

From Harappan Toys to Living Traditions: An Analysis of Toys and Cart Models at the National Museum, New Delhi

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Abstract

The Harappan Civilization (c. 2600-1900 BCE) has yielded a rich assemblage of material remains that provide valuable insights into the social and cultural life of its people. Among these, terracotta toys and cart models occupy a distinctive place as indicators of childhood, craftsmanship, transportation technology, and popular traditions. The present paper is based on a field visit to the Harappan Gallery of the National Museum, New Delhi, where a variety of terracotta toys, zoomorphic figurines, cart models, and terracotta wheels are displayed. Through direct observation and archaeological interpretation, the study examines the form, function, and cultural significance of these artefacts. Furthermore, it explores the continuity of similar traditions in contemporary folk communities, demonstrating how ancient practices of toy-making and cart modelling continue to survive in various regions of the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Harappan Civilization, National Museum, Terracotta Toys, Cart Models, Material Culture, Folk Tradition, Cultural Continuity.

Introduction

The Harappan Civilization (2600-1900 B.C.) represents one of the earliest urban traditions of South Asia, distinguished by its well-planned cities, specialized crafts, long-distance trade networks, and highly developed material culture. While monumental architecture, seals, inscriptions, and ceramics have received considerable scholarly attention, smaller artefacts such as terracotta toys and miniature cart models provide equally valuable insights into the everyday life of Harappan society. These objects reflect various aspects of childhood, recreation, craft production, transportation technology, animal husbandry, and the socio-cultural practices of one of the world's earliest urban civilizations.

Almost all major urban centres of Harappan civilizations have yielded a wide variety of terracotta toys such as animal figurines, rattles, whistles, miniature vessels, wheeled toys, and cart models, etc. Their widespread occurrence suggests that play and recreation formed an integral part of Harappan society.

The National Museum in New Delhi occupies a distinguished position as the premier repository of India's archaeological, artistic, and historical treasures. Originating from an Exhibition of Indian Art organized by the Royal Academy, London, during 1947-48, the museum was formally inaugurated in 1949 and has since expanded to house nearly 200,000 objects. Among its diverse exhibits, the Harappan Gallery stands out as a critical section, displaying a rich collection of artefacts that provide invaluable insights into the social, economic, and technological fabric of the Harappan Civilization. Particularly noteworthy within

this collection are the terracotta toys and miniature carts, which represent some of the most vivid and relatable expressions of everyday life of the Harappan period.

Although Harappan toys and cart models have been discussed in archaeological literature, previous studies have primarily focused on their typology, chronology, craftsmanship, and symbolic significance. Compared to their interpretation through museum collections and their relationship with surviving folk traditions, comparatively little attention has been devoted to them. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by examining the toys and cart models displayed in the Harappan Gallery of the National Museum through direct field observations, supported by archaeological excavation reports and ethnographic parallels. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying continuities between Harappan material culture and the living traditions of rural communities in the Indian subcontinent.

Methodology

The present study is based primarily on a field visit to the Harappan Gallery of the National Museum, New Delhi, where detailed observations were made of terracotta toys, cart models, wheels, and related artefacts on display. Notes and photographs were systematically recorded to document their morphology, decorative features, and display context. The museum observations were subsequently supplemented with published excavation reports and standard archaeological literature to facilitate a broader interpretation of the artefacts.

The study adopts a descriptive, comparative, and ethnoarchaeological approach. For analytical purposes, the museum objects have been classified into six broad categories: (i) rattles and whistles, (ii) animal and bird figurines, (iii) miniature vessels and utensils, (iv) cart models and terracotta wheels, (v) gaming objects, category has been analysed with reference to its morphology, probable function, archaeological context, and distribution across Harappan sites.

To understand the cultural significance of these artefacts beyond their archaeological context, the museum observations have been compared with evidence from published excavation reports and ethnographic observations of living folk traditions. This integrated approach enables a better understanding of both the archaeological significance of Harappan toys and their enduring legacy within the material culture of contemporary South Asian folk traditions.

