CHAPTER 6

The Beginnings of Indian Civilisation

The most ancient civilisation of India, known variously as the Harappan, Indus or Indus-Sarasvatī Civilisation, was indeed remarkable in many ways. ... [It showed how] a well-balanced community lives — in which the differences between the rich and the poor are not glaring. ... In essence, the Harappan societal scenario was not that of 'exploitation', but of mutual 'accommodation'.

— B.B. Lal

The Big Questions

1. *What is a civilisation?*
2. *What was the earliest civilisation of the Indian Subcontinent?*
3. *What were its major achievements?*

0681CH06

Fig. 6.1. The North Gate entrance to Dholavira's 'Castle' area.

What Is a Civilisation?

Metallurgy: Includes the techniques of extracting metals from nature, purifying or combining them, as well as the scientific study of metals and their properties.

At the end of Chapter 4, we saw the first human groups settling down, practising agriculture, developing some technologies (such as construction, **metallurgy**, transport) and moving towards 'civilisation'.

What, then, is civilisation? In general, the term is used for an advanced stage of human societies. To be precise, we will consider here that a 'civilisation' should have at least the following characteristics:

- some form of **government and administration** — to manage a more complex society and its many activities
- **urbanism** — town-planning, the growth of cities and their management, which generally includes water management and a drainage system
- a variety of **crafts** — including the management of raw materials (such as stone or metal) and the production of finished goods (such as ornaments and tools)
- **trade** both internal (within a city or a region) and external (with distant regions or other parts of the world) — to exchange all sorts of goods
- some form of **writing** — needed to keep records and to communicate
- **cultural ideas** about life and the world, expressed through art, architecture, literature, oral traditions or social customs
- a productive **agriculture** — enough to feed not just the villages, but also the cities.

THINK ABOUT IT

Which of the above characteristics do you think is the most fundamental — that is, a characteristic essential to the development of all others?

LET'S EXPLORE

For each characteristic in the list above, can you make a list of professions or occupations that might exist in such a society?

It is easy enough to see that all these characteristics are present in most societies in the world today. But when did civilisation begin, in the sense we have now defined?

Civilisation began at different times in different parts of the world. In the region known as Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and Syria), that happened about 6,000 years ago, and the civilisation in ancient Egypt followed a few centuries later. You will learn about these and a few more civilisations in a later grade. In many ways, humanity would not have reached its present stage without the enormous contributions and advances of those ancient civilisations.

For now, however, we will only look at the Indian Subcontinent, and its northwest region is where our story begins.

