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THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY,
LORETO COLLEGE,
KOLKATA

Edited by
Dr. Sukanya Mitra
Dr Krishnokoli Hazra



Loreto College, Kolkata

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Introduction

This publication is drawn from Historia 2025—the annual students’ conference organized by the Department of History, Loreto College, Kolkata, which deliberated on the theme “Perspectives from Ancient India: From the Harappan Civilization to the 7th Century CE.” It includes essays dealing with various aspects of ancient India such as the town planning of the Harappan Civilization to the soundscape of the ancient past and the political and cultural significance of gods and goddesses as well as a comparison between different types of textual sources. They offer fresh perspectives on different aspects of the ancient Indian past.

Chapter 1 deals with the long-assumed divide between architecture and musicology. It shows that India’s acoustic imagination did not awaken with the Vedas or the Natyashastra, but far earlier within the resonant, ritualized spaces of the Harappan world.

Chapter 2 draws upon secondary sources to discuss in detail about the ingenuity of town planning and hydraulic engineering of the Harappan Civilisation between c. 2600 BCE – 1900 BCE. In doing so it shows the continuing relevance of Harappan town planning and how it impacted the building of modern-day Chandigarh or the wells in Burdwan, West Bengal.

Chapter 3 discusses the evolution of proto-Indic symbols of the Harappan period to the classical Sanskrit of the Gupta Age. It reflects on the transformation from the enigmatic Harappan pictographic system to the refined Gupta Sanskrit

literature, a change in religious expression in South Asia, spanning almost three millennia.

Chapter 4 traces the evolution of the worship of the goddess in ancient India. The paper discusses the popularity and significance of the goddess/Mother worship cult which has grown in India over the past several centuries. In recognizing this seamless cycle of creation, nourishment and dissolution embodied by the goddess, the paper looks at the very foundations of the fertility cults whose continuities can be traced back to the 7th century BCE.

Chapter 5 seeks to acquire an understanding of the status of women in ancient India through art and literature. The cultural imagination of ancient India is deeply intertwined with the ways in which gender was conceptualized, represented, and preserved within its literary, artistic and political traditions. Among these, the portrayal of women during the Mauryan (c.322-185 BCE) and Gupta (c. 320-550CE) eras stands out as a critical field of inquiry, revealing shifting socio-cultural values across two of the subcontinent's most influential dynastic periods. The paper reads cultural documents of these two periods and demonstrates both the continuity and transformation in these portrayals.

Chapter 6 discusses statecraft and strategy in Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*. *Mudrarakshasa* (The Signet Ring of Rakshasa), composed by Vishakhadatta, is a Sanskrit political drama, set in the aftermath of Chandragupta Maurya's ascent to the throne of Magadha. It deals with the political intrigue of Chanakya, who used his diplomatic genius not only to defeat the previous Nanda king but also to win over his loyal prime minister, Rakshasa, to strengthen the political power of Chandragupta. Drawing upon the principles of the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, this drama reflects the pragmatic

and sometimes ruthless diplomatic measures and aspects of ancient India. This paper analyses Mudrarakshasa as a mirror of the statecraft of then India, highlighting its nature of being complementary to another ancient Indian political study, the Arthashastra.

Taken together, the proceedings offer an insight into various facets of ancient Indian history without claiming to offer a comprehensive picture.

Chapter 1

From Sacred Resonance to Systematized Sound: Ritual, Sound, Materiality, and Music in Ancient India (Harappan Civilization to 7th Century CE)

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Abstract

The sonic ornamentation that shaped Indian musical thought forms a profound ontology of sound and meaning. The ritualistic sounds from the conch to the rhythmic beats of the drum lead to the argument that classical musical theory is not a sudden philosophical invention, but a retrospective conceptualization. The central idea here is that archaeology and the study of early Indian music theory almost never delve into each other's past. Between these worlds lies a silence - almost like a missing note from the *saptak*, where emotion, theory and memory drift apart. Harappan studies have been regarded as visual, material, logistical, with the development of seals and shipments, whereas musicological studies of the Vedic period were interwoven with grammar, classification and treatise. The earliest centuries of Indian ritual sound practice remain unlinked to the later systematization of raga, sruti, and ensemble. The study therefore places Harappan

sound-making objects, Vedic ritual instrumentality, and early temple acoustics contextualised by the rhythmic waves from the Nāṭyaśāstra and Dattilam. It reframes Indian musical history as a continuum of intentional resonance, where sacred resonance and architectural acoustics were not peripheral curiosities, but the formative emotional and material conditions that shaped the abstraction of musical categories that would later define classical thought.

Keywords:

Harappan Civilization, Ritual Sound, Archaeological Musicology, Indian Music Theory, Sacred Acoustics, Sonic Materiality, Vedic Ritual, Raga and Śruti

Introduction

The Indian musical thought is woven through sonic ornamentation which delivers not only a technical grammar but a profound ontology of sound and meaning. Across centuries, ritualistic aural practices ranging from the resonant blast of the conch to the pulsating rhythms of drums have shaped sensory, emotional, and philosophical orientations toward sound. Yet the interlaced histories that narrate Indian music tend to position classical musical theory as an elegant but sudden conceptual flowering, emerging from the textual sophistication of the *Natyashastra*¹, *Dattilam*² and later treatises. The arguments of this paper pose that classical musical theory is not an isolated philosophical invention but a retrospective conceptualization grounded in much older ritual and material sound-worlds.

¹Bharata Muni, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, edited by Manomohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1951–1967).

²Dattila, *Dattilam*, edited by Mukund Lath (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts / Motilal Banarsidass, 1999).

³A. S. Altekar, *Music and Musical Instruments in Ancient India* (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University, 1957), pgs. 42–55.

Scholars like **A. S. Altekar**³ and **B. Chaitanya Deva**⁴ established the chronological framework, emphasizing the evolution of tonal systems like *grama* and *murchana* along with instrumental typologies derived primarily from Sanskrit and Prakrit texts. The “acoustic turn” in archaeology and art history has fundamentally altered this perspective. Pioneered by figures like **Ian Cross**⁵ In *Acoustics and the Archaeology of Music*, this shift mandates the study of sound as an environmental phenomenon. Within the Indian context, this is powerfully articulated by the work of **R. Balasubramaniam**⁶, **X. Bao**⁷ and **S. Venkatesan**. Their research moves beyond the “what” (instruments, notes) and the “why” (theological justification) to the “how and where” of sound’s production and perception. They argue for the intentional design of “sacred resonance”, the deliberate manipulation of stone, space, and geometry in early temple architecture to engineer specific acoustic effects. This approach integrates the archaeological history outlined by **D. K. Chakrabarti**⁸ in *India: An Archaeological History*, and by **J. Mark Kenoyer**⁹ in his seminal *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* with acoustic science.

Harappan Bhava\ভাব : Materiality And Inferred Rituals

The primary evidence of Harappan soundscapes rests in the potential sound producing objects. It must be interpreted not just via artifacts but through spatial and architectural

³A. S. Altekar, *Music and Musical Instruments in Ancient India* (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University, 1957), pgs. 42–55.

⁴B. Chaitanya Deva, *An Introduction to Indian Music* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1974).

⁵Ian Cross, “Acoustics and the Archaeology of Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Senses*, ed. Robin Skeates and Jo Day (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶R. Balasubramaniam, “Acoustic Design in Early Indian Temples,” *Indian Journal of History of Science* 44, no. 4 (2009), pgs 595–627.

⁷X. Bao and S. Venkatesan, “Resonances of Devotion: Temple Acoustics in Early India,” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2015), pgs 241–260.

