
UNIT 8 SOCIETY AND RELIGION

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Society
 - 8.2.1 Dress Styles
 - 8.2.2 Food Habits
 - 8.2.3 Language and Script
 - 8.2.4 Warfare
 - 8.2.5 Main Crafts/Occupations
- 8.3 Who Ruled Them?
- 8.4 Religion and Religious Practices
 - 8.4.1 The Places of Worship
 - 8.4.2 Objects of Worship
 - 8.4.3 The Burial of the Dead
- 8.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.6 Key Words
- 8.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to understand the different aspects of society and religious practices of the Harappan people. Particularly you will be able to:

- know about their dresses and food habits
- discuss the controversy about their script and language
- list their main occupations
- understand the nature of the ruling classes
- recall their religious practices and prominent gods and
- know about their burial practices.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier Units of this Block you studied some significant features of Harappan Civilization. In this Unit we will discuss the society and religion of the Harappans.

One might ask what the Harappans looked like? Did they wear clothes of the same kind as we do? What did they read and write? What kinds of jobs did the townsfolk do? What language did they speak? What food did they eat? Did they have cups of tea with chips of potato? Did they play games and did they fight? Who ruled over them? What were their temples and gods like? Were they like us?

These are some very simple questions which the scholars find difficult to answer. This is because of the nature of sources available for knowing about that period. The main sources available are in the form of archaeological findings excavated from different sites.

Answers to many of the questions related to the realm of ideas and feelings are difficult to provide with our present knowledge about this civilization. Even an innocuous question like whether a Harappan was feeling a sense of pleasure while making a carmelian bead cannot be answered. In this Unit we will try to derive some answers from silent objects lying abandoned for thousands of years.

8.2 SOCIETY

The archaeological finds from Harappan sites help us in reconstructing the society of the period. We get an idea about their dress styles and food habits. We also get

information about the trade and crafts and various social groups. Let us first examine the external appearance and dresses of the Harappans.

8.2.1 Dress Styles

What did the Harappans look like? The only way of finding out an answer for this would be examining the terracotta figurines and stone sculptures surviving from that period. Another way of knowing would be examining the skeletal remains found in some of the Harappan settlements.

The study of the skeletal types shows that the Harappans looked like the present day north Indians. Their faces, complexion and height were more or less similar to the present day people living in those areas. But the similarities end here. They did not wear the shirts and trousers or Salwar-Kameej like the modern men and women. We can have some idea about their dresses and fashions by a study of contemporary sculptures and terracotta figurines. Men are mostly shown wearing a dress which would be wrapped round the lower half of the body with one end worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm—like the modern saree. The other dress was a kilt and a shirt worn by both men and women. The men arranged their hair in various ways sometimes making buns and using headbands. The men used many more ornaments than the modern Indians. They would be wearing ring, bracelets and ornaments round their neck and hands. Growing beard was fashionable but they would shave their moustaches. Women seem to have used ornaments on their waist. Women wore a large number of necklaces. Bangles too were in fashion and of course there was no end to the number of ways in which hair was arranged. Men and women alike had long hair. We know that they used cotton clothes also that in one sculpture the cloth was shown as having trefoil pattern and red colours. However, for all his fashionableness if we saw a man from Harappa walk on the road—to our eyes he will probably resemble a mendicant more than anyone else.



15. Jewellery of Gold and some precious stone

8.2.2 Food Habits

What did they eat? Again, we know very little, the Harappans of Sind and Punjab ate wheat and barley as their staple food. Those who stayed in towns of Rajasthan had to be content with barley only. The Harappans of Gujarat in places like Rangpur and Surkotdla preferred rice and millet. Let us see where they got their supply of protein and fat from.

