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ARCHAEOLOGY

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Behold the Holy City Where Krishna Was Prince

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The story of the tragic end of the fabulous city of Dvaraka has long been regarded as mere legend--that is, until an ambitious archeologist, Dr. S. R. Rao, began to investigate stone ruins sunk in the sea off the Kathiawar peninsula on India's western coast. The area lies, logically enough, adjacent to the modern city of Dwarka. Dr. Rao believes those sunken ruins to be Krishna's city, destroyed by a massive earthquake and tsunami. While such a catastrophic end might have seemed far-fetched a few years ago, the 2004 South Asian tsunami demonstrated to humanity once again the tremendous power of these cataclysmic natural events. Historically, decimation of coastal cities is more common than one might think. Less than 200 years ago, in 1819, in the same region of India, an earthquake sank the fort of Sindree and its surrounding village into the ocean. In November, 1775, in just ten minutes, a 9.0 quake destroyed the greater part of the coastal city of Lisbon, Portugal; one section of the city was submerged 600 feet.

Dr. Rao's underwater exploration of the ruins off modern Dwarka (as it is spelled on maps) suggests destruction was sudden and violent, with the ocean overwhelming walls and swallowing the city whole, just as described in the Mahabharata. "Dvaraka was submerged by tsunami-like high-energy waves, pulling down heavy blocks of stone used in the construction of the structures, " he told the 7th National Conference on Marine Archaeology at the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) in October, 2005. "The heavy stones and rocks used in making the forts and gateways could not be destroyed by simple cyclones."

Dr. Shikaripura Ranganatha Rao's indomitable efforts in Dvaraka and later elsewhere have made India a leading force in marine archeology, even though he officially retired from the Archaeological Survey of India in 1980. The Survey, unwilling to part with Rao, enticed him back to found the now-renowned Indian National Institute of Oceanography. Among the many projects he became involved with, nothing has fired his talents and passion more than the offshore ruins in Gujarat.

The search for the lost city of Dvaraka had been going on since the 1930s, but with no success. The stone ruins off Dwarka, barely discernible from above water, could not be adequately studied prior to improvements in the field of underwater research. In 1983, Dr. Rao led the work of the Marine Archaeology Unit of the National Institute of Oceanography in studying these ruins. They started by examining what lay above sea level, to better understand what would be found under the water. In the center of modern Dwarka, beneath an ancient temple, Rao discovered layer upon layer of ruins, revealing a history of construction that included two earlier temples, an entire wall and figures of Vishnu. Digging further, he found the eroded remains of a town. Reaching sea level, which he estimates to represent about 1500 bce, he recovered red pottery that is characteristic of that period. The next phase of work would take him further down, below sea level, and thus further back in time.

Explorations between 1983 and 1990 revealed a well-fortified township, extending more than half a mile from the present shoreline and now mostly lying from 9 to 50 feet below sea level. Dr. Rao reasons that the submerged ruins date to 1700 or 1800 bce. His underwater explorations yielded large bastions, fort walls, two gateways and three-holed anchors, which he says demonstrate an evolution from earlier, single-holed anchors he previously found in Lothal and Mohenjo-daro. Dr. Rao is convinced that the underwater ruins match the Dvaraka of the Mahabharata. "You see, " he begins, his energy and vigor belying his 85 years, "when Krishna comes with Arjuna to see the city, there is mention of the fort walls and the antahpurās, citadels, describing a fully equipped, fortified town. We have found these structures, six sectors and fortified parts of the city. The plan and certain details described in the Mahabharata match the archeological findings." Dr. Rao goes on to describe a submerged area covering at least 2,000 by 5,000 feet, or 235 acres, with houses, a temple, public buildings and semicircular bastions that had been designed to divert the waters and protect the city from sea storms. The city's walls were erected on a foundation of boulders, showing that the land was reclaimed from the sea. The layout of the city is in alignment with the temples onshore in modern Dwarka.

It was the discovery of a seal (photo, right) that convinced Dr. Rao he had found Krishna's city. The seal is engraved with the images of a bull, a goat and a unicorn in an unmistakable style--a motif he says is no doubt of Indus origin and goes back to the 16th or 17th century bce. It is a small, flat artifact, no bigger than the palm of your hand, carved from a conch shell. This, Rao believes, is a seal of free pass: only those carrying it were allowed to enter the fabled city. "There is a reference in the Mahabharata," he explains, "that when Dvaraka was attacked by king Shalva, Krishna was not there. Upon his return, Krishna takes certain measures to defend the city. One of them is described to be a mudra seal, an identity that every citizen of Dvaraka must carry. It was the duty of the gatekeepers to make sure that absolutely nobody without this seal would have entered the city. This gave us reliable evidence to identify these ruins, where we found the seal, as Krishna's Dvaraka. Finding this mudra was very exciting." Skeptics point out, however, that the discovery of a single seal, which could even have come from another area, is not irrefutable evidence of the city's identity.