Rattles (Jhunjhunās)

Harappan rattles are typically hollow and spherical, filled with small pellets, pebbles, or clay particles that create sound when shaken. These terracotta rattles have been found at several significant Harappan sites, such as Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro, and Lothal. Vats¹ noted that the rattles from Harappa are generally simple and spherical, often featuring handles, although some examples are turnip-shaped, with diameters ranging from approximately 1.2 to 2 inches. In contrast, the rattles discovered at Chanhudaro² (fig.2) are more intricately decorated than those from Harappa and Mohenjodaro.

The rattles displayed in the Harappan Gallery of the Museum come in various forms, including plain, undecorated versions as well as those adorned with painted motifs and perforated surfaces (fig.1). The perforations may have improved their acoustic qualities or served decorative functions. Notably, these rattles lack any joints. They are widely regarded as toys designed for infants and young children. Their hollow design and sound-producing mechanism closely resemble contemporary rattles used to entertain children, indicating that they likely served a similar purpose in Harappan society.

The tradition of using rattles persists to this day. Modern rattles show striking similarities in both form and function to their Harappan predecessors. According to Kenoyer, traditional communities in Pakistan still utilize terracotta rattles (jhankariyan) to create sound during performances by magicians. In various regions of India, traditional rattles are also crafted from palm leaves (fig.3), reeds (Sarkanda), and other locally sourced materials, while plastic and wooden rattles have become increasingly prevalent in urban areas. Although the materials used in their production have evolved, their primary function of providing amusement and sensory stimulation for children through sound has remained fundamentally unchanged, illustrating a remarkable continuity in this tradition.



(Fig.1,2 & 3) Rattle display in National Museum Rattle, Chanhudaro Palm leaf rattle
(P.C. Harappa.com, online source)

Whistles

Terracotta whistles represent a significant category of toys from the Harappan civilization. The majority of these whistles are designed in the likeness of birds, such as pigeons or partridges, featuring a small hole at the back that allows for sound production (fig.5). These terracotta instruments were likely created for the entertainment of children. The bird-shaped whistles displayed in the Museum are typically simple and lack decoration (fig.4).

Numerous examples of such whistles have been discovered at various Harappan sites, including Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro, and Lothal, indicating their widespread presence across the Harappan cultural area. Their striking similarity to contemporary whistles implies that they were primarily utilized as sound-producing toys for children, playing a vital role in daily domestic life.

The practice of crafting bird-shaped whistles persists in many regions of South Asia. As noted by Kenoyer, traditional communities in Sindh frequently employ clay bird whistles to attract or summon domesticated birds. Similar terracotta bird whistles have also been documented during field studies in the craft villages of Shilpgram, Udaipur (Rajasthan), where they are still produced and marketed by traditional potter communities (fig.6). Despite the nearly four-millennia gap, these modern examples bear a close resemblance to their Harappan predecessors in both design and purpose. Such continuities underscore the resilience of indigenous craft traditions and illustrate the lasting impact of Harappan toy-making practices within the living folk culture of the Indian subcontinent.



(Fig.4,5&6) Whistles display in Whistle, Chanhudaro National Museum
 (P.C. Brooklyn Museum rattle, Udaipur, Rajasthan galley, online source)

Balls and Marbles

Among the items showcased in the Gallery of the National Museum are various balls and marbles, which represent a significant category of recreational objects from the Harappan era. The displayed specimens differ in size and material (fig.7), highlighting the variety of playthings available to children during the Indus Civilization. Archaeological findings suggest that Harappan balls and marbles were crafted from terracotta, faience, stone, and shell. Their classification seems to be primarily determined by size: objects with a diameter of approximately 1.9-4.4 cm are typically classified as balls, while smaller items, around 1.3 cm in diameter, are recognized as marbles.

