



Semiotic Interpretations of the Terracotta Mother Goddess Figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization

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From the vast corpus of sculptural artifacts found in Indian art, one of the most enduring representations has been of the female form. This motif, due to its timelessness and an array of symbolic meanings attached to it, has been a source of inspiration for artists throughout time. The depictions vary widely from votive figures and divine embodiments of the Mother Goddess to images of divinities, sensuous renderings of females in general, as well as representations of the lives of ordinary women. Collectively, these representations reveal a profound cultural preoccupation with fertility, vitality, and regeneration, suggesting that the feminine principle was perceived not merely as a symbol of beauty but as the very source of life and cosmic continuity. Combined with other evidences, the study of human figurines can be employed to provide clues about past cultures, economic conditions and the cultural development of societies.

The earliest known examples of clay artefacts in the Indian subcontinent can be traced to the Harappan Civilisation (c. 2500–1750 BCE). Flourishing along the Indus River, the civilisation is regarded as one of the four great early riverine civilisations of the ancient world, alongside the Mesopotamian Civilisation, which developed around the Tigris and Euphrates; the Egyptian Civilisation, centred on the Nile; and the ancient Chinese Civilisation, which emerged along the Yellow River. At its zenith, the Harappan civilisation was by far the largest among these and spanned across an area of approximately 1.3million km² and possible as much as 3.1 million km², centred on the alluvial Indus and (the now dry) Ghaggar-Hakra-Saraswati River valley, with a wide-ranging trade network (Wankowski, 2006).

The extensive use of clay by the Harappans for pottery, figurines, seals, architecture, and other practices, reflects the importance of clay as a material in the technological, utilitarian, and cultural practices of the Harappan society. Earliest representations in clay in regard to the Harappans exist the form of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes as well as toys meant for leisure. Figurines in similar symbolic and practical contexts are found globally with the onset of early human civilisations. Clay, due to its malleability and tactile ease, which requires little to no technical effort in production has been a perineal choice of medium for creative expressions since the early human societies began to take shape.

Mehragarh, a precursor to the Harappan Civilisation, is an early Neolithic site situated in the Kacchi plains of Balochistan in Pakistan. Dating back to around 7000-2500 BCE, Mehragarh yields impressive examples of the earliest figurine making traditions in South Asia in the form of archaic Mother-

Goddesses. The site was discovered first in 1974 by French archaeologists Jean-François Jarrige and Catherine Jarrige, who subsequently carried out excavations at the site from 1975 to 1986. Mehrgarh's female figurines are endowed with prominent breasts and elaborate headdresses. Research shows that women were deified in their culture. The large breasts and the curvy bodies showing wide hips were not meant to sexualise the female body, but to revere it, it clearly is a representation of motherhood and the creation of life that is attached to a woman, since many recovered figurines are seen to be cradling babies (Latif, H.T., 2021).



(Replicas of female figurines from Mehrgarh by Syeda Rabia Khalid; photos courtesy the artist)

Figure 3: Terracotta replicas of Mehrgarh Figurines. Source: Hassan Tahir Latif

The female figurines of Harappa appear to be closely based upon the pre-established tradition of anthropomorphic representations prevalent during the Mehrgarh culture. (Fig. 1) The precise rationale behind the production of these figurines is a subject of scholarly contention, their pronounced breasts, broad hips, and voluptuous bodies have frequently been interpreted in relation to fertility, fecundity, and the regenerative forces of nature. Such interpretations, however, have been challenged by later scholars, as there is insufficient archaeological evidence to establish that these figurines represented a specific fertility deity or were used exclusively in ritual contexts. This emphasis on female fertility can also be understood in terms of a visual metaphor for agricultural prosperity which formed the core of earlier agrarian societies.

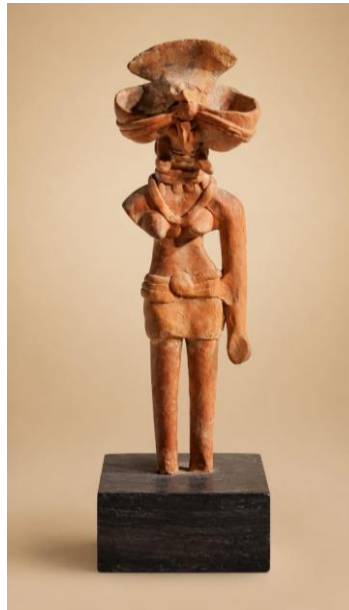


Figure 4: Mother Goddess, Terracotta. National Museum. Source: Self Collected

Figural art was a crucial component of prehistoric social structures, and the female life cycle was at the core of the survival and reproduction of the household. (Pizzeghello, A., et. al., 2015)

The manufacture of terracottas coinciding with the advent of food production was seen as being symptomatic and representative of a belief system based on fertility- the fertility of earth as generator par excellence and female fertility being ensconced in these tiny terracotta representations. (Bharadwaj, D.)