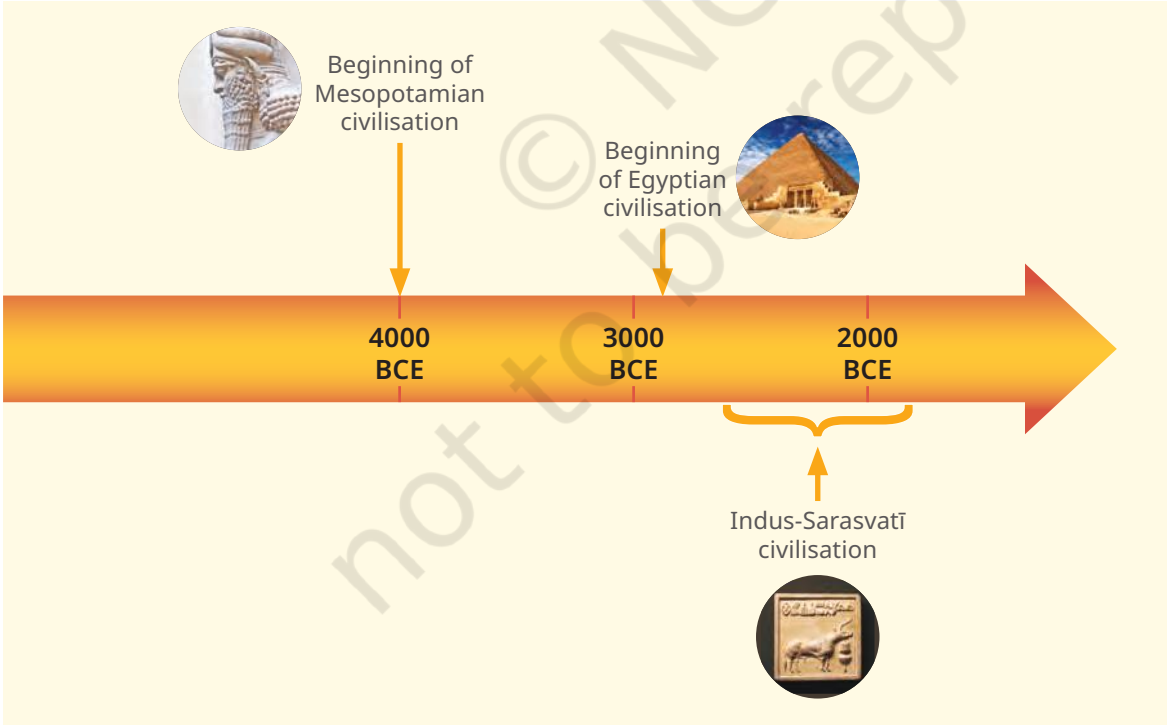


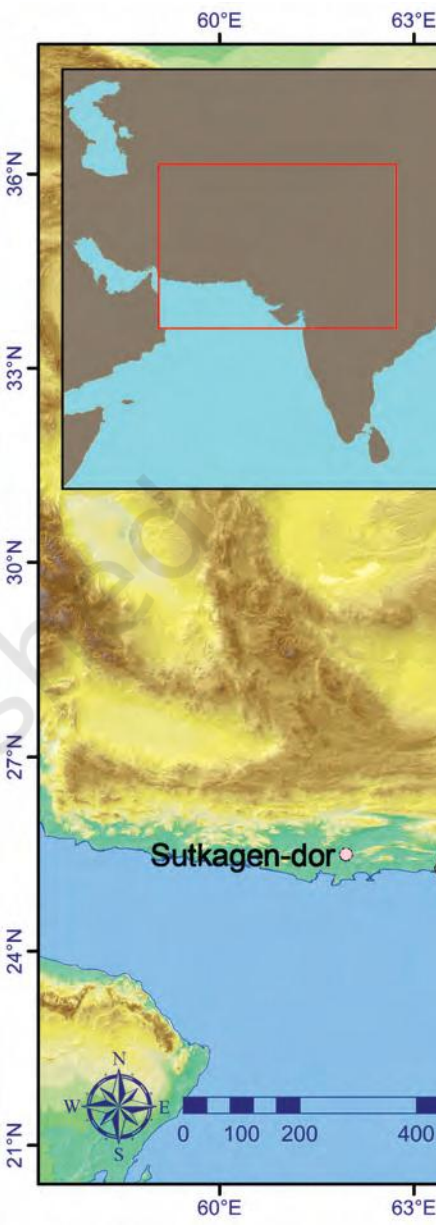
Fig. 6.2. Timeline showing the period of the Indus-Sarasvatī civilisation, from about 2600 to 1900 BCE.

From Village to City

Tributary: A river that flows into a larger river (or lake). For instance, the Yamuna is a tributary of the Ganga.

The vast plains of the Punjab (today divided between India and Pakistan) and Sindh (now in Pakistan) are watered by the Indus River and its **tributaries**. This made those plains fertile and, therefore, favourable to agriculture. A little further east, a few millenniums ago, another river, the Sarasvatī, used to flow from the foothills of the Himalayas through Haryana, Punjab, parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat (see Fig. 6.3). In this whole region, from about 3500 BCE, villages grew into towns, and with increasing trade and other exchanges, those towns further grew into cities. This transition happened around 2600 BCE.

Archaeologists gave this civilisation several names — 'Indus', 'Harappan', 'Indus-Sarasvatī' or 'Sindhu-Sarasvatī' civilisation. We will use all these terms. Its inhabitants are called 'Harappans'. It is one of the oldest civilisations in the world.



DON'T MISS OUT

Why are the inhabitants of this civilisation called 'Harappans' today? That is simply because the city of Harappa (today in Pakistan's Punjab) was the first of this civilisation to be excavated, way back in 1920–21, over a century ago.

This development is also called the 'First Urbanisation of India'.

