



A Brief History of Mehrgarh, a Neolithic-chalcolithic site of Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

Mehrgarh is an important Neolithic-chalcolithic site of the Indian Subcontinent. There was a continuous development in every aspect of lifestyles if we look at the periods of Mehrgarh. From the later level of Period I, people Mehrgarh started agriculture and hunting. They also set up a village economy. In the later period, their transport system was upgraded and they may also set up long trade with distant places. The pattern of making settlements was also developed. From Period III there was the usage of copper and the most interesting thing is the discovery of cotton seeds in Mehrgarh. As time was passing by, the people of Mehrgarh also made them better every day.

Keywords

Neolithic, Mehrgarh, cotton

Body

The features generally associated with the Neolithic age are food production, pottery and a try to live in a sedentary way. If you look at world context, the Neolithic age started in 9000 B.C.E. In the Indian subcontinent, there are many Neolithic sites, of which Mehrgarh is a very important and one of the oldest known sites of the world which gives evidence of village settlement. Mehrgarh is now located in the Bolan valley in the northern part of the Kachi plain of the Baluchistan province of Pakistan. Kachi plain is told as the "breadbasket" of Baluchistan. In 1974, a French archaeologist team under Jean Francois Jarrige and Catharine Jarrige started to excavate the site with the collaboration of the Department of Archaeology of Pakistan. This excavation continued till 1986 and again continued from 1997 to 2000.

The excavation gives evidence of at least seven occupational levels at Mehrgarh. Period I was a Neolithic and aceramic phase. The phase was semi-nomadic when people first started to cultivate crops. The chronology of period I at Mehrgarh was

approximately between 7000-5000 B.C.E. The period is subdivided into two sub-phases- Period IA and Period IB. Period IA can be differentiated from period IB with the finding of several earthen potteries. It had no pottery in the earlier period but the later period has given evidence of few potteries. Period II is also a Neolithic but ceramic phase. This period is the final stage of the Neolithic period at Mehrgarh. The chronology of Period II at Mehrgarh has dated approximately between c. 6000- 4500 B.C.E. The period is also subdivided into three sub-phases- Period IIA, Period IIB and Period IIC. Period III at Mehrgarh is chalcolithic though the use of stones continued as before. This period is also a ceramic period. It is dated approximately between c. 4800- 3500 B.C.E. It is important to note that Periods I, II and III are thought of as contemporary of another site named Kili Gul Mohammad. Period IV was considered from c. 3500 B.C.E. to 3250 B.C.E. Period V at Mehrgarh was from c. 3250 B.C.E. to 3000 B.C.E. and Period VI continued from around 3000 B.C.E. Period VII at Mehrgarh was approximately

between C. 2600- 2000 B.C.E. which is supposed to be contemporary with the Middle Indus Valley civilization and around this time the people of Mehrgarh seemed to abandon this area and moved to the nearby site of Naushro.

The result of pollen analysis shows that from the beginning of Mehrgarh occupation till the 4th millennium B.C.E., the region was probably dominated by a semi lacustrine or humid environment with riparian vegetation, characterized by Populus, Salix, Fraxinus, Ulmus, Vitis, associated in a typical hydrophytic complex, arranged in dense forests.

The first level of the Neolithic settlements in the Mehrgarh provides us information that as early as the 8th millennium B.C.E. there was a farming economy. There may be an assumption that the farming economy was come from Near East to South Asia. But Jarrige finished with the idea there must be an earlier local background in Mehrgarh. Lorenzo Costantini has shown that the plant is grown in the period I was dominated by naked six-row barleys. Probably, these were cultivated, not domesticated. There were domestic hulled six-row barley and wild, domestic hulled two-row barleys also but in small quantities. Another important crop was wheat. Grains of domesticated hulled einkorn wheat, Emmer wheat, and naked wheat has been found in the period I at Mehrgarh. Ber and dates were also in the period I. With these, seeds of cotton have been found in period II at Mehrgarh. From the metallurgical analysis of a copper bead from a burial of Mehrgarh, some threads were discovered. After characterizing, the threads are identified as cotton. The evidence of cotton seeds at Mehrgarh was earliest in the Indian Sub-Continent and also in the whole world. There were two new varieties of Wheat

and a new variety of Barley and a new cereal e.g. Oats in Period III at Mehrgarh. These give shreds of evidence of the development of agriculture at Mehrgarh day by day. Wheat became more important than Barley.

