



PREHISTORIC ART A PASSAGE TOWARDS THE FUTURE RELIGION IN INDIA

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Abstract: Defining religion with precision is difficult due to its encompassing nature, which includes various human activities and beliefs. Generally, religion signifies human acknowledgment of reality and submission to a perceived supreme power, often linked with nature. Through religious practices, believers establish a connection with this supreme entity. Early forms of religion are based on the deification of nature, embodying dependence, peace, and trust, particularly in ancient India, where Dharma comprehensively governed life. The beginnings of Indian religion remain unclear, complicated by diverse cultural layers. Art and religion are closely intertwined, with prehistoric religious evolution often deduced from artistic findings at sites like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. These artefacts suggest a profound connection between the Indus Valley civilization's religious beliefs and nature. Although evidence is limited, symbolic representations in art offer insights into prehistoric religious doctrines, depicting a rich yet fragmented tapestry of early Indian religious life.

Keywords: Religion, Indus Valley Civilization, Ancient India, Religious Artefacts, Prehistoric Beliefs

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Introduction

It is difficult to define religion decisively. Religion is a cumulative form of various human activities and beliefs. The broad perception of religion is an attitude and an open confession of human acceptance of reality and submissiveness towards a supreme one who is accepted as real

by human beings. Supremacy is often associated with nature which is direct and close to humans. Through Religious practices, a believer connects himself to the supreme power. As the writer stated, "Religious worship is the activity of man to appease those powers which are beyond

his control but on which, he thinks, his survival and well-being depend.”¹ Such deification or veneration attitude towards nature inculcated the existence as divine or a part of supreme divine and laid the foundation of an early form of religion. “It is a feeling of dependence, of peace and trust. In Indian terminology, the Dharma relates to and regulates life as a whole. In ancient India, it was assigned the highest significance and formed the way of life (Achara)” (Sharma: 1990:1).

The beginning of religion in India is one of the most difficult questions to be answered. Indian religions and cultures are layered with multiple backgrounds. Coincidentally, art and religion shared a knotted bond that almost every civilization witnessed. The very first indication of any religious evolution ensues with the discovery of art and artifacts found in any civilization. As mentioned “Art is a visual expression of the human mind and portrays both sensory and the abstract feelings about life...art in a wrap becomes the language of images and symbols by which man expresses his perception of the world seen or unseen, benevolent or malevolent” (Sharma: 1990: 2). Art in any form is the outcome of an artistic expression stimulated by surroundings. To understand the Indian religious beliefs of prehistoric people, researchers have studied such art forms that are found in the excavation of popular sites like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, etc. in the region of the river Indus and its tributaries, where “the Indus Valley culture (c. 2500-1700 BCE) and the Aryan culture (appearing in the Indus region around 1500 B.C.E.)” (Tomory 1982) are considered as the antecedent to later Hindu mythology. On the basis of excavated evidence, one can form an outline of the religious doctrine of prehistoric Indian people. However, it is difficult to frame a clear picture of the religion of that period due to the scanty and scattered evidences.

‘An officer of the Archaeological Survey of India, R.D. Banerji, discovered Mohenjo-daro in 1922.’ After two years, extensive excavations at Mohenjo-daro in Sindh and Harappa in Punjab

started in 1924. John Marshal, K.N. Dikshit, and Ernest Mackay supervised these key excavations. Archaeologists discovered many settlements in India, which offered significant insights into the core beliefs of the Indus religion’ (Harappa.com 2024).

The Indus Valley people and their strong bond with nature indicate that their religious faith revolved around nature. Their dependency on nature in daily life galvanized them to acquiesce towards nature as before a supreme entity. Imagination always plays an important role in developing the natural elements into new identical characteristics. In this process, the existing world has been infused into the supernatural world of dreams where deities and demons could exist for believers. The mythical emergence of animals, plants, gods, and demons built the structure for a new belief system that is present in the real world and this might have happened with the Indus Valley people.

Unfortunately, prehistoric Indian art provides a scanty glimpse of Indian mythological credibility depicted on the seals and the rocks in the form of religious symbols, reverence for animals and plants, symbolic depictions of the male and female reproductive organs like phallus (*linga*) and vulva (*yoni*), and, use of baths and water in religious rituals. All the excavated items helped the scholars to form speculations that they could reach the assumptive vocabulary of religion in the Indus Valley civilization. In archaeology, the term religion is often used to describe something that is not physically present in the living world. Based on presumptive art records, prehistoric Indian art can be classified into many religious cults.

