Harappan Script – The Unsolved Mystery

Mains: GS I - *Indian Culture - Salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.*

Why in news?

Scholars from around the world and across disciplines will be gathering in New Delhi this week to present their work on the Harappan script at a conference hosted by the Union Ministry of Culture.

What are Harappan scripts?

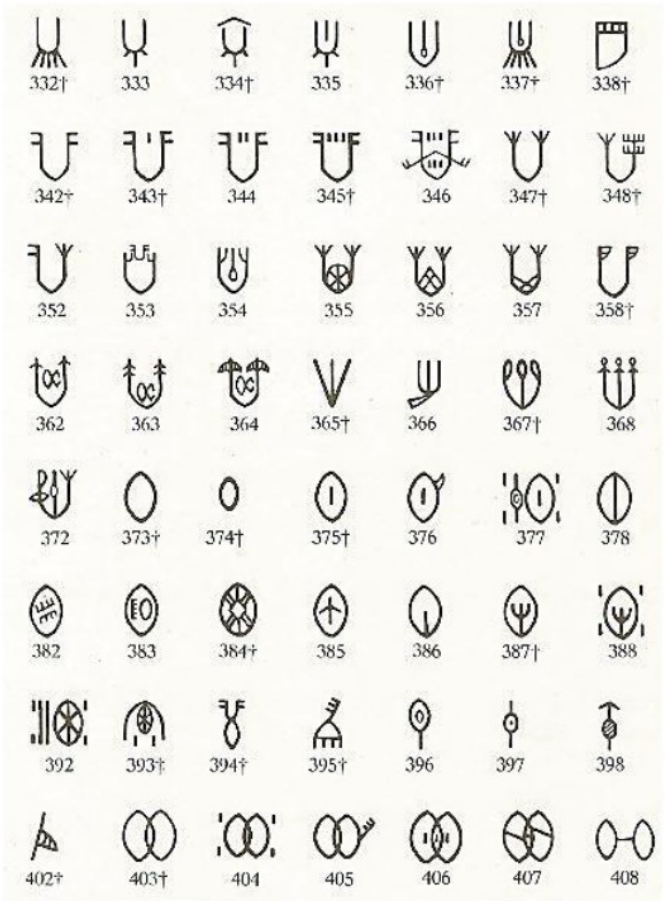
- **Scripts** – It is a writing system that uses a defined set of symbols or characters, and a set of rules (orthography) to represent a language.
- **Harappan script** – It is also known as the Indus script, is a pictographic script of the Indus Valley Civilization.
- **Characteristics** – It is characterized by about 400 symbols; most found on small square seals.
- The inscriptions are typically very short, found mostly on seals, but also on pottery, tablets, and other artifacts.
- **Style of writing** – The common direction of writing is thought to be right-to-left.
- Some longer inscriptions sometimes used the boustrophedon style, where lines alternate direction, similar to how an ox plows a field.
- **Undeciphered script** - The script, and the underlying language that the Harappans spoke, are mysteries that endure more than a century.

> ***Sir John Marshall*** *announced the discovery of the Bronze Age culture that thrived in the Indus Valley between c. 3300 and 1300 BCE.*









What are the different interpretations?

- **Claim of Sanskrit** – Historians close to the Sangh have long claimed that the underlying language represented by the Harappan script is Sanskrit.
    - Archaeologist S R Rao postulated in 1982 that the script contained 62 signs and linked the Indus script to Sanskrit and the Vedic civilisation.
- **Claim of Dravidian origin** – Others say that it is a form of proto-Dravidian.
- **Argument for tamil links** – Finnish Indologist Asko Parpola, in 1994 identified 425 distinct signs in the script which he had for decades linked to old Tamil.
- The script used a concept called *rebus* and the signs were pictures which stood for complete words by themselves.

Rebus *is a concept in which pictograms represented the word for the object or action depicted, or any other word with a similar sound, irrespective of meaning.*

    - ***For instance****, the fish sign, found in abundance on Indus seals, is unlikely to have meant actual fish, Parpola said.*
- Rather, he connected it to 'star'- A homophone (words with the same pronunciation but different meaning) of the Dravidian word for fish (min or meen).
- Parpola claimed to have found the Old Tamil names of all planets in the Indus script.
- His theory has found support from both Western and Indian scholars, including Iravatham Mahadevan, the leading researcher on the Indus script in the country.
    - **Support for the claim** – The existence of Brahui, an extant Dravidian language spoken by a small ethnic group in Balochistan in present-day Pakistan, appears to

lend further weight to the Dravidian hypothesis.

- Some other scholars link the harappan script to Ho and Santali.
- Driving such claims, often made with scant evidence, is a bid to establish the antiquity of one's people and culture, and the political capital that such antiquity provides.
- **Not a script at all** – The more recent scholarship has questioned whether the Indus script represented any language at all.
- This hypothesis was based mainly on the fact that all the Indus inscriptions are very short with only about five characters on average with the longest having only 26 characters.
- This claim was made in a 2004 paper by historian Steve Farmer, computer linguist Richard Sproat, and Indologist Michael Witzel who said that the "script" constituted non-linguistic symbols of political and religious significance.

What are the challenges in deciphering the script?

- **Problems to be solved** – To decipher a script, the following subproblems must be solved in order
  - Deciding if a set of symbols actually represent a writing system.
  - Devising appropriate procedures to isolate or segment the stream of symbols into a sequence of single signs.
  - Reducing the set of signs to the minimal set for the writing system forming (its alphabet, syllabary, or inventory of signs) by identifying Allographs (the same sign written in a variant form, for example a printed 'a' and a cursive 'a').
  - Assigning to each symbol their specified value, whether phonetic or otherwise
- **3 unsolved issues** – In the case of the Indus script, many of these problems remain unsolved due to three main reasons.
- **No multilingual inscriptions** – There is evidence that the Indus Valley Civilisation had robust trade links with the contemporaneous Mesopotamian Civilisation.
- The cuneiform script of Mesopotamians was deciphered in the early 19th century, but no multilingual inscriptions have been discovered so far.
- **Language not known** – Undeciphered scripts/languages fall in three basic categories,
  - An unknown script writing a known language
  - A known script writing an unknown language
  - An unknown script writing an unknown language.
- Of these, the third category, in which the Indus script falls, is the most challenging to decipher as they provide scholars with the least number of points of reference to go by.
- **Not much is known about civilisation** – Although some 3,500 seals have been identified till date, given that each seal has on average only five characters inscribed, scholars simply do not have enough material to analyse.
- In fact, compared to contemporaneous ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, much less is known in general about the Harappan civilisation.

What lies ahead?

- Even today dhobis in India have their own signs which are useful for them but they are not what you would call language.

- Most prehistoric societies did not write the kind of things we write today.
- Commercial information was perhaps the first thing that any society would record in writing.

Reference

The Indian Express| Harappan Script and its Mystery

