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Symbolism of Fertility, Motherhood, and Renewal: A Comparative Study of Indus Valley Terracotta Figurines and Urdu Literary Imagination

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Abstract

This study undertakes an interdisciplinary analysis of symbolic expression in South Asian culture by comparing terracotta figurines from the Indus Valley Civilization with thematic representations in Urdu literature. Drawing upon archaeological evidence, art-historical interpretation, and literary analysis, the research examines how concepts of fertility, motherhood, regeneration, and cosmic continuity are articulated through material form and poetic language. While avoiding claims of direct historical transmission, the study argues that both Indus visual culture and Urdu literary tradition participate in a shared symbolic

Research Framework

Research Objectives

1. To analyze fertility and maternal symbolism in Indus Valley terracotta figurines within their archaeological and ritual contexts.
2. To examine representations of motherhood, nature, and renewal in selected works of Mir Taqi Mir,

grammar shaped by agrarian life, ecological dependence, and collective cultural memory. By situating Indus artifacts as non-verbal symbolic texts and Urdu poetry as their later metaphorical counterpart, the research contributes to comparative literature, archaeology of religion, and South Asian cultural studies.

Core Keyword

Indus Valley Civilization; Terracotta Figurines; Fertility and Motherhood; Material Religion; Symbolic Abstraction; Urdu Poetic Symbolism; Cultural Memory; Comparative Literature and Archaeology

Mirza Ghalib, Muhammad Iqbal, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

3. To develop a comparative theoretical framework integrating archaeology, art history, and literary studies.
4. To investigate how symbolic abstraction functions across material and textual media in South Asian culture.
5. To contribute to interdisciplinary methodologies linking material religion with literary imagination.

Research Questions

1. How fertility and motherhood are symbolically represented in Indus Valley terracotta figurines?
2. In what ways do Urdu poets employ maternal and ecological imagery to articulate continuity, loss, and renewal?
3. What theoretical parallels can be drawn between Indus visual abstraction and Urdu poetic symbolism?
4. How do material objects and literary texts function as carriers of cultural memory in South Asia?
5. What are the possibilities and limitations of comparative analysis between archaeology and literature?

1. Introduction

Archaeological excavations at major Indus Valley sites—such as Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro, and Kalibangan—have revealed extensive evidence of creative activity in clay, stone, metal, and faience (Kenoyer, 1998; Marshall, 1931; Possehl, 2002). Among these materials, terracotta figurines and clay or steatite seals occupy a particularly significant position because of their abundance, accessibility, and symbolic richness. Unlike monumental architecture or elite artifacts, these small-scale objects provide rare insight into everyday religious practices and popular belief systems of the Indus people (Kenoyer, 1998; Ratnagar, 2016).

Many of these figurines appear to have been produced with ritual or symbolic intent, as suggested by their repetitive forms, standardized features, and wide geographical distribution (Possehl, 2002). Their importance is further heightened by their chronological position. Indus terracottas

predate the two most influential stylistic traditions of Indian art—the Mathura and Gandhara schools—and therefore represent an essential formative phase in the development of South Asian visual culture (Marshall, 1931; Parpola, 1994).

This article investigates terracotta figurines and seals as material evidence of early religious expression, with particular emphasis on female imagery, fertility symbolism, and scholarly debates surrounding the so-called “Mother Goddess” (Ratnagar, 2016).

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Indus terracotta figurines dates back to the earliest excavation reports. Marshall (1931) interpreted many female figurines as representations of a Mother Goddess, drawing parallels with fertility cults documented in other ancient civilizations. This interpretation strongly shaped early understandings of Indus religion, framing it as primarily fertility-oriented.

Subsequent scholars refined—and in some cases challenged—this view. Possehl (2002) emphasized the diversity of Indus material culture and cautioned against imposing uniform religious interpretations on heterogeneous artifacts. Kenoyer (1998) highlighted production techniques, noting that many terracotta figurines were handmade or mold-made, which suggests household-level manufacture and use. This observation shifted scholarly attention away from centralized cult worship toward domestic and neighborhood ritual practices.

More recent scholarship has critically re-evaluated the term “Mother Goddess.” Ratnagar (2016) argues that labeling terracotta figurines as cultic objects

constitutes a “simplistic solution” to a complex interpretive problem. She proposes that these figures may have served multiple functions, including ritual magic, protective symbolism, and social expression. Parpola (1994), through the study of seals and symbols, further demonstrated the complexity of Indus iconography, suggesting that religious meaning was conveyed through a combination of imagery, abstraction, and archaeological context.