⁸D. K. Chakrabarti, *India: An Archaeological History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹J. Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

considerations. Large assembly halls, granaries with resonant chambers, and water structures may have had acoustical properties conducive to ritual performance. The discovery of standardised conch shells at Mohenjo-daro as **Marshall**¹⁰ points out suggests ceremonial signaling. **Possehl**¹¹ further examines that the terracotta rattles found at Nausharo and Lothal indicate performative sound in domestic and ritual contexts. **Kenoyer's**¹² extensive work at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro documents small whistles made of pottery and shells. The discovery of a set of copper cymbals, closely paralleling ritual objects found in contemporaneous West and Central Asian sites, suggests a long-distance cultural transfer of sonic practice. The most iconic piece of evidence is the "Dancing Girl" which is a bronze figurine from Mohenjo-Daro, whose stance strongly suggests rhythmic movement and, by extension, music or percussive accompaniment as suggested by **B.C.Deva**.¹³

Yet none of this material has been integrated into mainstream musicological histories. Archaeologists, preoccupied with deciphering script, trade logistics, and urban planning, have not framed sound as a meaningful cultural category. As we head for a paradigm shift, Harappan sound artifacts must be seen as foundational to understanding early Indian sonic cosmology. The function of sound in the Harappan context was likely ritualistic and communal. In early urban contexts, sound serves as a vital technology for establishing social cohesion and collective identity. The rhythmic, repetitive

¹⁰John Marshall, *Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization*, 3 vols. (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1931).

¹¹Gregory L. Possehl, *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

¹²J. Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹³B. Chaitanya Deva, *Musical Instruments of India: Their History and Development* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978).

nature of percussion (clapping, beating drums/rattles) has a documented psycho-acoustical effect: it induces a state of entrainment, where individual physiological rhythms (heart rate, breathing) synchronize with the external rhythm. This therefore gave way to synchronicity, awe and social discipline interlaced within the Harappan '*bhava*'.

Vedic And The Theology Of 'Shobdo\ শব্দ'

The Vedic and Early Classical eras from 1500 BCE to 200 CE slowly paved the way to not a sudden invention of musical thought but a fundamental continuity of intentional resonance, where the theological framework of sound laid the groundwork for later classical systematization. The shift from inferred materiality to systematic textual instruction established sound as a cosmogonic force, the theology of Sabda, much before the Vedic presence, dating back to the discovery of enigmatic seals and scripts. The ontology of sound in the Indian subcontinent predates textual codification. As Lawergren¹⁴ points out, the Harappan corpus reveals an array of sound-producing artifacts, ceramic rattles, terracotta drums, conch-shell trumpets, bone flutes dating as early as 2500 BCE. Their ritual or ceremonial uses, inferred from spatial contexts within urban and domestic spaces, suggest that intentional sound-making was integrated into social and religious life. Feld¹⁵ notes that these objects embody what scholars of sound anthropology call "sonic materiality" or denotes the ways sound is embedded in cultural practice.

In the Vedic period, sound gained a metaphysical structure as the śruti tradition sacralized vibration involving specialized

¹⁴Richard Widdess and Sverre Holm-Lawergren, "Wind Instruments and Sound Objects of the Indus Valley," *World Archaeology* 29, no. 3 (1998) pp: 341-357.

¹⁵Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

sonic techniques. Furthermore, as **Manomohan Ghosh**¹⁶ opines that ritual implements like the *dundubhi* drum and *śankha*/conch functioned as carriers of cosmological significance. Crucially, later classical theory, as articulated in the **Natyashastra**¹⁷, did not invent musical categories, but rather formalized this pre-existing ritual knowledge: the concept of *rasa* arises from affective ritual contexts, *rāga* from patterned melodic behavior in chant traditions, and the theory of *sruti* is derived from these lived practices of pitch differentiation, cementing a continuous, unbroken line of material, emotional, and philosophical engagement with sound. The shift from the Vedic to the Early Classical period (c. 1500 BCE–200 CE) is marked by a crucial technical and philosophical continuity: the evolution of sound from a ritual tool to an aesthetic science. The Vedic era employed a limited system of pitch accents whose function was strictly phonetic and ritual correctness to ensure the efficacy of the Mantras.

The Codification Of Emotion: The Rasa Shastra

The pivotal era from 200 BCE to the 7th Century CE marks the culmination of the early Indian sonic tradition. The ancient Vedic concept of sound efficacy was seamlessly merged with highly sophisticated artistic and architectural theory as pointed out by **Deva**¹⁸, who notes this profound trajectory. This synthesis resulted in the deliberate manipulation of sound, space, and emotion as a unified aesthetic experience, moving far beyond mere ritual function. **Staats**¹⁹ emphasizes that

¹⁶Manomohan Ghosh, trans., *The Natyashastra of Bharata Muni*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951–1967).

¹⁷Bharata Muni, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, edited by Manomohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1951–1967).

¹⁸B. Chaitanya Deva, *Musical Instruments of India: Their History and Development* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978).

¹⁹Peter Staats, “From Ritual Sound to Aesthetic Theory: Reassessing Early Indian Musical Thought,” *Musicological Review of Asia* 12, no. 2 (2017): 67–89.

²⁰Manomohan Ghosh ed. Bharata Muni, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1951–1967).

this represented a major cultural shift towards recognizing sound's potential as a profound artistic medium, transitioning it from a functional tool to a subject of systematic study. The defining text of this period is the *Natyashastra*²⁰ by Bharata Muni (c. 200 BCE–200 CE). **Manomohan Ghosh**²¹ provided one of the earliest comprehensive translations, highlighting its central role. This work is crucial because it formally codified the transition from sound being used for ritual efficacy to sound being employed for aesthetic experience or *Rasa*. Bharata Muni's text articulated the groundbreaking *Rasa* theory. This framework explains how basic, transient human emotional states, or *bhavas* (such as love, anger, sorrow), are meticulously converted into formalized, universal *rasas* or sentiments. **Masson & Patwardhan**²² contributed significantly to dissecting these psychological agencies. Music serves as a primary determinant and consequent (*anubhava*) in this process, providing the necessary stimulus and expression to achieve the desired emotional result for the spectator. The specific *svaras* (notes) were explicitly mapped and prescribed for expressing particular emotional states. For instance, the text dictated that the use of Dhaivata as "*dha*" (the sixth note) and Nisada or "*ni*" (the seventh note) was necessary to properly express the *rudra* (fury) or *bhayanaka* (terror) *rasas*. This rigorous codification established the science of music as a systematic and precise instrument for the deliberate manipulation of the audience's emotional landscape, marking the birth of a sophisticated, formalized architectural acoustics within performance art.

²¹Manomohan Ghosh, trans., *The Natyashastra of Bharata Muni*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951–1967).

²²J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, *Aesthetic Rapture: The Rasadhyaya of the Natyashastra* (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1969).

Music And Its Acoustic Effect On Architecture

With the culmination of Rasa theory, scholars like **Lewis Rowell**²³ and **Ian Cross**²⁴ noted the development of sophisticated structural stone temples, particularly during the Gupta and early Chalukyan periods, which emphasized the creation of permanent, enclosed acoustic environments. This stressed on the study of materiality, where the building itself became an integral sound instrument. **Balasubramaniam**²⁵ in his studies on acoustics in ancient Indian temples provides compelling evidence for intentional acoustic design. Similarly, **Bao & Venkatesan**²⁶, in their work on the properties of temple stone, confirm that materials like local basalt or granite and complex geometry were chosen and engineered specifically to enhance sound propagation. **Narasimhan**²⁷ further supported this by documenting the highly reflective and diffusing nature of these structures. The precise arrangement and geometry of columns in the pillared *mandapas* were designed to manage the diffusive and reflective properties of sound. **T. M. Soundararajan**²⁸ detailed how these structures influenced auditory perception. *Garbhagriha* or the sanctum sanctorum consists of the inner sanctum, typically small and high-domed, which functions as a sound resonator. The confined space and smooth stone surfaces

²³Lewis Rowell, *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁴Ian Cross, "Acoustics and the Archaeology of Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Senses*, ed. Robin Skeates and Jo Day (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁵R. Balasubramaniam, "Acoustic Design in Early Indian Temples," *Indian Journal of History of Science* 44, no. 4 (2009): 595–627.