The artifacts unearthed from Harappa and Mohenjodaro include meticulously shaped and polished stone balls made from agate, slate, limestone, chert, and alabaster. Harappa has also produced items made from yellow Jaisalmer stone, carnelian, and hornblende. Faience balls are occasionally adorned with black painted bands, while shell specimens often feature incised concentric circles and signs of wear, indicating extended use.⁴ Terracotta balls found at sites such as Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro, Kotdiji, Amri, Sarai Khola, Kalibangan, Lothal, and Banawali illustrate the widespread presence of these objects throughout the Harappan cultural region.

The existence of these items in the museum offers significant insights into the recreational activities of Harappan children. Given that the balls do not have perforations or suspension holes, it is likely that they were designed for games rather than decorative purposes. Smaller stone items likely served as marbles, suggesting that games requiring skill, precision, and coordination were already integral to Harappan childhood.

The tradition of playing with marbles continues across the Indian subcontinent today. In northern India, the game is commonly known as kancha, while in southern India it is called goli gundu. Players place marbles within a circle drawn on the ground and attempt to strike them out using their thumb and forefinger⁵ (fig.8).



(Fig.7&8) Balls and marbles Display in the National Museum
 Game of marbles in present time.

Miniature Vessels and Utensils

The Gallery displayed miniature terracotta vessels that include a range of small pots, bowls, jars, dishes, and other clay containers. Many of these items are characterized by irregular shapes, asymmetry, and a rough finish, suggesting they may have been crafted by children as part of their learning and play. Conversely, several pieces display exceptional craftsmanship, uniformity, and meticulous finishing, indicating they were made by skilled potters for the specific use of children. Miniature terracotta vessels have been found at every Harappan site.



In contrast, some miniature vessels are expertly crafted, well-proportioned, and intricately decorated, signifying that they were produced by skilled artisans for children's use. While some scholars propose that these miniature items may have had ritualistic or domestic ceremonial functions, such as household worship or symbolic rituals, it is also plausible that many served as toys for children. Their varied forms and straightforward designs highlight this multifunctional aspect.

The practice of utilizing miniature clay utensils persists in numerous rural communities across India. Children continue to engage with miniature earthen bowls, pots, baskets, and cooking vessels, especially during village fairs, festivals, and traditional celebrations, illustrating the enduring nature of this ancient folk tradition.



(Fig. 9 &10) Miniature vessels,
National Museum, New Delhi

Miniature vessels from Khavda,
Kutch, Gujarat

Animal and Bird Figurines

The Gallery displays an impressive collection of terracotta animal figurines, representing one of the largest categories of toys produced by the Indus Civilization. These handcrafted models depict both domesticated and wild animals, including bulls, dogs, sheep, pigs, rhinoceroses, monkeys, rams, squirrels, snakes, and tortoises, reflecting the close relationship between the Harappans and their natural environment.

Among the exhibits, the humped zebu bull is the most frequently represented animal. The figurines occur in several forms, including humped and humpless bulls, as well as short-horned and long-horned varieties.

Carefully modelled humps, horns, muscular bodies, and facial features demonstrate the remarkable craftsmanship and keen observation of Harappan artisans.

The tradition of modelling animals in clay originated during the Neolithic period at Mehrgarh and reached a high level of artistic refinement during the Harappan Civilization. Many figurines displayed in the gallery preserve distinctive decorative features, including incised lines, painted details, and wavy patterns on the neck, illustrating the regional artistic styles and technical sophistication of Harappan terracotta craftsmanship.

The gallery also displays terracotta monkey figurines portrayed in lively postures such as climbing, sitting, and resting (fig.11). Similar examples have been recovered from Harappa⁶, Mohenjodaro⁷, Chanhudaro⁸, and other Harappan sites.



(fig.11) Monkey display in the National Museum

One example of a bull figurine exhibits movable heads or perforations for attaching wheels, clearly indicating their use as children's toys (fig.12). Wheeled bulls, detachable animal heads, and pull-toys demonstrate the ingenuity of Harappan craftsmen in producing mechanically movable toys.



