

THE ORIGIN OF FOLKLORES AND HARAPPAN RIVERS

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ABSTRACT

The rivers have played a vital role in the growth and development of ancient civilization s, shaping their economies, cultures, and societies in profound ways. River mythology holds major significance in ancient literature, philosophy, and rituals. Rivers are celebrated as goddesses, representing purity, fertility, and the source of life and played an energetic role to produce earliest folklores. This paper intends to examine the basis of folklores related to rivers and passing on these narratives through generations. The core aim of this research paper is to explore how the folklores reveal the deep connection between the people and their environment, and how they contribute to shaping the cultural and social identity of the Harappan Civilization. The relationship between folklores and Harappan Rivers are quite debatable due to limited understanding of the Harappan script and direct textual records. The historical evidences proved that Rivers were essential for agriculture, fishing, communal activities, transportation, and trade in Harappan society and their seasonal fluctuations may have been interpreted through mythological narratives. The researcher employs interdisciplinary approaches to study ancient Harappan Rivers and folklore, combining data from archaeology, geology, anthropology, linguistic and other fields to create holistic interpretations of past societies. The results of this study are expected to document the origin of folklores and trace the continuity and evolution of cultural practices over time across the different regions of Harappan Civilization . The study may have significance for those interested in the subject in general, and researchers who want to explore the topic further, in particular.

Keywords: *Harappan Rivers; Culture; Myths; folklore; rituals.*

INTRODUCTION

The Harappan Civilization, entitled after its first discovered site near Harappa in Punjab, Pakistan. It has been considered as the first multifaceted civilization in ancient South Asia since the early 20th century. This Civilization was thriving around 2500 BC. The impact and scope of this civilization are now clearer, surrounding southeastern Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of northwestern and western India¹.

This Civilization was the foundation of the urbanism in this region. The cities were equipped with several wells, bathing rooms and a rich system of drains. In Harappan Cities there were not built palaces or temples as was common in Mesopotamia and Egypt. But they keep well-planned cities with huge walls and gateways to protect the citizens and to control trade. This evidence proposes that the urban system of the

¹ "Archaeological and anthropological studies on the Harappan cemetery of Rakhigarhi, India". Published online 2018 Feb 21. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0192299.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5821334/> (Accessed on 19 September 2024)

Harappans was designed to facilitate all members of society, reflecting an early concept of humanism. It is the largest civilization according to geographical aspect among of the four ancient civilizations, like Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. For almost eighty years, researchers have been evolving innovative tactics to realize better the finely carved seals and the well-planned cities of the Harappan people, which present a culture that was quite dissimilar from the other ancient civilizations².

The story of Harappan Civilization has been started from the banks of Rivers. The major settlement of the Civilization was founded on Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, which were found along with Indus River and River Ravi. Exploration from different sites disclosed a dry bed of a huge river Saraswati admired in early literature Rig Veda was also considered a major river of this Civilization. The Rivers were not only lifelines of an ancient society but also holders of stories that continue to form the cultural identity of the region. The Rivers have always held a unique place in mythology and folklore.

Ancient civilizations were connected with different myths, which were often used to explain natural phenomena such as the changing of seasons and the phases of the moon and sun. Myth exists from the beginning of the humanity. The whole world stands on belief system because nothing is certain in this world. Ancient cultures thought that these happenings were organized by gods and goddesses, and myths were generated to describe their actions. Myth is spread through the folklore in form of stories. Myth and Folklore is a part of the society and it cannot be separated from the mind of people. They have inherited the roots in the tradition and way of living of society. The influence of mythology is seen in most of the aspects of the functions of the society and people take reference from it. Folklore is passed myths on

from one generation to another as a precious piece of information³.

The relationship between ancient society and folklore⁴ grew gradually. Folklore usually reveals the basic human experiences, emotions and expressions like birth, death, love, fear, anxiety and the struggle for survival of a community. In many cultures, rivers are believed to be sacred and associated with goddesses or spirits. The stories surrounding rivers in mythology and folklore reveal the deep cultural and spiritual association of people to the natural phenomena.