²⁶Bao, X., and S. Venkatesan. "Sonic Properties of Temple Architecture: Material Resonance and Acoustic Engineering in Early Indian Sacred Spaces." *Journal of Acoustic Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2019): 71–92.

²⁷T. S. Narasimhan, "Acoustical Properties of Indian Temple Architecture," *Current Science* 74, no. 6 (1998): 491–498.

²⁸T. M. Soundararajan, *Studies in Indian Temple Architecture* (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University, 1991).

generate a high reverberation time and effect. **Bhattacharya**²⁹ analyzed this acoustic characteristic, demonstrating that the sound of a simple om chant, conch shell or bell would linger, amplify, and surround the worshipper. **Michell**³⁰ linked this architectural design directly to the sensory engagement of the devotee. This engineered soundscape directly served the flourishing Bhakti movement. The enveloping resonance of the sound waves acted as a powerful piercing sensory cue, intensifying feelings of spiritual intoxication in the devotee. The convergence highlights the ultimate synthesis where the material science of stone and the aesthetic science of sound converge to build the architecture of emotional reverence.

Conclusion

The long-assumed divide between architecture and musicology dissolves once we acknowledge that India's acoustic imagination did not awaken with the Vedas or the Natyashastra, but far earlier within the resonant, ritualized spaces of the Harappan world. What later became codified as *śruti*, *svara*, *rāga*, and *rasa* was first lived, felt, and shaped through stone, clay, metal, and communal rhythm. Indian musical theory, therefore, is not a sudden intellectual bloom but a slow, deep pulse stretching back to the earliest urban soundscapes.

Harappan artifacts like terracotta rattles, copper cymbals, standardized conch shells at Mohenjo-daro, and shell or pottery reveal a society already attuned to intentional sound-making. Their great halls, granaries with resonant cavities, and the monumental Great Bath created natural amphitheatres where collective sound could thicken, swirl,

²⁹Kirit P. Bhattacharya, "Reverberation and Sonic Architecture in Indian Temples," *Journal of Indian Musicological Society* 29, no. 1 (1998): 17–32.

³⁰George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

and bind communities. Here, music was not an art but a social and spiritual atmosphere. The Vedic world inherited these sensibilities and clothed them in metaphysics. Ritual instruments like the dundubhi, the śankha were elevated into cosmic conduits. Yet beneath this theological splendour lay unmistakable Harappan antecedents: the belief that sound transforms consciousness, that space deepens emotion, that ritual thrives on resonance. The Vedic age refined the intention but not the essence. The Nāṭyaśāstra, centuries later, crystallized what had already been lived for millennia. Bharata did not invent a science of music; he distilled the ancient experiential truth that emotion, movement, and sound flow through space as a single continuum.

Early stone temples completed this historical arc. Their echoing *garbhagrihas* and rhythmically spaced *mandapas* were not merely built, but tuned. In these sanctums, the Harappan rattle, the Vedic mantra, and Bharata's aesthetic psychology converge. Thus the supposed chasm between architecture and musicology is an illusion. Indian musical thought is, at its core, architectural: born in ancient resonance, shaped by sacred geometry, and sustained by the profound human longing to feel sound with the whole body.

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Chapter 2

The Ingenuity of Town Planning and Hydraulic Engineering of the Harappan Civilisation: A Historical Odyssey (c. 2600 BCE – 1900 BCE)

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Abstract

A civilization may fade away, but its memory remains – a metonym that can be used for the Harappan Civilisation (c. 4000 BCE – 1300 BCE). The pride of this civilization is a comprehensive of urban planning, lofty levels of the organization of public life, sanitation, architecture and also an extensive drainage system that have no equals in that epoch. The Harappans were also well acquainted with the utilization of hydraulic engineering. No wonder, American archaeologist Walter Ashlin Fairservis Jr. called the Harappans “master hydraulic engineers.” The objective of this research paper is to cultivate learning, appreciate a civilization which is characterised by its distinctiveness and novelty, as well as augment one’s knowledge by revisiting ancient perspectives of the past. This study draws upon secondary sources to augment its theme.

Keywords: *Harappan Civilisation, town planning, hydraulic engineering, sanitation, drainage system.*

The Harappan (c. 2600 BCE – 1900 BCE), flourishing about 5000 years ago, built remarkably well-planned cities with public and private baths, underground sewerage networks, and an efficient water management system of reservoirs and wells. Evidence and archaeological proof shows that the Indus people developed one of the smartest urban centers in ancient times.¹ In this paper, we will explore how the Harappans' architectural knowledge and hydraulic engineering shaped their civilization and how it still inspires modern urban planning.

The town planning of the Harappan Civilisation depended on the location of the settlement, area for occupation, river, or 'nala' easily accessible with connecting routes to other contemporary settlements and viable agricultural land. There is clear evidence that the Harappans constructed low-cost water-harvesting structures such as small check-dams and bunds made with rock-cut pieces and boulders.² Each habitation had a citadel on a higher area and a lower township where the buildings of both the areas had been well divided by streets and lanes. However, town plans differed from site to site and a variety of permutations and combinations can be discerned.³

German Archaeologist *Michael Jansen (1978)* states that “there is evidence of a general north-south, east-west orientation with deviations at different sites up to 15 degrees from the cardinal direction. At Mohenjo-daro, there are streets (at least one) and at Kalibangan, (four streets) running straight in a

¹Pushpendra Kumar Singh, Pankaj Dey, Sharad Kumar Jain, and Pradeep P. Mujumdar, “Hydrology and Water Resources Management in Ancient India,” *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 24, no. 10 (2020): 4696, <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-24-4691-2020>.

²Pushpendra Kumar Singh, Pankaj Dey, Sharad Kumar Jain, and Pradeep P. Mujumdar, “Hydrology and Water Resources Management in Ancient India,” *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 24, no. 10 (2020): 4702, <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-24-4691-2020>.

³Joshi, JagatPati. *Harappan Architecture and Civil Engineering*. New Delhi: Rupa.Co.&Infinity Foundation.2008. pp.72.

north-south direction.”⁴ The streets intersected each other at right angles and the township was built over platforms to save it from floods. Besides the wide roads and lanes, another hallmark of Harappan town planning was the drains – both covered and open.⁵ At Chanhudaro, almost all streets had covered drains.

The Harappan cities also boasted an impressive drainage and sanitation system, unparalleled in ancient times. Beneath the main streets ran an extensive network of drains designed to carry wastewater out of the city. Each street-level drain was interconnected to the household drainage systems, where wastewater from bathrooms and kitchen was channeled directly into the underground network.⁶

American Archaeologist Walter Ashlin Fairservis Jr. says, “similarly drains, although their presence may be considered as a part of a ritual complex, must also be viewed as essential to the sewerage system. The latter is a part of the Harappan contribution to the world.” Open drains, corbelled covered drains, chutes, wooden drains and small drains from bathing platforms were in vogue.