Animal Cult

The presence of animals during religious practices was very common in the ancient world as revealed by the material evidence. Animals are depicted in two ways, especially on the terracotta seals of the Indus Valley sites like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. One category belongs to those that are familiar and found in their natural form

while another category is depicted with hybrid characteristics. Hybrid or composite figures comprise of more than one human and animal attributes. These types of forms are not only unique in their appearance but have been the part of many religious mythological texts all over the world. One such example was found on a seal (Fig. 6.1) from Mohenjo-daro where a figure with a horned crown stands between the tree branches. With hands folded, a kneeling figure is shown, in front of the horned deity. This seal shows an event of animal sacrifice of a human-headed composite animal standing behind the beseecher. N.C. Panda mentioned such composite creatures as a part goat or ram, part bull, and part man, etc., as "... minor tutelary deity accompanying the votary into the presence of goddess" He also mentioned the 'human-headed lions of Mesopotamia' and compared it with Assyrian art which is interpreted as 'genii' but considered as an 'actual god' (Panda: 2011: 21). Another important terracotta figure with a 'lion head and fish-like body' was found at Mohenjo-daro 'dated to c.2700 BCE' (Balaji: 2011) and now is in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi (Fig. 6.2). It was recognised as a mythical lion. Some identical features of this lion include bulging eyes with a line to show eyebrows, a big nose, thick lips, and the mane around its head depicted by a line. Another noticeable seal (Fig. 6.3) belongs to Mohenjo-daro portraying a composite image of a horned woman or 'cow-woman' shown fighting with a 'horned or feathered tiger' It was discovered during excavation at Mohenjo-daro carried out by Mackay in the 1930s (Walter Fairservis JR. 1986).

The Indian humped bull is commonly found at various sites of the Indus Valley during excavation which also has some mythological connections. In this sequence, there is an interesting composite image of a bull (Fig. 6.4) found in Harappa which is 'a unicorn bull' image. It is a composite of three animals: a short-horned bull, a "unicorn bull", and a second long-horned bull. (Walter Fairservis JR. 1986). Animals are usually represented simply as natural beings in rock paintings. However, in the

Indus civilization, they are sometimes depicted as superior to humans. Almost every deity has an important association with animal ministrants. For instance in India, the lion is associated with the goddess Durga and is significant for its physical power, strength, and courage. The goddess Durga embodies feminine power. The lion is also associated with Vishnu's Narasimha incarnation, who is half lion and half human. The same bull was found executed on many seals in the Indus valley is also found painted in the rock shelters of Bhimbetka caves. In Harappa at many places figures appear with the bull (Fig. 6.5) and the horns of a bull are considered as 'a universal symbol of male potency' (Ions: 2004). Depiction of bulls with a hump and horns are the prominent feature of the rock art. "The humped bull obviously held a pivotal position in religious symbolism. It is likely that the Bull symbolized a deity which is at times expressed in a symbolic dualism between a hero and a bull" (Harappa.com: 2024). Here bull is also identified as Nandi, who is a devotee as well as the mount of Shiva. The 'white Bull' was one of the symbols seen by Mahavir's mother Trishala in her dream before his birth' (Panda: 2011: 381). Mahavir is the founder of Jainism in India. The presence of another popular name for the animal elephant in religious practices was in the Harappa excavation which is identified as Airavatra, the mount of Vedic god Indra. "Airavatra which has four tusks and a huge snowy bulk is likened to Mount Kailasa, where Shiva's heaven was to be" (Ions: 2004). The buffalo is the vehicle of Yama, the god of death, and buffalo is also known as the dark demon named 'Bhainsasura' in Hindu mythology. According to N. C. Panda "...in prehistoric times the worship of the bull (with which must be included the wild bison, buffalo, and domesticated ox) disseminated throughout the homestead, sometimes as a malevolent storm demon" (Panda: 2011:27). Other "revered animals represented at Mohenjo-Daro monkey is associated with Hanuman called monkey god appeared half monkey and half man, crocodile is the vehicle of Ganga as the tortoise is of the

Jamuna and is associated with other rivers” (Panda: 2011:27). Such an urge to represent such a variety of animals is indeed a remarkable phenomenon of giving respect to nature and its creatures.

