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## **Sāvadhānapattra** **Little Words with Profound Meaning**

Michael Witzel

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## *Sāvadhānapattra* (1)

As announced recently, the following brief review opens a series of current news and brief book reviews dealing with recent publications in the Vedic and in the closely connected Harappan fields of study. As the title *Sāvadhānapattra* indicates, it is one of the aims of these reviews to warn about the steadily increasing tide of less serious approaches towards the study of the Indus civilization and of the Vedic texts.

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### Little Words with Profound Meaning

Dr. Madhusudan Mishra, *From Indus to Sanskrit (Part One)*. Delhi: Yugank Publishers 1996 (cf. web announcement of 23 Jan 2001 to a number of scholars; and cf. the more recent update, <http://www.indusscript.net>):

Connecting and equating the Harappan Civilization with that of the (*Ṛg-*)*Veda* has become a fashion that has gained considerable strength in India in recent years.

Madhusudan Mishra is no exception to this trend, but he must be credited with a particular twist to it, so far not imagined in this context. This is linguistic Darwinism. He sees a progression from a primitive form of language to more complex ones (see the summary p. 30).

To him, this is evident in the development of (an imagined) pre-Vedic to the Vedic language of the *Ṛgveda*: the ‘isolating’ Indus language consisted of unalterable mono-syllabic words, then developed into an agglutinative language with grammatical elements (such as word endings) attached, and finally into fully flexional Sanskrit, with declensions and conjugations based on stem formation. Sanskrit is related to the former stages genealogically. “Inflexional Sanskrit ... is the child of the agglutinative Indus”... “The former was monotonous, while the latter became accented, and ... the former was agglutinative but the latter became inflexional.” (p. 9).

In short, we get an imagined proto-language of Harappan times that looks vaguely like Vedic Sanskrit as far as its roots (*dhātu*) are concerned, but that does not yet have its affixes (prefixes, suffixes, infixes). Mishra's kind of Harappan thus is unlike any form of the commonly reconstructed Indo-Iranian or Proto-Indo-European, — both of which, along with other old Indo-European languages such as Hittite (1900/1600 BCE–), Greek (1400/1200 BCE–), or Latin, were of course already fully flexional languages. Not surprisingly, Mishra, like his namesake S.S. Misra (*The Aryan Problem*, 1992), actually doubts that Proto-Indo-European has been reconstructed correctly (p. 13).

Of course, Mishra's Harappan is quite different from Rajaram's and Jha's "late Vedic" Indus language (Delhi 2000, see *Frontline*, Oct. 13, 2000), that they based on their own particular "reading" of the *same* Indus seals.

Mishra's view, in fact, is based on the typical late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century Darwinistic vision and strict division of the world's languages into isolating, agglutinative and flexional, with an assumed development from 'primitive' isolating (e.g., Chinese) towards 'fully developed' flexional languages (such as Indo-European, Semitic). This was outdated long before he was a lecturer (i.e. language teacher) at the Institute for Comparative Indo-European Linguistics at Frankfurt, Germany (1965–67).

However, how does Mishra find his Ur-Sanskrit in the Indus inscriptions? Simply, by looking at them intensely (p. 7 sqq). Yet, even his starting point surprises: "The [Indus] alphabet appears to be syllabic, each sign being a full syllable... one consonant is not graphically related to the following syllable. All syllables end with vowels. The solitary presence of a large number of signs... shows ... that those signs are monosyllabic words." (p. 15)

Actually, we do not know any such thing and all of the above are unreflected assumptions. (For example, why should any sign, such as "!" not be polysyllabic in actual pronunciation, e.g. in English "attention!") Since no one, including M. Mishra, has read the Indus inscriptions successfully it also is pure belief, and without any attempt of proof, that "the Indus language consisted of monosyllabic words without any inflection." (p. 15) Actually, the remnants of Indus words in the *R̥gveda* (see *EJVS*, Sept. 1999) are polysyllabic!

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It is virtually useless to progress with reading the book beyond this point, as the rest is based on the set of beliefs described above. Like all ‘decipherers’ of the Indus script, Mishra has already ‘taken off’ and has left the firm ground of known facts (such as the —generally— right to left direction of the script, p. 15), but he has done so remarkably early in his book, on the fifth page of his exposition (p. 15).