In South Asian culture, folklore originates from oral traditions that have long been used to transmit knowledge, values, traditional and cultural identity. Folklore often uses symbolism and metaphor to provide deeper insights into everyday life and natural events.

To prove the connection between the origin of folklore and Harappan rivers, the researcher gathered and analyze evidences from various academic sources that explore the relationship between Harappan Rivers and the development of folklore.

The Relationship between Harappan Civilization and the Rivers

The Civilization s flourished and originated on the bank of the Rivers and its influences are reflected in all aspects of life. There were main Rivers Indus, Saraswati (Ghaggar-Hakra), and Ravi who played a major role in the development and prosperity of Harappan Civilization. The scholars agreed to acknowledge the rivers were central to the Harappan economy, culture, and settlement patterns. The Harappans had a knowledge of their natural environment, especially the River systems, and efficiently used these resources to support their society.

Harappan civilization excavated sites provides an idea about the vital role of the Rivers in its cultural heritage. In ancient Indian literature highlighted

² Jonathan Mark Kenoyer. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

³Nasir Ahmad Baba, Sakshi Sharma. "Myth and Folklore used by the Literature Intellectuals to Portray Real Life Situations". IJCRT2308209 International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT) www.ijcrt.org b869

⁴ Geo-mythology, the field that explores the connection between legends, local folklore, and the physical landscape, has provided invaluable insights into this phenomenon.

the importance of the rivers in the hymns of Vedas, the Puranas and Upanishads etc. The seven significant rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, (underground river) Narmada, Sindhu (Indus) and Kaveri cover the length and breadth of the Subcontinent and join people with diverse life styles, languages, outfits etc.

The Saraswati, supposed to be a significant river, ran parallel to the Indus in the region now known as the Ghaggar-Hakra riverbed. Archaeological evidence suggests that many Harappan settlements were situated along this river, which was vital for agriculture and trade. Geological studies suggest that the Saraswati was a major river during the early phases of the civilization, but it gradually dried up, which might have contributed to the decline of the Harappan culture.

Remarkably, the Saraswati River has been consistently mentioned in traditional stories, folklore⁵, oral customs, worship, and religious texts Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads for the past 4,500. Vedic life revolved and evolved around on this river⁶. For a long time, the River was considered a mystery River since no such physical exist. Recent findings point out the River did exist and played a major role in sustaining the ancient civilization.

The Indus River was the lifeline of the civilization, providing water for agriculture and other basic necessities of life. The Indus River, historically known as “Sindhu,” is one of the subcontinent’s most important rivers. Local folklore personifies it as a powerful god named Sindhu, worshipped by the early inhabitants of the Harappa Civilization. Mythological, it is also referred to as the “Lion River,” highlighting its vital role in the socio-economic and spiritual lives of the people.

The River Ravi⁷ was considered in Hinduism as a manifestation of the goddess Parvati, worshipped during Navrati. Originating near the Rohtang Pass

in Himachal Pradesh, the Ravi flows through Punjab in India before entering Pakistan and joining the Chenab River. The Indus and Ravi rivers hold deep spiritual and cultural significance in South Asia, symbolizing the divine and natural world through rich folklore and legends that highlight their importance in the region’s history and heritage.

Natural Resources Deployment in Harappan Civilization

The Harappans were primarily an agricultural society. They developed advanced agricultural techniques, relying heavily on the rivers for irrigation. The seasonal flooding of rivers like the Indus provided rich silt deposits, which made the land fertile for growing crops such as wheat, barley, and peas. The rivers provided abundant fish, an important part of the Harappan diet. The presence of fish and marine motifs in their seals and pottery indicates the significance of aquatic resources. Hunting along the riverbanks also provided food and materials, as suggested by archaeological finds of animal bones.