Male Deity

Another important seal (Fig. 6.6) found in the Indus Valley Civilization represents the figure of a male deity. This image emerged as a pivotal link for all speculations that determine the Indian religions have their roots in one of the earliest civilizations of India. This seal represented a figure with three faces. One more important feature of this image is his yogic pose that indicates the figure either himself a deity or in early period man practiced yoga to maintain self-discipline, just to connect himself to the god. Vasudeva S. Agrawala narrates about this seal in his book *Siva Mahadeva, the Great God*, in which a three-faced deity adorning a horned shape crown figure is sitting in yogic posture which is considered by many researchers as the first anthropomorphic representation of the deity in India (Agrawala: 1966: 60). N.C. Panda identified Siva on the seal as ‘a prototype, in his most essential aspects, of the historic Siva. Siva was also worshiped as ‘the God of medicine’ and it is believed that Rudra saved human beings and animals from diseases, so he was also known as the “...Pashupati (Lord of animals)’ and ‘Siva (auspicious)” (Shanker: 1972: 36).

This proto-Siva seal has some important features which are later associated with the deity Siva. Vasudeva S. Agrawala explains that the three faces figure is ‘wearing a trident shaped headgear’ and between the legs of Siva’s seat there is ‘an antelope’, which is associated with the “Mrigavyadha or Siva as great hunter... triangular necklace with five strings on the chest and his arms covered with profuse bangles from shoulder to wrist...” indicating that this image has many identical features of the lord Siva (Agrawal: 1966: 60). In this seal, the deity is shown surrounded by four animals namely a rhinoceros and a bison on proper right while an elephant and, a tiger

on the extreme left. Although there is no sure evidence found that can describe the connection of this figure with Siva, the gathering of the robust animals around the figure explaining the supremacy of the lord is however indicated on the seal. “The presence of animals like the tiger and elephant recalls the mythological connections of these animals especially with Siva” (Agrawal: 1966: 60).

Female Deity

In prehistoric culture, a woman was supposed to be more potent, blessed with celestial energy who could contribute multiple tasks like giving birth to a child, looking after the family, and also taking part in agricultural activities. The cult of the mother goddess emerged with the excavation of clay female figurines in Palaeolithic and Neolithic India at the Indus Valley sites (Fig. 6.7). As evidences shows, female figures are mostly depicted as a symbol of fertility who may be an ordinary woman as a genitive, as well as divine beings. Her extraordinary ability to give birth to life earned her the title of “a mother or Great Mother and prototype of the power (*Prakriti*) which developed into that of Shakti” (Panda: 2011: 9). A noticeable feature revealed by the excavations at the Indus Valley sites is a number of images of female figures that are supposed to be linked with mother goddess cult during the prehistoric period. Scholars interpret the significant features of female figures with bulky bellies indicative of pregnancy, and heavy breast suggesting that a healthy mother of a child signifies motherhood, female figures found in the excavation at the Indus Valley site.

Another example of the primacy of female deity in the Indus valley is the standing figure of a female between the branches of a tree and looking like a divine one. In the same seal at the extreme lower, there is a group of seven female figures standing in a row (Fig. 6.1). This nude figure is a single female figure standing strong without any male partner and her horned crown is symbolic to be the divine character and supremacy of

this figure. Although there is no evidence to narrate this exactly, Parveen Talpur, a Pakistani archaeologist wrote in her article 'The intriguing tale of the Seven Women' of Mohenjo-daro' that the idea of the grouping of seven women is old, and the foundations of it might have been found in ancient Indian holy texts like the *Purana* and the *Rig Veda*. It has persisted in modern-day India as the worship of seven heavenly mothers known as "*Sapta Matrika*," whose sculptures are erected in various temples (Goswami *et al* 2005).

Aniconic or animistic form of worship: Tree worship

In Vedic literature like Rigveda, Artha Veda, and Brahman Veda, the cult of tree worship is mentioned there. The post Vedic literature like in The *Samhitas*, the term 'Viraksa' is used for trees (Panda: 2011:60). Vedic mantras were chanted by the priest before cutting the trees. Many intellectuals observed the concept of animism and elements of nature worship in the Indus Valley communities where trees are suggested as supernatural properties and also considered more popular than other deities. In India trees like 'the pipal, the neem, the acacia, the sami' and, the date palm are popular in Prehistoric period. There are many assumptions among scholars regarding tree worship in the Indus Valley Civilization. In this regard Bansi Lal Mllah, mentioned in his book 'Trees in Indian Art Mythology And Folklore' that "it was believed that gods dwell in the trees (*Vrksa Devata* or *Vrksa Devi*) therefore, their divine character was depicted in a befitting manner, sometimes trees as such and sometimes, trees personified" (Malla: 2000:115). There are many examples found where the divine emergence of the trees is depicted from the human and animal body. In one of Mohenjo-daro seals (Fig. 6.9), the pipal tree served as the headgear of a unicorn-animal. "In this, the buffalo horn represents the two conventionalized unicorn heads, and the headgear the fan-shaped crest imitates the form of the pipal tree. Thus, the pipal tree and the unicorn are symbols of the pipal God'

