

## Chapter: # 3 of “The Hindus, an Alternate History” by Wendy Doniger

### Chapter Title: “Civilization in the Indus Valley: 50,000 to 1500 BCE”

#### General Comments on the Chapter

This chapter deals with the Harappan Civilization (also called the ‘Indus Saraswati Civilization’ or the ‘Indus Valley Civilization’). One wonders why Doniger even wrote this chapter herself, instead of assigning it to one of her graduate students who would have done a better job. For example, a cursory look at the bibliography for this chapter is embarrassing – of the 110 endnotes, only 2 are derived from the works from contemporary western Harappan archaeologists (1 each from Kenoyer and Possehl), two from contemporary Indian archaeologists, and half a dozen or so from almost a century old report by Marshall. The rest approx 100 end notes show her reliance on secondary works of India’s agenda driven Communist historians (e.g., Romila Thapar, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya), authors of generalist books in Indian history (e.g., John Keay) and other motley non-specialists in Harappan archaeology. Knowledge of this civilization has been changing practically every year due to ongoing archaeological digs, and Doniger’s near total ignorance of works of contemporary archaeologists of Harappan culture makes the chapter outdated and amateurish, in addition to being full of laughable errors, some of which will be pointed out in this review. As an example of her ignorance, we can point out to her *virtual* black-out of sites in the Ghaggar basin, in the Doab and in Gujarat. Throughout the chapter, the impression given is that the valley of river Indus was the center of gravity of that culture, whereas it has now been known for at least 2 decades that 65% or more of the sites were in the Ghaggar valley, Kutch and Saurashtra.

Good scholarship requires skepticism but Doniger verges towards cynicism when she starts questioning the quite reasonable interpretations that archaeologists of this culture have given to the artifacts unearthed during excavations. Her cynicism sounds quite hypocritical, considering that her own standard methodology is making reckless Freudian free associations between disparate facts (in different eras and geography) to consistently paint a pornographic picture of the Hindu culture. Other than her witty remarks and cute English phraseology, the chapter really adds nothing new to our knowledge or understanding of the Harappan Culture.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the origins of Hindu religious practices to Harappan times. Due to her ignorance of the relevant technical literature (as mentioned above), she does not mention several remarkable parallels between Harappan artifacts and Hindu artifacts in later times. And when archaeologists (i.e., those quoted by her) do point to these parallels, her skepticism about these reasonable identifications sometimes borders on cynicism. Doniger’s omissions and attitudes result not just from her limited acquaintance with technical literature on this topic, but also from her attachment to the racist Aryan invasion theory (which becomes clear when we read chapter 4 of her book) that holds that the superior white skinned Aryan invaders overpowered brown skinned natives of the Indus Valley Civilization. As in the rest of her book and in her other writings, here too Doniger tries to dodge academic debate by simply lampooning her critics as ‘Hindu Nationalists.’ Perhaps, that really reflects her own hatred for Hindus, because many of them have questioned her pretense of ‘love’ for the Hindu culture, a spurious claim that she makes even in this book (p. 16 etc.). Is a pedophile’s ‘love’ for children really love at all?

Some examples of errors in this chapter are listed below with comments –

#	Page #	Paragraph # on the page	Erroneous statement in the book	Comments
1	67	1	“But from about 2300 BCE the first urbanization took place, as great cities arose in the valley of the Indus River.....”	Incorrect. First, archaeologists date the beginning of urbanization as early as 3200 BCE. <sup>1</sup> And second, evidence of beginning of urbanization is not restricted to the valley of the Indus River. Digging in the Ghaggar basin has revealed evidence of urbanization around the same dates as in Harappa.
2	67	1	“...the Indus Valley Civilization or the Harappan Civilization (named after Harappa, one of the two great cities in the Indus, the other being Mohenjo-Daro....”	Doniger is also not aware that archaeologists now talk of not 2, but at least 5 great cities of this civilization with the added three sites of Ganeriwala, Dholavira and Rakhigarhi. <sup>2</sup>  Doniger fails to mention the third name “Indus-Saraswati Civilization” that is now increasingly being used in literature. As an archaeologist remarks –  <i>“...Suddenly it became apparent that the “Indus” Civilization was a misnomer – although the Indus had played a major role in the development of the civilization, the “lost Saraswati” River, judging by the density of settlement along its banks, had contributed an equal or greater part to its prosperity. Many people today refer to this early state as the “Indus-Saraswati Civilization” and continuing references to the “Indus Civilization” should be seen as an abbreviation in which the “Saraswati” is implied.”<sup>3</sup></i>  The culture is called ‘Harappan Culture’ because it is an archaeological convention to name cultures after the first type site discovered.
3	67	2	Explaining why civilization first arose in the Indus plains and not on the Ganges plains, she	The view that the Ganges plains were thickly forested is now rejected and it is believed that the Upper Ganga Plains area was mainly savannah grassland