In the Indus Civilization (ca. 2600–1900 BC), a society with no surviving monumental and few large representations of the human body, the body is primarily constituted as relatively small-scale arguably three-dimensional terracotta figurines. Characterized by an emphasis on small elegant art and sophisticated craft technology and a conspicuous absence of monumental art or other sculpture (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 1998), this so-called “faceless civilization” (Possehl, 1998) is most abundantly and richly embodied in the terracotta figurines. The richness and diversity of the Indus terracotta figurine corpus offers provocative insights into Indus ideology and society, despite its still undeciphered script.

The most significant volume of these figurines have been recovered from sites such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Apart from these standing formal ‘headdress’ figurines, (Fig 2) other female-form figurines from some sites engaged in domestic or other activities and holding/breastfeeding children (Wankowski, 2006). (Fig. 3) Marshall (in Clark and Kenoyer, 2017) reports that these ‘headdress’ figurines are very different to those of adjacent contemporaneous civilisations in Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt and Afghanistan, and proposes that this implies a very different societal organisation and culture to those adjacent civilisations (Wankowski, 2006).



Figure 5: Woman breastfeeding infant. Terracotta. National Museum, Delhi. Source: Self collected.

The earliest interpretations regarding the female figurines from Harappa were put forth by Sir John Marshall (1931). Marshall categorises these figurines into two distinct categories based on their inferred symbolic meanings. In the first category are figurines of women engaged in routine activities which he relegates to the status of playthings ‘without any religious meaning’. The other category includes figurines related to reproduction, centred around fertility. These figurines he identifies as having some sort of religio-ritualistic significance. The archetypical Mother-Goddess figurines fall into the latter categorisation. For a long time, research had viewed these figurines in the contextual framework put forth by Marshall. However, this hypothesis was challenged by P.J. Ucko where he submitted that it was unlikely that the figurines served the same single purpose, aspect or deity and urged for a distinction between symbolism of Mother goddesses and the sexless group being dolls. Recent studies put forth through the feminist conceptual frameworks have also questioned these categorisations and inquired if these representations could have other meanings as well that does not necessarily revolve around the reproductive abilities of women.

Earlier scholarship tended to subsume all figurines finds, especially of female figurines, as that of an archetypical mother goddess. Later works by archaeologist P.J. Ucko (1962) focused on examining the figurines themselves and considering what they must have meant to their makers. He argued that applying a single, generalised label to diverse prehistoric figures is methodologically flawed and that many statuettes could have served varied purposes that did not necessarily lean towards religious contexts. Ucko’s critical viewpoint heavily influenced researchers to view these figurines with a greater nuance.

In the words of Meskell (2017), “Figurines does not only sustain, but rather demands multiple viewpoints.” This view enables us to break free from the constraints of what we already know and demands us to probe further into alternate understandings of the object at hand. Was the process of making these figurines of as much significance as the end product? Were there any rituals associated



with the making of these figurines? Were the figurines modelled after or representations of actual women? How exactly were they used? Who were they used by? Were there any customs associated with their discard as well? There are infinite possible ways to look at an archaeological object. Meaning can never be fixed. It continually emerges from acts of engagement and articulation (Meskell, 2017).

These 'headdress' figurines have exclusively been found broken and deposited in waste middens, domestic rubbish pits and house floors with none found in any primary-use context (Biagi, 2004; Clark and Kenoyer, 2017; Insoll, 2017) implying that they were widely available, used ephemerally, possibly used or re-used as toys and then discarded after use (Clark and Kenoyer, 2017; Insoll, 2017) i.e. 'discarded at the end of their social lives' (Clark, 2003). So far, the evidence gained through the re-interpretation of the field inventories from Mohenjo Daro suggests that the majority of the terracotta figurines were not isolated finds but were usually associated with other terracotta images. Thus the figurines were found together with animal representations such as bulls, birds and dogs, but also with monkeys, rams and other female or male figurines (Jansen, A.A., 2002). We must therefore not look at these female figurines in isolation but as a part of much larger semiotic framework in relation to other archaeological finds. Insoll (2017) argues that figurines in general were part of 'much wider material worlds' and of a 'broader world of representation': they may have a ritual role in some contexts while in other function varied and changed over time; some were also used as toys (Wankowski, 2006). Kenoyer (1998) contends that these figurines may have simply been images of people who lived in the Indus and may have been hand-modelled in the likeness of individuals, created in the presence of the user or an audience, as a shared social activity (Clark, 2009). However, the question remains regarding the symbolic value of the 'headdress' type figurine. Given the fact that a vast corpus of jewellery has been recovered from Harappan sites, it is unlikely that if the 'headdress' figurines were worn by real women for initiation rituals or other such ceremonies, we would find no tangible traces of the headdress that their terracotta replicas are adorned with. It is possible that the headdress may have been an idealised, exaggerated, or symbolic attribute rather than a realistic depiction of something worn by actual women. There is also a possibility that the headdress may have been made out of perishable materials that have not survived. However, Kenoyer has identified a headdress from Ur, made of gold, lapis lazuli and carnelian beads, belonging to queen Puabi that he identified as being of Indus origin. Headdresses in Indian art can be first observed during the Mesolithic period parietal art although exclusively worn by men. (Francis, P., 1982)