(Malla: 2000:16). Several seals are reported here depicting the tree motifs in pre-Vedic India. In one such seal (Fig. 6.8), a tree spirit is sitting on a tree branch interacting with a tiger. In another figure (Fig. 6.3), there is a half woman and half buffalo figure attacking a tiger-like animal. Here tree branches are seem to be bending towards the deity encouraging or supporting the deity in the act of demolishing an evil animal.

There is another example where a deity is positioned in the middle of two branches of a tree. These branches are identified as 'pipal tree' branches covering the deity as if she is standing in a 'shrine'. "It may be mentioned here that in the days gone by, it is used to be possibly a custom for women to walk naked around a pipal tree in order to gain fertility" (Malla :2000:14). Woman is also depicted as the earth mother or creator who can give birth. Nature as depicted on a seal from Harappa is in the form of a tree coming out from a woman's womb (Fig. 6.10).The concept may be here is that "The earth is the great Yoni. The woman's body in the Indus Valley seal is the earthbound root, the Fecundating source" (Malla: 2000:14).

Marshall, one of the earliest scholars, describes two forms of tree worship in the Indus Valley civilization in his book 'Mohenjo-daro and Indus Civilization in 1931'. According to him, "...in one form tree itself is worshiped in its natural form and in other, tree spirit is personified and endowed with human shape and human attributes" (Malla 2000:13). Bansi Lal Malla, in his book *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* mentioned various opinions of many scholars regarding tree worship which was the most fashionable trend among the Indus people. He mentions the vision of Dikshit who 'referred to the worship of pipal tree in the Indus Valley' in his book *Prehistoric Civilization of the Indus Valley* as well as draws attention to the few seals of religious significance including the unique *pipal* tree and the seated god. Malla cites Dikshit and goes on to say that various religious customs and beliefs must have been woven around the

reverence of the mother goddess, the goddess of fertility and harvests, by the upper classes”(Malla: 2000:14).

Stone and Spirituality

Stones are not merely a geological element in Indian culture but are also treated as sacred ‘baetylus’ stones from the prehistoric period. The traces of stone worship are often associated with fertility concepts in the Indus Valley culture. In this context John Marshall the Director General of Archaeology, identified certain ovoidal lime stones as the symbolic representation of *lingas* that are also associated with the cult of phallic worship. Archaeologists have mentioned that a large number of such ‘Chessman-shaped *lingams*’ are found which vary in size, material, and colors (Fig.6.11). Materials like, “chalcedony, carnelian, lapis, lazuli cherty, limestone, grey sandstone with or without bands, yellow Jaisalmar stone, alabaster, imitation carnelian, faience, paste, shell, ivory and terracotta”. Archaeologists have measured these stones ranging from ‘0.5 inches to over 5 inches’ sometimes along with a lower base to form a border or support possibly for *yoni* female genitals (bharatkalyan 97.blogspot.com 2024). N.C. Panda mentions “the discovery of terracotta Siva Lingas along with a double-headed human figure and of a few of stone Lingas from Dholavira confirms that Siva Linga worship was prevalent among the Harappans (Panda: 2011:15). The same idea is associated with the geometric shapes inscribed on stones found in the ‘Baghor area’, which is the ‘Sone Valley of Madhya Pradesh.’ And “on this there is a specially colored rock on which were carved images of triangles within triangles. Such symbols are indicative of the goddess Shakti, who creates life”(devdutt.com 2024).

Symbols used in Pre-historic times

These seals contributed to introducing the categories of Hindu mythology such as the worship of natural phenomena, the personification of inanimate objects, and the natural forces.