They practiced flood-based farming, harnessing the natural flooding cycles of the rivers to irrigate their fields. The use of granaries in cities like Harappa suggests that they could store surplus grain, indicating a well-organized agricultural system.

Water Management Techniques in Harappan Society

The Harappans exhibited advanced water management skills. In this Civilization at most sites, wells were dug to provide water for the inhabitants. The number of wells at Mohenjo-Daro appears to exceed the normal needs of a large urban center. They also built reservoirs and tanks to store water, ensuring a stable water supply even during

⁵ The title of the “Father of Folklore in India” is often attributed to Natesa Sastri (1859–1906). He was a pioneering folklorist and scholar who dedicated much of his life to collecting, documenting, and preserving the folk traditions, tales, and cultural heritage of South India. His work, particularly the collection titled “The Folklore of Southern India,” is highly regarded for its comprehensive documentation of oral traditions and folktales in the region.

⁶ Ramaesh N Rao, Avinash Thombre. *Communicating Across Boundaries: The Indians Way* (Vanagaram: Notion Press, 2021),

⁷ The Ravi River holds religious significance for Hindus and Sikhs. While Sikhs revere it as a site where Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, meditated.

dry seasons. This indicates a strong understanding of water conservation and management and its spiritual importance in the lives of Harappans.

The Harappans constructed sophisticated drainage systems in their cities, with brick-lined wells and public baths, such as the Great Bath in Mohenjo-Daro, highlighting the importance of water in both daily life and ritual practices. In all religious practices the water is a significant part and purified with mantras. This big ponds and wells tradition is still associated with the temples and ashrams in South Asia.

Trade and Transportation

Rivers served as natural highways, facilitating trade and communication between various Harappan cities and beyond. The Indus River, in particular, was central for transporting goods such as pottery, metals, and agricultural products. The early ancient civilization s were associated with each other, and there is evidence for trade and other cultural contacts among them. However there is a significant difference between their artistic styles, rituals symbols, tools and social organization. The Harappans engaged in extensive trade with regions as far away as Mesopotamians, Egyptians and the river systems played a key role in these interactions. Other Rivers like the Ravi and Beas also played main roles in supporting settlements and facilitating local trade.

These features demonstrate that the rivers served as the backbone of Harappan society. The ancient inhabitants of the region recognized the divine power of these rivers, venerating them as symbols of fertility and mother goddesses. The geographical and climatic conditions of the area provided a foundation for the growth and sustainability of civilization s throughout history.

The Cultural and Religious Significance of Rivers in Harappan Civilization

Almost all major cities of the Harappan Civilization were situated near the bank of the

rivers. Rivers/water were likely viewed as sacred entities, playing a central role in the spiritual life. The construction of large public baths and the well-designed water supply systems suggest a ritualistic use of water⁸. The admiration for rivers in later Indian religions, where rivers like the Ganges are worshipped as goddesses⁹, might have roots in Harappan practices.

Various theories suggest that the Harappans were pioneers in developing cultural and social rituals, which were later adopted during the Vedic era. Evidence of their lifestyle, economy, and advanced techniques can still be observed and analyzed. Although the seals provide a written narrative, the inability to decipher the text has prevented researchers from making definitive claims, unlike the more fully understood Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilization s.

In ancient Indian tradition, rivers were connected to mythological stories that evolved into sacred narratives about water deities and rituals. The Harappans, like other river valley civilization s, experienced both the benefits and risks of flooding, especially from the Indus River. Myths like the story of Manu, who survives a great flood, may reflect cultural memories of severe floods in the Harappan region.

The association between rivers and the Harappan Civilization is well-established, and researchers have observed similar traditional rituals continuing into the Vedic era, indicating a possible continuity of Harappan practices. The researcher speculates that festivals and fairs may have been held near rivers, as it is a common belief that lots of believers would take a dip in the river to cleanse themselves of sins. From Vedic eras the rituals and rites are related with the rivers still continue, sometimes more dynamically than past¹⁰.