Alexandra Jansen states that the variety in the anthropomorphic representations is so great that it is hard to ascribe certain features to one specific type of figurine alone. Other than the 'headdress' type figurines, we have statuettes of women engaged in domestic chores, cradling infants, seated or doing farming or other domestic chores that do not appear to have similar elaborate adornments and are generally much smaller in scale (Kenoyer, 1998). The figurines, as a rule, lack feet and were therefore, could have been designed to be held in the hand.

Interpretations:

Early interpretations of the terracotta female figurines were largely dominated by the concept of fertility, which subsumed all possible alternative explanations regarding their symbolic, ritualistic, or social



significance. Heavily influenced by Marshall's initial interpretations, these figurines were invariably connected with fertility, sexuality and the nurturing aspects of motherhood and nature. Due to lack of correlational literary evidences, all conclusions on the purpose of these figurines are largely based on the individual backgrounds and interpretations of the scholars concerned.

Recent works on the female figurines of the Harappan culture have aimed to question these conclusions and have explored alternative narratives regarding the socio-cultural contexts of these figurines. Shereen Ratnagar (2018) argues that the archaeological contexts in which the female figurines had been discovered makes it highly unlikely that they represented a prominent deity. Many of the figurines have been recovered from refuse deposits, discarded alongside broken with pots, bones, broken toys, and other such utilitarian items. Ratnagar contends that if these objects had embodied a widely revered goddess, it is unlikely that they would have been discarded in such an unceremonious manner without anything connecting them to some sort of ritual significance. There are also arguments regarding the workmanship of these figurines which have argue that the crude and careless modelling of these figurines could be taken to mean that these were perhaps playthings for children that they modelled themselves. Mackay (1935) elucidates that 'a great majority were without doubt, made as toys for children and judging by the roughness of the workmanship were frequently the handiwork of children themselves'.

This view is challenged by scholars such as D.H. and M.E. Gordon who maintain that even though it might have been possible that they children modelled these figurines, it is inconceivable that the elders would have taken the trouble to fire them and preserve them for longevity.

Figurines are more than representations or reflections of something concrete or abstract and more than vehicles created to communicate a message- they are objects with material lives. Understanding what they were and how they were engaged in ancient societies is only possible by understanding their archeological and cultural contexts. Approaching the figurines as representations of the body and materializations of human experience provides a different perspective, one of mutual constitution. In other words, "we make objects and they in turn make us" (Meskell, 2004).

Conclusion:

Ultimately, due to an extensive lack of cohesive literature pertaining to the purpose and usage of these figurines, interpretations of their function remain largely rooted in indirect deductions and comparative considerations.

The initial scholarship concerning the terracotta figurines was primarily concerned with their associations with fertility and sexuality, based on assumptions that these attributes were particularly important during prehistoric societies rooted in agriculture. However, recent reassessments have increasingly questioned such constrictive notions and sought to examine these figurines in broader socio-cultural contexts.



Mackay (1936), for instance, examined their role as toys or playthings for children; going a step further to contest that the figurines could have been modelled by the children themselves. This view was negated by D.H. and M.E. Gordon, who reasoned that if this were actually the case, it would be difficult to explain the considerable effort involved in firing them, presumably to ensure their durability. The relative consistency in the modelling of these figurines disputes this notion further since it is not possible that mere children would have adhered to a set standard of modelling technique followed at large throughout the civilisation.

The research by scholars such as P.J. Ucko (1962) encouraged archaeologists to examine the figurines themselves as a process rather than an end product. Sharri Clark (2007) on the Harappan Civilisation has further encouraged a departure from considering these figurines in a singular context highlighting aspects such as material, form, and production. Taken together, these studies indicate the fallacy of interpreting these figurines through a singular viewpoint. We do not still have a definitive understanding of what these figurines must have meant to the Harappan society and the variety of purposes they might have served. Continually shifting meanings and contexts and the absence of textual evidence necessitates a cautious and undogmatic approach.

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