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Indus Valley Civilization's Symbolology
- Two is Great

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Indus Valley Civilization's Symbolology - Two is Great

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Abstract

Hypothesis - In the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), when a symbol is repeated twice it indicates a greater status either socio-economic or skill - Two is Great - Double Symbolic Convention. For example, unmarried women wore row bangles only in one arm. And mothers, mothers having a greater social status, wore row bangles in both arms. There are several signs/symbols which depict human forms with implements/tools in one arm or both arms, perhaps, an indicator of the greater level of expertise or skill or economic status. This paper attempts to prove this hypothesis based on the available artifacts from the IVC and various traditions in India, including traditions mentioned in the Sangam literature, which could reasonably be traced back to the ancient period.

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Row Bangles & Motherhood

There are 3 major types of bangles worn by women on their arms in historical times where – *Taṇṭai*, *Cilampu* & *Valaiyal* (Sasivalli 1989). *Taṇṭai* and *Cilampu* are usually made of metal and are worn few at a time, whereas *Valaiyal* is usually worn several at a time in a row on either or both arms. *Valaiyal* type was typically made of conch shells (Sasivalli 1989, Saha 2005). Sometimes made of terracotta also.

The number of artifacts from Indus depicting women wearing bangles is few, but they give an important set of clues. Also a common distinguishing feature of the seals, depicting women, is the plaited hair (plaited hair to denote women called out by Parpola (1994, Page 261). Here are some of the key artifacts:

1. Dancing Girl (Wheeler 1966, P44 fig 52 & 53) – one of the most famous artifacts from Mohenjo-daro depicts a girl with row bangles (*Valaiyal*) only on the left arm. On the right arm, she is wearing the *Taṇṭai*, *Cilampu* type of bangle.
2. Fig Deity Seal M-1186 (Parpola 1994, fig 14.35, p260) – another famous seal thought to depict the worshipping of the Fig Tree deity. Here all the women figures are shown wearing row bangles in both arms. Interestingly the woman in the worshipping posture is not wearing bangles in either arm. We can conclude that the human form in the worshipping posture is a woman due to the plaited hair. In the Sangam age, a ritual called *Cilampu kali nōṇpu* was performed before the wedding, when the bride removes the *Cilampu* (Gnanambal 1947). This could mean that when a woman marries she removes the bangles until she becomes pregnant. This may explain why the woman in the worshipping posture in this Fig Deity Seal is not wearing any bangles.
3. Seals K-50 (fig 14.26, p254), M-305 (fig 10.9, p185), H-179 (fig 14.5, p244), M-1181 (fig 14.16, p250) also depict women with row bangles on both arms (Parpola 1994).
4. Seal M-304 – Proto Siva - (Parpola 1994, fig 10.18, p188) likely represented a male due to the fact that the male genital is shown clearly. Discussion on ornaments worn by males in the IVC is outside the scope of this paper.
5. Cylinder Seal K-65 - Fighting for the woman's hand (Parpola 1994, fig 14.25, p253) – depicts two men fighting with spears presumably for the hand of a woman, with the Goddess present in the form of a composite tiger-human form. This seal presents the key evidence for the Double Symbolic Convention



Dancing Girl



Seal M-1186



Seal K-50



Seal H-179



Seal M-1181



Seal M-304



Seal K-65

hypothesis – the Goddess, is seen wearing row bangles on both arms, whereas the woman, whose hand is being fought over, is wearing row bangles only in one arm. Given that we find both the types in the same seal, scribal error can be ruled out. The Goddess in the composite tiger-human form is seen on other seals as well, for example K-50 (Parpola 1994, fig 14.26, p254). Several scholars have interpreted the composite tiger-human image as the Mother Goddess (Parpola 1994, Wangu 2003). MS Vats, a renowned IVC archaeologist, also thinks that this seal represents a fight over a woman's hand. Vats commented that the seal reminded him of the Mahabharata story of Sunda and Upasunda fighting over the hand of Tilottama (IRC 2009).