<sup>1</sup> McIntosh, Jane R. 2002. *A Peaceful Realm- The Rise and Fall of the Indus Civilization*. Westview Press: Boulder (Colorado), p. 12

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Possehl, *The Indus Civilization - A Contemporary Perspective*, Altamira Press (2002), p. 247

<sup>3</sup> McIntosh, p. 24

			<p>speculates (following the old Marxist theories repeated in Wolpert’s popular but antiquated book that regurgitates colonial theories)–</p> <p>“The Indus Valley plain.....not so rich as that of the effluvial plan of the Ganges, for instance, required no iron tools to clear and settle while, on the other hand, the silt from the river floodings provided sufficient natural fertilizer to create the surplus that makes civilization possible.”</p>	<p>with forests here and there and the Middle Ganga Plains had relatively thicker forests but there were enough open spaces.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>Archaeologists also question the premise whether iron tools were necessarily needed to cut the forests because slash and burn is a more effective way of getting rid of forests.<sup>5</sup></p>
4	67	4	<p>“The civilization of the Indus Valley extends over more than a thousand sites, stretching over 750,000 square miles, where as many as 40,000 people once lived.”</p>	<p>Ridiculous statement that only 40,000 people lived in the IVC. Doniger refers to Gavin Flood’s book<sup>6</sup> who does not make this claim at all! The figure 40,000 people is normally taken to be the approximate population of the city of Mohenjo-Daro alone, not the entire civilization. In any case, why should Doniger reference a non-specialist work on this topic instead of publications by competent archaeologists? Most of her references that she cites are similarly non-appropriate and it appears that she is merely trying to ‘pad’ her bibliography.</p>
5	67	4	<p>Explaining the extent of the “civilization of the Indus Valley”, she says of the</p>	<p>Incorrect statement. Lothal is about 200 miles away from the delta of the Indus river!</p> <p>The extent of the culture as stated by Doniger is completely incorrect and she</p>

<sup>4</sup> Rakesh Tewari, “Myth of Dense Forests and Human Occupation in the Ganga Plain”, pp. 102-116 in *Man and Environment*, Vol XXIX, No. 2 (2004)

<sup>5</sup> Dilip Chakrabarti, “Beginning of Iron and Social Change in India”, pp 329-338 in *Indian Studies: Past and Present*, Vol 14 (1973)

<sup>6</sup> Gavin Flood. 1996. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge University Press (UK)

			southern limits - “....down to the port of Lothal in the delta on the sea.”	leaves out the entire Gangetic Doab, northern Afghanistan, Jammu region etc.
6	68	2	“....a number of dice have been identified.....from Harappa and elsewhere....This is a fact of great significance in the light of the importance of gambling in later Indian civilization, from 1200 BCE.”	Inconsistent claims are made in her book.  In chapter 5, Doniger dates the Rigveda from 1700-1500 BCE (on page 103) and then quotes from this text the gambler’s hymn (p. 121) and says that gambling was a major pastime in the Rigvedic period. Now she says that Rigveda (where gambling is mentioned as pastime) is from 1200 BCE.  Isn’t this a difference of at least 300 years (from 1500 to 1200 BCE) if she claims here that gambling became important from 1200 BCE?
7	74	3	“The discovery at Indus sites of a number of polished, oblong stones, mostly small but ranging up to two feet in height, and probably used to grind grain, has led some scholars to identify these stones as replicas of the erect phallus (linga) of Shiva and the vagina (yoni) of his consort...There are so many assumptions here that it makes your head spin.....”  Doniger then makes other speculations to suggest that these have nothing to do with the worship of Shiva.	Harappan culture sites have yielded very convincing examples of linga-yoni, clearer than what Doniger seems to be aware of. <sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> B B Lal (2002), *The Saraswati Flows On*, Aryan Books International (New Delhi), p. 118