Indian mythological art is a vivid presentation of various symbolic vocabularies and ‘occupying pre-eminent position right from the time of the Harappa culture(Sharma:1990:11).These symbols are helpful to show the most appropriate presentation of mythical beings, inspired by the information of principal scriptures. These auspicious symbols can be divided into various categories such as ritualistic symbols, iconographic symbols, etc. Savita Sharma in her famous book ‘Early Indian Symbols’ claims ‘one hundred and eight’ auspicious symbols are mentioned in the ‘*Harivamsa* and *Vasturantna Kosha*’, and such symbols are attributed to particular deity using their distinctive weaponry (Sharma: 1990:5). Among these set of symbols, the Swastika is the most well-known. Swastika symbol ‘indicates happiness, safety, fertility and prosperity. In Indian ethos all these are considered as blessings of sun god’ (kamat 2003). Because it is regarded as the key symbol that reveals the earliest phases of Indian mythology, the swastika is widely used in Indian art (Fig. 6.12). It emerged at an Indus Valley civilization excavation site and also appears in a large number of contemporary Indian paintings. A cross with equal-length, symmetrical arms that bend at a right angle is called a Swastika. Dots are occasionally placed in between each arm. It is claimed that the word originates from the “Sanskrit swastika,” which means “conducive to well-being”. The swastika is still a popular auspicious symbol among Buddhists, Jainas, and Hindus in India. “Among the Jainas it is the emblem of their seventh Tirthankara (saint) and is also said to remind the worshiper by its four arms of the four possible places of rebirth—in the animal or plant world, in hell, on Earth, or in the spirit world” (Britannica.com 2024).

In this sequence some other noticeable symbols like ‘the Chakra’ and ‘the Surya’ (sun), are considered some of the most popular symbols found in the excavation at many sites of prehistoric art. The depiction of chakra or wheel is found depicted in Kabra Pahar (Raigarh) and Sitakhandi

(Chamba Valley) rock paintings'. "Another example of chakra-like design can also be seen in Sitakhardi (Chambal valley) rock-paintings where the four ornamental forms of Chakra with another circle inside have been painted in a group" (Sharma: 1990: 46). The chakra symbol is found executed on the potteries, sealing and seal also. The Chakra or the wheel symbol has a circle with a radical cross found in the Mohenjo-daro and the Harappa site. "It is depicted as a cross inside a circle on the back of bull" (Sharma: 1990:47).

The Sun or Surya is one of the most dominant deities of the Vedic period in India. It is also said that "In India, Surya is the principal cult deity amongst the five chief cults of Brahminic religion...Even in the prehistoric period when man started to live in groups, there is evidence to show the prevalence of sun worship" (Sharma: 1990: 25). The evidence in rock shelters of 'Singanpur (Raigarh, M.P.), Bhimbetka (M.P.), Sitakhardi (Cambal Valley, M.P.), Romp (Mirzapur, U.P.)' are found where the representation of a sun showed an evolution of different forms such as full orb form, half sun form, and variety of rays are found' (Sharma: 1990:26). Sometimes geometrical representation of the sun is also found in many places in rock shelter paintings. The pottery decoration was very popular in Indus Valley civilization, especially in Harappa and Mohanjo-daro. The Sun like symbol is also found on potteries of this time as a decorative image. "Sun on these potteries is represented with six, seven or even more rays which are either straight or curved. The most popular variety however, shows a circle, within a smaller circle inside, but with curved radiating rays" (Sharma: 1990: 27).

Conclusion

The prehistoric culture in India is distinctly characterised by a strong connection with nature. One prominent belief system involves humans being closely intertwined with nature itself. The gods were initially identified with and transformed into various natural elements. Artistic expressions

during this period largely revolved around these beliefs, where nature and its components dominated religious ideologies. These ancient beliefs have persisted into contemporary Indian religions. For instance, the concept of the mother goddess representing fertility and the worship of animals still resonates in present-day Indian culture. Archaeological findings suggest that the ancient Indus Valley civilization may have significantly influenced the development of Hinduism. Practices such as animal sacrifice, tree worship, and the use of special-shaped stones as sacred objects are observed both in the relics of the Indus Valley and in modern Hinduism. The early practices of yoga also found their roots in this era and are associated with religious practices. Symbols like the swastika, which originated in the Indus Valley, hold religious significance not only in India but also globally. Another important symbol, the phallic-shaped stones interpreted as lingas, are central to Shaivism in India. Shaivism, which venerates the divine in human and phallic forms, possibly traces its origins to the worship practices of the Indus culture. While conclusive evidence is still lacking, it is plausible that many features of later Hinduism may indeed have their roots in prehistoric traditions.

