



Harappa as Utopia: Reimagining Non-Voilent Civilization through Devdutt Pattanaik's Ahimsa

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibility of understanding the Harappan Civilization as a non-violent utopia through the interpretive lens of Devdutt Pattanaik's reflections in "Ahimsa: 100 Reflections on the Harappan Civilization". Traditional studies on ancient civilizations tend to focus on political power, warfare, and hierarchical social structures. However, the Harappan Civilization, known for its sophisticated urban planning, and apparent lack of warfare or large-scale conflict, invites a reimagining of early social organization rooted in peace and mutual coexistence. This paper analyzes archaeological evidence—such as the absence of weapons, fortifications, and war iconography and contrasts it with the historical narratives of other ancient cultures. Devdutt Pattanaik's re-interpretation of Harappan society through the Indian philosophical concept of 'ahimsa', or non-violence, which he situates not just as a moral virtue but as a lived social principle. By synthesizing insights from history, philosophy, and mythology, Pattanaik's work challenges prevailing notions of civilization that equate complexity with conflict. This paper critically evaluates the legitimacy of viewing Harappa as a utopian model and examines its implications for contemporary discourses on peaceful social organization. Using an interdisciplinary methodology, combining textual analysis and archaeological interpretation, this study highlights the need to diversify frameworks through which we understand the past. In doing so, it also



underscores the relevance of non-violent models of civilization in addressing the violence and fragmentation that characterize today's global society. Ultimately, this paper offers a fresh perspective on Harappa, positioning it as a powerful cultural symbol of peaceful resistance and utopian potential.

Introduction

The Harappan Civilization, flourishing along the Indus River over 4,000 years ago, has long captivated the imagination of historians, archaeologists, and thinkers who search for alternative models of social organization. While much scholarship focuses on urban planning and material remains, the civilization's philosophical and mythological dimensions offer a profound avenue for reinterpreting its ethos—especially through the lens of ahimsa, or non-violence, as articulated by Devdutt Pattanaik in his recent reflections.

The centre of this inquiry is the philosophical concept of Ahimsa, a principle rooted in compassion and respect for all living beings. In Indian traditions, ahimsa extends beyond mere avoidance of harm, embracing a worldview in which ethical conduct, inner discipline, and social harmony converge. Pattanaik's work situates Harappa as a pivotal precursor to later philosophies embodied in Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, suggesting that the Harappans practiced non-violence as an organizing social ideal—a mode of coexistence distinct from the warfare and conflict found in most contemporaneous cultures. This paper foregrounds how such philosophical underpinnings may have shaped Harappan society, not merely in physical practice but embedded within belief systems and community values.

Equally intriguing is the mythological legacy of Harappa, discernible through enigmatic seals, figurines, and city alignments. Although the precise narratives of Harappan mythology are lost to time, their material remains hint at goddess worship, the veneration of natural elements like trees and water, and symbolic motifs such as bulls, horned figures, and seven-woman groups—possibly prototypes for later Hindu and Jain iconography. These elements suggest a mythic imagination centered on nature, fertility, and cyclical order, distinct from later Vedic or Abrahamic mythologies.

Literature Review

1. The Harappan Civilization: Key Features



The Harappan Civilization, also known as the Indus Valley Civilization, emerged around 2600 BCE in the northwestern regions of South Asia. The Harappan Civilization stands out in ancient history for its advanced urban planning and civic order. Key sites like Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, and Dholavira were designed on strict grid patterns, with wide avenues intersecting at right angles and clear divisions between public, residential, and ceremonial areas (Vajiram & Ravi; Primus Partners 3). These cities featured sophisticated water management: houses often had private wells, courtyards, and drainage connecting to a centralized sewer system, reflecting a society that valued hygiene, efficiency, and public health (Primus Partners 3; Wikipedia “Indus Valley Civilisation”). Unlike other contemporary urban cultures that prioritized monumental palaces and tombs, Harappa emphasized utility and communal well-being in its public infrastructure, such as granaries and the iconic Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro (Vajiram & Ravi). While city walls existed, they often served for flood control or as symbols of collective strength rather than for militaristic defense (Wikipedia “Harappan Architecture”). This deliberate focus on functional order and minimal fortification encourages philosophical reflection on what constitutes a harmonious society suggesting that Harappan civic life was structured more by cooperative intent than by violence or dominance.

2. Ahimsa: Concept and Evolution

The concept of ahimsa i.e., non-violence toward all beings, is a cornerstone of India’s philosophical heritage, later embodied in Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Though explicit texts from the Harappan era are absent, many scholars and thinkers see the civilization’s emphasis on egalitarian urban design, lack of apparent weaponry, and absence of monumental warfare as early evidence of a non-violent ethos (Pattanaik 19). In this view, ahimsa is not just personal restraint but a worldview underpinning laws, governance, and daily conduct. Later, this ideal becomes philosophically codified: Jainism frames it as absolute respect for all life, Buddhism as compassion, and Hinduism as a guiding social ethic. If the Harappan pattern is its proto-form, then the civilization was notable not just for what it built but for the values underpinning that built environment—a structured peace rooted in mutual respect and restraint. Thus, ahimsa’s evolution reflects a gradual movement from civil practice to articulated doctrine, and the Harappan case offers an archaeological—if silent—testimony to that philosophical trajectory.