Collectively, these studies underscore the necessity of a nuanced, context-sensitive approach to Indus terracottas—one that recognizes both their symbolic potential and the inherent limitations of archaeological interpretation (Kenoyer, 1998; Ratnagar, 2016).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in art-historical and archaeological analysis. Rather than relying solely on quantitative data, the research focuses on visual form, iconography, materiality, and archaeological context. Comparative analysis is employed to examine similarities and variations among figurines and seals from different Indus sites.

Secondary data derived from excavation reports, museum collections, and peer-reviewed scholarship constitute the primary evidentiary base. Schematic pictorial

references drawn from authoritative academic sources support the visual discussion while avoiding speculative reconstruction. The methodological framework also incorporates comparative anthropology, drawing parallels with fertility symbolism and household religion in other early agrarian societies.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

4.1 Terracotta Figurines

Terracotta figurines represent one of the most frequently recovered artifact categories at Indus sites. Female figures dominate this corpus and are typically characterized by wide hips, pellet-like breasts, tubular limbs, and elaborate ornamentation, including necklaces, girdles, bangles, earrings, and ornate headdresses. These stylistic features emphasize fertility, abundance, and corporeality rather than individualized identity.

Subtle variations within this typology—such as pot-bellied forms suggestive of pregnancy—reinforce associations with procreation and the continuity of life. The use of terracotta, an inexpensive and easily molded material, indicates that these objects were accessible to broad segments of the population and were likely employed in domestic or neighborhood-level ritual practices.



Figure 1. Female terracotta figurine with elaborate headress and jewelry, Harappan period (c. 2500–1900 BCE). Baked clay. After Kenoyer (1998). A schematic popular deity.

The concept of the Mother Goddess has often been invoked to explain these figurines, as motherhood, fertility, and regeneration were central concerns in early agrarian societies. The mother, like fertile soil, was perceived as a generative force sustaining life. Numerous figurines discovered at sites such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa exhibit forms suggestive of pregnancy or nurturing, which has been interpreted as symbolic of life's perpetuation.

However, as Ratnagar (2016) cautions, the designation of these objects as purely "cultic" risks oversimplification. Rather than representing a single, institutionalized goddess cult, the figurines may have functioned within domestic rituals involving

formal temple worship.

4.2 Clay and Steatite Seals

Seals constitute another crucial category of Indus visual culture. Typically carved in intaglio on steatite using copper burins and subsequently fired to enhance hardness, these objects demonstrate a high level of technical skill and aesthetic refinement (Kenoyer, 1998; Marshall, 1931). Seal imagery predominantly features animals—such as humped and hump-less bulls, wild oxen, zebu cattle, elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers, and the so-called unicorn, which is by far the most frequently depicted motif (Atre, 1985).

Animals are often shown standing before an enigmatic object placed on a stand, from which horizontal lines sometimes emerge.

Scholars have variously interpreted this object as a ritual altar, feeding trough, standard, cage, sacred tree, or even a container for *soma*, an intoxicating ritual substance mentioned in later South Asian traditions (Parpola, 1994; Possehl, 2002). The sophistication and wide distribution of seals indicate their central importance in Indus society. Examples recovered beyond the Indus region suggest their role in long-distance trade networks extending to

Mesopotamia and West Asia (Kenoyer, 1998). While seals likely served practical functions related to identification or exchange, their iconography strongly implies additional mythological and religious significance. Abstract signs—including variants of the svastika—point to an early visual language capable of expressing cosmological concepts (Marshall, 1931; Possehl, 2002).