Nevertheless, to continue with a summary of Mishra’s views: after some comparisons of Hindi, Swahili and Turkish, he promises “to look upon the Indus language without preconceived notions about its being Dravidian or Vedic or some kind of Prakrit language.” (p. 19)

But, he has already decided that “from the behaviour of the signs of the text, it appears to be of agglutinative type of language” (p. 19), — which does not quite rhyme with: “the Indus people spoke full sentences consisting of monosyllabic words.” (p. 21) Or to put it in his own, inimitable style: “They were godly people who spoke little words with profound meaning.” (p. 20)

Having confirmed that, the next step can be taken: the construction of polysyllabic words. This stage is still reflected in (Vedic) Sanskrit. According to Mishra, Sanskrit, apart from particles such as *vā* ‘or’, has two types of monosyllabic words (p. 21 sq.) First, those found only in compounds (*-ja*, *-da*, *-dhi*) “which are too weak to bear any inflexional ending independently” (but, what about the accusative, etc. endings of *dhī*, etc.?) Second, those not derived from Skt. roots: *ka* ‘water’, *kha* ‘sky’, *ku* ‘earth’. “Because Sanskrit has accepted these underived words they certainly belong to a language genealogically related to Sanskrit.” (p. 21). (Such as English, which then would be a Polynesian polysyllabic language as it has ‘accepted’ taboo, *mana*, *kava*?) In fact, such monosyllabic Skt. words are “the words of the Indus language and ... Sanskrit was related to it.” QED.

The exposition then continues logically with the construction of polysyllabic Skt. words out of the monosyllabic Indus words: *ka* “water” + *la* “earth” + *śa* “?”, which means ‘earthen water container’ (*kalaśa*) (p. 22); or *ṇa-ra-ṣa* from *ṇa* “to breathe?” + *ra* “?” + *ṣa* “original pl. sign”, resulting in *ná’-ra-s* ‘a man’ ... (p. 23), in short, Indus *ṇara-ṣa* > ‘pre-Vedic’ *ná’ra-s* ‘man’.

Grammatical forms are then built up in the same way: “The Vedic past augment *ā*’ (sic!) is the gift of the Indus language” (p. 25, but what about Greek

and Armenian augments?) Other suffixes, such as *-ya*, *-va* yield nouns such as *ja-ya* ‘victory’ (p. 39), *ha-va* ‘call’ etc.

One may wonder whether Mishra ever took a look at Wackernagel, Debrunner’s, Burrow’s, or any other recent, linguistically sound grammar of Sanskrit while at Frankfurt? Or has he simply forgotten all of this on his returning home? For that matter, Pāṇini’s equally sound analysis of Skt. nouns and verbs, based on roots and affixes, also would have helped.

The pinnacle of Mishra’s analysis can be seen in such derivations as the following one: “The syllable *a-*, being the base in most pronominal forms, stand for ‘*he*’; *va-* is the Indus basis of the Sanskrit root *av* ‘to protect’, which developed due to the new analysis of the Indus past form *ā-va* as *a-av-a*; and *ma* is the base of the First person pronoun “I”. Briefly, *a-va-ma* means ‘may HE PROTECT ME’, which became the first utterance OM.” (p. 40)

He then progresses with “The Identification of Indus signs” (p. 49 sqq.) The “nipple shaped sign” (i.e. the most frequent Indus sign, the rimmed vessel, Mahadevan no. 342) must be either *ṇa* or *ṣa* as such retroflex roots are monosyllabic in the Pāṇinean *dhātupāṭha*. Clearly, by now, we are firmly on Pāṇinean Indus territory. After all, Pāṇini comes from the confluence of the Indus and the Kabul rivers, or so says a Buddhist Chinese pilgrim.

The rest is easy: *Sa* at the end of an Indus sentence must mean ‘to be’ (p. 52) because it outnumbers *ṇa* in Skt., while “in the middle of the texts it is either the pl, suffix-*ṣa* or the possessive suffix *-ṣa*, (e.g. in *śa-śa* ‘hare’ for \**śa-sa* from *śa-ṣa*)”! (p. 52)

Or, the Indus fish sign (p. 52): “Its frequent occurrence in the middle, even more than the initial and final position taken together, entitles it (sic!) to be a representative of *ṇa* of Indus.” Again based on Skt. lexicons, it means either ‘water’ or ‘gift’; thus Mahadevan 4826 ‘nipple-fish-fish’ = *ṇa ṇa ṣa*, means, with Rajaramesque echoes, “these are the two gifts or ornaments” (p. 53) or also, and we can only agree:

“truth is knowledge!”