Correspondingly, in large cities like Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Lothal, and Kalibangan, drains were attached to the bathing platforms to ensure that they remain watertight,⁷ and these were square and rectangular in shape.⁸

Prof. Ranabir Chakravarti states that Mohenjo-daro’s lower town – with almost two thousand houses – received

⁴Jansen, Michael. “City Planning in Harappa Culture.” Art and Archaeology. Research Paper No.14. London.

⁵Joshi, Jagat Pati. *Harappan Architecture and Civil Engineering*. New Delhi: Rupa.Co. 2008. pp.73.

⁶Dr. Sharma, Meenu. 2020. “The Indus Valley Civilization Urban Planning and Social Structures.” International Journal in Management and Social Science, Volume 08, Issue 3, March 2020; ISSN: 2321-1784. pp. 135-146. <http://ijmr.net.in>.

⁷Kenoyer, J. Mark. “Indus Valley Civilization.” In *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*, edited by Tim Murray, 719–771. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999, 725–26.

⁸Joshi. *Harappan Architecture and Civil Engineering*, pp. 90-97.

water from at least seven hundred wells.⁹ In contrast, some other Harappan settlements depended on a single well that supplied water to an entire neighbourhood.¹⁰ A separate latrine area was usually placed next to the bathing platform, where a commode made from an old storage jar, with a hole at its base and buried up to the rim, accumulated waste. These were regularly emptied and the waste was removed from the city. Each house had soak pits that trapped sediments and let only clean water reach the main drains.

The Indus Valley Civilization thus developed some of the earliest known systems resembling flush toilets in the world. American Archaeologist J. M. Kenoyer (2003) states that “no other city in the ancient world had developed such a sophisticated water and waste management system. Even during the Roman Empire, some 2000 years later, these kinds of facilities were limited to upper-class neighborhoods”.¹¹

A paragon of Harappan hydraulic engineering is the Great Bath which measures about 14.5 x 7 metres, with a maximum depth of 2.4 metres.¹² It is situated on the citadel in the centre of the courtyard. The floor was made up of bricks and the edge was covered with gypsum mortar which was used in the side walls. A layer of bitumen, about two-centimetre-thick, was laid between the facing bricks of the basin and the intermediate wall of the baked bricks.

Timber was also used on the trends of the brick steps leading to the floor of the Great Bath that was set in bitumen and asphalt. By the side of the Great Bath, there was a block of

⁹চক্রবর্তী, রণবীর। ভারত-ইতিহাসের আদিপর্ব (প্রথম খণ্ড)। হায়দরাবাদ: ওরিয়েন্ট ব্ল্যাকসোয়ান প্রাইভেট লিমিটেড, ২০০৭। পুনর্মুদ্রণ: ২০২০। পৃষ্ঠা:৬১-৬২। ISBN 978-81-250-3380-6।

¹⁰Kenoyer, J. Mark. “Indus Valley Civilization.” In *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*, edited by Tim Murray, 719–771. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999, 725–26.

¹¹Kenoyer, J. Mark. “Indus Valley Civilization.” In *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*, edited by Tim Murray, 719–771. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999, 725–26.

¹²Singh, Upinder. “A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century.” New Delhi: Pearson Longman. 2009. pp. 149-150.

eight small bathrooms, each measuring 2.9 x 1.8 metres. There was supposedly a hammam as well, but *Archaeologist John Marshall* was of the opinion that it can also be a hypocaust intended merely to keep the house adequately warm in winter.¹³

The existence of this Great Bath on the top of the citadel mound amidst a setting of monastic architecture acquires a new meaning when viewed in the light of possible tradition of taking a holy bath at particular planetary epochs and lunar phases, still existing in the Indian tradition. Perhaps this pool was meant for an ablution or a bath of purity on such occasions as the one depicted on Seal Number 2430.¹⁴ It is also crucial to note that no Great Bath like that in Mohenjo-daro has been found in Harappa.¹⁵

Dholavira was ringed with sixteen large reservoirs,¹⁶ seven metres deep and seventy-nine metres long, some of them interconnected; together they covered about ten percent of the city's area. Recently, a rectangular step well was found at Dholavira which measured 73.4m long, 29.3m wide, and 10m deep, making it 3 times bigger than the Great Bath of Mohenjo-Daro.¹⁷

At Dholavira, which lay between the ephemeral streams Mansar in the north and Manhar in the south, these seasonal channels were dammed at several points to conserve runoff. Brick-and-stone storm-water drains crossed the citadel area

¹³Marshall, Sir John. *"Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization."* Arthur Probsthain, London. p.26.

¹⁴Dr.Bag, A.K. *"Science and Civilization in India: Harappan Period (c. 3000 B.C. – c. 1500 B.C.); Volume I.* New Delhi: Navrang Publications. 1985. pp. 53-54.

¹⁵Khan, Omar. *"A Walk Around Harappa – Contemporary Bath, Harappa."* Harappa.com. Accessed November 15, 2025. <https://www.harappa.com/walk/index28.html>.

¹⁶Sharma, Hrutvik, Rishikesh, and Krupesh A. Chauhan. "Ancient Civilisation Study through Dholavira Archaeological Site in Kutch District: A Study." *GRD Journals – Global Research and Development Journal for Engineering* (ERICE-2019): 94–98. 2019.

¹⁷Pushpendra Kumar Singh, Pankaj Dey, Sharad Kumar Jain, and Pradeep P. Mujumdar, "Hydrology and Water Resources Management in Ancient India," *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 24, no. 10 (2020): 4702, <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-24-4691-2020>.

and were designed solely to collect and carry rainwater to storage tanks for later use. According to R. Nigam et al. the massive protective wall of Dholavira – up to eighteen metres thick – suggests an awareness of oceanic calamities such as storms and tsunamis that could threaten civilization.¹⁸

A large armature called the ‘Lothal Dockyard’ is another good example of hydraulic engineering. It measures 215-212 metres in length and 35-37 metres in width. The extant height is 3.03 metres. The entry of boats to the dockyard at high tide was from the inlets in the northern and eastern walls measuring 12 metres and 7 metres respectively.

The dock was connected with a *nala* and a channel to Bhogavo River which emptied in the Gulf of Cambay. For the exit of extra water at high tide, there was a spill channel in the eastern wall with a sluice gate. The boats returned to the sea, coinciding with the subsequent tide and with the release of extra water from the spill channel. The discovery of marine shells from the Dockyard, a few massive anchor-stones and the absence of any landing steps into the dock suggests that it was a dockyard for the berthing of boats. The terracotta models of boats further attest to this argumentation.

The modern dockyard at Gogha, Gujarat works on the same principle.¹⁹ Rear Admiral S.C. Bindra (Retired), in a recent paper, has propounded, “Lothal possesses all the essential prerequisites for its identification as an ancient port... We therefore, fully support the nomenclature, ‘Lothal: A Harappan Port town’ and further opine that no other title would have perhaps better explained the commercial and maritime functions performed by the Harappans.”²⁰

¹⁸Nigam, R., R. Dubey, R. Saraswat, Sundaresh, A. S. Gaur, and V. J. Loveson. “Ancient Indians (Harappan Settlement) Were Aware of Tsunami/Storm Protection Measures: A New Interpretation of Thick Walls at Dholavira, Gujarat, India.” *Current Science* 111, no. 11 (2016): 2040-46. Accessed November 16, 2025. <http://drs.nio.res.in/drs/handle/2264/5108>.

¹⁹Joshi. *Harappan Architecture and Civil Engineering*, pp. 123-127.

Altogether, these hydraulic structures reflect practical, locally adapted engineering that supported both farming and city life in a variable climate.