Dr. Rao contends that a scripted piece of fired pottery found underwater provides further dating evidence. Using thermoluminescence analysis (useful on any object that has been heated, but having an error of plus or minus several hundred years), he dates it to the late Harappan period, about 1,700 bce. Using his own system of translation of the Harappan script, he believes the shard reads, "Mahagacha-sha-pa," or "Sea God protect." Dr. Rao's translation system, while regarded as a step in the right direction, is not accepted by some linguists.

Critics also point out that only the Mahabharata describes the destruction of Dvaraka as being "a matter of a few moments." The Harivamsha and the Matsya Purana state that it took seven days to vacate Dvaraka before it was submerged by the sea. Dr. Rajiv Nigam, head of the geological division of the National Institute of Oceanography, and some other scientists believe in this more gradual submergence of the city.

Another issue is that Dr. Rao's dating of 1700 bce does not agree with the traditional dating of this event. Based on the Indian calendar, some Indian historians hold that the destruction of Dvaraka took place around 3200 bce. This event marked the beginning of the Kali Yuga, our present age when ignorance and darkness prevail in the world.

In spite of the objections, Dr. Rao's evidence is exciting and compelling. It is difficult

to dispute that he has found an ancient submerged city; the question is whether or not it is Krishna's Dvaraka. In either case, it is an enchanting doorway to an important part of India's history. Dr. Rao wants the ruins preserved, protected and available. He proposes, "In my concept, tourists or even scientists could go around the structural remains of Dvaraka, in the sea, inside a giant acrylic tube to see the ancient city. Let us hope that some day the project will be taken up." The State Government of Gujarat and the Travel & Tourism Department are working on his proposal, which could give rise to the world's the first underwater museum. Rao's work with Dvaraka is part of growing international interest in near-shore archeology which has turned up remarkable discoveries, as in Mahabalipuram, In this growing field of research, the future might reveal much more of India's fascinating and still hidden past.

The Beauty and Tragic End of Krishna's City

The Mahabharata tells the story of holy Dvaraka, home to Lord Krishna in the last decades of his life. It is said that to avoid conflict with the powerful king of Magadha, a sworn enemy that had attacked them repeatedly, the Yadava clan of Krishna left their home in Mathura and fled to the west. Finding a delightful, peaceful place, they created a city to be their capital. It was made into a safe heaven, a fortress to withstand the fierce wars of the time. The Mahabharata recounts, "The city was well fortified on all sides, with arches, combatants and walls and turrets, and engines and streets barricaded with spiked wood-works, towers and edifices."

Descriptions of Dvaraka give a glimpse into the beauty which Krishna imbued into his city. "Arjuna could see the splendid fortress city from a distance, shining like the sun on the horizon. It could only be reached by passing along a heavily guarded gate. Tall flags lined the roofs of mansions, and the ground was strewn with flower petals. As Krishna's chariot moved slowly toward his father's palace, Krishna saw the opulence of his city--the orchards and flower gardens, the beautiful lakes teeming with swans and thick with red and blue lotuses. Golden archways studded with precious stones stood at every crossroad, and white mansions lined the roads."

Some texts record that the city was designed by Tvastar, the architect of the gods. It is praised in the Bhagavad Purana, the Skanda Purana, the Vishnu Purana, the Harivamsha and the Mahabharata, all boasting Dvaraka's unsurpassed beauty and

referring to it as the Golden City. "In the city, gardens flourished with celestial trees and the gold-towered buildings had balconies of crystal, " says the Vishnu Purana.

After the epic Kurukshetra war ended with the victory of the virtuous Pandavas, Lord Krishna retired to live in Dvaraka for thirty-six years. Ill omens hinted at the shadows of the upcoming Kali Yuga: fratricide fights broke out between the Yadavas; hideous spirits traversed the skies, and Yama, God of Death, was seen in every household.

Distraught, Krishna retired into the forest and sat under a tree in meditation. A hunter mistook his partly visible foot for a deer and shot an arrow, mortally wounding Krishna. Not long afterwards, the sea mercilessly devoured the fabled city of Dvaraka.