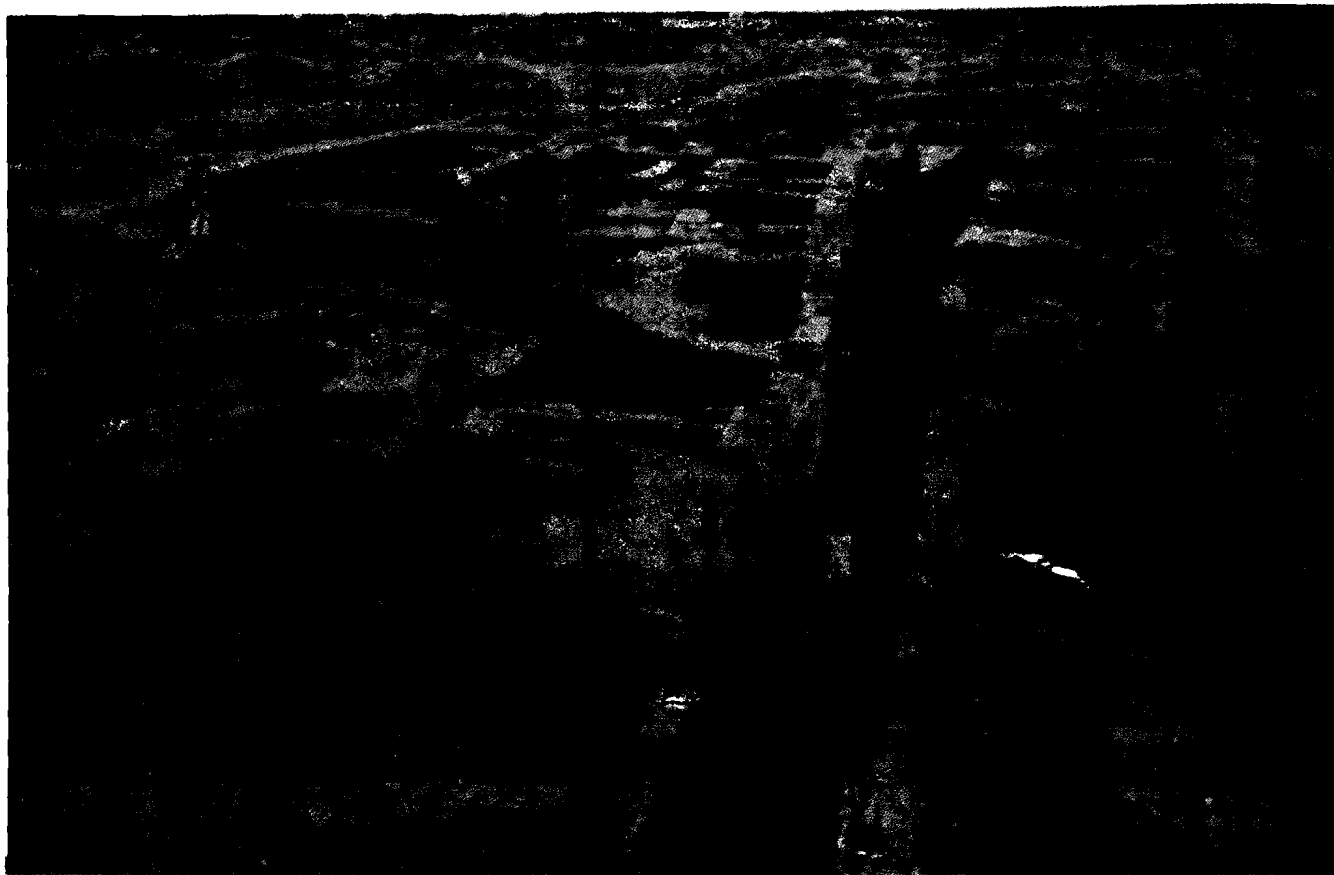
They got their supply of fat and oil from sesame seeds, mustard and possibly Ghee. We do not know whether they were familiar with sugarcane to supply them sugar. They might have used honey to sweeten their food. Seeds of jujube and dates found in the Harappan sites indicate their preference for these fruits. It is likely that they also ate bananas, pomegranates, melons, lemons, figs and of course mangoes. They

seem to have consumed a whole range of wild nuts and fruits but it is difficult to identify them. They were eating peas too. Apart from this the Harappans seem to have relished non-vegetarian food. Bones of deer, bears, sheep and goats have been frequently found in the Harappan settlements. Fish, milk and curd too would be known to them. However, they had neither tea nor potato-chips. Could you yourself find out the reason for this?