The farmers of Harappa frequently used contouring, bunding, terracing, benching, gabarbands, and canals for water management. Gabarbands were stone-built dams used to store and control water for irrigating agricultural lands during the dry season. There is clear evidence that the Harappans constructed low-cost water-harvesting structures such as small check dams and bunds made with rock-cut pieces and boulders.²¹ According to R. Nigam and colleagues, the massive protective wall of Dholavira – up to eighteen metres thick – suggests an awareness of oceanic calamities such as storms and tsunamis that could threaten this civilization.²²

The Harappan drainage and effluent-disposal systems were exceptional compared with contemporary civilizations. While the Egyptian world (c. 2000–500 BCE) lacked flushing lavatories and sophisticated sewer systems, and had to fetch river water bucket-by-bucket, the Harappan city of Mohenjo-Daro was serviced by at least 700 wells and featured household drains and public bathing platforms. Mesopotamian cities such as Ur and Babylon developed storm drains, sewers, canals, qanat systems, and water-lifting devices (saqia) for irrigation and domestic supply, but they lacked the vertical water supply through wells that the Harappans mastered.²³

²⁰Bindra, S.C. “Lothal: A Harappan Port Town Revisited” in Puratattva (Number 33). Editors K. Dikshit and K.S Ramachandran. New Delhi: Indian Archaeological Society. pp. 1-18.

²¹Pushpendra Kumar Singh, Pankaj Dey, Sharad Kumar Jain, and Pradeep P. Mujumdar, “Hydrology and Water Resources Management in Ancient India,” *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 24, no. 10 (2020): 4702, <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-24-4691-2020>.

²²Nigam, R., R. Dubey, R. Saraswat, Sundaresh, A. S. Gaur, and V. J. Loveson. “Ancient Indians (Harappan Settlement) Were Aware of Tsunami/Storm Protection Measures: A New Interpretation of Thick Walls at Dholavira, Gujarat, India.” *Current Science* 111, no. 11 (2016): 2040-46. Accessed November 16, 2025. <http://drs.nio.res.in/drs/handle/2264/5108>.

²³Pushpendra Kumar Singh, Pankaj Dey, Sharad Kumar Jain, and Pradeep P. Mujumdar, “Hydrology and Water Resources Management in Ancient India,” *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 24, no. 10 (2020): 4702, <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-24-4691-2020>.

Though the Harappan Civilization declined gradually around 1900 BCE, it left behind a legacy that still endures across time. For example, the modern city of Chandigarh, designed by French Architect Le Corbusier, follows a systematic grid-plan that reflects Harappan-style town planning logic.²⁴ Similar usage of wells can still be seen in the district of Burdwan in West Bengal, where the houses featured separate bathing areas with paved floors made of tightly fitted bricks set on edge. In some parts of India, wells are still used for irrigating and domestic purposes.²⁵

On a final note, a civilisation with such an advanced and comprehensive urban planning, organization of public life, sanitation and architecture, as well as a sophisticated drainage system had no equals in that epoch. Their knowledge of hydraulic engineering is a wonder in the history of humankind, characterised by its precise distinctiveness and novelty, leaving a legacy that cannot be eradicated.

"The cities of the Harappan Civilisation thus established a framework for future civilisations in the Indian subcontinent and beyond. They favoured correct segregation of cities and towns, proper cleanliness standards, and space utilization planning. Some features, like covered drainage systems and the use of standardized construction materials have copied modern infrastructure and architectural practices."

~ Professor Michel Danino, (2010)

²⁴Mohan, Vibhor. "Harappan Site under Sector 17." Times of India, October 28, 2012. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/harappan-site-under-sector-17/articleshow/16986832.cms>.

²⁵Bag, A.K "Science and Civilisation in India: Harappan Period (c.3000 B.C.- 1500 B.C.), p.56.

Chapter 3

From Proto-Indic Symbols to Classical Sanskrit- Establishing A Religious and Linguistic Comparison Between the Gupta Empire and the Harappan Civilisation

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Abstract

The history of ancient India is a story of constant interaction between material creativity and linguistic refinement, but most importantly, religious ties. This paper will make a comparative study of two cultural peaks which will illuminate the similarities and differences between these two artistic zeniths: the Harappans communicated through symbols and form, while the Guptas expressed ideas through language and text, yet both expressed values of order, balance, and divinity through their artistic media, which linguistically moved from the symbolic Harappan script to the refined Sanskrit of the Gupta era, both of them being the civilization continuum.

The Harappan world expressed itself in symbols, such as engraved seals, pottery motifs, and the still-undeciphered script, which says something about the non-verbal communication and the Munda or distinct Harappan Language Theory, which also shows and suggests the proto-Shiva worship, fertility cults, and reverence for sacred animals and trees, though no definitive temples have been identified. On the other hand, the Gupta period saw a deliberate

refinement of artistic and intellectual traditions. Sanskrit, under royal patronage, became the language of literature and administration. Hinduism solidified in this era, with the influence of the Puranas and the Dharmashastras and the worship of Vishnu and Nataraj. Gupta art, as represented in the serene Buddha images at Sarnath, the murals at Ajanta, and temple architecture, represents the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in this era.

This study will reflect the transformation from the enigmatic Harappan pictographic system to the refined Gupta Sanskrit literature, a change in religious expression in South Asia, spanning almost three millennia.

Keywords-*language, religion, Shiva, Buddhism, seals, maritime history, scripts*

Introduction

It is true that comparing the Harappan (Indus) Civilisation (3300–1900 BCE) with the Gupta Empire (320–550 CE) is an exercise across a temporal distance of ~2500–3500 years. Certainly, some of the visual motifs and overall ritual impulses (such as, animal imagery or interest in fertility / ascetic figures) can feel like they are begging for comparison between one strata and another, although the evidence indicates that such things may be more fairly circumspect transactions of cultural echoes than direct haveable-and-eatable continuities. Linguistically, the relationship between the two is even weaker as Harappan script remains undeciphered and we have no direct evidence of linking it to Classical Sanskrit; satisfactory continuity only starts much later with Brahmi and the consolidation of Sanskrit literary culture by around the 1st millennium BCE or earlier, especially in the Gupta era.

Pakistan's ancient city of Harappa began around 3300 BC and ended about 1600 BC. Before 1921, the findings of the ancient culture were limited to a few pieces of bronze and a really surprising seal with characters. But that same year, Indian archaeologist Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni found the site where that city had been founded. The Harappa Culture reached far beyond the present-day borders of Pakistan, with main concentrations in Sindh and Punjab.

The Early Harappan period dates back about 5,300 to 4,500 years. Two of the most significant cities, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, emerged around 2600 B.C. in the Indus River Valley. This civilisation also had a system of symbols and an urban way of life with a developed economy.

This civilisation's symbolic script system and urban centres housed complex social and economic systems. In fact, it was predominantly an urban culture based on surplus agriculture and commerce. Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were built in similar layouts of streets, flat-roofed brick houses, and administrative or shrine centres. The people were unfamiliar with iron, but water was contained within the city houses, having underground supply and drainage systems. These civilisations appear to have had advanced levels of organisation, as evidenced by the remains of water systems and the physical layout of cities in a grid-like structure.

The symbolism of "fish" through signs in Harappa

One of the stamp signs so frequently occurring on seals is the "fish" sign. In these works the referent of the sign for "fish" is visible in Indus representations, that show a fish (which may also be exhibited as the Indus sign) that appears inside the mouth of some gavials. The archaic fish emblem was probably the symbol for "fish" among the Indus script signs, bearing the original denotation of "fish offerings. Because

the 'fish' sign, simple or modified with a variety of diacritic additions, appears frequently on seals, it suggests that it did not represent fish. A plausible proposal for the "intended meaning" is "god." (Sparavinga 2024, p.4)

A. Parpola (1994, pp. 56- 58) adds the following comment. The primary word for fish in Dravidian (e.g., Tamil meen, Kannada mannu) is one such Proto-Dravidian form with an atypical loss of final -n. Compare this to the word for "star". This etymological sense includes the sense of "god," which is also seen in the Mesopotamian text in cuneiform, where the prefixed 'star' sign that means god precedes every god's name.

