

Subject: **Ancient Scripts and Languages**
Article: **37**

The Indus Valley Language

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In article **17 - The Indus Valley Script**, I said that the Indus civilization left behind a multitude of seal molds and tokens made chiefly of steatite whose size are one to two inches square. More than 60 sites have yielded seals and tokens of stone, copper, silver, bone, terra-cotta, or ivory. The inscriptions on the tokens contain about 400 different symbols, but scholars have few clues to their meaning. The script on the tokens is still not deciphered, in spite of claimed decipherments.

Since we are not able to read the Indus valley script, what can we say about the language spoken in the region? We know that the languages of this region was and is still is Urdu and Sanskrit, but the exact date of their arrival to the region is not so clear. The origin of the word 'Urdu' is the Turkish word 'Ordu', which means /**army**/. Thus Urdu was the language of the conqueror elites. Even the English word 'horde' has its origin in the same 'ordu' word. The general belief is that Urdu began to take shape in what is now Uttar Pradesh, India during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1527), and continued to develop under the **Mughal Empire** (1526–1858). Mughals are decedents of the **Mongols** and are part of the **Turkic** culture. They came to northern India and present Pakistan from Turkistan and Khorasan. Their mother tongue was the **Chaghatai** Turkish dialect (known to them as *Turki*, "Turkic") and they were equally fluent in Persian, the *lingua franca* of the Timurid elite. But it is quite possible that the people of this region came long ago from the north of Pakistan (see Article **16-The South-West Expansion**).

Regarding the language spoken in the Indus Valley long ago, I can quote Prof. Dr. **Ahmed Hassan Dani** (1920 – 2009), a Sanskrit expert and archeologist of the Indian subcontinent. Dr. Dani worked with Sir Mortimer Wheeler and helped him excavate **Mohenjo-Daro** in 1945. After independence he taught in Dhaka, and wrote a classic work on East Indian archaeology.

Regarding the language of the Indus valley, here is what he says:

“Dravidian is an agglutinative language. But at the same time Altaic is an agglutinative language, and certainly we know, that there was a connection between Turkmenistan [in Central Asia] and this region. Turkmenistan is a region where Altaic languages are spoken. Even in the pre-Indus period we have a connection. In what we call the Kot Diji period, we have a connection between Indus Civilization and excavations in Turkmenistan. The people of this site lived about 3000 BCE. So if we insist on an agglutinative language being used in the Indus period, why not connect it with Altaic, rather than just with Dravidian? Why not connect it with Sumerian, which is also an agglutinative language? In fact, when I was in Korea, I found that their language is agglutinative, which I did not know before. Just because of agglutinative language, it is not necessary that it is connected with Dravidian. But unfortunately, our history has been so written in the time of the British that earlier we tried to trace out history from the Aryans, and we thought that before the Aryans were Dravidians, that was the idea. So when the Indus Civilization was discovered, it was thought if it is not Aryan, it must be Dravidian. That was the general assumption. But it is not necessary.”



Dr. Ahmed Dani



The ancient site at **Kot Diji** was the forerunner of the **Indus** Civilization and was located near the city of Harrapa. The Indus Valley civilization had trade and cultural relations with the Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia, as can be seen on the map above. So it is quite possible that they had a common language (see Article **30-Hittite and Sumerian**). From the words of Dr. Dani we can claim that even the Dravidian language has its origin in the early proto-language of Central Asia. It should not be included in the Indo-European language group, but rather in the Altaic language group.