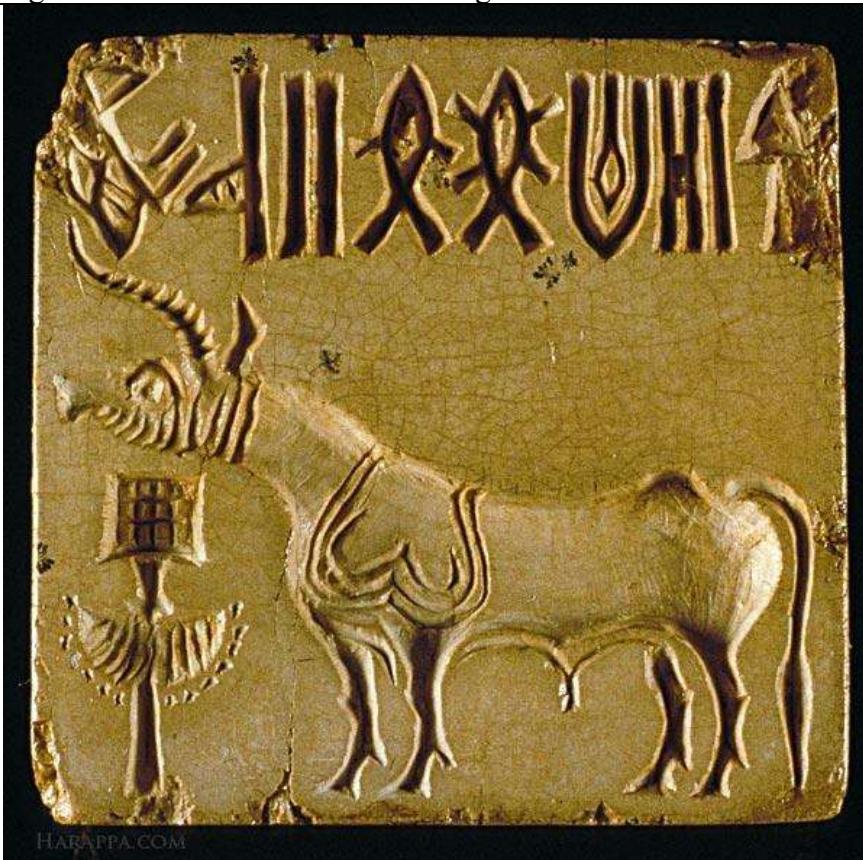


Figure 2. Steatite seal depicting a unicorn motif facing a ritual object. Mohenjo-Daro. Intaglio carving. After Marshall (1931). Schematic academic reference.

The unicorn motif remains the most enigmatic element of Indus seal iconography. Appearing from approximately 2600 BCE and persisting until around 1900

BCE, it suggests long-term symbolic continuity (Atre, 1985). Although some scholars have proposed zoological explanations—such as profile depiction of a

two-horned animal—the presence of clearly two-horned animals shown in profile elsewhere in Indus art weakens this argument. Consequently, many researchers regard the unicorn as an intentionally conceived, symbolic creature rather than a naturalistic representation.

The unicorn's symbolic legacy may extend beyond South Asia. Classical Greek accounts, beginning with Ctesias of Cnidus in the fourth century BCE, describe a single-horned animal from India whose horn was believed to possess protective and medicinal properties (Cavallo, 1998).

Whether derived from the Indian rhinoceros or from transmitted mythic imagery, these accounts underscore the enduring imaginative power of South Asian animal symbolism.

4.3 Abstract and Geometric Seals: The Svastika Motif

Among the most intriguing seals are those bearing purely geometric designs. A faience button seal with a geometric motif was recovered from the surface of Mound AB at Harappa, illustrating the complexity of Harappan abstract symbolism



Figure 3. [Swastika seal from the Indus Valley Civilisation]. (n.d.). [Steatite seal]. The British Museum, London, United Kingdom. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1837-0609-42

This seal presents a labyrinthine, right-angled design widely interpreted as an early form of the svastika. Unlike the predominantly zoomorphic seals, this example relies entirely on abstraction. Its careful execution demonstrates that abstract seals were produced using the same sophisticated

techniques as figural ones, suggesting comparable cultural value (Marshall, 1931; Kenoyer, 1998).

The recurrence of svastika-like motifs across Indus sites implies participation in a shared symbolic vocabulary. Parpola (1994) argues

that such abstract signs likely conveyed cosmological or ritual meanings, operating alongside animal imagery. From an art-historical perspective, these seals anticipate the later prominence of the svastika in South Asian religious traditions, though caution is required to avoid projecting historic meanings onto prehistoric contexts.

4.4 The Fish Goddess Icon

Among the most distinctive terracotta figures is a female deity often identified as the “Fish Goddess.” This figure is characterized by a large, heavy-featured face with wide-open eyes, an elaborate bicornate coiffure with a

central bulb, and abundant jewelry, including a girdle and belt. In several examples, the figure grasps paired fish restrained by leashes that enter their mouths.

Fish symbolism is widely associated with water, fertility, regeneration, and abundance—concepts particularly significant within the riverine ecology of the Indus Valley. The leashed fish may signify controlled power over natural forces, reinforcing the supernatural authority of the figure. Rather than representing a standardized, pan-Indus deity, this icon likely reflects a localized synthesis of fertility, ecology, and female divinity.



Figure 4. Terracotta figurine identified as a “Fish Goddess,” holding paired fish restrained by leashes. Indus region. After synthesis of archaeological literature.

7. Continuities in Symbolism: Indus Civilization and Urdu Literary Imagination

This section reframes the discussion explicitly within a **comparative literature and archaeology** framework, treating Indus material culture as a non-verbal symbolic text and Urdu literature as its later verbal and metaphorical articulation. Rather than proposing a direct historical continuity, the analysis foregrounds *structural and thematic correspondences* that reflect long-term cultural patterns within South Asian civilization.