3. Devdutt Pattanaik’s Perspective

The year 2024 is commemorated as the 100th year of the discovery of Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization. To commemorate this historic milestone in India’s past, Devdutt Pattanaik explores key



facets of the Harappan Civilization, accompanied by his signature illustrations i.e., *Ahimsa: 100 Reflections on the Harappan Civilization*. Devdutt Pattanaik offers a distinct philosophical reading of Harappa, viewing its archaeological silences and artistic motifs as evidence of a social imagination shaped by non-violence and mythic symbolism. He interprets the absence of conflict scenes and militaristic grandeur as a conscious cultural choice, suggesting fulfillment not through conquest but through harmony, trade, ritual, and ecological balance. Mythological motifs on seals—such as horned figures, animals, and goddess-like forms—are, in Pattanaik’s view, signifiers of a civilization attuned to cyclical time, nature’s rhythms, and the sacred feminine. These symbols, he argues, are not mere art but “living myths” that framed civic identity and communal order. Pattanaik invites his readers to see Harappa less as a mystery and more as an intentional utopia shaped by shared myths and core philosophical values. Such a reading bridges material evidence and intangible heritage, highlighting the formative power of myth and philosophy in shaping one of humanity’s earliest urban experiments.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining history, archaeology, comparative philosophy, and interpretive mythology to explore Harappan civilization and its non-violent ethos. Drawing from archaeological research and field reports, the approach integrates material findings like; urban layouts, burial practices, seals, and artifacts, with a focus on uncovering how these tangible elements reflect civic order, social priorities, and symbolic frameworks (Book of Abstracts 3; Kumar 4; “Harappan Civilization” SATHEE). Advanced scientific techniques such as bioarchaeology and isotopic analysis are considered alongside traditional excavation to contextualize urban forms and population dynamics (Walimbe 17; Schug et al.).

In parallel, this research uses textual analysis of philosophical treatises, with specific attention to how ahimsa—central to Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions—may find echoes in the Harappan archaeological record. Devdutt Pattanaik’s reflections serve as a bridge, interpreting mythic symbols and social organization in philosophical terms. This method justifies reading seals, goddess iconography, and settlement patterns as evidence not just of material life, but of mythic imagination and underlying values.

By deliberately juxtaposing material evidence with philosophical frameworks, the research hopes to reveal how myth and ideology were woven into Harappan social realities and to provide a nuanced understanding that transcends disciplinary boundaries (Book of Abstracts 17; “Harappan Civilization” SATHEE).



Analysis & Discussion

1. Harappa as non-violent Utopia:

The idea of Harappa as a non-violent utopia has intrigued both scholars and the public, inspired by the civilization's remarkable urban achievements and the notable absence of direct evidence for warfare or coercive rule. Archaeological investigations across the Harappan world—stretching from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro to the coastal settlements—reveal a society deeply invested in collective organization and civic order. Streets were precisely laid out, houses constructed on standardized plans, and public works such as granaries and the Great Bath were maintained for communal use. These urban features hint at a shared ethic of cooperation and access to resources across social strata, as nearly all homes, regardless of size, had access to water and sanitation facilities, reflecting relative social equality and shared responsibilities.

Philosophically, while we lack surviving texts from the Indus Valley, the material record allows us to infer an implicit civic ethic that prioritized peace, stability, and collective well-being. Unlike their contemporaries in Egypt or Mesopotamia, the Harappans left no grandiose depictions of rulers or conquest, no militaristic monuments, and little in the way of fortification or weaponry. This has led some scholars to argue that power in Harappan society took a different form—possibly dispersed, ritualized, or embedded in communal institutions rather than enforced by violence. The apparent absence of glorified violence suggests that authority may have rested more on consensus, tradition, or religious and mythological narratives than on force.

Central to legitimizing this social order was the role of mythology—experienced through seals, figurines, and recurring iconography. Seals displaying animals, trees, and enigmatic horned or goddess-like figures possibly broadcast shared values about fertility, nature, and protection. These symbols likely functioned as collective anchors for ethical and communal life, reminding citizens of their place in a larger natural and cosmic order. Rather than celebrate conflict or domination, mythological motifs in Harappan art seem to invite reflection on harmony, ecological respect, and social balance—values in tune with a non-violent civic philosophy.

Even as some scholars caution against idealizing Harappa as entirely peaceful, it is likely that interpersonal conflict and defensive needs remained part of daily life—the broader pattern remains distinctive. The Harappan experiment, with its blend of egalitarian planning, dispersed authority, and



unifying mythology, stands as a persuasive historical vision of how philosophy and myth can work together to foster communal harmony and legitimate peaceful coexistence.

2. Ahimsa in Harappan Society

The concept of ahimsa, or non-violence, is often regarded as a later philosophical innovation within the Indian context, yet a close engagement with the archaeological and mythological record of the Harappan society suggests that non-violent praxis was deeply embedded in its urban and social fabric. While the absence of deciphered Harappan texts limits direct access to their explicit beliefs, the evidence found in city planning, art, and material culture allows us to reconstruct a worldview where peace and cooperation were central civic values.