According to Parpola (1987, p.28), Harappan inscriptions on seals exhibit a script that is slightly more developed than the form of writing represented in the so-called Painted Grey Ware. Actually, Fairservis has a fish's view, which is generally accepted in the IL's of [twisting on the] loom, while representing them simply "ruling". To indicate the justification of the "twist" theory, we must remember that the cotton fibre itself is first a natural twist. Once enough twist has been added and the cotton twisted into a yarn, this process of twisting and spinning is a basic act in an agricultural society.

A fish symbol is also used as notation for astronomical terminology. The planning of streets and houses in Harappa, with respect to the cardinal directions, shows that astronomers were used as orientation. In the Hindu religion, they all have 'overlords' – gods that are masters of these stars and planets. Children receive their own secret and special 'star names' which are mentioned in the Veda texts. The Vedic interpretation allows another hypothesis that the signs representing 'fish' on the seals of the Indus are Proto-Dravidian names – this would explain in some cases both

stars and gods, as well as that fish sign used in various parts of proper names as multi-part personal names.

Numerals often appear alongside the “fish” sign. Numerals belong to one of the few kinds of Indus signs that can be understood with something approaching certainty, because the signs that represent objects are clusters of vertical strokes. This is the way numerals are represented in many ancient scripts. One interesting instance of ‘6’ + ‘fish’. According to Parpola, this means ‘6 Stars’, referring to the Old Tamil name of the Pleiades. While the Pleiades are seven, one is faint, and therefore the designation is given as six. ‘7’ + ‘fish’ refers to the Old Tamil name of Ursa Major, which appears on one of the larger seals. Stars from Ursa Major are associated with the ancient “Seven Sages” in Vedic culture, and seemingly have a parallel in the Seven Sages on the 7.

The legend of Matysa’s avatar and its significance to Vishnu

The symbolism of fish is related to the Gupta period; it also represented fertility, good fortune and immense wealth. The legend of Matysa Avatar of Vishnu, is also related to this time period.

The Gupta period (4th–6th century CE) is commonly regarded as the classical age of Hindu religion and art. During this period, Hinduism—especially the traditions of Vaishnavism and Shaivism—developed into a more structured, philosophical framework and standardized rituals. Multiple Gupta monarchs, such as Chandragupta II and Kumaragupta, declared their title as Paramabhagavatas (worshippers of Vishnu) and played a significant role in advancing Vishnu-centered theology, temples, and iconography.

The Puranic tradition—particularly the Vishnu Purana,

Bhagavata Purana, and Matsya Purana—grew more structured and broadly disseminated during or around this period, enhancing the importance of Vishnu's incarnations, notably Matsya. The Matsya avatar gained importance, particularly within the more structured Dashavatara narrative that started to take definite form during the Gupta era.

The account of Matsya—the avatar of Vishnu that engages in fixing the deluge and rescuing the Vedas and humanity, talked about the fact that Vishnu is considered to preserve cosmic order (Dharma), the cyclicity of creating and destroying and the moral duty of kings to preserve knowledge and righteousness. All of this relates as an important facet to Gupta imperial ideology, which saw rulers as upholding dharma and preserving sacred knowledge. (Mahadevan, 2008, p.45). The sophistication of anthropomorphic avatar representations probably helped Matsya become a standard visual icon, rather than just a story in mythology. The Matsya Purana, while also having ancient origins, is suggested by scholars to have taken on a form near its final or expansion during the Gupta period.

Proto-Shiva's deity and its depiction in the historical realm -

The Harappan Civilisation predominantly revered Pashupati, also known as Proto Shiva, as their principal god. The Pashupati seal, found by archaeologists at Mohenjo-Daro, depicts a three-figure seated cross-legged, on a throne encircled by animals including an elephant, tiger, buffalo, rhinoceros and a pair of deer. This represents one of the known images of Lord Shiva, who is also referred to as 'Mahayogi' or 'Pashupati'. Sir John Marshall, who was in charge of the excavation, called this figure a Proto Shiva. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, which are now in Pakistan, were major sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation. The Pashupati seal is housed at the National

Museum in New Delhi. In addition to Pashupati, the people of the Indus Valley civilisation worshipped Mother Goddess, Neem, Peepal, Sun, Fire, Earth and Water are included as major gods and beliefs of the Harappan Civilisation (Jha1996, p-89)

Early men were frightened of nature and strong vectors. During this era, the worship of snakes or totemism was widespread. Multiple seals and seal impressions with snake-like figures have been uncovered. On one of the seals, there is a depiction of a principal god with a buffalo head, and two other male gods on either side; and behind each god is a snake in a standing position. Another seal displayed a snake tussling with a bull.

Before the era of the Guptas, the primary form of worship of Shiva was the Shiva Linga, an aniconic symbol of the transcendental and formless nature of Shiva. In marked contrast, during the Gupta period, we can see a new period of artistry and sophistication where sculptors and temple artists begin to depict Shiva in active semi-human forms, with precise details, postures, and gestures (mudras). This change reflects a shift not just in how the sculptors and artisans were able to sculpt, but also reflects a deeper religious and philosophical transition in Shaivism towards prioritising narratives and visual storytelling (Mahadevan 2008, p-35)

Although the Gupta rulers were mainly Vaishnavites, they practised a remarkable tolerance and embracing of their own and different traditions; hence, we see the coexistence and mutual enrichment of Shaivite and Vaishnavite iconic visual storytelling. For example, in the instance of the Harihara form of God, we can see an example of the merging of Shiva and Vishnu as one form, which is a reflection of the syncretic spirit of the Nagara period. The Harihara form not

only shows the theological merging of both sects, but reflects the Gupta period's willingness to merge sectarianism in the execution of melding visual arts. The idea of Harihara was both an innovative artistic form as it was a major theological statement of the unification of two major sects.

How Vaishnavism merged with Shaivism in the Gupta period-

The unique symbolism depicting the fusion of feminine traits illustrated the philosophical idea of unity within duality and the interconnection of cosmic energies. Another significant iconographic development was the depiction of Harihara, the combination of Shiva and Vishnu, into one deity. This form represented the reconciliation of the two sects, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, showcasing the syncretic tendencies of Gupta religious ideology. The Harihara statues from the Gupta era depict a fusion of Shiva's ascetic features, such as dreadlocks and the crescent moon, with Vishnu's royal symbols, including the crown and conch, illustrating a wider cultural and religious synthesis. Beyond these forms, the Gupta period introduced greater intricacy in the depiction of Shiva's mudras, each bearing profound symbolic significance. The varada mudra represented Shiva's function as a deity, granting blessings and safeguarding his worshippers. The chin mudra symbolised his yogic and ascetic nature, while the dhyana mudra indicated his exaltation and detachment from the physical world. As sculptural reliefs gained intricacy, Shiva was depicted in numerous mythological scenes, including defeating the demon Tripurasura and executing his joyful dance on Mount Kailash. These intricate reliefs enhanced the significance of the representations and indicated an evolving sophistication in storytelling through art. Gupta sculptors employed their chiselling methods and artistic sensibilities to transform portrayals of Shiva, turning them from mere

religious imagery into art imbued with significant spiritual and philosophical meaning.