8.2.3 Language and Script

What language did they speak and what did they read and write is again not very clear to us. We have discovered the written script of the Harappans. As pointed out earlier, we have not deciphered it as yet. Some scholars believe that the language written there is ancestral to the Dravidian group of languages like Tamil. Some other writers would like to think that it was ancestral to an Aryan language like Sanskrit.

However, no one has proved his case beyond doubt. However, one noticeable thing about their script is that it did not change all through the life of the Harappan Civilization. All the other ancient scripts have showed distinct changes over a period of time. This indicates that the Harappan script was not in common use. Perhaps a very small section of privileged scribes had a monopoly over the written word. About what they learnt and how they learnt—we have no answers. Whether they had some kind of school for teaching as was the case in contemporary Mesopotamia is not known to us.



16. Northern half of Kalibangan citadel

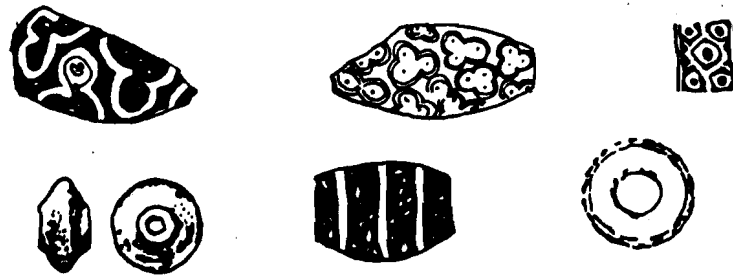
8.2.4 Warfare

Did they play and did they fight? We know that they played dice. But beyond that we again draw a blank. They did fight—and there is enough evidence for it—possibly because the archeologists who were digging up various Harappan sites were looking for evidences of war and not of sport. One important indicator of course is that at the time of the emergence of the Harappan Civilization many 'Early Harappan' sites like Kot Diji and Kalibangan were burnt down. However an accidental fire could destroy large towns, but it is more likely that some of the settlements were burnt down by victorious human groups. Then there is the evidence of some skeletons lying scattered in the streets of Mohenjodaro. Human societies from times immemorial have disposed off the bodies of their dead in some ordered fashion. It is natural that the Harappans would not leave their dead to rot in the streets. So, obviously some

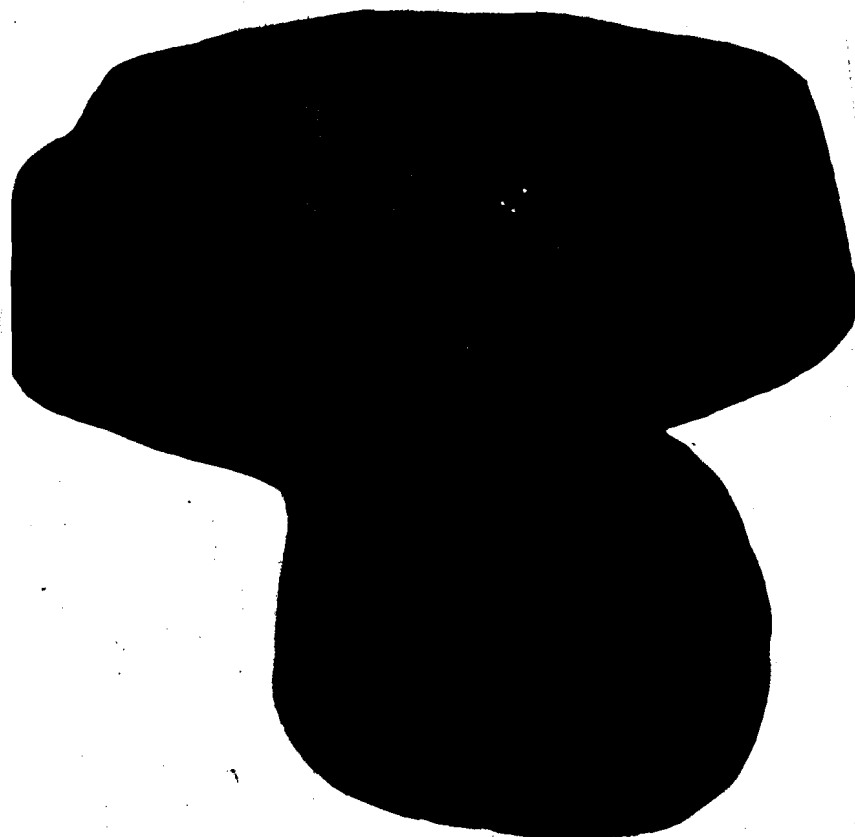
extraordinary conflict is indicated when the Harappans did not get an opportunity to bury their dead. The presence of citadels and fortification around many Harappan towns also indicates a need for protection against outsiders. Some of the protection walls might have been bunds for protection against floods. But given the opulence of the Harappan townships in contrast to the surrounding rural communities it is likely that the Harappans wanted to protect their wealth and life by fortifying their settlements. Many copper and bronze weapons have also been reported.