8	77	2	Wendy refers to feminine terracotta figurines unearthed in Harappan contexts and speculates – “Big breasts are as useful to courtesans as to goddesses. Are the buxom centerfolds of <i>Playboy</i> magazine fertility symbols...?”	<i>Comment:</i> Quite a jejune remark, typical of Doniger.
9	79	2	Doniger questions the identification of the Great Bath at Mohenjo Daro with the bathing tanks of Hindu temples in later times with the remarks – “Well, it’s a big building, true, but why couldn’t it be a dorm, or a hotel, or a hospital, or even a brothel.”	<p>Very silly and immature comment, ignoring the architectural features of the site. Doniger should explain why the site could have been a brothel.</p> <p>Here is a description of the site, which makes it clear why archaeologists believe that it played a religious function –</p> <p><i>“Ascending the grand staircase into the citadel at Mohenjo Daro, visitors entered the complex. The visitors were probably required to purify themselves in the bathroom at the top of the stair. From here a zigzag route led into the heart of the complex: along a street, turning to enter one of the two doors of the building on one’s left, and passing through an antechamber into the pillared courtyard within which lay the Great Bath ...This is a large rectangular basin, carefully constructed so as to be watertight. An outer baked brick shell held an inner wall, with mudbrick packing between them. Within this a thick layer of bitumen (natural tar) provided a seal within which the bath was constructed of closely fitted bricks placed on edge, the gaps between them filled with gypsum plaster. Steps led down from the courtyard to a ledge running across each end of the bath and thence down into the water. Scholars seem by and large united in considering that this was a religious structure, connected with ritual bathing. Ritual purification has played a key role in religion in the Indian subcontinent over the last 2,500 years and must presumably have done so 2,000 years earlier. Clockwise circumambulation (pradakshina) has been an important form of worship in the subcontinent for several millennia and it is possible that the colonnade was used to perform this act of worship around the Great Bath. A large well lay in a room to the east of the colonnade while around the east and northern sides were a series of bathrooms, where perhaps the worshipper might ritually wash before</i></p>

				<i>entering the bath itself.</i> " <sup>8</sup>
10	80	1	<p>"The stupa is indeed a strong hint that the structure underneath it might have been religious, for Buddhism shares with other religions (including, notably Hinduism and Islam) the habit of sacred recycling, putting one religious building on the site hallowed by another, the funeral baked meats served cold for the wedding breakfast that follows."</p>	<p>The comment is simply another example of Doniger's perverse logic (a more charitable explanation would be reckless free association). Hindus are not known in general to have destroyed Buddhist monuments on any large scale, whereas the Muslim rulers did in fact indulge in large scale destruction of Hindu temples – a plain historical truth. In some cases, when entire Buddhist populations of an area adopted Hindu traditions, they may have converted their local Buddhist shrines to Hindu ones. In contrast, Muslim mosques were built for <i>minority</i> Muslim communities in the midst of a sea of Hindu population after the destruction of pre-existing Hindu temples at those sites by invading fanatical Muslim rulers.</p> <p>The absurdity of Doniger's facile parallels may be demonstrated from the following example.</p> <p>"Daryl dies and his widowed wife Susan, being without support, re-marries a caring man Michael after a while. There is another man William whose wife Sarah is raped by Jeffrey and William is unable to protect her from Jeffrey. Looking at these two cases, a scholarly lady named Ms X. O'Flaherty remarked – "Both the cases are similar because after all, the husbands of Susan and Sarah are both sharing their wives with Michael and Jeffrey."</p> <p>Any objective observer would consider this observation of Ms X. O'Flaherty as the product of a sick and a perverse mind.</p> <p>Wendy Doniger's comment is no different – her statement shows that it is the product of a mind filled for hatred with Hindus, or with a perverse understanding, or with both.</p>
11	pp. 83-84	-	In these concluding paragraphs, Doniger lists some other Harappan- Later Hindu	<i>Comment:</i> Doniger conveniently leaves out the other parallels between Harappan and Vedic cultures that are noticed in contemporary archaeological

<sup>8</sup> McIntosh, p. 109

			<p>parallels like the Pipal leaf, conch shells etc.</p>	<p>literature, showing that her knowledge of Harappan Culture is clearly quite antiquated. Some of these parallels are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Fire Altars:</b> <i>“An unexpected feature of Indus worship has been the discovery, doubted at first but repeated now at many sites including the recent excavations at Rakhigarhi, of the sacrificial hearths known as fire altars. Fire altars are a central feature of the religion of the Indo-Aryans, and their apparent discovery has fueled the cause of those who are convinced – wrongly, as I and many other scholars believe – that the Indus people were also Indo-Aryans, while it has proved an embarrassment to those who don’t support this view. But are the Indus hearths really fire altars in the Vedic sense? The similarities have been overemphasized and the shared elements of fire and animal sacrifice are too common, being found in many religions, to be a culturally diagnostic link.”</i><sup>9</sup></li> <li>2. <b>Domestic Shrines:</b> <i>“...In some settlements, namely Kalibangan, Banawali and Lothal, the houses also included a room set apart as a domestic shrine, a feature also common in modern Indian homes, although such shrines have not been found at Mohenjo Daro.”</i><sup>10</sup></li> <li>3. <b>Weights and Metrology:</b> <i>“The most common Indus weight was equivalent to about 13.7 grams. Taking this as the basic unit the Indus people used smaller weights that were 1/16, 1/8, ¼ and ½ of this basic unit and larger ones that were multiples of 2, 4, 10, 12.5, 20, 40, 100, 200, 400, 500, and 800 times the basic unit. The basis for the whole weight system was probably the ratti, around 0.109 gram, the weight of a seed of the gunja creeper (Abrus precatorius), equivalent to 1/128 part of the Indus basic unit. The ratti is still used in India as a jeweler’s weight and was the basis, among other things, for the</i></li> </ol>
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<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, p. 121

