



Femininity in Proto-historic South Asian Art: an Analytical Study of Harappans

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ABSTRACT

Women carry divine procreative powers gifted by nature. There is an inherent sophistication in the movements of a woman's body and the liveliness of these movements has been well represented since proto-historic times. Be it either sculptural art or terracotta art, the artisan or even a novice took care of representing the associated sophistication. The statuettes of females, despite crude and imperfect figurine elements, can be identified by the prominently shown sexual organs/female body parts. In the context of the Harappan Civilization, the feminine figurines have been widely reported. From Mundigak III and IV the female figurines with prominent breasts have been reported. The most famous female figure is a Zhob mother goddess; the name has been suggested by the findings at the Zhob valley. Harappa and Mohenjodaro have been blessed with a different kind of female figurines. These figurines are characterized by wide hips, narrow waist and sometimes large breasts. The feminine representation appears also in the Chalcolithic pottery in Maharashtra.

Introduction

The earliest refined evidence of South Asian art can be ascribed to the Greater Indus Region, commonly known as the Indus Valley Civilization. The principal region covered Baluchistan on the northwest frontier, the plains of the Indus Valley, Punjab, Haryana, Ganga-Yamuna Doab, the northern and the western parts of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, the sandy north Gujarat plains, Kutch, and the hilly savanna of Saurashtra.¹

Indus Valley art has come to us in the mass of finds mainly at the two cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Cunningham has touched the site of Harappa as early as 1878, but its Proto-historic character was revealed for the first time in 1921 when D.R. Sahni dug at Harappa on the Ravi and following him in 1922 R.D. Banerji struck upon the treasures of a Chalcolithic civilization at Mohenjodaro on the Indus River. Marshall and his colleagues took up the work bringing to light an urban culture of vast dimensions, judged to be the most extensive in the Pre-classical world. In time it stretched over a period of about a thousand years and in space over 1500 miles from Ropar to Rangpur and Lothal at the head of the Gulf of Cambay, District Ahmedabad, and still further up to Bhagvatrao. The discovery of the Indus-Valley Culture has done a miracle for both art and history of South Asia.² It

1 Possehl, G. L., *The Indus Civilization*, p. 6.

2 Agrawala, V. S., *Indian Art*, p. 16

has pushed back at one stroke the beginning of civilized life from 600 B.C. to 5000 B.C. It has placed the Indian civilization in a world context making it as one of the other great civilizations of the ancient world like Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Western Asia. The character of this civilization shows it to be essentially urban, comprising a community of merchants and rulers devoted to many fine arts and dependent for their economy on the labours of a toiling peasantry. A large number of female figurines and a hoard of seals and sealings was discovered from a good number of Harappan sites.

Discussion:

We feel convinced that the woman from the very beginning was recognized as the primary symbol of generation or the act of creation. In the course of recent excavations in the Indus sites there have been found numerous terracotta, stone and metal figurines from places like Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro and Kot-Diji, Lothal and Kalibangan etc.

(1) Women in Pre-Harappan terracotta: Harappans produced terracotta human figurines in very large number. They modeled both female and male figurines. The earliest terracotta female figurines coming from Mehargarh in Baluchistan, takes back the history of female figurine to the aceramic phase of this Neolithic culture³. These female figurines commonly known as mother goddesses, have been found in a much wider area pertaining to the Harappan Culture. The Pre-Harappan and Harappan sites in Baluchistan produced more figurines than Sind, Punjab and other regions. Stylistically four distinct types of female figurines are discernible. They differ both in form and style of decoration. Therefore, to make a detailed study of these figurines, the following divisions may be made:

(i) Zhob Female Figurines: Zhob type female figurines are not exclusive to Zhob Valley alone.⁴ They may be seen all over the northern Baluchistan region, eg. Quetta Valley, Loralai Valley and Pishin Valley. The main sites of these valleys, where this type of female figurines have been recovered are Damb Sadaat, Surjangan, Dabarkot, Periano Ghundi, Mughal Ghundi, Deh Morasy and Kaundani. Besides these Valleys, these female figurines have been found at Mehargarh, also in northern Baluchistan, and Mundigak in southern Afghanistan. Most of them appear to belong to a phase earlier than mature Harappan culture. A similarity can be seen, both in form and style of decoration at all the sites of the above mentioned Valleys.

Posture: Zhob type female figurines are generally found in standing posture, in rare cases they are depicted sitting on stools.⁵ In most of cases, they are just fixed on pedestals but In the Zhob type figurines at Mehargarh they are invariably standing.