8.2.5 Main Crafts

What did the Harappans do for a living? We are on surer grounds in answering this question. This is because studies of pre-modern civilized societies show that most of the people in those societies were engaged in agriculture. However, quite a few Harappan townsmen were engaged in various other kinds of activities. Bead making was one of the favourite activities of the Harappans. In settlements like Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro and Lothal a fairly large number of Harappans were engaged in this work. Since a variety of stones like Carnelian, Lapis Lazul, Agate and Jasper were used for making beads it is likely that there were specialised bead makers for each type of stone. Some other Harappans specialized in making stone tools. Apart from them groups of potters, copper and bronze workers, stone workers, builders of houses, brick makers and seal-cutters must have lived in Harappan towns. When we talk about the Harappan Civilization, we are basically referring to seals, bricks, pots and other such objects surviving from those times. These objects presuppose the existence of their makers.



17. Beads of some precious stones from Harappan sites



18. Furnace used for bead-manufacture

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 Which of the following statements is right (✓) and which is wrong (×).
 - i) The Harappan script underwent a number of changes during the period this civilization survived
 - ii) The Harappans were strict vegetarians
 - iii) Generally the Harappan towns were fortified
 - iv) The Harappan men were fond of wearing ornaments.
- 2 Fill in the empty spaces given in the following sentences.
 - i) We get the information about the dresses and fashions of Harappan people through their
 - ii) was used to make Harappan metallic tools.
 - iii) The staple food of the Harappans was in Rajasthan, in Sind and Punjab and in Gujarat.
 - iv) A large number of beads found in Harappan settlements are made of
- 3 Write five lines on Harappan Script.

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8.3 WHO RULED THEM?

At the top of the pyramid of the Harappan society were three invisible categories of people—the administrators, the traders and the priests. Their presence can be presumed on the basis of an understanding of the problems of organisation. The rise of Civilization is associated with the emergence of a centralized decision-making system called the State. In the Harappan civilization we can perceive the presence of a decision-making authority for running the municipal system:

- The construction and maintenance of elaborate drainage system and streets would require a municipal authority in the cities.
- Similarly, the granaries indicate the presence of an authority which would collect food grains from the surrounding hinterland and redistribute it among the citizens.
- As pointed out earlier, the tools, weapons, bricks etc. show a remarkable uniformity of design. Some of the tools and weapons seem to have been mass-produced in one place and then distributed to various cities and settlements. The organisation of production and distribution of these objects over an area covering thousands of kms. would give tremendous power to those who decided how much to produce and where to send the products. If these people were to stop the supply of goods to a particular town, that town would be starved of tools and implements.
- The sheer range and volume of products consumed by the residents of the larger cities indicate that some kind of a ruling class resided in them. Many of the objects were rarities brought from faraway lands. The possession of such precious stones or metals would give immense prestige to owners vis-a-vis the rest of the population.
- Similarly, the larger size of the cities did not simply indicate that a larger number of people lived there but also the fact that they contained many monumental structures like temples, palaces etc. The people who lived in these structures exercised political or economic or religious authority. No wonder, the seals which are considered marks of authority of traders, priests or administrators are found in largest numbers in Mohenjodaro where the largest number of monumental structures have also been found.

However, we are not suggesting that Mohenjodaro functioned as the Capital of the Harappan Civilization. It is possible that the Harappan Civilization consisted of two or even five independent political units. All we are suggesting is that the city had

emerged as the Centre of politico-economic power. We do not know who the rulers of the Harappans were. They may have been kings, priests or traders. However, we know that in many pre-modern societies the economic, religious and administrative spheres are not clearly demarcated. This means that the same person could be the head priest, king and the wealthiest merchant. But all these evidences indicate the presence of a ruling authority. What was the form of this authority is not yet clear to us.