While there is no conclusive proof on the IVC religion, the preponderance of fertility oriented symbols and iconography in the IVC (Parpola 2004, Possehl 2002) suggests that fertility rituals were a key feature of the IVC religion. Analysis of modern day Hindu and tribal practices in India shows a fertility oriented substratum. The substratum influence can be seen in puberty, marriage and pregnancy rituals.

The puberty ritual, celebrating the coming of age of the woman, is an important event in a woman's life. This ritual is still performed by the people of Tamilnadu and some other groups in Southern India (Narayan 2001). This ritual has mostly disappeared from Northern and Central India but it was widely prevalent in ancient India (Bhattacharya 1980).

Bangles as a protector of the unborn child, is a widely prevalent notion in Modern India (Parpola 2004). This notion manifests itself in two ways:

1. **Weddings** – during the wedding a specific type of ritual bangles are worn by the bride – *Choorā*, ivory bangles (later made of plastic/bones) in Punjab (which is in the Indus region), or *Sankha Phola*, shell bangles in Bengal in Eastern India (Saha 2005), are worn by the bride on both arms during a wedding. These ritual bangles can be worn only by married women and is thought to protect the marriage or a future childbirth. Given the ritualistic nature of the row bangles, it is possible that women didn't wear this specific type of bangles (row bangles) until the pregnancy ritual (described below), which might have overtime become part of the wedding ceremony itself.
2. **Pregnancy** – typically during the 7th month of the pregnancy, a ritual is performed – *Valaikāppu* in Tamilnadu, during which the woman wears row bangles (Parpola 1994). In the tradition followed by Badaga tribes, of the

Nilgiris, the woman has to successfully carry the foetus for 7 months for the wedding to be solemnized (Thurston 2004), thereby making the marriage contingent upon the ability to give birth to a child. This tradition is not an isolated instance. Todas, another tribal people in the same Nilgiris region also follow the same custom (Times of India, 2009).

Further, bangles are used as an indicator of marital status by tribals/ancient castes of India. For example, the Banjaras - a married woman wears the Balia or Baliya (made of ivory or bones or horns) in her upper arm. Unmarried women don't wear bangles in the upper arm (Dhamija 2004). This is not an isolated instance - Charans (Russell 1916), Kolams (Rao 1990), Lambadis (Thurston 1909) and Ahirs also have the same tradition.

From the above, it is reasonable to infer that the IVC would have either treated, row bangles in both arms, as a symbol of a marriage or as a symbol of motherhood. In either case, in a fertility oriented society, it indicates a greater status.

Indus Signs Depicting the Double Symbolic Convention

A few examples from the sign list:

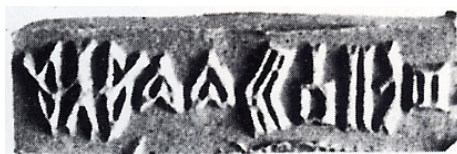
1. M-626 - man with bow/arrow in one arm [Mahadevan Sign # 028] and M-1316 – man with bow/arrow in both arms [Mahadevan Sign # 029] (Parpola 1994 fig 5.1, p70).
2. M-837 – man with a stick in one arm [Mahadevan Sign # 025] and H-517 – man with a stick in both arms [Mahadevan Sign # 025a] (Parpola 1994 fig 5.1, p70).
3. M-1281 – man with an ornament in one leg [Mahadevan Sign # 040] and H-477 – man with an ornament in both legs [Mahadevan Sign # 040a] (Parpola 1994 fig 5.1, p70)
4. M-991 – man with an implement in one arm [Mahadevan Sign # 023] and H-951 – man with the same implement in both arms [Mahadevan Sign # 024] (Parpola 1994 fig 5.1, p70)

While there is nothing in the seals themselves that could directly lead us to infer the Two is Great symbolic convention, given that we have not yet deciphered the Indus script, there is some evidence from later day India.

1. Subcastes of the Teli (Oil pressers) castes of Central/Western India - Ekbaila/



Seal M-626



Seal M-1316



IM signs 028 𐎠 029



Seal M-837



Seal H-517



IM signs 025 𐎠 025a



Seal M-1281



Seal H-477



IM signs 040 𐎠 040a



Seal M-991



Seal M-951



IM signs 023 𐎠 024

Ekbaile use one bullock in their oilpress and Dobaila/Dobaile use two bullocks in their oilpress. Dobaile are considered to be of a higher status (Russell 1916).