Dress and Ornaments: Most of the Zhob female figurines wear an elaborate head-dress, hiding the hairdo completely⁶. But in a few exceptional cases bare headed figurines have been found. Only one type of head-dress has been found which consists of a close fitting cap over which a strip of cloth is worn. The Mehargarh female figurines are examples of fine hair treatment.

3 Tripathi, Vibha, *The Indus Terracottas*, p. 116

4 Agrawala, V. S., *Studies in Indian Art*, p. 34

5 Banerjee, N. R., *Religion, Art Science and the Indian People Through the Ages*, p. 9

6 Goetz, H., *India: Five Thousand Years of Indian Art*, p. 27

Few ornaments are visible on these figurines. Necklaces however are there. There are two main types- the first one is of a pleated dog-collared type and the second one is multi-stringed beaded necklaces. At Mehargarh single stringed necklaces with pendants are shown though in one case multi strings with locket is also seen.

(ii) Kulli-Mehi female figurines: Sir Aurel Stein collected approximately ninety two figurines at Mehri and five at Kulli during his surveys in southern Baluchistan⁷. He also reported similar figurines from Kalatuk–Damb and Chiri–Damb. Subsequently J.M. Casal reported similar figurines from Nindowari during her excavations from 1962 to 1965. She also reported some crudely made human figurines from here. Most of them appear to belong to a phase earlier than Mature Harappan.

Posture: Kulli–Mehi types of female figurines are generally in akimbo⁸. They all terminate at the waist in a slightly splayed out flat bottomed pedestal. The arms, as stated above, are either on the waist or on the hips but in exceptional cases their hands are raised above the breasts. An interesting specimen found at Nindowari is that of a lady holding a baby on her lap.

Physiognomy: the faces of these figurines are neither elongated nor round. The most outstanding characteristic of the face of this type of figurines is its bird like feature⁹. The eyes, in most of the specimens, are in a mutilated condition. But generally the eyes are pellets with a hole pierced into them. The eyelids are not indicated in this type. Also the ears are not represented.

Two types of modeling of breasts are discernible. The first type which is crude in appearance shows separately made flattened balls attached to the body without any indication of nipples. The second type is modeled out of the same clay lump as the body thus looking more naturalistic and as an integral part of the body. The arms of some of these figurines are in good state of preservation. There is a clear indication of finger but elbow and wrist are not represented. Each arm is formed somewhat like a parabolic curve.

(2) Women in Harappan Terracotta:

Terracotta female figurines have been found mainly at Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro and Kot-diji¹⁰. About three-fourth of all female figurines have been recovered only from Harappa and Mohenjodaro, the key sites of this culture. They occur in a limited number at Chanhudaro and Kot-diji. From Kot-Diji only three specimens were reported from the Harappan level. At Banawali, similar female figurines have been reported by Bisht.

Most of these figurines are painted with red, especially those found at Harappa and Mohenjodaro. But the decorations or motifs have largely faded. According to Mackey the salty soil of the region is responsible for this phenomenon.¹¹

7 Sankalia, H.D., *Pre-History and Proto-History in India and Pakistan*, p. 73

8 Tripath, Vibha, op. cit, p. 120

9 Ibid, p, 122

10 Khosa, Sunil, *A Handbook of Indian Art*, p. 15-16.

11 Mackay, E.J.H., *Excavations at Mohenjodaro – Annual Report of Archaeological survey of India*, p. 67.

Posture: The female figurines of the Indus style are, generally speaking, better than male figurines. These are modeled in two postures: (a) standing and (b) sitting. It may be observed that the majority of the figurines available are in standing posture.

At Harappa and Mohenjodaro there are numerous female figurines in standing posture though in some cases the lower portion of body is in a mutilated condition. Some figurines have been identified as mothers; they are in standing posture, holding their babies in their laps. In many cases they are suckling their infants. Besides, some specimens of pregnant female figurines were found at Harappa, Chanhudaro and Mohenjodaro.¹²

Dress and Ornaments: The Harappan female figurines are rightly described as 'semi-nude' regarding their dress. Vats and Mackey reported the female figurines represented with a narrow girdle around their loins from Harappa and Mohenjodaro.¹³ In most cases these are without any garments at all. At Mohenjodaro they are sometimes decorated in front with two or more medallions. Besides, we have a very interesting example of 'kilt wearing' figurines at Mohenjodaro. However, it is hard to identify whether it is a male or a female figurine.¹⁴ At Harappa and Mohenjodaro a 'pannier'-like object is worn by female figurines on each side of their heads.¹⁵ They are in some cases supported by the hands carried round them and also around the head. In some figurines from Harappa, the female figurines are carrying horn-like objects while their head-dresses are supported by hands. All these figurines are standing.