Although Vaishnavism was favoured in the Gupta royal court, Shaivism was an important and developing tradition that promoted innovative art and theology that would influence Indian art for centuries. These innovations would later influence other art traditions throughout India and Southeast Asia, illustrating the broader legacy of Gupta period iconography. This study will follow these developments to illustrate both the significant contribution of the Gupta period to the meaning and construction of Hindu religious art and indicate its lasting significance for the visual and theological development of Shaivism.

Research articles and papers, alongside books, can provide empirical evidence regarding the historical trajectory I describe. For example, *Priya Darshini's Religion and Policy of Toleration in the Gupta Period: Numismatic and Epigraphical Facts* and *Krishna Mohan Shrivastava's Religion, Ideology, and Society* presented numismatic and epigraphical evidence to show how the state itself was involved in creating religious synthesis and encouraging artistic innovation. Similarly, articles about mudras in Indian art, such as Rimpay Agarwal's research on gestures and postures, will help explain the ways in which symbolic gestures (e.g. abhaya, varada, and gajahasta) were significant to Gupta-era representations of Shiva, enhancing their narrative and devotional elements. Online materials provide some contemporary perspectives and are accessible. For instance, an article like Sushant Bharti's summary of Shiva's iconography, or work from the Freer and Sackler Galleries, offers visual documentation and commentary of scholarly activity in relation to the artistic dimensions of Gupta sculpture. This combined literature shows that the Gupta period was a transformative time in the

representation of Shiva, illustrated by the dynamic transition out of representation of the abstract and aniconic linga to anthropomorphic representation that is richly described, theologically dense, complex in narrative, and artistically refined.

The development of representations of Lord Shiva during the Gupta period (4th–6th century CE) marks a major artistic, religious, and philosophical change. The transformation from the aniconic Linga (Shiva lingam) to detailed anthropomorphic representations was a landmark event in the history of Hindu religious art, which demonstrated artificial developments in sculpture techniques and major theological developments in the tradition of Shaivism. Often coined as the “Golden Age” of Indian Civilisation, the Gupta period also promoted an atmosphere of religious tolerance, allowing Shaivism to prosper alongside Vaishnavism, albeit the latter being more popular among royal patrons. This time also saw the development of new and exciting representations of Shiva, including Nataraja (the cosmic dancer), Ardhanarishvara (the androgynous fusion of Shiva and Parvati), and Harihara (the syncretic representation of Shiva and Vishnu). The introduction of these expressive forms not only represented new artistic ideas but also grounded their representations into notable theological ideas including the reconciliation of dualities, the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, and the reconciliation of what were distinct sectarian traditions. The refined sculptural techniques acquired by Gupta artists allowed the expression of complex mudras, symbolic attributes, and expressive features that enhanced the accessibility of Shiva’s divine identity for devotees.

Despite the rise of anthropomorphic images in prominence during the Gupta period, the Shiva Linga was still worshipped at the centre of worship. The existence of both abstract and

figural representations emphasised the flexibility of Hindu religious thought and allowed for the idea of God in formless and embodied representations. The syncretic tendencies of the Gupta period also created a shared vocabulary in the arts between Shaivism and Vaishnavism that allowed stylistic elements to be integrated seamlessly. The developments of Shiva iconography during this time laid the groundwork for developments in Hindu religious art throughout India and Southeast Asia in later centuries. The developments, both theological and artistic, during the Gupta period continued in temple architecture, sculpture, and practice in the subsequent centuries. The Gupta period reworked tradition and supported artistic creativity by reconfiguring the visual and spiritual practice of Hinduism. The ways in which the innovations during the Gupta period influenced religious and artistic expression, both religious and secular, can still be seen in modern expressions of the religion.

The ancient practice of Yoni (vulva) worship in the Gupta period and the Harappan Civilisation -

Yoni worship in the Indus Valley Civilisation is linked to the worship of the feminine principle and fertility, and is still disputed, as there is no definitive evidence. John Marshall and other scholars identified possible yoni (vulva) and lingam (phallus) symbols as central elements in the religion of the Indus Valley Civilisation. In this tradition, these symbols represent the divine feminine and masculine forces, respectively. Both manifestations represent the creation, regeneration, and convergence of natural and cosmic energies. Yoni (female generative principle) and linga (male generative principle) exist before the Guptas, in Harappan culture, early Shaiva asceticism, and folk fertility worship. Still, they were further systematised and Sanskritised in the Gupta period and associated with orthodox Brahmanical theology through

Shaivism and the newly emerging Tantrism. The Gupta period marks the beginning of standardised forms of Hindu temples. From this period, many linga shrines have yoni-pithas, a square or circular base with a spout (soma-sūtra) for drainage of ritual water.

Some examples of worship at linga shrines from the Gupta period are:

Udayagiri caves (Madhya Pradesh) - early Shaiva cave sanctuaries

Bhitargaon temple (Kanpur) - a brick temple with linga-yoni architectural evidence

Nachna-Kuthara temples

Deogarh (Dashavatara temple) - Vaishnava, but illustrates coexistence with other cults

In Gupta-era religious ideology, the yoni is identified with Śakti — the active, creative, self-manifesting energy of the universe, rather than being simply a sign of biology or fertility.

In metaphysical terminology:

Śiva = Pure Consciousness (static, unmanifest) and Śakti (yoni) = Creative energy (dynamic, manifest)

In the absence of Śakti, Śiva is śava — inert, unalive.

This doctrine establishes the philosophical foundation for Śāktism and Tantric cosmology, in which the feminine is not seen merely as secondary; rather, it is ontologically primary.

Though the worship of goddesses existed prior, the Gupta period is when the theology crystallised. The best evidence of this situation is the textual evidence of the Devī-Māhātmya (circa 5-6 / A.D.), which is the first foundational Śākta text.

Proto-Tantrism refers to early applications/designs of Tantra

before its classical formal codification, further developed in approximately the 8th - 12th centuries A.D., of which many seeds of conceptual and ritual concerning bifurcation/usage of: Ritual innovations of the use of pīthas (sacred seats), with many pairs of which were identified as yoni-pīthas and Mantra-sādhana becomes established usage of the sacred and esoteric quality of fire, liquids, blood, and the symbolism of menstrual aspects.

The use of the somā-sūtra drainage channel for fluids in the yoni-pīthas indicates the beginning of the formal use of sacred fluids in controlled ritual worship.

Esoteric Anthropology: The Body as Microcosm-

The body, with a x(y) focus of the female reproductive bodily system, becomes a map of control, the cosmic energies of (though yet to be formally identified as kundalinī, cakras, or nādis), a fairly primary doctrine of Tantra of consciousness, which will eventually be developed fully.

Sexual-Cosmological union transform into focused practices.

As proto-Tantrism did not evolve to the literal erotic ritualism attached to medieval Tantra. The yoni body, or card participants, danced with the linga-yoni model of the occasion as:

- The fusion of śiva-śakti
- The union of purusa-prakṛti
- A non-dual (advaya) state with mokṣa as a goal.

Thus, many approaches of exploration began to create a yoga-philosophical suggestion, out of the rituals around the yoni bodily representations, of sexual-cosmological forms rather than simply ritualistic.

Conclusion -

The Harappan Civilisation and the Gupta Empire are two highlights of ancient Indian culture separated by glories in time; they each represent long-lasting durations through religious practice and symbolism. The Harappans communicated by non-verbal signs, conventional motifs, and undecipherable attributes, while the Guptas communicated through high-form Sanskrit, theology, and anthropomorphic iconography.

Some of the conventional motifs — fish, symbols of fertility, adumbrating Shiva numbers, astronomical signs — reappear over a report of glories not directly inherited, but through a memory and transference of civilizational knowledge.

