

Unraveling the Mysteries of Archaeology through Museums

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Introduction

Every ancient civilization of the world has marked its glorious identity in the book of human past. All the tangible features these civilizations left behind were unique to the place they flourished in various parts of the World. Many mystifying stories have emerged as an outcome of the recovery of splendid artefacts or numerous material evidences, archaeologists have come across. The development of human intelligence with the experience in dynamic surrounding environment led to changes in patterns of their living, subsequent development of new technologies, also creation of better means of communication, and transportation, social wellbeing etc. All these archaeological material evidences we procure today must have undergone some kind of cultural or natural transformation process after they have been made. Studying only these evidences in isolation might not give us the full information of the civilization and the people who inhabited it. It requires deeper thought and practical approach to unravel these mysteries. An understanding of the function of an artefact is often shaped by its resemblance with present-day things – beads, querns, stone blades and pots are obvious examples (NCERT 2009: 22).

Archaeology is one of the techniques of understanding people who consciously or unconsciously left behind the patterns of their living. An essential task of a modern museum is to give people a richer sense of the past and a more personal stake in the future by binding their present to their past with pride and affection (Baxi & Dwivedi 1973: 6). One has to observe carefully the tangible evidences that do give

a hint of patterns of living in past, but it still leaves us with many questions unanswered.

Archaeology was indispensable part of earliest museums in India. The rich heritage of country is the key element for it. The earliest museum in the modern sense came into being in 1814 when the Asiatic Society of Bengal brought together a collection of geological, botanical, zoological, anthropological and archaeological exhibits (Sivaramamurti 1959: i). Why were these artefacts made? Who made it? Why the particular raw material was used? Such questions create a dialogic protocol (code of behavior) for any scholar or student getting acquainted with these ancient civilizations.

To study archaeology without a museum is like studying art without a gallery, or anatomy without a subject (Murray 1904: 279).

This paper deals with experiences with School students as most of the present ongoing research focuses on them.

Harappan Seals: A Unique Artefact to Study at the School Level -

Harappan civilization that flourished in the Indian subcontinent had a prominent expanse as well as quality of living. Being the earliest urban civilization of India, it was the birthplace of archaeological studies for us. It was the essence of their sophisticated pattern of living that reflected in architecture, art, writing or such features which left a glorious mark on the world archaeology too.

Seals of Harappan civilization are the most fascinating artefacts. The total number of seals & seal impressions (sealings) found in Indus sites exceeds 3200 (Nandagopal 2006: 65). They instigate a sense of curiosity about the meaning hidden in the script, various motifs and the overall formation of the object. The study of the seals and seal impressions in combination with their archaeological contexts & details of style and manufacture can significantly contribute to the understanding of the economic and administrative aspects of an ancient civilization (Joshi & Parpola 1987: XV). Evidence of knowledge of some form of writing or codified language is an essential element that indicates presence of a standardized system of communication in the past. Scholars unveiled a contemporaneous

ancient civilization dating back to time period of Mesopotamia & Egypt through analysis of similar traits on seals and further dating of these artefacts.

Seal is a source of mystery that is being taught at school level also as a characteristic feature of Harappan civilization. But brevity of text (in school books) given through medium of textbooks or subjects taught doesn't cover the aspects which create an urge or a sense of questioning at school level. The significance of selecting a particular animal or composite motif, or writing direction of script, symbols used as script, the coated layers on surface of seal and the differentiating size & shapes of seals with their function based on these connotations (association), is still an enigma for the children in schools. The pictorial motifs not only rank among the very best preserved examples of Harappan artistic expressions but also provide some of the most important clues to the Harappan religion and to accompanying inscriptions (Joshi & Parpola 1987: XVI).

What can be done to make concept of Harappan Seals interesting?