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Illustrations



Fig. 6.1: Horned deity on the fork of a tree



Fig. 6.2: Terracotta lion, Mohenjo-daro Harappa Civilisation, (Ions: 2004:8).

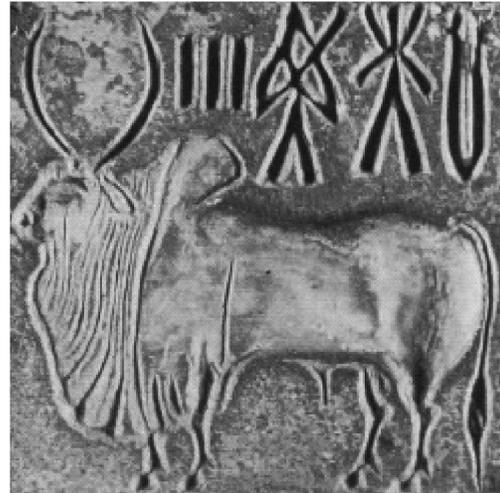


Fig. 6.5: Indian humped bull The Zebu (Ions:2004)



Fig. 6.3: Horned Cow-woman, Mohenjo-daro (Walter Fairservis JR:1986)



Fig. 6.6: Seated horned deity with animals of the grasslands: a rhinoceros, buffalo, elephant, and tiger. (Ions 2004, P-9)

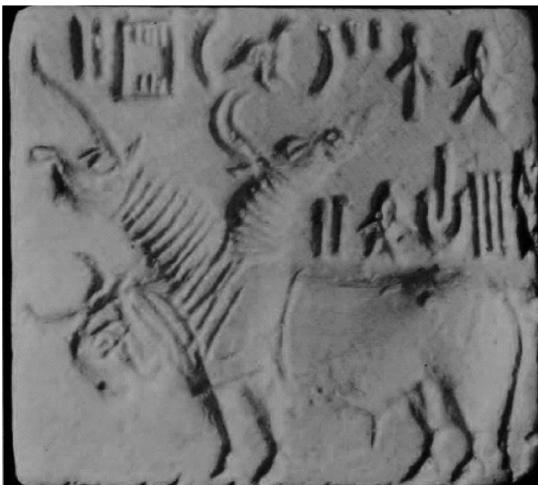


Fig. 6.4: Composite bull and unicorn (Walter Fairservis JR:1986)



Fig. 6.7: Terracotta Women figurines depicting Motherhood, Mehrgarh (Kalyanaraman, 1997)

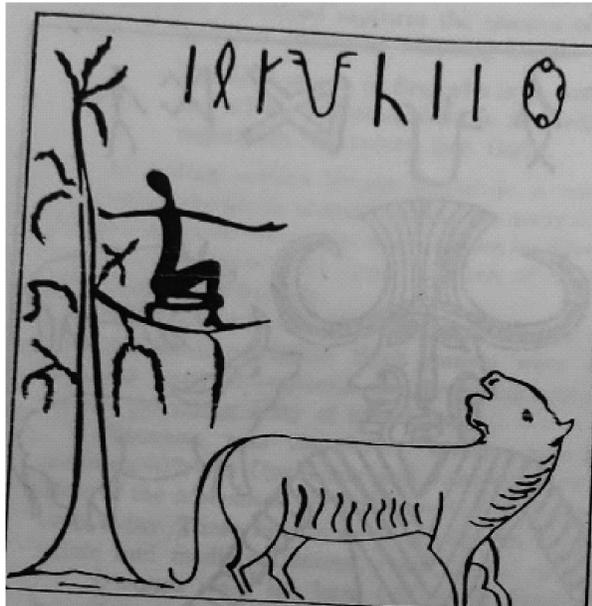


Fig. 6.8: Tree spirit with a tiger, Mohenjo-daro National Musium, New Delhi (Balaji, 2011)



Fig. 6.11: Chessman-like Siva Linga (Panda:2011:15)



Fig. 6.9: Seal depicting Pipal tree and Unicorn, Mohanjo-daro, (Panda: 2011:12)



Fig. 6.12: Swastika motifs (Kamat 2003)



Fig. 6.10: Goddess giving birth to the Vegetation: seal: Harappa 3000 BCE National Museum, New Delhi,(Malla:2000:16)

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