

ANCESTRAL DRAVIDIAN LANGUAGES WERE POSSIBLY SPOKEN BY MANY IN INDUS VALLEY CIVILISATION, SAYS STUDY

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File photo of an Indus Valley Civilisation site in Binjor, Rajasthan. A recent study says early Dravidian languages were spoken in the ancient times.

A recent publication has provided crucial evidence that Ancestral Dravidian languages were possibly spoken by a significant population in the Indus Valley civilisation.

The paper titled "[Ancestral Dravidian Languages in Indus Civilization: Ultraconserved Dravidian Tooth-word Reveals Deep Linguistic Ancestry and Supports Genetics](#)", by Bahata Ansumali Mukhopadhyay was published earlier this month in a Nature Group of journal - *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* volume 8, Article number: 193 (2021).

This study seeks to resolve a crucial part of this perennial puzzle of South Asian prehistory, through establishing the certain existence of ancestral Dravidian language(s) in the Indus Valley civilisation. In the absence of any deciphered written documents of Indus Valley civilisation, there are no direct ways of identifying Harappan languages. Thus, the only feasible starting point is to find certain proto-words whose likely origin in Indus Valley civilisation gets confirmed through historical and linguistic evidence, whereas archaeological evidence indicates that the objects signified by those proto-words were prevalently produced and used in the Indian Valley civilisation.

Analysing numerous archaeological, linguistic, archaeogenetic and historical evidences the study finds some such proto-words. It claims that the words used for elephant (like, 'pri', 'pru') in Bronze Age Mesopotamia, the elephant-word used in the Hurrian part of an Amarna letter of ca. 1400 BC, and the ivory-word ('pîruš') recorded in certain sixth century BC Old Persian documents, were all originally borrowed from 'plu', a Proto-Dravidian elephant-word, which was prevalent in the Indus Valley civilisation, and was etymologically related to the Proto Dravidian tooth-word '*pal' and its alternate forms ('*pel'/'*pl'/'*pi').

Extensively analysing Dravidian grammar and phonology, Ms. Bahata, a Bengaluru-based software technologist, argues that the elephant words 'plu', 'palla', 'pallava', 'piuvam', etc., which are attested in various Dravidian dictionaries, are related to the Proto-Dravidian tooth-word "pal".

The paper points out that elephant-ivory was one of the luxury goods coveted in the Near East, and archaeological, and zoological evidence confirms that Indus Valley was the sole supplier of ancient Near East's ivory in the middle-third to early-second millennium BC. Some of this Indus ivory came directly from Meluhha to Mesopotamia, whereas some of it got imported there through Indus Valley's thriving trade with Persian Gulf, and even via Bactria. Thus, along with the ivory trade, the Indus word for ivory also got exported to the Near East and remained fossilised in different ancient documents written in Akkadian, Elamite, Hurrian, and Old Persian languages.

Ms. Bahata provides another intriguing evidence regarding the etymological link of the 'plu' word to the meaning of tooth. She shows that some trees of Salvadoraceae family, which are famous as 'toothbrush tree' in the western-world, and as 'miswak' tree ('miswak' meaning 'toothcleaning-stick') in the Arabic-speaking countries, are called by 'plu' and its phonological derivatives

across the Indus valley regions. The branches and roots of this tree have been used since antiquity as a natural toothbrush. In traditional medicine systems such as Indian Ayurveda and Perso-Arabic Tibb Ynn this tree is called as 'plu' and 'pilun' respectively. Ms. Bahata claims that, just like its English and Arabic names, its Indic name was also related to the meaning of tooth. Archaeobotany shows that Indus people used this tree's wood frequently, and it is a key characteristic flora of Pakistan's tropical dry thorn forest.

The researcher, however, puts an important disclaimer, saying that it would be very wrong to assume that only a single language or language-group was spoken across the one-million square kilometre area of Indus Valley civilisation.

"Even today, people across the greater Indus Valley speak several tongues including Indo-Aryan, Dardic, Iranian, along with the isolated Dravidian language Brahui and the language isolate Burushaski. During the Indus Valley civilisation era, this region could have been even more multilingual, with some languages that are now extinct. But we can at least be sure that ancestral Dravidian was one of the most popular tongues spoken by our ancestors," she added.

Two years ago, on July 9, 2019, the researcher had published a paper titled '[Interrogating Indus inscription to unravel their mechanism of meaning conveyance](#)' suggesting that majority of Indus valley inscriptions were written logographically or semasiographically (by using word-signs or meaning-units) and not phonograms (speech sounds units).

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This study was completed before the emergence of the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 now dominating in the U.K.

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