These noteworthy aspects of seals are to be added upon with the information already given in (school) books related to the discovery of seals, material and findings at various sites and its exact motive (which is speculated till date) of idea of formation. Books cannot carry museums or information revealed in the artefacts. This understanding is to be developed and an alliance between a student, teacher and museum staff (gallery educator/resource person) must be created for the same purpose. It is no distortion of facts to say that the Indian museums have also failed, whatever may be the cause, to occupy their rightful place in the school and college curricula; museums, as educational institutions, have failed to get themselves integrated in the country's educational system or it may also be put the other way round (Sarkar 1981: 9). To some extent, experiences in various museums in India reflected this idea too in front of researcher.

Writing is an essential indicator to implicate the fact that the inhabitants of the civilization were literate. Ancient people created a coded language long time back which created ripples in epigraphical records of the world. The decodification is an arduous task that school students cannot do or understand easily at school level but yes a thoughtful approach can be created so that the pull gets created towards the hidden ideas in artefacts such as seals.

As an initiative to create interest in these artefacts, a brief informative activity or worksheet was developed by the researcher. It was a step notifying the students about why necessity of writing on seals originated and even a massive sign board was also made. Seal as a unique medium of carrying/communicating written message or coded language, is exceptionally brilliant task of the Harappan civilization till date. School students don't feel its significance until they are told about its rarity and influence.

Knowledge Testing of School students: Seals in a Worksheet form -

To get an idea that at what extent the worksheet or workshop method helped in expanding the classroom teaching process, and made students understand the uniqueness of Harappan seals, the school visits were organized at the Indus Gallery, in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda which also enabled researcher to get practical output through the worksheet mode of activity.

Children were divided into two groups which were given the gallery tour and engaged in doing a Pre-Visit worksheet related to Harappan seals. The students belonged to standard 7th and 8th who had studied NCERT board pattern of syllabus. Few interesting responses of questions in worksheet are:

- ❖ A picture is drawn in worksheet of a Seal and students had to identify what it can be. The number of students who gave a particular answer is mentioned in the brackets. Many children were aware of the fact that the unique picture they saw is a Seal.

S e a l s	Seal from Harappan civilization (11)
	Inscription of Harappan civilization (7)
	Ancient seal (8)
	Others (15)



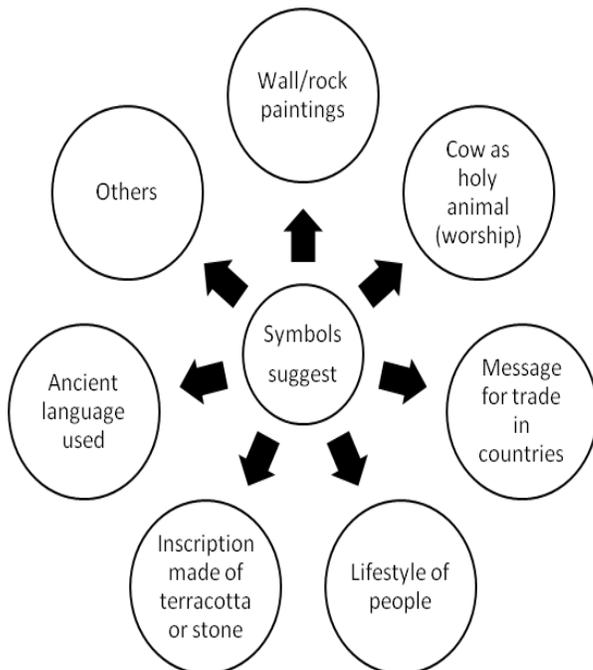
Responses given by students

Picture given in worksheet

Further students were asked to draw a similar picture and write the symbols as they can visualize in the picture on the worksheet. It was a fun activity to make children learn as they do the worksheet, and simultaneously creativity of the students can be checked through these tasks. Children remained in light mood and didn't consider the worksheet as a test of visiting the Archaeology department museum. Learning is now seen as an active participation of the learner with the environment (Hein 1998: 6).

- ❖ Similarly further a question had been put up related to the symbols depicted on the picture (animal figure and the written signs). This seal picture somewhat matches the picture that is already in the NCERT textbooks of these students. So those who were able to recollect gave responses in following fashion :

What do you know about Symbols?



