Chapter 6: The Beginnings of Indian Civilisation

Questions — Questions, Activities and Projects

Q1 Why does the civilisation studied in this chapter have several names? Discuss their significance.

SOLUTION

The civilisation has several names because different scholars and discoveries highlighted different aspects of it.

'Harappan' comes from Harappa (in present-day Pakistan's Punjab), the first city of this civilisation to be excavated, in 1920–21.

'Indus' refers to the Indus (Sindhu) River, along whose banks many important cities like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa grew.

However, the term 'Indus Valley civilisation' became outdated once it was found that the civilisation spread far beyond the Indus valley — into Gujarat, Haryana, Rajasthan and beyond.

The name 'Indus-Sarasvati' or 'Sindhu-Sarasvati' was added to recognise the important role of the Sarasvati River, along which major cities like Rakhigarhi and Ganweriwala, and smaller sites like Kalibangan and Banawali, were located.

Each name therefore reflects a real feature — the site of first discovery, the river system, or the full geographic spread of the civilisation.

The textbook uses all these names to remind us that no single name fully captures the civilisation's extent.

Answer: The civilisation is called 'Harappan' after the first excavated city, 'Indus' after the Indus River, and 'Indus-Sarasvati' or 'Sindhu-Sarasvati' to recognise the equally important Sarasvati River basin. Each name highlights a different aspect — discovery site, river system, or geographic spread.

Q2 Write a brief report (150 to 200 words) summing up some of the achievements of the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation.

SOLUTION

Model report (150–200 words):

The Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation (c. 2600–1900 BCE) was one of the world's earliest and most remarkable civilisations.

Its cities — such as Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Dholavira and Rakhigarhi — were

carefully planned, with wide streets, fortification walls, and a division into upper and lower towns.

The Harappans were pioneers in water management: they built elaborate drainage networks that ran under the streets, hundreds of brick-lined wells in a single city (about 700 in Mohenjo-daro alone), and at Dholavira, at least six large stone reservoirs connected by underground drains.

Agriculture was productive and diverse — wheat, barley, millets, rice, pulses, vegetables, and cotton (the first in Eurasia) were all cultivated.

Trade was brisk: carnelian bead ornaments and ivory combs have been found as far away as present-day Iran and Oman.

Their craftspeople worked copper and bronze into tools, figurines and everyday objects.

They also developed a writing system — though it has not yet been deciphered — and used standardised weights and seals.

Despite its eventual decline around 1900 BCE, much of Harappan culture and technology passed on to later Indian civilisation.

Answer: The Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation achieved planned cities with efficient drainage, advanced water management (wells and reservoirs), productive agriculture including the world's first cotton cultivation, long-distance trade, bronze technology, standardised weights, and a writing system.

Q3 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?

SOLUTION

This is a model answer based on what the chapter tells us about Harappan transport and geography.

Harappa is in present-day Punjab (Pakistan) and Kalibangan is in Rajasthan (India) — they lie roughly 500–600 km apart.

Option 1 — By river (partly along the Sarasvati/Ghaggar river system): The Harappans used rivers as trade routes. A boat journey along river routes would be slow but practical for carrying goods. Covering 30–40 km a day by river, the journey could take 2–3 weeks.

Option 2 — By land using bullock carts: The Harappans had wheeled carts (depicted on seals and in clay models). A bullock cart travels roughly 20–30 km a

day on flat plains. The journey could take 3–4 weeks.

Option 3 — On foot or by animal (faster land route): A person walking briskly covers 25–35 km a day. On foot, the journey might take about 3 weeks.

In all cases, travellers would pass through fertile river plains and likely stop at smaller Harappan settlements along the route.

Note: These are rough estimates — the chapter does not give us exact distances or travel times, so answers may vary.

Answer: Harappa (Punjab) to Kalibangan (Rajasthan) is roughly 500–600 km. By river/boat: ~2–3 weeks. By bullock cart on land: ~3–4 weeks. On foot: ~3 weeks. The Harappans used rivers and land routes; there was no money, so travellers likely relied on stored food and hospitality at settlements along the way.

Q4 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?

SOLUTION

Based on what the chapter tells us about Harappan food and technology, several things in a modern kitchen would surprise a Harappan visitor.

First, they grew barley, wheat, millets, rice and pulses — so they would recognise grains and dal. But they would be astonished by packaged or processed food, since they had no such thing.

Second, turmeric and ginger were already part of their diet, so those spices would be familiar. But they would not know many modern vegetables and fruits introduced from other parts of the world (like potatoes or tomatoes).

Third, they used clay cooking pots — a modern gas stove or electric appliance would be completely baffling to them.