Harappan cities, such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, reveal a remarkable commitment to civic order and collective well-being. The urban landscape, characterized by standardized brick sizes, advanced drainage systems, and shared public spaces, hints at a society that prized equitable access to resources and public hygiene. Notably, there is very little evidence for standing armies, fortifications designed solely for warfare, or heroic depictions of combat. As Devdutt Pattanaik notes, "the Harappans were very different from the Vedic people—they were urban, preferred trading and had no armies"—a pattern distinct from other Bronze Age cultures where militarism was prominent. Their social cohesion relied less on overt displays of power and more on mutual dependence, trade, and civic collaboration.

This material harmony is echoed in the mythological motifs that recur across Harappan seals and figurines. Mother goddess figures, tree and animal iconography, and composite beasts serve as metaphors for protection, fertility, and harmonious relationships between humans and nature. Several seals depict scenarios in which human figures—or goddesses—intervene to prevent violence: for example, women are shown stopping men from fighting, or bird-faced women are seen halting tigers from aggressive displays. Such images suggest not the celebration of dominance, but the cultural ideal of restraint and equilibrium. The presence of protective female figures resonates with later South Asian traditions, in which mother goddesses symbolize nurturing, shelter, and the upholding of social and cosmic order.

Philosophically, these patterns suggest that ahimsa in Harappan society was both structural and symbolic—woven into the very foundations of urban life and continually reinforced by the civilization's mythic imagination. As Pattanaik and others argue, the prominence of animals revered in later non-violent Jain and Hindu traditions (such as the bull, elephant, and rhino) on Harappan seals points to an early melding of economic, social, and spiritual interests.



In re-examining these silent yet eloquent artefacts, we find in Harappa a profound legacy: their model of societal organization, enriched with myth, stands as an ancient articulation of non-violence, inviting reflection on the possibilities for peace and harmony in human civilization.

3. Mythology and Symbolic Structures

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4. Reimagining Utopia Through Pattanaik:

Reimagining Harappa as a utopia through Devdutt Pattanaik's lens brings together the civilization's evidence of non-violence and rich mythic imagination into a compelling mytho-philosophical framework. In *Ahimsa: 100 Reflections on the Harappan Civilization*, Pattanaik argues that the Harappan world stands apart from other ancient cultures because of its profound commitment to peace and its restraint in both material culture and symbolic representation. He finds it remarkable that, despite being contemporaneous with the militaristic societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Harappan civilization left behind no depictions of war or conquest, nor any representation of grandiose rulers or divine kingship—themes central to later Vedic and Western myth-histories (Pattanaik, *Ahimsa*).

Pattanaik synthesizes archaeological discoveries and mythological interpretation to suggest that the Harappans envisioned their society as bound by civility, trade, and mutual respect. Their images, found on seals and artifacts, often depict animals, trees, and scenes of social interaction, but rarely, if ever,



violence. Even in the few artworks that hint at conflict—such as the rare instance of two figures in rivalry—a female figure intervenes, signaling a cultural preference for mediation and restoration over escalation (“Ahimsa”;). Rather than elevating the warrior or hero, as seen in Homer’s Greece or Vedic India, Harappan iconography subtly privileges social harmony and restraint.

This stands in stark contrast to the narratives that emerged with the Vedic tradition, where mythic cycles frequently involved battles among gods and mortals, elaborate sacrifices, and divine hierarchy. Vedic mythology, while acknowledging order and dharma, places significant emphasis on cosmic contests and the legitimacy of power established through conflict. Similarly, Western myth-histories—from the Iliad to Roman epic—narrate the rise of civilization through the dramas of war, conquest, and heroic struggle. In Pattanaik’s analysis, Harappan society finds its unique identity in its very refusal to glorify violence; instead, it constructs utopia on a foundation of restraint and interdependence, supported by the deliberate use of myth as a binding, peaceful force (Pattanaik, Ahimsa;).

Moreover, Pattanaik traces how the Harappan legacy of non-violence filtered into subsequent Indian philosophies—especially in Buddhism, Jainism, and aspects of Hinduism—which evolved ahimsa into a central ethical and spiritual doctrine. In reimagining utopia, Pattanaik ultimately shows that the Harappans’ quiet, persistent memory persists in Indian cultural consciousness, proving that peace, not war, can offer a lasting foundation for civilization.

Conclusion

Reimagining Harappa through the lens of *ahimsa* invites us to see an ancient civilization not as a silent remnant of the past, but as a gentle reminder of humanity’s capacity for peaceful coexistence. Through Pattanaik’s insights, Harappa emerges as a society where order grew from cooperation, where myth nurtured harmony, and where power did not depend on violence. While no civilization is flawless, the Harappan model urges us to rethink how communities can thrive through dignity, balance, and mutual care. In a world often fractured by conflict, Harappa’s quiet legacy becomes a hopeful blueprint for living with compassion and restraint.

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