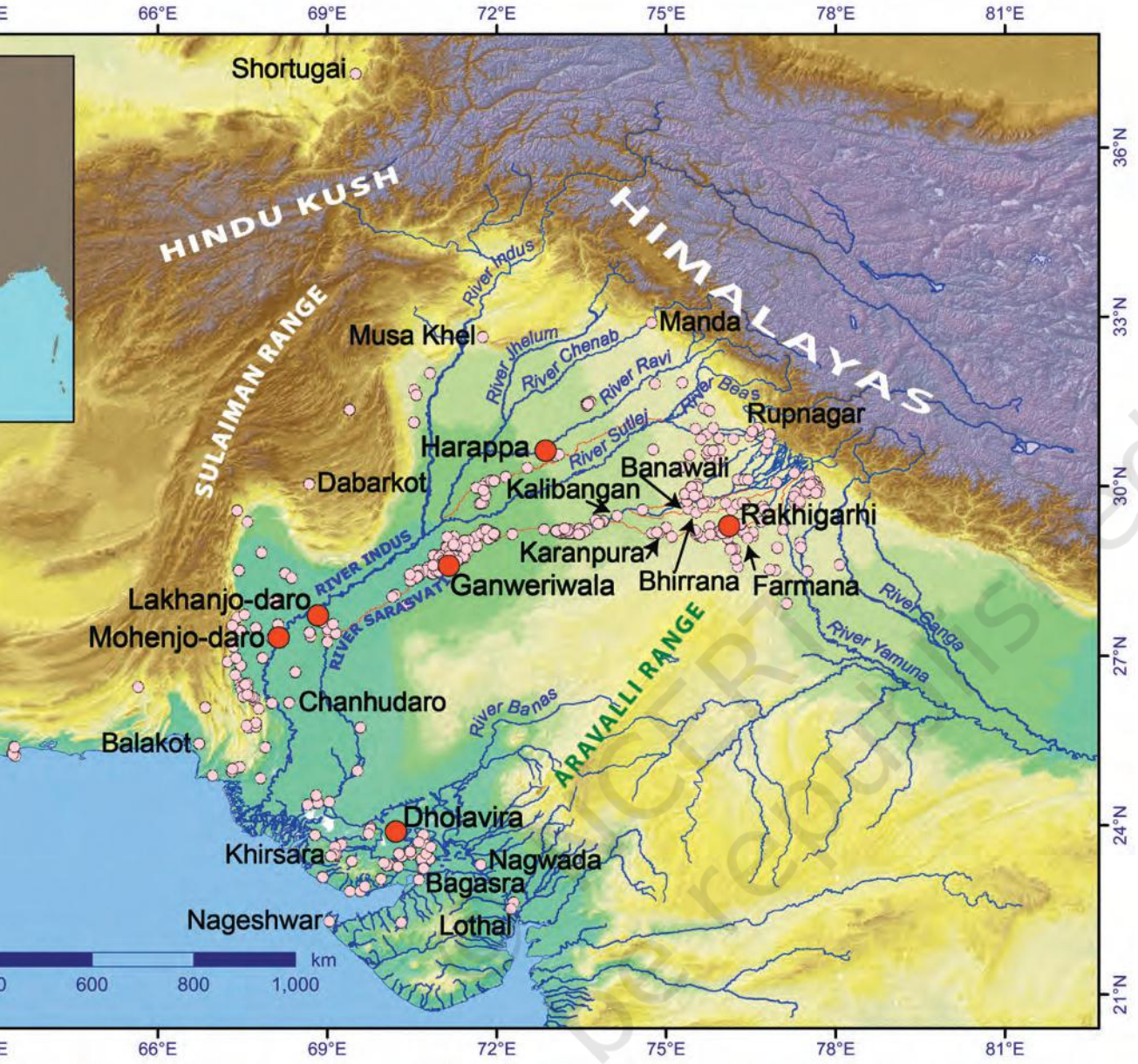


Fig. 6.3. Map of some of the main settlements of the Indus-Sarasvatī civilisation. Notice the natural boundaries formed by the mountain ranges (in brown colour).

LET'S EXPLORE

Some of the important cities of this civilisation are marked in the map (Fig. 6.3). As a class activity, can you try to match these cities with the modern states or regions in the table on the next page?

Harappan city	Modern state / region
Dholavira	Punjab
Harappa	Gujarat
Kalibangan	Sindh
Mohenjo-daro	Haryana
Rakhigarhi	Rajasthan

The Sarasvatī River

The map (Fig. 6.3 on page 89) shows the Indus (or Sindhu) and its five main tributaries; important cities grew along those rivers, such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. But there are also many sites along the Sarasvatī River, which today goes by the name of 'Ghaggar' in India and 'Hakra' in Pakistan (hence the name 'Ghaggar-Hakra River'). This river is now seasonal, because it flows only during the rainy season.

The Sarasvatī River is first mentioned in the Ṛig Veda, an ancient collection of prayers which we will read about in Chapter 7. In this text, Sarasvatī is worshipped both as a goddess and as a river flowing 'from the mountain to the sea'. Later texts describe the river as drying up and eventually disappearing.