- ❖ Thereafter the worksheet had questions related to the various depictions on the seal, its function, size and the raw material out of which it might have been made.

- ❖ The pattern of questions was multiple choice questions as well as open ended questions. This allows children to focus on writing their views openly without stressing much on each and every aspect they can recollect. Some hints they get enable them to think better and respond further.
- ❖ A logical effort was made in the last question on worksheet to ask students about description of a seal in their own words. The results were like



The Outcome of Activity and the Main Highlights -

Students were in good mood after completing the worksheet and were enthusiastic to see the actual seal in gallery and brief PowerPoint presentation which was shown after the worksheet activity. The result was that students took along a lot of new information they might not have thought earlier during the monotonous school sessions/ classes. For some years now, museums have been regarded, in the legal sense, as ‘educational institutions’ (Olofsson 1979: 21). Active learning is often translated into physical activity associated with learning; thus the common reference to “hands-on” learning (Hein 1998:30). So letting students actively participate in a particular concept enables better understanding and innovative answers. The museums help to supplement the inevitable gaps that such teaching

cannot fill, even when audio-visual materials are also employed for the purpose (Banerjee 1990:130).

Also a clay workshop was organized for school students, on similar theme, allowed a deeper understanding of the concept of clay art or terracotta in Harappan civilisation. Original archaeological specimens were shown; images of artefacts and few replicas were compiled for the workshop.

The visual aids amalgamated with the imagination of children created wonderful pieces of molded clay figurines that resembled many TC artefacts of Indus Valley terracotta such as wheel carts, bull heads, mother goddesses, bangles, weights etc. Thus the purpose of conducting the workshop proved to be fruitful.

What can be added to such activities for school children –

Outdoor visit to a museum and such places relieves a teacher from taking monotonous classes and in turn creates learning a fun activity. It creates the sparks of knowledge that can be gathered out of the periphery of school.

Similar activities were conducted in Allahabad Museum, Uttar Pradesh and thereafter in National Science Centre, New Delhi, which enabled in deepening the understanding of research's myriad outcomes. The researcher acted as a resource person in these activities.

Students of various schools were also guided by the researcher at archaeological sites like Lothal and Dholavira, that bear the testimonies of ancient civilizations and there antiquities are housed in museums near the actual site. Activities conducted here were in a different form rather than doing sheets. It was a kind of putting down the impressions on paper, drawing, labeling and also in form of models of clay.

Museums in action - Allahabad Museum

Museums add special values to the formal school and college education system, as part of the informal sector of education (Boylan 2004: 119). To name one museum

is the Allahabad museum that is consistently in news because of its undying effort to create awareness among youth and children about their rich heritage. The galleries at Allahabad Museum showcases archaeology collections pertaining to sites of Harappan civilization, Kaushambi, Rock art sites of the Northern Vindhyan region, sculptures from across the regions of India.

This museum was chosen as an apt source of active learning as it was directly related to archaeology as a subject of didactic source. Series of astonishing outcomes were received in the form of creative replicas, written feedbacks, innovative drawings and oral session on the archaeology as a subject of exploration.

Through these interactions students were encouraged to ask questions, explore other collection within the museum, and then select what they like the most. Transferring the viewed objects and the acquired knowledge into an artistic form can deepen the learning and the sensory experience (Boylan 2004: 126). It was a remarkable highlight that actually all the participants were choosing variety and not sticking to a particular exhibit or an easier shape. They actually saw the galleries on the whole and then made the appropriate choice for their sketch or outputs. Participants were enthusiastic and spent quality time to put their creativity onto paper and later their oral feedback was expressive and fruitful about experiences they had in the gallery observation. Experience with the mixed age group participants provided some splendid outcomes that were ranging from basic coloring sheets to the exuberant pencil sketches. Experiments on pottery were also done later with same enthusiasm by the Museum.

