

# Glimpses of Lost Indian Civilizations

A new book has appeared with the title 'Underworld' authored by Graham Hancock and published by Penguin Books in 2002 which should prove to be of special interest to us in India as it deals with 'one of the big ideas of modern times – the possibility that a great civilization, unsuspected by archaeologists may be hidden in pre-history'.

Graham Hancock was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, but was brought to India as a child of three years in July 1954 by his father who had accepted the position of a surgeon at the Christian Medical College Hospital at Vellore in Tamil Nadu. About his childhood Graham states:

'My childhood encounter with India was formative and I am grateful that I was introduced at such an impressionable age to its aura of intriguing and impenetrable mystery, its velvety warmth and depth, its intense colours, sights, its never ending drama of stark contrasts – past and present, sun, sounds, tastes and smells, its joyous erotic beauty, its cruelty, its love, its passion and storm, desert and meadow, wealth and poverty, life and death . . .'

The family did not stay in India for long but left in March 1958 back to UK to provide better education for the children. Graham graduated from Durham University in 1973 with first class Honours in Sociology and became a journalist writing for many of the leading newspapers of Great Britain. He is the author of several popular books which have become international best sellers. His new book entitled "Underworld, Flooded Kingdoms of the Last Ice Age" is an interesting exposition of the effects of melting of glaciers at the end of the Ice Age and flooding of earlier civilizations which flourished on the continental margin.

The author has singled out two reported discoveries in recent years from India – structures found submerged off the coastline, one at Poompuhur along the southeast coast of India and the other at Dwaraka in the Gulf of Cambay.

These discoveries serve to tell us of lost civilizations which had flourished more than 9000

years ago. The difficulties in piecing together information is well summarized by Hancock (2002, p.86)

' . . . It is to this precise period of unrecorded prehistoric darkness set amidst epic, climatic and environmental turmoil that archaeologists trace the origins of civilization: the first settlements, the first signs of structured hierarchical communities, the domestication of plants, the inventions of agriculture, building with bricks and stone etc. – in other words the whole suite of economic and social attributes that set mankind on the road to science and reason and the technological achievements of the modern world'.

Admittedly, the evidence to support this thesis is extremely scanty – 'elevated from tiny areas of archaeological sites that become more and more scarce the further we go back in time'

## *New Archaeological Site off the coast at Dwaraka*

Separately in this issue appears a note on 'A New Archaeological Find in the Gulf of Cambay' giving details of an underwater survey carried out by the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), Chennai, at a depth of 20 to 40 m (Kathirolu et al. 2002, pp.419-428). The survey has revealed the presence of a submerged palaeochannel traceable for a length of over nine kilometres. On either side of the channel are structures in a grid pattern. Grab samples collected include artefacts, potsherds, hearth pieces, animal bones and human teeth embedded in fluvial sands. One sample of wooden log (50 cm long, 25 cm girth) has given <sup>14</sup>C age of 9500 years BP. The importance of this discovery lies in its being probably the first record of human activity of early Holocene in the marine environment of India.

## *Antiquity of the Vedas*

The Vedas are described as 'The oldest elements of India's oral tradition.... No written versions of them ever existed – not because they could not be written down but because the priests of the Vedic religion that evolved into Hinduism believed that they should not

be written down but should be kept alive instead in human memory.'

Western scholars place the date of the Vedas not earlier than 1500 BC. They are not prepared to accept a much earlier date for their composition. The second millennium BC in India was a time of decay and collapse and was certainly not a time that would have produced a sublime intellectual creation like the Rig Veda. Common sense dictates that Vedas belong to an earlier period coinciding with the Indus-Sarasvati civilization. It seems very likely that the hymns '*have had an extremely long prior existence in India's ancient and fantastically elaborate oral tradition.*'

According to Hancock, a beginning has been made in the long overdue process of bringing together one of the greatest and most profound spiritual literature of antiquity with what is arguably the greatest and most remarkable urban civilization of antiquity. This is an important item of research in which scholars of all disciplines should concentrate.

'At its peak around 2500 BC this mysterious pre-historic culture boasted at least six large inland cities – others may yet await discovery – with populations in excess of 30,000. These urban hubs were linked to hundreds of smaller towns and villages and to several key ports like Lothal and Dholavira at strategic locations along the coastline and up its navigable rivers. Its borders enclosed an area larger than western Europe – 1.5 million square kilometers, extending from Iran in the west and Turkmenia and Kashmir in the north to the Godavari valley in the south and beyond Delhi in the east. It also had outposts overseas, including once thriving colony in the Persian Gulf and it had an extensive trading network supported by a large merchant navy.'

