The immortals of Harappa

Ancient citadels, dry well and intriguing scripts... Dholavira is a magical ghost town mirroring a civilisation that thrived here millennia ago

On a windy and wintry January morning, I eased the handbrake of my car, shifted gears and pointed the bonnet towards Mumbai. In the rearview mirror, I could see the guards dragging shut the doors to the city of Dholavira. My wife, Srividhya and I were totally enthralled by the magical city of Dholavira and the Great Rann.

The reader is well advised to wear the proverbial imagination cap, as you are about to visit an archaeological site where the stones talk to you.

Dholavira is where the remains of a part of the Harappan civilisation exist. The city is located on an island called Khadir Bet and is connected by an umbilical cord of a road which streams across to the mainland. On either side of the road, lies the Great Rann of Kutch. The topography of the land is unforgiving. People adopt various kinds of vehicles for mobility, the discomfort surrounded with a stoic smile and the super white of their clothes.

The inhabitants of Dholavira were master water conservationists. No significant rivers were flowing by, just two rivulets — Mansar and Manhar. Nine reservoirs were built around the city to store water. The city itself is divided into three parts — the Citadel, the Middletown and the Lower town. A ramp which runs for about 30-40 feet turns left into the citadel. On the right of the ramp is a large tract of open land, which has been identified as a stadium. On either side of the stadium, one can still find remains of spectator stands.

Remains of the day

As you enter through the halved gates of the Citadel, you notice raised platforms on either side and a rectangular chamber on the right. Ten mysterious alphabets on a wooden board intrigue you. Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has taken an imprint of the alphabets on a blue board which is carefully placed on the rectangular chamber.

You reach a flat piece of land on which several houses stood. Children would have played in the courtyard. On the far left, two pillars embedded in the ground scream for attention.

Jaimal Makwana, our guide, said that they still do not have any clue on its purpose.

There is a well, which is now closed by an iron grill. At its mouth, there lies a massive stone slab with cuts — some thick, and some thin. Our guide said the ASI team was stumped when they excavated the well and tried to imagine how the water would have been drawn. They used two types of ropes — the thick varthadi, and the thin varthadi. Big water bags were used to draw water from the well, and bulls pulled the ropes. These practices have been passed on to succeeding generations.

Reservoirs are built partly on stone beds, and partially mason made. The tanks are fed by aqueducts which collect water from various parts of the city. The reservoir consists of two levels. The higher level will hold the clean water, and the lower level, which is like a step down, will allow sedimentation to happen, wherein the dust will settle at the base of the reservoir.

Ancient water conservationists

On the east side of the site lies the Middle town and the Lower town. The Middle Town consists of a central street running down a slope with houses/shops on either side. Well-laid drainage systems are seen, and ‘save every drop of water’ is the central theme. Earthen pots were found embedded in the ground, and in one peculiar case, on a raised platform covered in soot.

The Lower Town was populated by the working class. There are remnants of many houses. Nature bound the inhabitants to stay, and later Nature willed them to migrate. Who knows, dear reader, your ancestors would have been a part of the huddle over the bonfire.