<sup>10</sup> McIntosh, p. 100

				<p><i>weight standards of the first Indian coins that were first issued in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. A number of the early states issued coins of 1 or 2 karshapanas, a karshapana being 32 rattis, so these coins were equivalent to the Indus weights of ¼ and ½ the basic unit.”<sup>11</sup></i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. <b>Yogic posture terracottas:</b> Even though referring to Marshall’s report, Doniger fails to mention that both Harappa and Mohenjo Daro have yielded terracotta figurines in yogic asanas.<sup>12</sup> Some of these clearly show the Namaste gesture of Hindus today.</li> <li>5. <b>Burial Customs:</b> <i>“In most of the burials, the body was fully stretched in the north south direction, with the feet pointing towards south – the direction associated with Lord Yamaraj in the later Hindu tradition.”<sup>13</sup></i> Fractional burials and cremation are also attested in Harappan culture – again paralleled in the Rigveda.</li> <li>6. <b>Urban planning patterns:</b> The ratios of the dimensions of Harappan settlements often correspond to those recommended in later Hindu scriptures on architecture (Vastushastras).<sup>14</sup> The orientation of the streets also demonstrate concern for the principles of these texts.</li> <li>7. <b>Feminine Ornaments:</b> Sindhoor in women’s hair parting; Harappan ornaments and ornaments worn by women in that region today<sup>15</sup></li> <li>8. <b>Harappan and modern carts in that region today:</b> Transportation vehicles in the Indus region still resemble the images of vehicles in Harappan art.<sup>16</sup></li> <li>9. <b>Agricultural Practices:</b> <i>“Striking parallels exist, however, between the rural economy of later India and that which we can reconstruct from</i></li> </ol>
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<sup>11</sup> McIntosh, p. 125

<sup>12</sup> Lal, p. 127

<sup>13</sup> McIntosh, p. 118

<sup>14</sup> Michel Danino, “New Insights into Harappan Town-Planning, Proportions and Units with Special Reference to Dholavira”, pp. 66-79 in *Man and Environment*, vol. XXXIII, No. 1 (2008)

<sup>15</sup> Lal, pp. 82-89

<sup>16</sup> Lal. pp. 107-110

				<p><i>Indus evidence. The Early Indus field discovered at Kalibangan, for example, was ploughed in exactly the same pattern as is used in the region today...The tools and equipment by the Indus farmers, such as ploughs and solid-wheeled carts drawn by bullocks, are still in use today. The same is true of many other tools and domestic equipment, underlining the antiquity of agricultural practices in the Indian subcontinent and the strong similarities that exist between the daily lives or ordinary people in Indus times and today – 4,500 years later.”<sup>17</sup></i></p>
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### **PostScript on the Chapter:**

The three main flaws in this chapter may be summarized as follows –

1. A completely out of date acquaintance with the nature and spread of the Harappan Culture due to an almost completely reliance on antiquated works of non-specialists.
2. A cynical attitude is shown by Doniger towards archaeologists when they adopt the most parsimonious interpretations of archaeological data while comparing Harappan artifacts to later Hindu traditions.
3. An ignorance of deep parallels between Harappan and Hindu religious and cultural patterns, as a result she is unable to justify the inclusion of this chapter in her book, which deals with the history of Hindus.

It is perhaps apt to close the review with the following remarks from a leading archaeologist because they also show precisely what Doniger’s chapter fails to demonstrate –

*“It has recently been written that the Indus Civilization ‘provided the structure for the later Indian civilization’ and that ‘all the people of the subcontinent are, in one way or the other, inheritors of the Indus Civilization.’ This strong emphasis on the role of the Indus Civilization as laying down the foundations of the later developments of Indian history and culture rests on a large number of archaeological features, especially those related to agriculture, crafts, internal and external trade, communications, social and political framework, religion, and art forms.”<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>17</sup> McIntosh, p. 200

<sup>18</sup> Dilip Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology*, OUP (2006), p. 211

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