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Q2(b)

"Indus Valley was the first settlement of the big civilization." Comment critically.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Critically comment on the statement that the Indus Valley was the first settlement of the big civilisation
- Separate Neolithic settlement from Bronze Age urbanism
- Use named sites and chronology
- State what "first" and "big civilisation" can and cannot mean

Revision summary

Mature Harappan cities are the first large Bronze Age urban system of the Indus-Gujarat belt.

Mehrgarh and Early Harappan sites show farming settlement many millennia earlier.

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic camps are older still, so "first settlement" is false.

Egypt and Mesopotamia are separate **Old World civilisations**.

The Indus script is unread, so political form remains argued even while urbanism is clear.

Introduction

The Indus or Harappan urban phase is the first large **Bronze Age civilisation** of the north-west subcontinent. It is not the first human settlement there, and it is not the only early civilisation in the world. The statement mixes three different facts and must be taken apart.

Body

What the Indus urban phase is

- **Mature Harappan** cities such as **Mohenjo-daro**, **Harappa**, **Dholavira**, **Rakhigarhi**, and **Lothal** (about 2600-1900 BCE in standard teaching chronology) show planned streets, drains, craft specialisation, weights, and long-distance trade.
- **John Marshall**, **R. E. M. Wheeler**, **S. R. Rao**, **J. P. Joshi**, and later **R. S. Bisht** at **Dholavira** established this as urban, not a village cluster with a grand name.
- In that limited sense it is the first "big" civilisation on the Indus-Ghaggar-Hakra and Gujarat systems.

Why "first settlement" is false

- Settlement long predates the cities. **Mehrgarh** (Balochistan) has aceramic and ceramic Neolithic farming from the eighth-seventh millennium BCE, with houses, barley, and later craft.
- Early Harappan or regional phases - **Ravi, Hakra, Kot Diji, Amri, Sothi-Siswal, Bhirrana** and **Girawad** in the Ghaggar belt - are towns and villages before Mature street grids.
- Palaeolithic and Mesolithic occupation of the same rivers is older still. "First settlement" would erase Soanian terraces, Upper Palaeolithic, and Mesolithic camps.

Why "the" big civilisation is too large a claim

- Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China have their own urban sequences. Indus is one of the Old World river civilisations, not the world's first.
- Inside India, later Ganga urbanism (mahajanapadas) is another "big" civilisation on a different crop and iron base. It is not a child of Mohenjo-daro in a simple line.
- The script remains undeciphered, so political form - palace, priest-corporate, or merchant elite - is still argued. Urbanism is clear; a single "settlement of civilisation" story is not.

Critical comment

- **Keep the praise:** **Mature Harappan** is the subcontinent's first fully urban Bronze Age system at a large geographic scale.
- **Reject the wording:** settlement is older, civilisation has several centres, and "first" without dates misleads.

Flow diagram

Mehrgarh Neolithic -> Early Harappan villages
Early Harappan villages -> Mature Harappan cities
Mature Harappan cities -> Urban craft weights drains
Palaeolithic Mesolithic -> Mehrgarh Neolithic

Conclusion

Indus cities are the first big urban civilisation of the north-west Bronze Age. They are not the first settlements and not the only civilisation. **Mehrgarh**, Early Harappan villages, and other world rivers break the slogan.

Facts & figures

Mehrgarh

Neolithic site in Balochistan with early farming, houses, and craft long before Mature Harappan cities.

Mature Harappan

Urban phase with Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi, and Lothal, about 2600-1900 BCE in standard chronology.

Bhirrana and Girawad

Ghaggar-belt sites with early levels used to argue pre-urban settlement in the greater Indus tradition.

Dholavira

Kachchh city excavated by R. S. Bisht, with reservoirs, walls, and a staged urban plan.

Kot Diji

Early Harappan type site showing fortified village life before the Mature street-and-drain package.

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