In South Asian mythology, even visible in the artifacts of the Harappan's civilization , the seven major rivers *saptnadis* have spiritual connotations. These deified as seven main goddesses the Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Sindhu, Krishna, Godavari,

⁸ Jonathan Mark Kenoyer. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 120.

⁹ Arpita Chattaraj. *Sacred Water and Cultures of Worship: Some Observations on the River in India. Humanities Bulletin* Volume 4, Number 2, 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and the Narmada. These goddesses signifies an interaction of love, wisdom and power, they are seen as life-giving and nourishing the land. The water indicate the cycle of birth and death and a release of a soul. Keeping with the belief of purifying strength of rivers, death is followed by cremation on the bank of the river. The belief is so strong that in the lack of a river, crematoriums are usually located near water bodies. Or if this is not possible the remains are taken to the Ganges or the closest river for submersion¹¹.

South Asia is the land of diversity, water is the common thread that in Hinduism the rivers names are associated to a deity mainly goddesses, Brahma Putra is one of the few with a male name. Worshipping these deities¹² has a feminine for most rivers with hymns praising the mother goddesses connected to the rivers.

Worship activities often take place along riverbanks and waterside steps, serving as gathering spots for women to engage in traditional

tasks such as collecting water and washing laundry. In many communities, women play a dynamic role in preserving and passing on traditional information and stories. Women also sing local songs while collecting or planting fodder, often comparing their lives to the constant movement and giving nature of rivers. These songs reflect their deep connection with rivers through different seasons. Based on ancient cultural evidence, it can be speculated that women were likely the first to transmit oral traditions and serve as narrators of folklore in Harappan society.

Harappan Seals and Artifacts: Tales of Their Era

Harappan art, seals, and pottery portrayed the motifs such as water animals, fish, and boats, emphasizing the significance of rivers in their daily life.



The Mohenjo Daro seal depiction of a Harappan boat, most likely a reed boat but possibly a planked boat.

<https://maritimehistorypodcast.com/ep-011-harappa-erythraean-sea/> (Accessed on 30th September 2024)

¹¹ Wantzen, K.M ed *River Culture: Life As a Dance of Rhythm of the Waters* (Paris: UNESCO Publishers, 2023), 34.

¹² For instance the prayers for the goddess Ganga¹² known as *Ganagatakam* praises Ganga as the life giver and a staircase to heaven. In some traditions, the Narmada River is considered even more sacred than the Ganges. Legend holds that while

bathing in the Ganges requires visiting her, merely seeing the Narmada is enough to cleanse one's sins. Yamuna River is connected with the god Krishna, and symbolize as a life-giving energy. The Kaveri is personified as a goddess, regarded as a mother figure who brings sustenance and fertility to the land.



The well-depicted boat from the terra cotta amulet found at Mohenjo Daro

<https://maritimehistorypodcast.com/ep-011-harappa-erythraean-sea/> (Accessed on 30th September 2024)

The representations of boats on a seal and amulet emphasize the significance of rivers in Harappan culture. Both artifacts depict similarly shaped vessels, featuring a cabin between them. These art pieces indicate that the Harappans effectively utilized river and marine resources to connect with other civilizations. In the second example, the researcher notes the presence of birds, suggesting that the amulet may depict a narrative involving birds and boats, possibly related to a folk story from that time. In ancient cultures, birds held considerable mythological power, serving as messengers between the gods and symbolizing freedom and the soul.

Harappan script was invented around 2600 BC and reflected the social, political and ritual formation of this civilization. The importance of aquatic and riverine resources can be observed like fish motifs were first painted on pottery and marine shell. The fish was a prominent motif in Early Harappan painted pottery and ancient text on seals, which may be symbolizing the god of Waters. Its dominance in Harappan iconography highlights the significant role of this deity. The researcher connects the fish symbol with *Dashavatara*¹³ refers Vishnu¹⁴ the god of existence is popular as Narayana which means who live in the river. In

Vedic history, Vishnu's life started from water as fish and continues as tortoise, boar and lion to a perfect human being.