Town-Planning

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, now in Pakistan, were the first two cities of this civilisation to be discovered; their identification goes back to 1924, a century ago. Several sites followed in the Indus plains, which is why the civilisation was initially called 'Indus Valley civilisation'.

Later on, other major cities, such as Dholavira (in Gujarat), Rakhigarhi (in Haryana), Ganweriwala (in the Cholistan desert of Pakistan), and hundreds of smaller sites (such

THINK ABOUT IT

You may have come across the term 'Indus Valley civilisation' and noticed that we have not used it. A look at the map (Fig. 6.3 on page 89) explains why the term 'Valley' is obsolete, as we now know that the civilisation extended much beyond the Indus region.

as Lothal in Gujarat), were discovered, some of them excavated. Such discoveries continue even today! It is interesting to note that the Sarasvatī basin includes not only two major cities — Rakhigarhi and Ganweriwala — but also several smaller ones (Farmana in Haryana, Kalibangan in Rajasthan) and a few towns (Bhirrana and Banawali, both in Haryana); indeed, the map (Fig. 6.3 on page 89) makes clear the high density of sites in that region.

The larger Harappan cities were built according to precise plans. They had wide streets (Fig. 6.4 and 6.5 on page 92), which were often oriented to the cardinal directions. Most cities seem to have been surrounded by **fortifications** and had two distinct parts — the 'upper town', where the local **elite** probably lived, and the 'lower town', where common people lived.

Some large buildings seem to have been used for collective purposes — for instance, warehouses where goods to be transported were stored. Individual houses of various sizes lined the streets and smaller lanes. Interestingly, the quality of construction was the same for small and big houses. All those buildings were generally made of bricks.

The purpose of some of the structures remains a matter of debate. This is the case of the famous 'Great Bath' in Mohenjo-daro (Fig. 6.6 on page 93), a small but elaborate tank which measured about 12 x 7 metres and had waterproofing materials (such as natural bitumen, a form of tar) applied on top of carefully laid-out bricks. The tank

Fortification: A massive wall surrounding a settlement or city, generally for protective purposes.

Elite: Here, the word refers to the higher layers of the society, such as rulers, officials, administrators, and often priests.

(Top) Fig. 6.4. A wide street at Kalibangan (Rajasthan), in the lower town area.

(Right) Fig. 6.5. Housing area in Dholavira, with perpendicular streets, in the middle town (Dholavira had three distinct zones, not two as in other cities). Also, in this city, the foundations of most buildings were made with stones.

was surrounded by small rooms, one of which contained a well; there was a drain in one corner of the tank to empty it from time to time and refill it with freshwater.

Fig. 6.6. Mohenjo-daro's Great Bath

What was the purpose of such a structure? Archaeologists have proposed several possible interpretations — a public bath for people; a bath for the royal family only; or a tank used for religious rituals. The first interpretation is now ruled out because it turns out that in this city, most houses had individual bathrooms.

LET'S EXPLORE

Have a debate in class about the last two interpretations. Can you think of any others? Remember that in this case, we do not have any other source of history — no inscription, no text, no traveller's account.

Water Management

The Harappans gave much importance to water management and cleanliness. They often had separate areas for bathing in their homes; these were connected to a larger network of drains (Fig. 6.7), which generally ran below the streets and took the waste water away.

Fig. 6.7. Drainage system at Lothal (Gujarat)

In Mohenjo-daro, people drew water from hundreds of wells made of bricks. But in other regions, it may have been

from ponds, nearby streams or human-made **reservoirs**. In the case of Dholavira (in the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat), the largest reservoir measured 73 metres in length!

Reservoir: A large natural or artificial place where water is stored.

LET'S EXPLORE

As a class activity, measure the length of your classroom, a school corridor or a playground with the help of any measuring tape. Compare these lengths with the length of the largest reservoir in Dholavira.

At Dholavira, at least six large reservoirs were built with stones or even cut into the rock (Fig. 6.8). Most of them were connected through underground drains for efficient water harvesting and distribution.

Fig. 6.8. A large reservoir cut in the rock at Dholavira, measuring 33 metres in length

THINK ABOUT IT

Imagine the large number of workers required to build such a network of reservoirs. Who do you think organised their work and gave them precise instructions? How do you think they were paid for their labour? *(Hint: there was no money at that time in the way we have today.)* Since the reservoirs needed to be cleaned from time to time, was there some local authority to manage their maintenance? What clues do we get from all this about this city's ruler and municipal administration?