In the early levels of Period I at Mehrgarh civilization, the people of Mehrgarh usually hunted for getting most of the meat. The bones of wild animals like wild sheep, wild goats, wild asses, blackbuck, nilgai, large deer, small deer, wild boar, water buffalo, wild cattle and possibly elephants were found from the earliest levels of Period I.

Neolithic periods of Mehrgarh give clear evidence of the transition of people how they proceed from hunting to animal domestication. In the period I at Mehrgarh, the bones of domestic animals like goats, sheep and bulls with humps have been found. Probably the first domesticated animal of Mehrgarh was goat. Interesting thing is that the lower levels of Period I was dominated by bones of wild animals, but at the end of this period, the bones of wild animals became lower and the bones of domestic animals were increased and this gives a clear idea that people of Mehrgarh could understand the importance of animal domestication slowly. Interestingly, Period III showed the increase of bones of wild animals again with the bones of domestic animals parallel which suggests resurgence in hunting activity.

The houses which have been excavated yet are of four types i.e. two-roomed, four-roomed, six roomed and ten roomed houses. Generally, the houses were made of mud bricks. The bricks were long and narrow. It measured 62 * 12 * 8 cm. There was a herringbone pattern on the upper faces of the bricks. Generally, inhabitants of Mehrgarh in Period I followed the four-

roomed building plan. The walls of the rooms were approximately 30 cm wide. In level VII, there were six roomed buildings. But there is no fireplace or any other proof of domestic activities. These buildings may be used as granaries or storage facilities in Mehrgarh. They plastered the walls with clay. Sometimes the walls were painted with red ochre. Some floors of some houses excavated at Mehrgarh were also covered with red ochre.

Proofs of fireplaces have also been found in Mehrgarh. There were many circular fire pits, found in the open spaces between the houses of Mehrgarh.

The layouts of the houses were ordered in a regular pattern. There are two groups of layout. One is East-West oriented and the other is North-South oriented. There was open space between two houses. The plan is opposite to the plan of Neolithic settlements of Western and Central Asia. The houses were made there together without keeping open space. There was no regular pattern as well. So Mehrgarh settlements suggest a more developed settlement than any other contemporary settlement.

People of Mehrgarh in Period I used microliths which were made either on blades or on flakes. Some Neolithic handaxes were found in Period I at Mehrgarh. Sometimes, they joined wooden handles with blades. They may have used these as sickles to harvest grain. They may have also processed the food. The findings of grinding stone indicate this. They also used bone tools like needles and awls. The use of stone tools and bone tools were gone on also in Period II at Mehrgarh. People of Mehrgarh in the period were associated with activities like butchery, cooking, making of bone artefacts and others using stone tools. In Period IV, people used lunates, trapezes, borers and

scrapers. In upper levels, the main tools were truncated blades, drills and trapezes. It is interesting to note that the tools of later were more polished and developed than earlier that indicate the continuous development of tools in Mehrgarh.

Pottery has been found from Period II at Mehrgarh. At first, there were a limited number of potteries but later in Period IIB, the number became larger. From that time, the potteries became much finer with vessels shaped or rounded with a dabber. There have been numerous broken fragments of pots at the site of MR4. Archaeologists have shown that many of them were made with a mixture of straw and clay, pressed by hand. It is generally fragments of bowls, flat circular dishes etc. There was also some fine wheel-made ware like open bowls, medium size globular vessels with collard rim in the buff, sometimes decorated with simple geometric motifs, criss-cross and oblique lines and others. There were many potteries and also fragments of pottery in Period III. In the period, the quality of wheel made potteries was more developed than at earlier levels. The quality of paintings inscribed on pottery was also improved.