Check Your Progress 2

1 On what basis can we say that Harappan was an Urban Civilization?

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2. A number of things found in Harappan excavations indicate the presence of civic and political authority. What are these?

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8.4 RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Who did the Harappans worship? This is one question about which there has been considerable discussion among scholars. The mute survivors of the Harappan past do not tell us anything. So, we have to fit in our logic and our fancies to understand their religious beliefs. One major problem is that without written information it is difficult to differentiate their sacred and secular activities. Thus, it seems that any or every find from Harappa might have a sacred content. However, we shall try to understand the religious beliefs of the Harappans with the help of modern parallels.

8.4.1 The Places of Worship

A number of large buildings in the citadel and the lower town at Mohenjodaro are believed to have been temples of gods. This view is supported by the fact that most of the large stone sculptures were found in these buildings.

In the lower city at Mohenjodaro a large building has been discovered. This building has a monumental entrance and a double stairway leading to a raised platform on which was found a stone sculpture 16½ inches high. It is a seated man with hands on knees. It has a bearded face with a fillet passing over a receding forehead and hanging down in two strands at the back. Another stone statue was discovered in the same building. This is why scholars have identified this building with a temple.

In Mohenjodaro several structures are reported from the citadel mound which seem to have had some ritual significance. Among them 'The Great Bath' is the most famous. Such elaborate bathing arrangements were made in very sacred ritual spots in the subsequent historical phases in India. So, it is likely that 'Great Bath' was not simply a swimming pool but that it had a great ritual significance.

Near the 'Great Bath' was found another large structure (230 × 78 feet) which has been identified as the residence of some high priest or college of priests. Similarly, an oblong assembly hall has also been reported from the citadel area. To the west of this structure was found a complex of rooms in one of which was discovered a seated male statue. This too has been identified as a part of some religious structure. These ritual structures provide us with a glimpse of the religious practices of the people in Mohenjodaro. We can presume that some of the ritual performances took place in the large temple like structure.

8.4.2 Objects of Worship

The evidence for the objects of worship comes from the study of Harappan seals and terracotta figurines. Amongst the evidences that come from the seals, the most famous is a deity who has been identified as proto-Siva. On a series of seals a deity wearing a buffalo-horned head-dress is shown sitting in a yogic posture. The deity is surrounded by animals like goats, elephants, tiger and antelope. Marshall identified him with god Pasupati (Lord of Beasts). In several instances he has a sprouting plant emerging between his horns. In another case a deity with horns and flowing hair is standing nude between the branches of a Pipal tree. A worshipper is kneeling in front of it. Behind the worshipper is a man-faced goat and below are seven other human figures. They have long pigtailed and tall head-dresses. In one seal are shown snakes accompanying the yogic figure. Each of the features associated with the horned deity are attributes of Siva of later Indian history. Moreover in some Harappan settlements the phallic emblem of Siva (Lingam) has been found. All these evidences have led scholars to believe that Siva was the most important male god of the Harappans. Perhaps the temples were dedicated to the same god.

i. Mother Goddess

The Harappan settlements have yielded a very large number of terracotta figurines. Among them are the representations of females adorned with a wide girdle, loin cloth and necklaces. They wear a fan-shaped head dress. Sometimes they are shown with an infant. The general notion of fertility is indicated by many representations of pregnancy. These evidences indicate the prevalence of cults of fertility and mother goddess worship.

ii. Tree Spirits

The Harappans also seem to have worshipped tree spirits. Several seals depict the Pipal tree. In many cases a figure is shown looking through the branches. Scholars believe that this represents the tree-spirit. In many cases worshippers are shown standing in front of the tree. In many other cases a tiger or some other animal is shown in front of the tree. In one case seven human figures are shown standing in front of it, with a horned figure standing in it. As discussed earlier the horned figure probably is Siva. The Pipal tree has been worshipped in India for ages and in many cases the Pipal tree and Siva are worshipped together. The seven figures have sometimes been identified with the seven great sages or seven mothers of the Indian mythology.

iii. Some Mythical Heroes

Some other human figures which seem to have a religious significance are those found on seals and amulets. Human figures with horns on the head and long tails are frequently shown on the seals. Sometimes, they have hoofs of cattle and hind legs. Some other seals remind us of Mesopotamian mythology.