Interactive Digital Approach- National Science Centre-

National Science Centre, Delhi has remarkably developed a unique way of presenting concepts, which can be experienced through various senses. The entire area of Centre has in total nine galleries to explore, which continue in a sequence, taking the visitor (connecting) move from one gallery to another.

Following the footprints of ancient scholars and their vital contributions, an informative gallery was developed to provide glimpses of Indian Heritage.

Exploring these advancements through hands-on exhibits is a perfect mode of learning the rendezvous of Indian heritage with science & technology.

The *Heritage gallery* exhibition itself is splendidly rich with diorama representations, replicas, reconstructions, informative labels, touch screen multimedia aids, and other audio-visual aids, along with some artefacts, maps and interesting models. As one explores these amazing artefacts, the journey in gallery becomes more interesting.

Researcher acted as a resource person and oriented children (visiting with or without family or friend) about the significance of archaeological display and the purpose of this section being the first in *Heritage gallery*.

Students, who were selected to do a page of worksheet, created by the researcher, were observed and oriented about the purpose of this data collection, and its significance for the research study. It was observed that those visitors that had read (in school) some or the other aspect displayed in gallery, were more enthusiastic to perform the worksheet doing procedure and completed the worksheet page in an appropriate manner. Mostly the selected students were above 10 years of age. This was a different kind of display that kept children engaged in archaeological collection and mysteries.

All the written forms till now were used in Pre-visit and during the visit. But there is a special charm in developing data through Post-visit worksheet as that actually tells the effectiveness of the display at the museum and its label information content.

Significance of Post – visit Worksheet and its Highlights –

A great advantage of matched pre- and post- assessments of any kind is that behavior can be compared rather than measured absolutely (Hein 1998:121). A school visit was again conducted to museum of Department of Archaeology and Ancient history. The pattern of questions were different and activities were different which included information related to seal. The students were of NCERT board, so were able to respond very effectively. Most of them were able to answer correctly the name of seal (few pictures of seals are also in NCERT books with more information). Also name of Harappan sites were known to them which was

part of extra information as students have visited the gallery and responded afterwards. Post-Visit worksheet was a better form to arrive at the conclusion that museum touched the cognitive levels of children effectively and enhanced their understanding towards archaeological perspective.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that the syllabus and teaching style in schools must be accompanied by museum education as when education crosses the formal boundaries of four walls, the knowledge existing beyond can be used and imbibed efficiently. Children need time, usually more than one visit, to become oriented to a museum. Children orient themselves, engage in fantasy play, carry out investigations, and generally interact with objects (Hein 1998:142). Museums are excellent centers of informal education and provide a visual aid as well as pool of information that cannot be filled in books. Archaeology is a specialized field of knowledge that needs to be explored beyond books. So museum comes to the rescue for this task. Black-board illustrations, photographs, coloured drawings, lantern demonstrations, are all excellent in their way, but as a rule, a lesson from the object itself is superior to one from a picture of the object. Size, in particular, is a characteristic which is very imperfectly, and often inaccurately, learnt from a drawing (Murray 1904: 260). The pooling of resources found in museums, schools, libraries and archives by making-up small teaching packages, portable exhibitions, 'kits', has often been reported during museum conferences (Olofsson 1979: 24). Many museums in India are creating kits to tackle this idea too.

Every object has a different story to tell about its origin and existence. The visual impact of an artefact appeals the eye, enhances the learning and inculcates the understanding about the facets of Archaeology. Every ancient civilisation had a unique perception of using resources and technology at its best. A museum should illustrate the growth and development of civilisation and the arts (Murray 1904: 266).

The opportunity to see, touch and interact with objects first hand had a profound effect on learning and impressed and affected students in many different ways

(Clarke et al. 2002: 9). Everything is there for us to explore, the urge has to be created to look for more. Archaeological material was unearthed from outside the four walls of any museum or building premises, it had a curiosity so why not go beyond the school premises and unravel these mysteries as and when they can be experienced through sense of vision and touch.

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