(fig.12) Bull figurines, from Mohenjodaro, are displayed in the Museum gallery

The impressive collection of terracotta bird figurines illustrates the Harappans' close observation of their natural environment. Representations include parrots, pigeons, peacocks, ducks, sparrows, and hens, etc. Parrot figurines are particularly distinctive, with carefully modelled curved beaks and, in some cases, suggesting familiarity with domesticated birds. Peacocks are portrayed with gracefully modelled bodies and raised tails, while pigeons and sparrows are rendered in simple yet naturalistic forms. Several hollow bird figurines functioned as whistles, serving both recreational and decorative purposes.

One of the most remarkable exhibits is a pear-shaped terracotta bird cage (fig.13b). Similar examples are also preserved in the Lothal Site Museum. These artefacts suggest that keeping pet birds was a familiar pastime in the Harappan period and provide archaeological evidence for a tradition that continues in many parts of South Asia today.



(Fig.13a,b) Peacock and Pear-shaped terracotta bird cage

The tradition of making clay animal and bird toys continues across many regions of India. Potter communities in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh continue to produce handmade terracotta bulls, horses, elephants, birds, and other animal figures for village fairs and religious festivals. During the Pola festival in Maharashtra, children play with painted clay bulls, while clay parrots, pigeons, and other bird toys remain popular in rural markets. Similar handmade animal and bird figurines are also produced in the craft centres of Khavda and Bhujodi in Kutch.

The striking resemblance between Harappan terracotta figurines and their modern counterparts in subject matter, craftsmanship, and function demonstrates the remarkable continuity of India's folk craft traditions. The objects displayed in the National Museum, therefore, represent not only archaeological remains of the Indus Civilization but also enduring expressions of a living cultural heritage that has continued for more than four thousand years.

Carts and Wheels

The inhabitants of the Harappan Civilization, who occupied the extensive alluvial plains of the Indus region, had developed various types of two-wheeled carts, as evidenced by numerous terracotta cart models recovered from archaeological excavations. Scholars generally agree that these miniature carts represent replicas of actual wooden vehicles used for transportation. The terracotta models are frequently found together with solid wheels, cart frames, and occasionally bull figurines, indicating that wooden carts fitted with solid wheels and drawn by oxen formed an important component of Harappan transport technology.

The cart-related artefacts displayed in the Harappan Gallery of the Museum can be broadly classified into three categories: (1) wheels, (2) cart frames, and (3) bullock-cart models. Together, these objects provide important evidence for Harappan transport technology and children's toys.

Wheels

The gallery displays several terracotta wheels that once formed part of miniature toy carts. These wheels are generally solid, circular, and well-fired, reflecting the standardized craftsmanship of Harappan potters. Most examples exhibit a projecting conical hub on one side and a central perforation for fixing the wheel onto an axle, while a few hubless specimens are also represented. Similar wheels have been recovered from major Harappan sites, including Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Kot Diji, Sarai Khola, and Kalibangan, indicating their widespread use across the Harappan cultural region.

The wheels generally range in diameter from 6.4 to 11.4 cm and feature several decorative elements, including concentric circles, radiating lines, and small circular impressions. In some examples, traces of black or red paint imitate spokes, suggesting that Harappan craftsmen sought to reproduce the appearance

of actual wooden wheels in miniature form. The central perforation clearly indicates that these wheels were designed to rotate on an axle (fig.14).

Some of the displayed wheels also exhibit signs of wear, implying that they were functional components of toy carts rather than merely symbolic or decorative objects. These miniature wheels offer valuable evidence for Harappan transport technology, while also highlighting the importance of children's play in everyday life. Their use also finds continuity in the present, where children in many rural parts of India still roll individual wheels with sticks as a traditional game, reflecting the enduring survival of an ancient folk practice (fig 15).



(Fig.14&15) Terracotta wheel Boy playing with wheel

Toy Carts

These miniature models of toy carts represent two-wheeled vehicles and are generally made with two side panels connected by three transverse bars. Horizontal perforations through the frame were designed to accommodate wooden rods that held the axle and, in some cases, supported a canopy or superstructure. The displayed specimens vary in size but demonstrate remarkable uniformity in their overall construction and design.