As cited earlier in most of the Harappan figurines, the ears are covered with head-dresses, hence it is difficult to form a clear idea about their ear ornaments. Nevertheless, there is one example at Mohenjodaro whose ears are clearly visible and the lady depicted is sporting a dancing ear-ring hanging down the ears. Besides this, some figurines found at Harappa, wear ear-rings that are very crudely depicted.

A large variety of necklaces are depicted on female figurines. The most outstanding example of these ornaments comes from Mohenjodaro showing a necklace with six strings.¹⁶ The main string which is aptly called dog collar is snugly fitting around the neck. This is strung with beads. The second string is comparatively larger with three prominent beads. The third and fourth strings have got five beads each and the fifth string has got a pendant with floral design, possibly a lotus.

Regarding ornaments depicted on the arms we have only one example of armband which is worn by a female figurine on her right hand at Harappa¹⁷, though, it has been found in a post-ceramic burial. Anklets are also very rarely seen because of their mutilated condition. Only at Mohenjodaro two female figurines adorned with anklets have been found¹⁸. The anklets have double rows and their design is very simple.

12 Agrawala, Prithivi Kumar, *Prachin Bhartiya Kala Avam Vastu*, p. 33

13 Tripathi, Vibha, *op. cit.*, p. 121

14 Bridget and Raymond A., *The Rise of civilization in India and Pakistan*, p. 204

15 Zimmer, H., *The art of Indian Asia*, p. 22-23.

16 Mackay, E.J.H., *op. cit.*, p. 71

17 Agrawala, V.S., *op. cit.*, p. 37

18 Tripathi, Vibha, *op. cit.*, p. 124

(3) *Other types of (crude) terracotta female figurines:*

There are specimens of terracotta female figurines found from various Harappa sites which differ as to facial features and decoration from the above mentioned three types. These are so coarsely modeled that scholars are reluctant to call them mother goddesses¹⁹. This type of female figurines are distributed roughly all over the Indus culture viz. Mehargarh, Mundigak, South Afghanistan, Gumla, Rehmandheri and Jalilpur in Punjab, Kalibangan in Rajasthan, Lothal in Gujarat. These female figurines represent an independent style. Most of them are nude and their facial features are not well depicted. These figurines are being reported below region wide.

(i) *Baluchistan Region:* The earliest female figurines in Baluchistan region come from Mehargarh. At Mehargarh a distinct evolution of terracotta plastic art is observable. Crudely made human figurines are found in a large number during the Neolithic period i.e. Mehargarh IV Phase. VI and VII Phase of Mehargarh demonstrate an increased production of female figurines²⁰. Phase VI belongs to the third millennium B.C. We come across a large number of nude and seated female figurines. These female figurines have fantastic head-dresses forming large coils of hair flanking the head, pendulous breasts with arms and legs which are clasped together. Subsequently in phase VII the female figurines are found in large numbers. The style is developed and resembles the typical Zhob mother goddesses²¹.

(ii) *Punjab Region:* At Gumla, (Harappan phase) the female figurines are very crudely modeled²². Only busts of these figurines have been found. The neck is elongated, nose and mouth are pressed at a point and the breasts are round. In one case at the back of head a scarf falls down on the left shoulder and again it is folded back. In another case a turban is represented. In some cases the hands are raised up to breasts. Most of the head portion as well as that of lower body are broken. These figurines bear a red slip.

At Kot Diji, three main categories of figurines have been found²³ (a) seated, made in two parts, the lower portion below the neck is modeled from a lump of clay showing legs stretched forward, heavy and broad hip, slim round waist and flat back. The breasts were modeled prominently. (b) This type is perhaps made with a single lump of clay with pinched face, beaked nose, disproportionately pointed breasts added separately, and show a fine hairdo. The arms were struck on the shoulders. (c) The third category is made of seated figurines with spread out legs and folded arms underneath. One more category may be added to this. In this type, we come across slim waists, proportioned hips, appliquéd breasts and separately joined arms which are folded below the breasts²⁴. Some figurines found at Jalilpur in Punjab are also very crudely modeled but are extremely limited in number. Their features resemble the Gumla and Saraikhola female figurines.