For example, a man grappling with a pair of tigers immediately brings to mind a brave warrior called Gilgamesh who is said to have killed two tigers.

iv. Animal Worship

A large number of animals also seem to have been worshipped. Again, our information comes from their representation on seals and sealings and in terracotta. A seal has been reported from Chanhudaro depicting a bull-bison with erect penis, fecundating a supine human figure. A plant is sprouting from the head of the human figure. This obviously is indicative of some fertility cult. The Brahmani bull with its heavy dewlap is frequently represented on the seals. It is possible that the present day reverence for bulls and cows had its beginnings in the Harappan Civilization.

v. Mythical Beasts

Many composite animals are depicted in the seals. There are animal representations of creatures with the foreparts of humans and the hind-quarters of tigers. Similarly, composite creatures combining various portions of rams, bulls and elephants are a frequent occurrence. They obviously represented objects of worship. The conception of composite creatures like 'Narasimha' was very much a part of the mythology of the later Indian tradition. One important animal frequently represented on the Harappan seals is the unicorn. This is a horse-like beast with a horn issuing from the middle of its head. In front of the animal occurs a curious object which is not shown in association with any other animal. It consists of a bowl on a central post carrying a cage like object. We do not know its function—it has been taken for a sacred manger or an incense holder. In

another seal impression, a 'unicorn' is shown being carried in a procession between two other objects, one of which was similar to the one discussed above. Obviously the 'unicorn' was a mythical animal, since there is no such real beast. It is likely to have been a cult object.

The Harappans at Kalibangan and Lothal seem to have followed different religious practices. At Kalibangan in the citadel were found a series of raised brick platforms crowned with 'fire altars' i.e., a series of brick-lined pits containing ash and animal bones. This area also had a well and bathing places. This complex seems to have represented some kind of ritual centre where animal sacrifice, ritual ablution and some sort of fire rituals were performed. Many houses in the lower town also contained a room having 'fire altars'. Several other 'fire' altars are also reported. At Lothal too, fire altars have been found. These evidences are very important because:

- a) they show that the Harappans staying in different geographical areas followed different religious practices, and
- b) the fire ritual was central to the Vedic religion.

The Vedic Aryans are believed to have been a different set of people. The evidence from Kalibangan might indicate that the Aryans adopted the religious practices of the Harappans when they came and settled down in these areas.

8.4.3 The Burial of the Dead

Disposal of the dead has been an important religious activity of the human groups. This is because the attitude towards the dead is linked up with the human beliefs regarding this life and life after death. The Harappan civilization has not yielded any monuments for the dead which could equal the pyramids of Egypt or the Royal cemetery of the Mesopotamian city of Ur, in its grandeur. However, we have certain evidences about the burial practices of the Harappans.

In Harappa many graves have been discovered. Dead bodies were generally placed in a north-south orientation. Bodies were laid on their back. A large number of earthen pots were placed in the grave. In some cases the dead were buried with ornaments like shell bangles, necklace, and an ear ring. In some cases copper mirrors, mother of pearl shells, antimony sticks etc. were kept in the grave. A number of graves were constructed with bricks. A coffin burial has been found at Harappa. At Kalibangan some other kinds of burial practices were encountered. Small circular pits containing large urns and accompanied by pottery have been found. But they did not have any skeletal remains. Some other burial pits with collected bones have also been found. From Lothal some examples of pairs of skeletons with a male and a female in each case buried together.

These practices show that the disposal of the dead among the Harappans was different from the one followed subsequently. In the historical phases the predominant system seems to have been cremation. At the same time the careful placement of bodies provided with ornaments and toiletries is indicative of some belief in life after death. What that belief was is unknown to us.