2. *Reṭṭai viḷakkukkāraṇ*, man of 2 lights, performing purification rites (Thurston 1909). For someone to perform purification rites, they have to have a higher status.

3. In Tamil weddings, people of higher economic status employed a band consisting of two people playing the Nagaswaram (traditional musical instrument) bands, whereas people of lower economic status employed a Single Nagaswaram band (only one person playing the instrument). While this could be due to cost considerations, the choice of 2 instruments of the same type, could be symbolic. For example, someone having more wealth could have had trio Nagaswarams or Quartet of Nagaswarams but they choose to use just 2.

4. In Kerala, if a woman - *Irattai perraval* gives birth to twins, as opposed to giving birth to a single baby, it is believed that she becomes the equivalent of a physician who can cure diseases with her mere touch.

Double House

In keeping with the generally accepted name, Meluhha, which is a morph of melakam - meaning upper or higher house, which Balakrishnan (2012) has conclusively shown that they are usually in the citadel part and is on the high west (as opposed to the low east) part of an Indus city. Additionally, it appears that most houses in Mohenjo-Daro had 2 floors and some may have had even 3 floors (Possehl 2002). If the Elites lived in 2 storied houses, it would further corroborate the Two is Great hypothesis.

Perhaps there were Elites amongst the Elites? House 1, in HR-A Area (Mohenjo-daro) could offer a clue. It had double entrances, double staircases, and a brick circle 1.2 meters wide (Ratnagar 2001). Number of seals found is unusually high and the presence of prestige objects suggests that it was not an ordinary residence. Sir Mortimer Wheeler assumed this to be a temple (Parpola 1994).

In the same house in Courtyard 10, a vandalized alabaster statue was found wearing the characteristic ceremonial headdress with two long pieces falling down the back of his head (Ratnagar 2001) - the two long pieces could be another instance of the Double Symbolic convention. The famous priest king statue (DK 1909) wore a similar ceremonial head dress (Parpola 1994, fig 12.1, p212). [Could this mean that House 1 was the Priest King's house?]

Double Boats

Double tiered boats as well as single tiered boats represented in seals have been found in Mohenjo-daro (Kenoyer 1998 Fig 5.18 Page 90). Contrast this with a single tiered boat (Parpola 1994 Fig 1.10 page 14) Perhaps the double tiered boat was used by people of higher status? Could be another instance of the Double Symbolic Convention.



Single tiered boat



Double tiered boat. When we analyze the picture above closely, we can see the 2 tiers in the center of the boat.

IVC Burials

There are some instances of women being buried with shell bangles only in one arm (McIntosh 2008 p247). Claus (2003) p51 – “During the Indus Valley Civilization.... Burials of adult women with shell bangles on the left arm are thought to represent the earliest use of bangles to define ethnic affiliation and possibly marital status”.

Connection Between Two and Higher Status

How is the number two connected to higher status? Interestingly, the word for two in Tamil – Iru, has the meaning of greatness/eminence/largeness/vast/spacious in Tamil (DEDR 481) as well as the traditional meaning of two (DEDR 474) (Mahadevan 2009).

In Old Tamil tradition, there are several instances of Iru being used in the sense of greatness. There are poems written for a Chera King - Ceraman Kanaikkal Irumporai (Purananuru, Sangam Literature). Irum used as great. Inscriptions and coinage from the age of these Chera Kings have been found (Mahadevan 2009).

Irumpanai meaning great/big bamboo in Pathirrupathu (Sangam Literature). Irukeer for ocean/great water in Manimekalai, (Sangam Literature). Irumpon – iron – great metal Akananuru (Sangam Literature).

Linguistic evidence for the Double Symbolic Convention in Dravidian

Aṭukkuttoṭar is common in Dravidian languages. *Aṭukkuttoṭar* means a string of the same word. The closest term in English is tautology. Examples in Tamil are *kulay kulayay* ('many bunches'), *saari saariyay* ('many rows') and *ani aniyay* ('many groups'). Onomatopoeic repetitions called *Iraṭṭaikkilavi* (literally, 'double words') is another common feature of Dravidian languages. In both instances, the same word is repeated once, making the emphasis greater. Is this another indicator of the Double Symbolic Convention? Given that, Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and Austro-Asiatic (Munda) are the other 2 candidate languages for the IVC Script, an analysis has been conducted on these and is presented below.