Use your imagination and discuss with your teacher. Archaeologists also discuss these questions, and the answers are not always final!

What Did the Harappans Eat?

The Harappans created many of their settlements along the banks of large or small rivers. This is a logical choice, not just for easy access to water, but also for agriculture, since rivers enrich the soil around them. Archaeological findings have shown that the Harappans grew cereals like barley, wheat, some millets, and sometimes rice, in addition to **pulses** and a variety of vegetables. They were also the first in Eurasia to grow cotton, which they used to weave into clothes. They made farming tools, including the plough (Fig. 6.9), some of which continue to be used by modern-day farmers.

Pulses: A category of crops that includes beans, peas and lentils (dal).

Fig. 6.9. A small clay model of a plough (from Banawali in Haryana)

This intense agricultural activity was managed by hundreds of small rural sites or villages. Then as now, the cities could survive only if enough agricultural produce from rural areas reached them on a daily basis.

The Harappans also domesticated a number of animals for meat consumption and fished both in rivers and in the sea. This is known from the large numbers of animal and fish bones found during excavations.

What did Harappan cooking pots contain? Scientific examinations of clay pots have provided some answers, both expected ones (dairy products) and surprising ones — such as remains of turmeric, ginger and banana. Clearly, their diet was quite diverse!

LET US EXPLORE

Imagine you cook a meal in a Harappan house. What dish or dishes would you prepare, based on the data given above?

A Brisk Trade

The Harappans were engaged in active trade, not only within their own civilisation (other cities nearby or far away), but with other civilisations and cultures within and outside India. They exported ornaments, timber, some objects of daily use (Fig. 6.11 on page 98), probably also gold and cotton, and possibly some food items. The most favoured ornaments were beads of carnelian (Fig. 6.10 on page 98), a reddish semiprecious stone found mostly in Gujarat. Harappan craftspeople developed special techniques to drill them, so a string could pass through them, and to decorate them in various ways. They also worked conch shells into beautiful shell bangles, which requires sophisticated techniques as shell is a hard material.

What the Harappans imported in exchange of the exported goods is not so clear. It probably included copper, since this metal was not so common back home.

DON'T MISS OUT

The Harappans mastered the art of working copper, a soft metal. If tin is added to copper, the resulting metal is bronze, which is harder than copper. The Harappans used bronze to make tools, pots and pans, and, as we will see later, some figurines.

Fig. 6.10. Harappan beads of carnelian beads excavated at Susa (present-day Iran)

Fig. 6.11. Harappan ivory comb (about 7 cm long) found on the coast of Oman

To conduct such a trade, they used land routes and rivers, and the sea for more distant destinations — this is the first intensive maritime activity in India. Indeed, quite a few Harappan settlements are located in the coastal regions of Gujarat and Sindh. Lothal, a small settlement in Gujarat, has a surprisingly huge basin measuring 217 metres in length and 36 metres in width — the length is just a little more than that of two football grounds! This basin must have been a dockyard, that is, a structure used to receive and send boats for further transportation of goods.

Such elaborate trade requires traders to be able to identify their goods — and also each other! This seems to have been the chief purpose of thousands of small seals, which have been excavated from many settlements. These seals

Fig. 6.12. The huge dockyard at Lothal

were generally made of steatite, a soft stone that would be hardened through heating. They measure only a few centimetres and generally depict animal figures with, above them, a few signs that are part of a writing system. But that system and the symbolic meaning of the animal figures are yet to be understood. What is certain is that they somehow relate to trade activities.

Fig. 6.13-1, 6.13-2, 6.13-3. (Left to right) Harappan seal showing a unicorn; Harappan seal showing a bull; Harappan seal showing a horned tiger

LET'S EXPLORE

Looking at these three Harappan seals with some writing signs, what goes through your mind? Would you like to suggest any interpretations? Let your imagination run!

The Lives of the Ancients

Archaeologists have unearthed many objects made and used by Harappans.