By now, we can read the Indus texts easily (p. 58 sqq.), of course always with the help of the *dhātupāṭha*, and with further —unintended— echoes of Rajaram before his day:

*sa sa* “two birds” reflects ṚV 1.164.20 *dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā...* (p. 62); and “nipple – eight strokes – triangle” = *ra la ṣa* ‘active, bright, heavenly, auspicious’ reflects ṚV 4.58.3 *catvāri śṛṅgās...* (p. 62)

Of course, *om* (and the Tantric monosyllabic Mantras) cannot be left alone; it is explained (p. 27), as already mentioned, from *a-va-ma* “he, protect me!”

It must be added, though, that “The Indus numeral-signs reflect in Pāṇini’s *Māheśvara-sūtras*,” which is explained on several pages, p. 55–57.

Nobody should be surprised by now that the Indus “alphabet” (of 400–800 signs!) results in the later Brahmi script (p. 64 sqq.). For example, the Indus ‘goat horn’ sign(?) is turned around to become Brahmi *a-* and is taken from Skt. *aja* ‘goat’; the Indus Ḍamaru drum sign (from \*Ḍam dam, ‘drumming’) is cut in half and results in Brahmi Ḍ; *dha* is from *dhanus* ‘bow’, found as the Indus bow sign. In short, with a lot of Rajaram-Jha echoes before their time, and therefore prophetically, “we have seen that the letters of the *brāhma* alphabet derive from Indian birds and animals and are rooted in the Indus soil.” (p. 71)

Perfect, not just humans but also animals and even letters are sons of the Indian soil (*bhūmiputra* — something that used to be called, some decades ago, the “Blut und Boden” ideology). The now much maligned Max Mueller would have repeated, on reading this kind of statements, his well known classifications of Brāhmaṇa style texts. We, later denizens, cannot but wait eagerly for the other three promised volumes to appear on our shelves — more little words with profound meaning.

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In short, one can safely put this book aside, after 30 minutes, and add it to the growing pile of failed decipherments — and of related patriotic or nationalistic fantasies.

Mishra hardly refers to any approaches or results of the 20<sup>th</sup> century study of the Indus inscriptions, betrays no sophisticated knowledge of linguistics, anthropology, etc. — all of this is just unbridled speculation, free association.

Though this book is not expressively political as such, the familiar verbiage of the Hindutva Cottage Industry seeps in more often than not : “after some catastrophe, the group settling in Panjab later entered the Gangetic plain and went as far as Europe in the west... Briefly, the Indus valley is the original

home of the Aryans or Indo-Europeans. The racial distribution as Aryan, Dravidian and Austric etc. is ill conceived.”

While *any racial* interpretation of these three (or any) languages and language families would indeed be ill conceived, the idea of “one India, one language, one race” clearly shows: “Dravidian and Santhal languages are sisterly related to Sanskrit” (p. 30) And, not to forget, “the Swastika-sign of Indus reached Germany, and the four-twenties for 80 reached France” (p. 9, meaning *quatre-vingt* ‘eighty’.) One may wonder, of course, how the Swastika ended up in Ghana where it means ‘monkeys’ feet’, or in the Americas, and why only the Gauls preserved the vigesimal Indus trait, but not even their French speaking Wallon Belgian and Romand Swiss neighbors, not to speak of the other Romance languages — and their parent, Latin.

In sum, amusing reading, like so many of the decipherment books. (More of them, and other Aryan fantasies, will be reviewed here, in due course). The only real surprise remaining then is this: M. Mishra (author of several Indo-Aryan grammars) was for many years the “Assistant and Deputy Director (academic) of the Rasthriya Sanskrit Sansthan, Delhi (1973–93).”

One would like to know what other cutting edge, innovative, thought provoking, seminal and trend setting research is carried out by academic (ex)members of this Government financed institution?

(M.Witzel)