

Harappan Script - The Unsolved Mystery

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

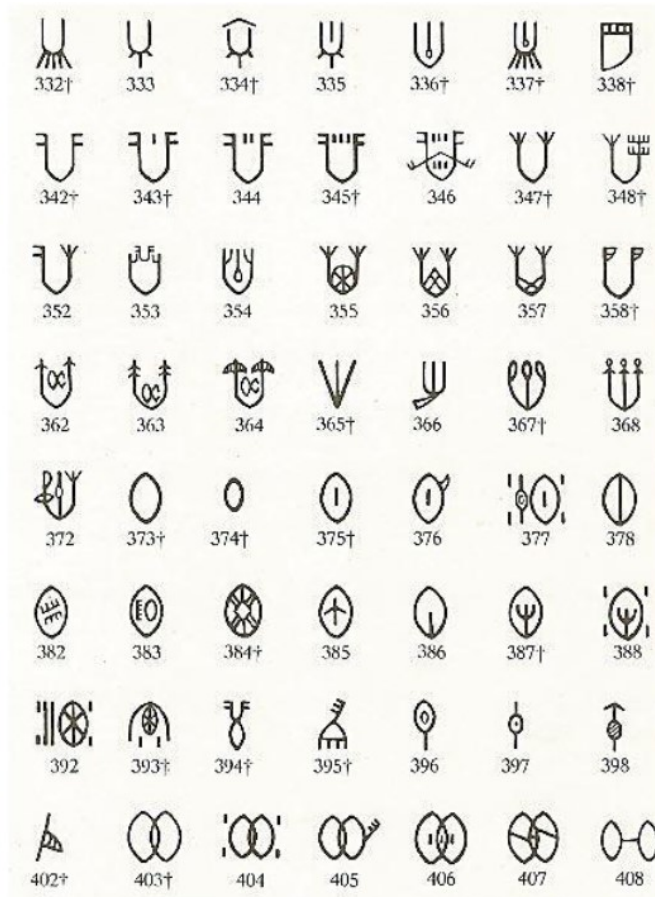
Why in news?

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](#)