Fourth, they had no money — a modern household where everything is bought with coins or cards would be very strange.

Fifth, modern metal utensils like steel bowls or pressure cookers would surprise them; they knew only copper and bronze tools.

Answer: A Harappan visitor would be surprised by: modern cooking appliances (gas/electric stoves) instead of open fires; packaged or preserved food; unfamiliar vegetables like potatoes; metal utensils made of steel (they knew only copper/bronze); and the use of money to buy food, which they did not have.

Q5 Looking at all the pictures in this chapter, make a list of the ornaments / gestures / objects that still feel familiar in our 21st century.

SOLUTION

This question asks you to look at the chapter's pictures. Based on what the chapter text describes about those pictures, here is a model list:

Ornaments: Bangles (the 'Dancing Girl' figurine wears bangles covering an entire arm — a practice still seen in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan today). Carnelian bead necklaces are still worn as jewellery.

Gestures: A terracotta figurine is shown seated in a 'namaste' gesture — a greeting still used every day in India.

Objects of daily use: A terracotta pot (still used in many homes). A bronze mirror (mirrors are universal today). A comb made of ivory (combs are identical in purpose today). Stone weights (the principle of weighing goods continues). A plough (clay model from Banawali — farmers still use ploughs).

Games and toys: A gamesboard engraved on stone (board games are still popular). A terracotta whistle (children still play with whistles).

Symbolic/cultural: The swastika symbol (seen on a Harappan seal) is still widely used in Indian culture and religious contexts.

Note: Your list may include more objects depending on which pictures are in your copy of the book.

Answer: From the chapter's pictures and text: bangles (worn the same way today in Gujarat/Rajasthan), the namaste gesture, terracotta pots, mirrors, combs, weighing weights, ploughs, board games, whistles, and the swastika symbol. Pictures in the book may add more.

Q6 What mindset does the system of reservoirs at Dholavira reflect?

SOLUTION

Dholavira was located in the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, a region with limited and irregular rainfall.

The Harappans built at least six large reservoirs there — some made of stone, some cut directly into the rock.

The largest measured 73 metres in length; one shown in the chapter measures 33 metres.

Most of these reservoirs were connected through underground drains for efficient water harvesting and distribution.

Building such a large and connected network required careful planning, a large organised workforce, and a long-term vision for water management.

This reflects a mindset of collective planning, civic responsibility, and foresight — the community thought ahead about water needs rather than relying on day-to-day availability.

Answer: The reservoir system at Dholavira reflects a mindset of careful long-term planning, collective organisation, and civic foresight. The Harappans anticipated future water needs, built six large interconnected reservoirs, and maintained them — showing that public welfare and community management were central values.

Q7 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.

SOLUTION

Seven hundred brick wells maintained over several centuries is a remarkable achievement.

It implies that there was an organised system to assign responsibility for well maintenance — likely some form of local administration or civic authority.

It also shows a high level of technical skill: the bricks were carefully laid in a circular pattern strong enough to last for centuries.

The large number of wells suggests that clean water access was considered a right for all residents, not a luxury — wells were distributed across the city rather than limited to elite areas.

Regular maintenance over centuries implies continuity of community rules and civic practices across generations.

All of this points to a well-organised, civic-minded society with a stable administration and a strong sense of public responsibility.

Answer: Seven hundred maintained wells imply organised civic administration, distributed water access for all residents, skilled bricklaying technology, and community rules maintained across generations. It shows the Harappans valued clean water as a public resource and had the governance structures to protect it.

Q8 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.

SOLUTION

Civic sense means caring for shared public spaces, resources, and services — not just one's own home.

The Harappans show many signs of a high civic sense: their cities had planned streets, efficient drainage systems running below the streets to carry waste water away, hundreds of wells maintained over centuries, and an elaborate reservoir network at Dholavira.

Interestingly, even small and large houses were built to the same quality standard, suggesting equality in civic services.

The drainage system benefited every household and required everyone to follow common rules — this only works if residents cooperate and respect shared infrastructure.

Comparing with a large Indian city today, we can see both similarities and differences: India today also has municipal services, but problems like littering, encroachment on drains, or neglect of public water sources suggest that civic sense is not always as strong.

So yes, the evidence supports the view that the Harappans had a high civic sense — their entire urban design was centred on collective well-being.

Answer: Yes, the evidence supports this statement. Harappan cities had efficient underground drains, hundreds of maintained wells, planned streets, and equal construction quality for all houses — all of which require community cooperation and respect for shared resources. Compared to many cities today where public infrastructure is often neglected, the Harappan civic system seems remarkably organised.