Archaeological evidence indicates that terracotta cart models first appeared during the Ravi phase at Harappa and became increasingly diversified during the Kot Diji phase. Excavations have yielded cart frames from major Harappan sites, including Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Chanhudaro, Kalibangan, Lothal, Alamgirpur, and Banawali. Vats described a distinctive red-painted, truck-shaped terracotta cart from Harappa whose form resembles a modern tipping truck⁹.

The cart models exhibited in the museum are widely regarded as miniature representations of actual wooden vehicles used for transport in the Harappan period. Their carefully modelled structure, provision for movable wheels, and standardized construction indicate that they were not merely children's toys but also reflected contemporary transport technology and everyday life.



Frame and toy cart

Bullock Carts

One of the finest examples displayed in the museum is the Harappa bullock-cart model from Mohenjodaro possesses a boat-shaped chassis with vertical perforations along both sides and appears to have been drawn

by a pair of humped bulls. Vats (1940) observed that its construction bears a remarkable resemblance to the traditional bullock carts of northern India. The associated bull figurines, representing zebu cattle, emphasize the importance of draft animals in Harappan transport and agricultural activities.

The solid terracotta wheels attached to these models often bear incised lines or painted designs suggesting spokes, demonstrating a balance between artistic simplification and realistic representation. Their careful workmanship indicates that they were not merely symbolic objects but functional toys designed to imitate actual wooden carts used in Harappan society. Kenoyer (1998) similarly argues that Harappan toy carts faithfully reproduce the construction of contemporary wooden transport vehicles, providing important evidence for ancient cart technology.

The tradition of making miniature bullock carts has continued in many parts of India. During festivals such as Diwali and village fairs, potter communities still manufacture toy bullock carts from clay, often decorating them with natural pigments. These toys symbolize rural transport, agriculture, and village life and continue to be popular among children. The striking similarity between Harappan bullock-cart models displayed in the National Museum and modern folk toys demonstrates the remarkable continuity of India's craft traditions. Thus, these museum objects represent not only archaeological evidence of Harappan transport technology but also a living cultural tradition that has survived for over four millennia.



(Fig.16&17) Terracotta bullock-cart,
National Museum, New Delhi



Present time terracotta
bullock-cart

Discussion

The terracotta toys and miniature cart models displayed in the Harappan Gallery of the National Museum, New Delhi, offer an intimate glimpse into the everyday life of the Indus Civilization beyond its monumental architecture and urban planning. Objects such as rattles, whistles, miniature vessels, animal and bird figurines, gaming objects, terracotta wheels, toy carts, and bullock-cart models reveal that Harappan society possessed a rich tradition of childhood recreation, skilled craftsmanship, technological innovation, and close interaction with the natural environment. The study further demonstrates that many of these objects possess remarkable ethnographic parallels in the living traditions of rural India. Miniature clay utensils, terracotta whistles, wheeled pull-toys, bullock-cart models, marbles, and handmade animal figurines continue to be produced by traditional potter communities and remain an integral part of village fairs, festivals, and children's play. Such continuities indicate that several elements of Harappan material culture have survived through folk traditions for more than four millennia.

The National Museum plays a vital role in preserving, interpreting, and communicating this cultural continuity. By bringing together artefacts excavated from numerous Harappan sites within a single gallery, the museum transforms isolated archaeological discoveries into a coherent narrative of the civilization's social and cultural life. The displays enable visitors to visualize how Harappan children played, how

wheeled transport functioned, how artisans expressed their creativity through terracotta, and how many of these traditions continue to survive in contemporary rural communities.

This study also demonstrates the value of museum-based archaeological research. Direct examination of museum collections, when integrated with excavation reports and ethnographic evidence, provides a more comprehensive understanding of artefacts than typological analysis alone. The Harappan Gallery illustrates how museum collections can serve as an effective bridge between archaeology, material culture studies, folklore, and public heritage.

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