(iii) *Gujarat Region:* An independent style of female figurines is seen at Lothal, though their number

19 Mackay, E.J.H., *Further Excavations at Mohenjodaro*, 2 Vols, p. 39

20 Bridget and Raymond, L., op. cit, p. 209

21 Jarrige, C., *The Terracotta Figurines from Mehargarh*, p. 87

22 Tripathi, Vibha, op. cit, p. 125

23 Herman, Goetz, op. cit, p. 30

24 Basham, A.L., *The wonder that was India*, 3 Vols. P. 273.

is extremely limited. These crudely modeled figurines are devoid of decorations. One of them has a slim waist, prominent hips and well proportioned limbs but it is unfortunately damaged. Features like circular breasts, beak-like noses and appliquéd mouths are also conspicuous by their absence here. The pedestal base of these figurines reminds us of the Kulli-Mehi style female figurines.²⁵

(iv) *Rajasthan Region*: At Kalibangan, in Rajasthan, some figurines have been found²⁶ which are so coarsely modeled that it is difficult to identify their womanhood but some of these have prominent breasts, the only feature to indicate their female character. These are in a mutilated condition, therefore the facial features are not clear. These are, as it regards the visible portion, devoid of decorations.

(4) *Women in Bronze Sculpture*: Some remarkable figures in bronze have also been discovered at various sites falling within the purview of the Harappan Civilization²⁷. The most captivating piece of art from an Indus site is probably the bronze dancing girl from HR area at Mohenjodaro²⁸. She was found in a late level house of Block-7 by Sahni during the 1926-27 field season²⁹. The house is a small structure deep within the urban maze of the south western quarter of the city. She is 10.8 centimeters high and was cast in bronze using the lost wax process. The figure is that of a very thin young woman, standing upright, with her head tilted slightly back, her left leg bent at the knee. There is little sense of flesh on the body or anatomy to the joints, which is a stylistic feature shared with some later Indian sculpture. Her right arm is bent, with her hand placed provocatively on the back of the hip, the thumb outside a clenched fist. The left arm rests slightly bent on the thigh of her left leg. The thumb and forefinger of this hand form a circle, and it is apparent that she once held a small object, possibly a baton of some kind.

She is naked, except for some adornments. Around her neck there is a small necklace with three large pendant beads. On her left arm she wears twenty four or twenty five bangles. The right arm has four bangles, two at the wrist and two above the elbow. Her hair is coiled into a kind of loose bun, held in place along the back of her head much the same as some Indian women wear their hair today. The artist has rendered this feature in detail.

Whether this small statuette actually portrays a dancer is open to question. Only the pose seems to convey this idea. If she was a dancer, it would foreshadow later Indian sculpture, which is much influenced by this theme.

Some think that the broad nose and large lips of the dancing girl can be used to indicate a racial affiliation: Dravidian³⁰, Nubian³¹, Baluchi Proto - Australoid.³² Piggott even ventured “when we are

25 Walker, B., *Hindu World : An encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, 2 vol, p. 336.

26 Kala, Satish Chander, *Bhartiya Matrika Kala*, p. 13

27 Khosa, Sunil, op. cit, p. 12.

28 Possehl, G.L., *The Indus Civilization*, p. 113.

29 Sahni, D.R., Mohenjodaro – Annual report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1926-27, p. 60.

30 Huntingto, S.L., *The art of ancient India*, p. 16

31 During Caspers, *Was the dancing girl from Mohenjodaro a Nubian?*, p. 99.

32 Piggott, S., *Prehistoric India to 1000 B.C.*, p. 150.

describing the Harappa culture we shall, I think recognize a Kulli girl in a foreign city".³³ Phenotypic features on such a stylized piece of art are difficult to interpret, and there is every chance that she is representative of women of one of the Indus peoples.

Marshall referred to this bronze statuette as "a small figurine of rather rough workmanship".³⁴ But he did catch something special in the figure as well: "It gives a vivid impression of the young aboriginal nautch girl, her hand on hip in a half-impudent posture and legs slightly forward, as she beats time to the music with her legs and feet.... The modeling of the back, hips and buttocks is quite effective."

