actions. All social activities take place in a flow of time and its recursiveness arise as a result of repetition through time.

The task of analyzing change, and explaining it has always presented formidable problems to the historians. At the beginning of the 1960's a broadly culture-historical or 'normative' view of the past prevailed in archaeology as changing kaleidoscope of 'cultures' held to correspond in some sense to 'people'. It was believed that particular peoples had particular 'mental templates' or 'norms' for conducting their lives. The mechanisms of change that were held to operate were twofold: the replacement of one people by another and thus the replacement of their templates, or the modification of the templates by the diffusion of influences from outside. The latter mechanism was based on various assumptions about the processes of innovation, imitation and diffusion.

This normative view was attacked in the early 1960's by the champions of 'New Archaeology' from a functionalist perspective (Binford 1972). What they essentially questioned is the assumption in normative approaches that it is not a primary centre of innovation that necessarily influences other regions. In other words, there can be parallel and independent centres of innovation (Renfrew 1972). Without any reference to cultural transmission they treated cultural content purely from an adaptive viewpoint. Most explanations sought to identify a principal causal factor whose influence could be shown, ultimately as a determining significance. The nature of the explanation offered thus depended upon the causal agency, which the analysts ultimately choose to recognise as important. One school of workers emphasised environmental factors as overwhelming importance and lay stress on changes in climate. Another saw population as a crucial variable. The third emphasised developing technology. The original inception of the change was consequently relegated to some outside area.

In the words of Kent Flannery (1968), one of the exponents of Systems Theory, "It is vain to hope for the discovery of the first domestic corn cob, the first pottery vessel, the first hieroglyphic, or the first site where some other major breakthrough occurred. Such deviations from the pre-existing pattern almost certainly took place in such a minor accidental way that these traces are not recoverable. More worthwhile would be an investigation of the mutual causal processes that amplify these tiny deviations into major changes in prehistoric culture."

A new emphasis on the importance of individuals as agents, creators as well as products of their socio-cultural environment, has led some archaeologists towards a renewed interest in dealing with change directly. A multivariate procedure where the interactions of a number of factors, taken in conjunction are considered, can overcome the partiality of the 'significant factor' analysis, but it risks taking on an unmanageable complexity. We cannot step beyond metaphor. It is our only means of relating, of connecting, which means our connections will always be incomplete. All the techniques by which our knowledge and our cultures are normally

understood and judged - they also misrepresent what we can and cannot do.

According to Paul Ricoeur's (1981) school of hermeneutics, human action, like a text, has a plurivocity and like a structured totality has plurality of interpretations, which leads to a plurality of ways of self understanding (Chattopadhyaya 2000). In Ricoeur's words "that the meaning of human actions of historical events and of social phenomena may be constructed in several different ways is well known by all experts in the human sciences. What is less known and understood is that this methodological perplexity is founded in the nature of the object itself and moreover that it does not condemn the scientist to oscillate between dogmatism and scepticism. As the logic of text interpretation suggests, there is a specific plurivocity belonging to the meaning of human action.

Human action, too, is limited field of possible constructions." There is an evidence that Harappan civilization represents a change, reversal and systematic suppression of the traits of social transformations in favour of a more idiosyncratic form of social control and social organization that is strikingly different from any contemporary example.

The Harappan is perhaps unusual in the degree to which we are entirely reliant on prehistoric material for its interpretation. The Harappan script has not yet been convincingly deciphered and there is not writing of a later period. But this absence of written material may not pose any problem because with the material culture a society creates representations of itself. The provide an important element in the habitus - the everyday world in which the human subject is created in history and which provides the sources from which these same subjects through their strategies as individuals and social groups create history (Bouirdieu 1977). A particular array of forms may represent the interests of a particular group and mask those of subordinate elements in society who have no access to control over the forms taken by cultural property. This poses problems for the archaeologists since it suggests that different sources of evidence may well provide entirely contradictory images of the same society.

In the Harappan, power resided in those organizational forms which ensured the reproduction of order, and which were as productive as they were constraining of social formations (Miller 1984). This is to then a case of "primitive communism" since in Harappan, individuals are merely equal in their subjection to order, as in many theocratic states. It is important that this is not represented as a kind of "orientalism" - the occidental beliefs about the unchanging East and the oriental despotic state. Orientalism is a creation by the occident of its alternative and oppositional image (Said 1979). The highly significant evidence for a lack of change in time demonstrated by Fentress's work (1979) must be taken as a positive assertion of tradition, not mere stagnation as suggested by Piggott (1950). It is the temporal version of the spatial homogeneity and should be analyzed as similar phenomena. This suggests the need to consider the kind of historical consciousness, which may have been engendered by

the Harappan. It was a highly conservative civilization that sought to deny history, as is evident from the problems of archeologists in locating evidence for change over more than half a millennium. This conservatism is an instrument of social reproduction.

It is against this background that we can best understand the particular nature of the evidence for the end of Harappan civilization. A belief system which conforms nature and human individual aspiration by denying both, may look immutable but expends considerable force in its own maintenance. There are always the tendencies towards individual and group aggrandizement, heresy and innovation.

It cannot be argued that the Harappan saw no change. Rather there is a contradiction between its refusal to acknowledge or represent change and its actual history, which could only finally manifest itself with the overthrow of the entire state. The evidence is suggestive of what has been termed by Habermas a "legitimation crisis" (1975), a breakdown in the ideological control that unified the various elements of the civilization and maintained its continuance. This is an alternative interpretation of the end of the Harappan to all those looking to forces external to the Harappan - from the traditional Aryan invasion to environmental factors (cataclysmic floods, droughts, etc.). Thus the very lack of evidence for change manifests its contrary. The importance of the changes that are there by being denied demonstrates the force of internal factors rather than their insignificance. The evidence for external factors as the key to the decline of the Harappan has never been convincing. Wheeler's claim for an Aryan invasion has generally been questioned on the grounds that there is no evidence for Aryan-connected artifacts or settlements following the Harappan, and his "massacre" victims do not appear to have been massacred (Kennedy 1982).

Rather we find that many of the settlements show some evidence of decline in the later phase, in which they continue to be occupied, by small-scale settlement. The next phase of settlement is one of village occupancy similar to the one that preceded the rise of urbanism in the area. There is no reason to expect other than long term continuity of population but without the structure which produced the civilization. If we analyze the harappan civilization in terms of ideology, we find religion, rituals, settlement pattern, administration/governance, trade, art (or lack of it) is highly structured and shows a tight control to deny the change that is inevitable over the time.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is two fold .The first is to study and understand the processes of transformation and change in a society. what is meant by change, how does it happen and what are the factors that contribute to this processes? Here it is important to understand change its juxtaposition to the concept of stagnation.The aim to relate our knowledge about the Indus Civilization, which flourished between 2600 B.C. and 2000 B.C.

Conclusion

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