A study of the various kinds of objects found in excavations shows that different regions of the Harappan civilization followed different kinds of religious practices. Fire worship was prevalent in Kalibangan and Lothal but unknown in Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Ritual bathing evidenced at Mohenjodaro might have been absent in Harappa. The burial practices show wide variation ranging from extended inhumation to double burials and pot burials. Finds in Kalibangan also show that different kinds of burial practices were being followed in the same settlement. This kind of diversity of religious beliefs and practices even in the same settlement reflects the complex nature of the urban centres. Unlike tribal societies where every member of the tribe follows similar kinds of religious practices, the urban centres are characterised by the presence of people following different kinds of religious practices. This apparently means that urban centres were formed by the political and economic integration of varied social groups. Also, an urban centre means the presence of traders from different regions with their own religious practices. These groups retained their social mores and religious customs but lost their political and economic independence.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1 Which of the Harappan religious structures indicate the prevalence of some collective worship or rituals?
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- 2 Which of the following statements are correct?
- Siva seems to be the most important Harappan God
 - The female deities were absent in Harappan religious objects
 - Trees also seem to be worshipped by Harappans
 - No animals were worshipped by the Harappans
- 3 Do we get any evidence of fire worship from Harappan finds?

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- 4 What significant points emerge from the study of burial practices of Harappan people?
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8.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the religious and social aspects related to the life pattern of Harappans.

The main dresses of Harappans were a big unsewn cloth like modern day saree and was wrapped on the body. The kit and shirt were other dresses worn by men & women alike. Men and women both were fond of ornaments. Their food included a large variety of items depending on the inhabited areas. The main items included rice, barley, millet and wheat. A number of fruits, vegetables and non-vegetarian items were also used. We hope you found the answer to the question raised in Section 8.2.2. Well if not, it is because tea and potato were not grown in the region at that time.

The Harappan script is still a mystery for the archaeologists and linguists. It has not been deciphered yet.

Fortification of their settlements and weapons found indicate that they were often engaged in fights.

Pottery, metal work, bead making and a number of crafts were practiced by the Harappans. This indicates the presence of artisans and urban labour force.

The society seems to have been divided into classes. There are indications of the presence of some kind of a political structure. Administrators, priests and traders alongwith large number of workmen seem to constitute the society in towns.

Some large structures indicate the prevalence of some collective worship or rituals. A number of gods, goddesses and objects seems to have been worshipped. The prominent were mother goddess, Siva and a number of trees and animals. Some composite mythical beasts also seem to have some place in religious practices.

The most prevalent system for disposing the dead seems burial rather than cremation. A number of ornaments and other objects are also found in the burial pits. All these give us, if not a total but a nearer view of the Harappan society.

8.6 KEY WORDS

Fertility Cult : A system of worship in which the reproductive aspects of nature and mankind are emphasised. The worship is expected to ensure the production of abundant crops or children.

Fire Altars : Brick-lined pits found in Kalibangan. They contained ash and animal bones. In many societies fire is worshipped. In the Vedic society similar kinds of pits were dug for lighting fire and worshipping it.

Royal Cemetery of Ur : A cemetery discovered in the Mesopotamian city of Ur belonging to the third millennium B.C. This cemetery contained the graves of many kings.

Script : System or style of writing.

Unicorn : A mythical animal having a body of a horse and one straight horn.

8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 i) × ii) × iii) ✓ iv) ✓
- 2 i) Terracotta human figures ii) Copper iii) Barley, Wheat and barley, rice and millet iv) Stone.
- 3 Your answer should include which present language seems to have descended from Harappan script, the changes it underwent and whether we are able to read it or not.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 Your answer should include things like large number of brick structures spread in a big area, a number of craft products, drainage system etc. Also see section 8.3.
- 2 Your answer should include things like well planned towns, big houses, presence of granaries their management and other such things. Read Section 8.3 again.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1 Big temple like structures with a number of sculptures, common baths, assembly halls, structures with a number of fire pits, etc. Read Section 8.4 and Sub-sec. 8.4.1
- 2 i) ✓ ii) × iii) ✓ iv) ×
- 3 In Harappan settlements like Kalibangan and Lothal a number of findings indicate to the presence of fire worship such as fire altars, in apparently public worship places and even houses. See sub-section 8.4.2 last paragraph.
- 4 The most significant point is that burying the dead was accompanied by some rituals. It appears that the Harappans believed in some sort of life after death because a number of items of every day use or ornaments are also placed alongside the dead. Some times it is paired burial one male and one female. In some cases urns containing bones are also buried.