#### *Inundation Maps of South India*

In a separate chapter (Lost India) Hancock concentrates on two anomalous sites one at Poompuhur near Nagapattinam in south India and the other at Dwaraka off the coast of Gujarat at Dwaraka. It is conjectured that these areas currently at 23 m depth were submerged about 11,000 years ago. He presents four inundation maps of south India showing the disposition of the coastline of India around (1) 21,300 years ago, (2) 16,600 years ago, (3) 16,400 years ago

and (4) 4800 years ago. These maps are ascribed to Dr. Glenn Milne of Durham University, one of the world's leading experts on 'inundation mapping' using a powerful computer program to calculate the complex variable and to produce accurate models of ancient shorelines at chosen dates and chosen localities. The first map illustrates how the subcontinent would have looked 21,300 years ago - around the time of the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) when the world oceans had sunk to their lowest level.

21,300 years ago, a strip of country at least 100 km wide was exposed all along the whole of the west coast of India - a linear distance of 2000 km. The Kathiawar peninsula today surrounded on all sides by the sea was completely land locked at that time. Western India had lost to the sea a vast coastal domain nearly the same size and roughly the same shape as modern California and Baja California put together with an area close to half million square kilometres.

If this is true, there is every probability that this region had supported an ancient civilization on land which got submerged 11,000 to 8000 years ago at the end of the Ice Age. Excavation at Mehrgarh in Pakistan have revealed the existence of a civilization as far back as 8500 years before present. The origin of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, as also the Vedas seem to recede further and further into the past with each new turn of the archaeologists spade at sites such as Mehrgarh (Hancock, p.161). A hypothesis is projected 'that the Indus-Sarasvati civilization goes back to 9000 years and that it had an earlier episode of hidden pre-history. It was founded by the survivors of a lost Indian coastal civilization destroyed by the great global floods at the end of the Ice Age' (ibid, p.205).

One way to prove the hypothesis was to find ruins more than 9000 years old underwater on India's continental shelf. In an epoch of rising levels, it is but natural that newer structures are built over the submerged shrines. Future work may bring to light, 'older and more deeply buried ruins'. The only way to find out was by doing more diving, observation and excavation. This requires massive effort and liberal funding.

### *Under Water Structure at Dwaraka*

A discovery of more than local interest has now been made below the sea bed in the Gulf of Cambay by the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT). Images of 'excellent geometrical objects' are reported in a 9 km belt west of Hazira in Gujarat at a depth of 30 to 40 m below sea level. These underwater structures are similar to structures found on land in archaeological sites of Harappan affinity.

Reaction of the Indian scientific community to the NIOT's claim of antiquity to the submerged structure and artifacts collected has not been encouraging. Archaeologists of NIO have not endorsed the claims of scientists of NIOT. They are of the opinion that the geometrical structures seen on the side scan sonar readings are merely artifacts of the imaging process. The Director of the Archaeological Survey has dismissed these as hallucinations. Despite such discouraging comments, the scientists of NIOT have continued their investigations which have only confirmed their earlier inferences that extensive man-made structures did exist on the sea bed at depths of 25 to 40 m. Over 2000 artifacts – including jewellery, stone tools, pottery and figurines have been collected. Hancock who examined these specimens has confirmed that the underwater structures indeed represent relics of large scale human settlements before their inundation. The possibility that a lost civilization, older than the Indus and Harappan did exist and lies concealed is clearly indicated.

Western scholars have refused to take note of recent developments and continue to repeat the Aryan Invasion Theory. India is not even mentioned in their accounts of ancient civilisations, Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Mexico taking the lion's share. Evidence on the antiquity of Indian civilization is considerable and can no longer be ignored. Archaeologists have no right to claim any monopoly of interpretation. Findings of other disciplines must also be taken into account.

Hancock in his present treatise has focused attention on one other aspect of Indian pre-history – the antiquity of a southern culture centred around Mahabalipuram and Poompuhur on the east coast of India. The existence of two ancient civilizations one in the NW of India and the other at the southern tip of India opens up many vistas of pre-historic studies shedding new light on the dawn of Indian civilization. This should emerge as a field of intensive multi-disciplinary research in the years to come.

Geoarchaeology – an emerging field in earth science has a very important role to play in unravelling the pre-historical evolution of man and civilization in south Asia. We should build up a strong indigenous school of research in this vital area, with modern tools of underwater sampling, videography and mapping. Only then, can we come out with bold hypothesis to alter the entrenched 'semi-colonial' perspectives of history and pre-history that will stand the test of time.

B.P. RADHAKRISHNA