In Urdu literature, symbolic expression (*ramziyat*) and suggestion (*ishārat*) function as core aesthetic principles. Meaning is rarely fixed or singular; instead, it unfolds through metaphor, image, and emotional resonance. A similar logic governs Indus visual culture, where terracotta figurines and seals communicate ideas through abstraction, repetition, and archetypal imagery rather than narrative clarity. From a theoretical perspective, both may be understood as cultural sign-systems shaped by collective experience rather than authored texts.

The **maternal archetype** provides a particularly strong point of comparison. In Indus terracotta figurines, exaggerated hips, breasts, and ornamentation foreground fertility and generative power rather than individual identity. In Urdu poetry, the mother emerges as a symbol of origin, sacrifice, and existential grounding. Mir Taqi Mir's verse frequently invokes the imagery of birth, loss, and return, embedding maternal symbolism within a metaphysics of suffering and continuity:

پیدا کیاں بیس ایسے پر اگنہ طبع لوگ
افسوس تم کو میر سے صحبت نہیں رہی

While not explicitly about motherhood, Mir's poetics of origin and existential fragility resonate with the Indus emphasis on life's precarity and regeneration.

Mirza Ghalib expands this symbolic field by linking creation, pain, and cosmic order. His conception of existence as cyclical and paradoxical parallels the Indus use of repetitive forms and abstract seals:

بزاروں خواہیں ایسی کہ ہر خواہش پہ نم نکلے
بہت نکلے مرے ارمان لیکن پھر بھی کم نکلے
Here, desire and continuity echo the cyclical logic embedded in Indus fertility imagery and svastika-like motifs, both of which imply perpetual motion rather than final resolution. Muhammad Iqbal explicitly reactivates ancient South Asian and Islamic symbolic traditions to articulate ideas of life-force (*khudi*), creation, and renewal. His recurrent metaphors of earth, seed, and river recall the agrarian worldview central to Indus civilization:

بہ کائنات ابھی ناتمام ہے شاید
کہ آرہی ہے دمادم صدائے کن فیکون

Iqbal's vision of continuous creation resonates with the Indus symbolic stress on fertility, becoming, and cosmic order as materialized in terracotta figurines and seals. Faiz Ahmed Faiz transforms these archetypes into socio-political symbolism. His poetry often draws on images of soil, blood, and rebirth to articulate collective suffering and hope:

بہ دیکھیں گے
لازم ہے کہ بہ دیکھیں گے

Faiz's use of renewal imagery aligns conceptually with Indus popular religion, where material objects mediated between hardship, hope, and survival.

From a comparative theoretical standpoint, this correspondence may be understood through **material religion theory** and **cultural memory studies**. Indus figurines functioned as tactile, visual anchors of belief within domestic spaces, while Urdu poetry serves as a verbal archive of symbolic memory. Both negotiate the relationship between the human, the natural, and the

metaphysical through symbolic compression rather than explicit doctrine.

5. Findings

The analysis demonstrates that Indus terracotta figurines and seals form a coherent yet internally diverse symbolic system. Female figurines consistently emphasize fertility and the continuity of life, while variations in form and iconography suggest multiple localized meanings rather than a single, uniform cult. Seals reveal parallel complexity, combining animal imagery and abstract signs to articulate ideas of power, protection, and cosmology.

Overall, the evidence supports an interpretation of Indus religion as primarily household-based and experiential, involving popular ritual practices, magic, and shamanistic elements rather than formalized temple institutions. Terracotta figurines and seals functioned as material mediators between human communities and the natural forces upon which agrarian life depended.

6. Conclusion

Terracotta figurines and clay seals from the Indus Valley Civilization constitute some of the earliest material expressions of religious and artistic thought in South Asia. Far from being crude or simplistic, these objects reveal a sophisticated symbolic imagination rooted in fertility, ecology, and communal belief. Female figurines traditionally labeled as Mother Goddesses are best understood within *ppa: Civilization in the greater Indus Valley*. Tulika Books

a flexible interpretive framework that acknowledges their multiple functions and contextual meanings.

By situating these artifacts within their archaeological and art-historical contexts, this study demonstrates that Indus terracotta represent a foundational stage in the evolution of Indian art and religion. Their integration into daily life, reliance on symbolic form, and coexistence of figural and abstract imagery anticipate later developments in South Asian visual culture. Continued interdisciplinary research remains essential for refining our understanding of these enigmatic yet profoundly influential creations.

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