After a detailed examination of the bronze dancing girl from HR area one sees a subtlety to the expression and pose that defies description and cannot be captured by the camera. In spite of the stylized, even abstract, nature of the figure, there is a sense of "impudence" as Marshall noted, certainly youthful superiority, self confidence, even arrogance. In the autobiographical television film Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the archaeologist, described his favourite statuette³⁵: "There is her little Baluchi style face with pouting lips and insolent look in the eye. She's about fifteen years old. I should think, not more, but she stands there with bangles all the way up her arm and nothing else on. A girl perfectly, for the moment, perfectly confident of herself and the world. There is nothing like her, I think, in ancient art".³⁶ We may not be certain that she was a dancer, but she was good at what she did and she knew it.³⁷

Second Bronze dancing girl from Mohenjodaro:

There is a second bronze dancing girl from Mohenjodaro, found by Mackay in his final full season of 1930-31. It was associated with level II of DK-G area. Block 9, House X, Room 81, an undistinguished building just off central street. The preservation is not as fine as the first dancing girl, but, as Mackay observes, "Despite the damage by corrosion, it is clear that the workmanship and finish of this later figure is inferior to that found earlier".³⁸

(5) *Women in stone sculpture:* The stone sculptures are said to be the most monumental products of the Indus Civilization. Though they are only a few, they exhibit a variety of themes and treatments. That those stone sculptures were not the result of a freak is established by their artistic excellence. There must have been a long artistic tradition and experience behind it. In general these works do not appear to be the tentative formulations one would accept in a beginning art tradition. But, as these works are, they do reflect a mature stage of artistic development in which problems of proportion, scale, relation of forms and surface enhancement are all carefully worked out. While the formative stages remain under-mentioned, these works can be contextualized by comparison to Mesopotamian examples as well as to later Indian art.³⁹

33 Ibid, p. 111

34 Marshall, J., "Other antiquities and art". In *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization*, 3 vols., p. 44.

35 Ibid, p. 45

36 Hawker, J., *Adventurer in archaeology*, p. 367.

37 Possehl, G.L., op. cit, p. 114.

38 Mackay, E.J., Excavations at Mohenjodaro. Annual reports of the Archaeological survey of India for the years, 1930-31, p. 44.

39 Roy, C. Carven, *Indian art*, p. 21.

The female figure from Harappa in grey limestone is a lively dancing figure⁴⁰ with her head originally stuck separately, the arms and legs sculptured in more than one piece were similarly attached and the nipples were inlaid. The contour of the body and the heavy hips show it to be a female figure, the several features pointing to an ideal feminine beauty. The drilled holes on the back were intended for affixed hair. The narrower region between the shoulder and the soft effeminate built as well as the delicate pose of balancing the body on the right leg while the left is thrown to the right in a rhythmic sweep hardly leave any doubt that it was a female dancer either human or divine.

Women carrying children are a feature of the figurines at Mohenjodaro and Harappa.⁴¹ Mackay lists four examples from his excavations. This illustration may well show the suckling child at a woman's breast. None of the sources mentions males holding children at either site.⁴²

A real treasure of a figurine, with clear female gender markings, is the woman either kneading bread or grinding grain. She comes from Mound F at Harappa, where the granary is located. By inspecting the original, Vats believed that she is kneading bread.⁴³ This is good evidence for the involvement of women in food preparation. We do not know if males also kneaded bread, but this shows the women did it. It is also interesting to see that the figurine is all dressed up, with the hair fan, panniers and head cone. Could this portrayal of Indus daily life show that at least some of the Indus women actually dressed this way?

Conclusion

In the early stage of his progress towards the path of culture and civilization, primitive man portrayed his counterpart in the form of a woman from his socio-religious surroundings and developed the norms and concepts of beauty and its appreciation. The media may be stone, metal, terracotta or any other form fit for female expression.

The earliest material of Indian art is found in the Harappan civilization. Harappans produced terracotta, stone and metal female figurines in very large numbers from places like Mehargarh, Kulli, Mehi, Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro, Kot-Diji, Lothal and Kalibangan etc. The female figurines in clay are much more impressive. They are heavily adorned with ornaments. But the main attraction of Harappan art is the bronze dancing girl from HR area of Mohenjodaro. There are also some secular figurines showing women kneading dough or holding a dish of cakes. There are relatively few pieces that bridge the differences – they seem to be either very good, as with the fan-like projection and the dancing girl, or artistically somewhat lacking.

40 Agrawala, V.S., *Indian art*, p. 22

41 Marshall, J., *Mohenjodaro and Indus civilization*, 3 vols, p. 20.

42 Possehl, G.L., *op. cit.*, p. 182.

43 Vats, *Excavations at Harappa*, 2 vols, p. 296

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