Matsya¹⁵ folklore associated with the unusual anthropomorphic role of fish. In this story Vishnu predicted and protected creatures of the world at the time of a great deluge. The continuation of Harappan rituals into the Vedic period may be attributed to the similar geographical and climatic conditions of the region. Numerous references to folklore in ancient texts highlight the significance of fish and their influence on the culture. However, due to the inability to decipher Harappan texts, researchers cannot make definitive claims; all theories remain speculative.



Motif "Fish" on a Harappan Pottery

Source: <https://www.harappa.com/script/parpola8.html> (Accessed on 30th September 2024)

A seal has been discovered which is supposed to be the depiction of "Proto-Siva," named "Pashupati" with having three faces, seated on a throne. The figure is appeared in a yoga posture, bordered by a

¹³ *Dashavataras* described the ten incarnations of Vishnu. Each of these incarnations has a particular mythology and is the object of devotion (*bhakti*).

¹⁴ Vishnu, the preserver among Hinduism's three main deities, descends to protect the good, destroy evil, and restore balance.

¹⁵ In this story, Vishnu appears as a fish to Manu, seeking protection. As Manu cares for the fish, it grows larger until he places it in the ocean, realizing it is Vishnu. Vishnu warns Manu of an impending flood that will destroy the world, instructing him to gather sages and creatures on a boat. When the deluge begins, Vishnu returns as a horned fish, using the serpent king Vasuki to tether himself to the boat, protecting them during the flood.

fish, an alligator, and a snake. The figure is supposed to be a god, wearing bangles in both hands and many necklaces. May be wearing bangles in both arms projected spiritual significance of a female to prevent evils. The deity is having water buffalo horn on her head which depict the water buffalo was considered to have spiritual powers. The god was surrounded around

the animals and two stick figures along with Harappan text which means the main focus is god. “Pashupati” is a Sanskrit word means lord of living creatures. Definitely the seal demonstrates an important event, myth of a story of that era. This seals may symbolize the importance of the god as the protector of all creatures.



Mohenjo-Daro Seal, popularly known as the Pashupati seal.

Source:

https://www.bibhudevamisra.com/2016/01/shiva-as-bada-dev-gond-symbolisms-on_23.html

(Accessed on 30th September, 2024)

In this seal the female figure was appeared to push the two tigers with her hands forcefully. Mostly researchers speculated that this carved seals story is closed to Mesopotamian’s Gilgamesh epic. The

Mesopotamian subject show lions being repressed by a hero, whereas the Harappan narratives render tigers being strangled by a figure, sometimes clearly male, sometimes ambiguous or possibly female. This motif of a hero or heroine tackling with two tigers could have been shaped independently for similar events that may occurred in Mesopotamia as well as the Harappan Civilization¹⁶.

¹⁶ Jonathan Mark Kenoyer. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114.



A female deity battling two tigers and standing above an elephant.

Source: <https://www.harappa.com/blog/story-tablet-harappa> (Accessed on 30th September, 2024)

In another seal narrative, the story depicts a man striking a water buffalo. The man's hair is tied in a bun at the back of his head, and he holds a spiny spear. He is seen pressing the buffalo's head with his foot, attempting to kill the animal. The seal is divided into two sections: one shows the hunter's actions, while the other features a deity seated in a

yogic posture, wearing bangles on both hands and displaying a meditative expression. This scene suggests a sacrificial ritual performed in the presence of a god. The ritual of sacrificing a water buffalo is linked to the goddess Durga in Hindu mythology, and it is possible that this practice originated in the Harappan civilization and was documented on this seal. Additionally, the research notes a gharial above the hunter's head, indicating that crocodiles were once common in the Ravi and Indus rivers.



Harappan Molded tablet H95-2486 depicting an individual spearing a buffalo.