Objects of daily use

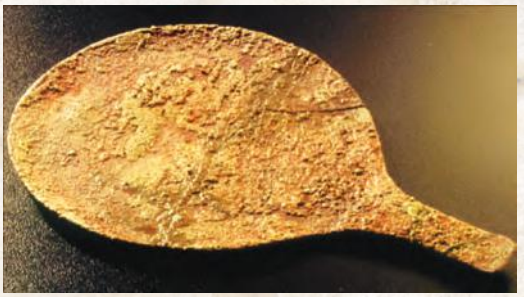


Fig. 6.14-1 (top), 6.14-2 (right). A bronze mirror; a terracotta pot (both from Dholavira)

Fig. 6.14-3 (top), 6.14-4 (right). A few stone weights; a bronze chisel (both from Dholavira)

Fig. 6.14-5, 6.14-6. A gamesboard engraved on a stone, about 25 cm in length (from Dholavira): a terracotta whistle, about 4 cm in length (from Karanpura in Rajasthan). Harappans designed many games and toys to keep both adults and children amused!

Cultural and symbolic objects

Fig. 6.15-1, 6.15-2, 6.15-3. A statuette of a figure often called 'Priest King' (although it is not known who this figure was); a seal showing a swastika; a seal depicting a three-faced deity seated on a raised platform, surrounded by powerful animals

Fig. 6.15-4, 6.15-5, 6.15-6. The 'Dancing Girl', a bronze figurine from Mohenjo-daro (it is 10.8 cm high); a terracotta figurine seated in a 'namaste'; a design on a pot which seems to tell the story of the thirsty crow, who finds a clever way to drink water at the bottom of the pot (from Lothal).

THINK ABOUT IT

- Looking at the objects on pages 100 and 101 — or any other pictured in this chapter — can you make out what activities or aspects of life were important for the Harappans?

LET'S EXPLORE

- Complete the story found on the Lothal pot. How was such a story remembered for more than 4,000 years, in your opinion?
- Consider the 'Dancing Girl' figurine. What do you make of the attitude the figurine expresses? Observe her bangles covering an entire arm, a practice still visible in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Where else in this chapter can you spot bangles worn in this manner. What conclusion should we draw from this?

The End or a New Beginning?

Around 1900 BCE, this Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation, despite all its achievements, began to fall apart. The cities were abandoned one by one. If any inhabitants remained, they adopted a rural lifestyle in the changed environment — it appears that the earlier government or administration no longer existed. Gradually the Harappans scattered over hundreds, if not thousands, of small rural settlements.

THINK ABOUT IT

The Harappans returned to rural settlements because a rural lifestyle gives easier access to food and water than an urban lifestyle. Then as now, cities depended on villages to provide food, and sometimes water.

What caused this decline? Archaeologists have proposed many factors. Long back, it was thought that warfare or

invasions may have destroyed the cities, but there is no trace of warfare or invasion. Indeed, the Harappans do not seem to have kept any army or weapons of war; as far as the evidence goes, it seems to have been a relatively peaceful civilization.

Two factors are currently agreed upon. First, a climatic change which affected much of the world from 2200 BCE onward, causing reduced rainfall and a drier phase. This would have made agriculture more difficult and could have reduced food supply to the cities. Second, the Sarasvatī River dried up in its central basin; suddenly, cities there, such as Kalibangan or Banawali were abandoned. There could have been other factors, but these two remind us of how much we depend on climate and the environment for our well-being.

Although the cities disappeared, much of the Harappan culture and technology survived and was passed on to the next phase of Indian civilisation, which we will explore in a future chapter.

Before we move on ...

- The Indus, Harappan or Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation is one of the oldest of the world. Its inhabitants, the Harappans, created planned cities with efficient water management, diverse crafts and a brisk trade.
- A productive agriculture brought a variety of crops to the cities.
- The civilisation eventually declined, probably because of climatic and environmental changes; people returned to a rural lifestyle.

Questions, activities and projects

1. Why does the civilisation studied in this chapter have several names? Discuss their significance.
2. Write a brief report (150 to 200 words) summing up some of the achievements of the Indus-Sarasvatī civilisation.
3. Imagine you have to travel from the city of Harappa to Kalibangan. What are your different options? Can you make a rough estimation of the amount of time each option might take?
4. Let us imagine a Harappan man or woman being transported to an average kitchen in today's India. What are the four or five biggest surprises awaiting them?
5. Looking at all the pictures in this chapter, make a list of the ornaments / gestures / objects that still feel familiar in our 21st century.
6. What mindset does the system of reservoirs at Dholavira reflect?
7. In Mohenjo-daro, about 700 wells built with bricks have been counted. They seem to have been regularly maintained and used for several centuries. Discuss the implications.
8. It is often said that the Harappans had a high civic sense. Discuss the significance of this statement. Do you agree with it? Compare with citizens in a large city of India today.