Evidence in Indo-Aryan Languages

Turner (1966) was used to analyze words in Indo-Aryan languages related to two, greatness, eminence, largeness, vast, and spacious – the words associated with two in Dravidian:

1. "Two" - There are 251 entries whose meaning have the word "Two" in them. Out of those the only word that has used two in the context of great/big/vast/spacious/eminence is *Doni* – big pond in Prakrit. However, the word origin is from *Droni*, which is not connected to "Two".
2. "Double" - There are 65 entries whose meaning have the word "Double" in them. None of them has been used in the context of great/big/vast/spacious/eminence.
3. "Pair" - There are 104 entries whose meaning have the word "Pair" in them. None of them has been used in the context of great/big/vast/spacious/eminence.
4. "Couple" - There are 14 entries whose meaning have the word "Pair" in them. None of them has been used in the context of great/big/vast/spacious/eminence.

It is clear from the above that Indo-Aryan does not have this "Two is Great" feature. The presence of Dual in Sanskrit in addition to Singular and Plural is an interesting phenomenon. However, Dual does not seem to be connected with a higher status. From this, it is reasonable to conclude that the *Dvija* (or twice born) concept in the Caste System, which gives a higher status to the Kshatriyas, Brahmins and Vaishyas is a loan from the Two is Great concept of the Dravidians.

Evidence in Munda


In the absence of a comparative Austro Asiatic dictionary, a Santali-English Dictionary (Campbell 1899) was used to analyze words related to two, greatness, eminence, largeness, vast, and spacious – the words associated with two in Dravidian.


1. Aben – means You Two and is used as an honorific. A man and his wife may refer to their elder in-laws with Aben as a suffix. For example, Calakben for father in law in place of Calakme.
2. Do – An emphatic or persuasive Imperative. For example, Do Calakme to Go.
3. Dobo – big, large.


It is not clear whether these are etymologically connected to two since the Santali word for two is Babar. If they are indeed etymologically connected to two, it is likely that two indicating large or great or eminence is a feature of Munda also. However, given the low frequency of these instances, it could be due to a Dravidian influence on Munda.

Future Scope for this Hypothesis - The Indus Guild System - Elites & Commoners

Several scholars (Parpola 1994) have hypothesized that the man signs with their ligature marks constitute an ideogram depicting the profession. Parpola (Parpola 1994 Page 80) gives 3 examples:

 'A man holding a bow and arrow' = 'archer' or 'soldier'

 'A man holding a mortar and pestle' = 'miller'

 'A man holding a long stick or sceptre' = 'overseer' or 'master'

Combining this concept of professions with the signs mentioned previously in this paper - M-626, M-837, M-1281, M-991, where the man holding the same implement in both hands, it is possible to hypothesize, that the Double Symbolic Convention in this case could indicate the elites or master craftsmen of a professional guild. Whereas, the man sign holding the implement in only one arm could indicate the apprentices or commoners of a professional guild. More research needs to be done in this area to prove this, but could hold a real key to understanding the social stratification of the Indus society.

Conclusion

If a hypothesis has predictive capability, it could mean that is a powerful hypothesis. For example, the author did not use the Fig Deity Seal M-1186 (Parpola 1994 , fig 14.35, p260), elaborated earlier in this paper to arrive at this hypothesis. Since the fig deity seal is considered a fertility ritual to beget a child, the hypothesis predicted that the woman praying will not have bangles in both arms. When you look at M-1186 carefully the praying woman doesn't have bangles in both arms as predicted by the hypothesis. This means that the hypothesis has predictive capability and that makes it powerful. Therefore it is a distinct possibility, that the Double Symbolic Convention was a key feature of the IVC.

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Joshi, Jagat Pati, and Asko Parpola. 1987. *Corpus of Indus seals and inscriptions*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.

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