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Premium

Decode Politics: How \$1 million prize for Indus Valley script is a chapter in Stalin govt's 'Dravidian' narrative

Archaeological digs supported by DMK govt have sought to establish that settlements in TN are contemporaneous to Indus Valley; Stalin ties Indus Valley symbols "similar" to TN sites to broader symbols of Tamil identity.

Written by [Arun Janardhanan](#)
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The Stalin government has claimed that the Keeladi excavations hence narrow the gap between the Indus Valley Civilization and Tamil Nadu settlements. (Photo: X)

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Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin's offer of a \$1 million prize for anyone who deciphers the Indus Valley script serves a purpose beyond solving the lingering mystery regarding the 5,000-year-old civilization.

The announcement on the back of a study by the state Archaeological Department showing many similarities between the signs and graffiti found in Indus Valley and those discovered during digs in Tamil Nadu bolsters attempts by Stalin to recast himself as an upholder of "Dravidian interests" – and to position himself and his party as a staunch opponent of the BJP and its ideology.

*** What is the study that Stalin drew on?**

Authored by researcher K Rajan, and R Sivananthan of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, the study 'Indus Signs And Graffiti Marks of Tamil Nadu – A Morphological Study' involved documentation, digitisation and categorisation of over 15,000 graffiti-bearing pot shards from 140 archaeological sites across Tamil Nadu. These were then compared against 4,000 artefacts recovered from Indus Valley sites, including seals.

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As per the study, 42 'base signs', 544 'variants' and 1,521 'composite forms' were identified at the Tamil Nadu sites. "Out of 42 base signs and their variants, nearly 60% found parallels in the Indus script," the authors wrote. Furthermore, "more than 90% of the graffiti marks of South India and the graffiti marks of the Indus Valley Civilisation had parallels".

The researchers explicitly state that theirs is a "morphological approach" and not linguistic, focusing on physical comparisons, with their observation being that the Indus script may not have disappeared but evolved into different forms. "Extensive comparative study of graffiti marks and Indus scripts... suggests that both are undeciphered signs," the authors wrote.

*** Why are the similarities significant?**

The key excavation sites in Tamil Nadu where the researchers focused were Keeladi, Sivagalai and Thulukarpatti. As per the study, Thulukarpatti alone yielded nearly 5,000 graffiti marks, while in Keeladi, just southeast of Madurai, hundreds of inscribed pot shards were found. These included carnelian beads, agate, black and red ware, and high-tin bronze objects.

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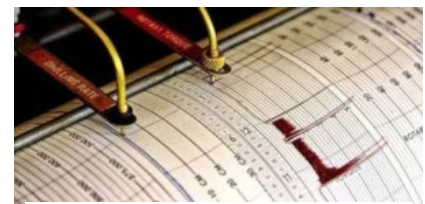
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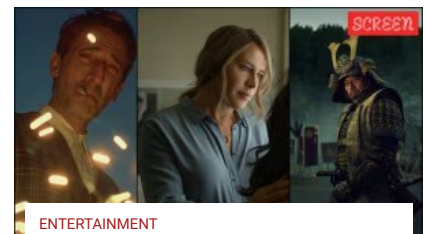
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The occurrence of identical graffiti marks at Indus Valley and South India sites, the study says, suggest a cultural contact between them. The study also says that recent chronometric dates indicate that when the Indus Valley was going through the Copper Age, South India was in the Iron Age (that is, a more advanced period).

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“In this sense, the Iron Age of South India and the Copper Age of Indus are contemporary. If both are contemporary, there is a possibility of cultural exchanges either through direct or intermediate zones,” the study says, adding that more material proof and tangible data were needed to support the view.

*** How does it fit into Tamil Nadu gov't's larger plank?**

In 2019, a DMK government-supported advanced carbon dating of Keeladi artefacts concluded that the Tamil Brahmi script dates back to 600 BCE, much earlier than the previously accepted date of 300 BCE. The Stalin government has claimed that the Keeladi excavations hence narrow the gap between the Indus Valley Civilization and Tamil Nadu settlements.

The dating of the scripts was surrounded by a row as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) had earlier not proceeded with the advanced carbon-dating tests, with an ASI researcher who initiated the study transferred out of the state.

T Udhayachandran, the Tamil Nadu Finance Secretary who is also in-charge of the state Archaeological Department, is a key face behind the Stalin government’s push for these digs. However, the preceding AIADMK government had also persisted in this in the face of alleged dragging of feet by the ASI.

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Proof that civilization developed in the South parallelly with Indus Valley counters the dominant Aryan-centric narrative of the subcontinent’s history – particularly when the BJP dispensation has put its weight behind the theory that Aryans were not “outsiders”.

*** What has Stalin said earlier?**

Two years ago, before he launched the study that has come out with its findings now, Stalin said in the Assembly that his party’s goal was to establish, through scientific methods, that the history of India be rewritten from the Tamil land. He then announced that the state Archaeology Department would begin work on a comparative study of graffiti found in Keeladi and the signs of the Indus Valley Civilization.

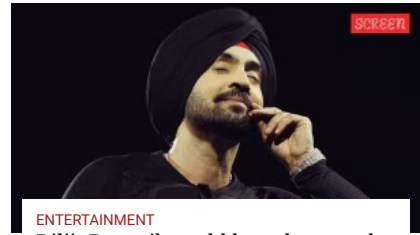
On Sunday, while talking about the findings of the study, he tied it to broader symbols of Tamil identity, particularly linking Indus Valley seals with the image of the bull to the Tamil tradition of bull-taming sports like Jallikattu.

“There were bulls in the Indus Valley. Bulls are Dravidian symbols. Bulls spread from the Indus Valley to Alanganallur (a village near Madurai famous for Jallikattu). Ancient Tamil literature has rich references to bull-taming sport and one of the Indus Valley seals has impressions of a man trying to tame a bull,” Stalin said.

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*** What other steps have been taken by Stalin to claim a distinct ‘Dravidian’ image?**

Soon after he took charge in May 2021, Stalin added the words “Belongs to Dravidian Stock” to his Twitter profile. This phrase harked back to a speech made



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by C N Annadurai, one of the founders of the DMK, in Parliament 59 years ago.

On completion of a year in government, Stalin talked about a 'Dravidian Model of Governance', releasing newspaper advertisements, including in the national capital, talking about the same.

In January 2023, this framing was at the centre of a flare-up between the DMK government and Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi after the latter skipped two portions referring to "Dravidian Model of Development" during his customary speech at the start of an Assembly Session.

After the Tamil Nadu [Budget](#) was presented in 2023, Stalin said it "was a complete example of the Dravidian Model". "When asked about the meaning of the Dravidian Model, I said it was an inclusive growth model," he said in a statement.

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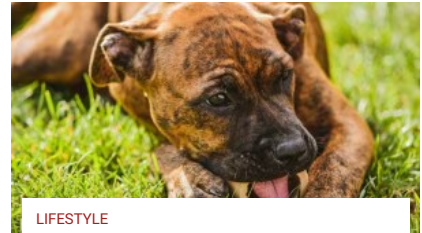
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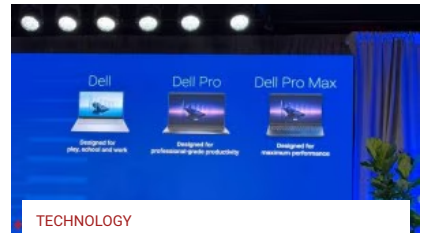
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