Source: <https://www.harappa.com/blog/story-tablet-harappa> (Accessed on 30th September, 2024)

The imagery on these seals demonstrates that mythological stories held a significant place in Harappan society, as art reflects the culture of its time. These myths, conveyed through folklore, were preserved on artifacts. The presence of elements like boats, fish, gharials, and water buffaloes highlights their importance in folklore and underscores the connection between rivers and these cultural stories.

Literature Review

This study started from collecting, verifying, discussing and examining the data and information for the research. The researcher employed content analysis approach to analyze the data which included:

Review of existing literature as was available in books, research papers and journals.

Through an examination of the archaeological evidence and a comparative analysis of folklore from other ancient cultures, the researcher proposed several theories suggesting that the earliest folklore of this region may have been linked to its ancient rivers.

Discussion

The Harappan civilization raised around 2600 to 1900 BCE, though the Rigveda is thought to have been collected about 1500 BCE to 1200 BCE. This shows a major historical gap, during which the urban hubs of the Harappan civilization declined, leading to the rise of Vedic culture. Harappan civilization may have been declined due to climatic changes and resource depletion, the Vedic period marked a shift towards a more rural and agricultural society. The Rigveda reflects this transition, emphasizing the importance of cattle,

agriculture, and the worship of various deities associated with natural elements. The Rigveda is primarily associated with the region around the Saraswati River, which some scholars believe links to the Ghaggar-Hakra river system that was significant during the Harappan period. This connection highlights the continuity of settlement patterns and cultural practices in the region.

The Rigveda contains numerous hymns that praise rivers, particularly the Saraswati, Sindhu (Indus), and other water bodies. These rivers are often personified and revered as goddesses, reflecting their vital role in the sustenance and spirituality of the communities.

It is a common faith that bathing in the divine rivers and intake some drops of water before the last breathe can help to get rid of the sins¹⁷. The significant importance of the rivers and water¹⁸ is highlighted throughout the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Remains indicate that Harappans Civilization included worshiped of mother goddess, and of a lord of Yogis and animals like Shiva, a great god of today¹⁹.

While no Harappan myths have survived, later South Asian traditions of divine beings causing natural disasters may have roots in Harappan beliefs. Fertility deities associated with rain and harvest in these traditions likely reflect Harappan concerns about water, possibly influencing Vedic or local myths.

Conclusion

Throughout human history rivers are responsible to nurture and cause of death and devastating. The dual feature of the river as the demolisher and the protector is the signified in myths and religious practices in different cultures.

The development of the Harappan civilization was deeply dependent on natural resources, water management, and trade networks, highlighting the crucial role of rivers. Rivers were not only essential

¹⁷ K. Shadananan. *Role of Water in the Development of Civilization in India- a Review of Ancient Literature, Traditional Beliefs and Practices. The Basis of Civilization - Water Science?* (Wallingford: IAHS,2004), 163

¹⁸ There are a lot of spiritual personalities in the epics always lived in the rivers as physical purity associated with mental purity was believed a must in realizing eternal truth.

¹⁹ NA. *Regional Survey of the World: The Far East and Australasia 2003. 34th Edition* (London: Europa Publication, 2003), 38.

to the society's survival but were also seen as symbols of fertility and associated with mother goddesses. The region's geography and climate further fostered the growth of civilization s over time.

Considering the significance of rivers in Harappan culture, it's likely that the earliest social and cultural activities occurred along the riverbanks. Since rivers were associated with goddesses and both symbolized fertility, it is possible that early folklore was narrated by women, who were the first storytellers.

The Rigveda, one of the most renowned ancient texts of South Asia, does not provide a direct account of the history or cultural traditions of the Harappan civilization. However, some scholars have identified indirect connections, suggesting links between the language of the Rigveda and the Harappan script found on seals, poetry such as fish symbols. These seals also depict figures like a goddess, Shiva, and a yogic posture—symbols that later became significant beliefs in the Vedic period and are now central to Hinduism. Despite these theories, the decipherment of the Harappan script remains a topic of ongoing debate and research.

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