Now the question is if the people of Mehrgarh were connected with trade. There have been valuable stone beads like Turquoise, Lapis Lazuli in grave goods in the period I at Mehrgarh. This may indicate a long distant exchange of people at Mehrgarh as the stones were not indigenous to the area. Archaeologists have found some bronze materials like earrings, bangles, pins (double spiral headed, bird-headed and button headed), cosmetic bottles and toilet objects like mirrors, blades in the cenotaph areas at Mehrgarh. These all types are known from Bactria and Margiana. Various other

findings e.g. the stone sceptre, the button seal with snake and the kidney-shaped fritte vase indicates the relation between Mehrgarh and Bactria, Margiana and south Turkmenia. There are exceptional five figurines, found in Period III at Mehrgarh. Three of the figurines are human beings and the other two figurines are animals. A necklace of applique clay lozenges is on a human figurine that is conical. The second is in a seated position. They are similar to the early human figurines of Western Iran. This may indicate a connection between Mehrgarh and Western Iran.

Now, what was the funerary system in Mehrgarh civilization? From the analysis of Marille Santoni, it is shown that there were four types of funeral remains at Mehrgarh: graves (rectangular structures containing one or more skeletons with funeral materials), cenotaphs (rectangular structure containing only funeral materials), an isolated deposit of materials (either in a rectangular-shaped pit or just lying in the natural soil) and large jars placed upside down (generally associated with one or two small pots).

Generally, the people of Mehrgarh dug a small place at the bottom of an about 1 m deep pit which was used as a burial chamber. The body was in a flexed position in the burial chamber. Then the chamber was blocked with hard clay or brick walls. The pit was filled with earth. Most of the graves are East-West oriented. The deceased body may be painted with red ochre as there were numerous traces of bones stained in red colour. At the earlier levels, the dead body was placed along with offerings of young goats disposed of in a semi-circle around the legs. The skeletons of women were buried with some ornaments and young goats and the skeletons of men were buried with bladelets and microliths. In level III,

skeletons of two young women were found with skeletons of five young goats. One of the female skeletons was found wearing ornaments of Lapis Lazuli, Turquoise and seashells. In later periods, the grave goods in the burial chamber were reduced slowly. It is important to say that in Period II, there were the first terracotta seals along with burials.

Let's focus on the dresses and culture of the people of Mehrgarh. Though some threads of cotton have been found in a burial in Mehrgarh, it is not certain that the people of Mehrgarh knew the process of weaving. In Period I at Mehrgarh, the people may wear ornaments like beads, pendants and bangles, made of marine shells. There are different types of beads e.g. cylinder discs – short and long cylinders, pendants e.g. shaped, natural shells etc. These ornaments were decreased in Period II. From the period, some polished beads and pendants have been found. Certainly, the long string beads, found in the burials at Mehrgarh had considerable socio-economic value. In Period III, there are findings of numerous grooved bangles. The presence of grooved bangles at this early period is unusual as there are few decorations of these types in Indus Civilization or Harappa Civilization and it also becomes quite popular in Early Historic and Early Medieval periods.

After examining the skeletons, archaeologists and other researchers have told about dental lesions among Mehrgarh people. The chemical reaction in stomach acid or food seems unlikely a cause of dental lesions in the Mehrgarh civilization. Mehrgarh is a Neolithic- Chalcolithic site of the Indian sub-continent where we have found early settlements, agriculture, animal domestication. Even we have found the existence of copper and cotton in later period at Mehrgarh. We also found long-

distance trade with other places, the earlier form of granary and usage of sickle which was the earliest in the Indian sub-continent. All of these would be found as a more developed stage in Harappa Civilization later. So it may not be wrong if we call the Harappa Civilization the descendant of the Mehrgarh Civilization. So we may conclude that history of Mehrgarh pushed the India's glorious ancient past to at least seven thousand years ago. This rural civilization defies the Neolithic settlement of India, mature phases of which tell us about their habitation with usage of copper. Agriculture, some sorts of domestication, making of mud brick houses, some sorts of drawing and others signifies that in future there would be a much developed civilization, the process of transformation started from the developed stages of the Mehrgarh Civilization.

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