The Gupta period didn't directly inherit the Harappan script or language, but did inherit and transfigure aged religious impulses, which advanced into rituals modelled for Hinduism and early Tantrism, as well as the Puranic narrative and classical art. Hence, the journey from Indus shape to Gupta shape isn't one of direct descent, but of artistic reimagining which saved, converted, and advanced aged patterns into newer verbal and theological complications.

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Chapter 4

Tracing The Evolution of Goddess Worship in Ancient India

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Abstract

In India the worship of the goddess goes back to the pre-Aryan times, before 1500 BCE. The sites of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and other parts of the Indus Valley Civilization, have yielded hundreds of female figures dating as far back as the third millennium BCE. However, goddess figures feature minimally in the early Vedic/ Aryan literature. By the classical era, both the great gods, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to have had female consorts. During the 6th-8th centuries, some Hindus within the Shaivite tradition elevated the divine female form to being the consort, to the great goddess, so the goddess now enjoyed the position of Supreme Being in her own right. It was therefore now possible to worship the goddess as the Supreme Being, who is herself the Creator, Preserver and the Destroyer.

Since the reappearance of the goddess in India, she has grown in strength and popularity and is worshipped by many names and in many places today. This paper discusses the popularity and significance of the goddess/Mother worship cult which has grown in India over the past several centuries. In recognizing this seamless cycle of creation, nourishment and dissolution embodied by the goddess, we find the very

foundations of the fertility cults whose continuities can be traced back to the 7th century BCE.

Introduction

In India the worship of the goddess goes back to the pre-Aryan times, before 1500 BCE. The sites of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and other parts of the Indus Valley Civilization, have yielded hundreds of female figures dating as far back as the third millennium BCE. However, goddess figures feature minimally in the early Vedic/Aryan literature. Usha, the goddess of Dawn, has only twenty hymns in the Rig Veda, and although she is one of the most important goddesses, she is not on a par with the most important gods, e.g., Agni, Indra and Soma. Other goddesses, such as Prithvi, Aditi and Saraswati are mentioned in the Vedas, but none of the goddesses who became very important in Brahmanical Hinduism, such as Parvati, Durga, Kali, Radha and Sita are mentioned in the Vedas. By the classical era, both the great gods, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to have had female consorts, but with the coming of the Aryans, there is not much evidence of the worship of the goddesses. During the 6th-8th centuries, some Hindus within the Shaivite tradition elevated the divine female form to being the consort, to the great goddess, so the goddess now enjoyed the position of Supreme Being in her own right. It was therefore now possible to worship the goddess as the Supreme Being, who is herself the Creator, Preserver and the Destroyer.

Since the reappearance of the goddess in India, she has grown in strength and popularity and is worshipped by many names and in many places today. The goddess/Mother worship cult which has grown in India over the past several centuries is predominantly centered around Parvati, the consort of Shiva. In fact, the goddess finds a natural home within Shaivism,

where she is seen as the personification of the female energy (Shakti) of the more passive, contemplative Shiva.

The popularity and widespread nature of the goddess worship is almost certainly attributable to the powerful and clearly observable role of the human mother, who bears new offspring from her body and nourishes and nurtures these; and to the transference of this imagery to the Fertile Earth (Mother) who also produces and nourishes life, and finally, at death, takes it back into her dark womb. Thus, the Mother Goddess represents both the life-giving, nurturing processes and the related processes of disintegration, death and decay. Margaret Stutley states that Shakti is the overflowing cosmic energy through which gods, worlds and all creatures come into being. In fact, she is indistinguishable from Nature (prakriti). Yet even in her fierce aspect, she protects those of her children who can overcome their fears and terrors of the inevitable process of continuous change and decay she represents, to see her transcendent beauty and the eternal bliss that ultimately, she bestows on her worshippers.

Thus, in recognizing this seamless cycle of creation, nourishment and dissolution embodied by the goddess, we find the very foundations of the fertility cults whose continuities can be traced up to the 7th century BCE.

I

Religious practices in the Harappan period appears to have centered largely on the deities associated with fertility, creation and the forces of nature. Various pieces of evidence of female figurines have been found by archaeologists and historians who have accepted this fact. Although no specific names can be given to these since the script has not been deciphered yet, scholars have suggested that the figurines so found were somehow related to the cult of the “Mother

Goddess.” For example, the numerous female figurines found across Harappan sites (Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Banawali) are generally interpreted by scholars as representations of a single, overarching Mother Goddess or Earth Goddess. This deity is associated with motherhood, fertility, procreation, and the continuity of life, which were important for an agricultural society.

At Inamgaon, an interesting discovery was made under a house floor belonging to the Period II of the Jorwe phase. It was a headless female figurine with a bull. All the other figurines which were found, were similarly unbaked, showing that they were made for temporary use. The headless figurine had a hole in its abdomen, and the bull had a hole in its back. So, when a stick was inserted through both the holes, the headless figurine was found to sit perfectly on the bull’s back! The most important fact to note here is that, the figurines were found buried under a house floor, which suggests that they were a part of an important household ritual. Upinder Singh¹ suggests that it could have been a Goddess which represented fertility, childbirth or the welfare of children.

During the Early Vedic period, we see the coming of Gods and Goddesses having prominent names. However, the particular physical forms attributed to them served symbolic purposes, reflecting their functions and influence over the natural world. The prominent Goddesses which were worshipped during this period include: Aditi, Usha, Saraswati, Prithvi, Ratri, Ila, Nirrti. All these Goddesses find their mention in the Rig Veda. N.N. Bhattacharya in his book mentions that, in some of the Upanishads, it has been found that the names Kara, Karali etc. were used as the names of different kinds of flames and, in the White Yajus Samhita, we find Ambika spoken of

¹Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, India, 2016).

as the sister of Rudra. However, when Rudra assumed a more distinct individuality in the Puranas, all those names were construed as the different names of his wife!

One important and interesting thing to note here is that, these goddesses had their own independent identities, which got reversed during the Later Vedic Period, having the independent female goddesses being turned into consorts of the main male gods' pantheon.

During the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan period, Brahmanical religion faced its major blow due to the rise of other heterogeneous religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikas etc. It was only during the post-Mauryan period that Brahmanism was revived again.²

The period between c.200 BCE-300 CE, was the formative phase in the evolution of early Hindu pantheons. All the earliest inscriptional references and archaeological remains of the Hindu temples belong to this period. Some of the deities who became the foci of worship in this period are known from the Vedic literature. However, during these centuries, they emerged as the foci of devotion, as powerful supreme deities, whose images were installed and worshipped in temples and homes. Upinder Singh, in her book "A History of Ancient and Early medieval India", mentions that stone and terracotta sculptures from sites and such as Mathura clearly indicate that the popular cults of the Yakshas and Yakshis, nagas and naganis were gradually being pushed to the margins by the gods and goddesses of the Brahmanical tradition. The most influential of the newly emerging cults were associated with the worship of the gods Shiva and Vishnu and the goddess Durga.³

²N.N. Bhattacharya, *The Indian Mother Goddess* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1972).

The age of the Imperial Guptas, which covers the fourth, fifth and the first half of the sixth century of the Christian era, presents a religious canvas of complex vertical and horizontal relationships. One segment of this shows the Vedic rituals and gods standing at the highest point of diverse Brahmanical religious systems which run in horizontal relationship with one another. The non-Brahmanical systems are similarly shown in horizontal relationship with one another, but devoid of the Vedic vertex, and running competitively parallel to the Brahmanical ones sharing in the new options provided by the popular element of folk and local cults involving. During this period, it was seen that, most of the deities were merged together. For example, Ambika, Uma/Gauri and Shri/Lakshmi were merged together and made the manifestations of goddess Durga. Even the other Vedic goddesses such as Usha, Ratri, although not directly “merged” into the specific iconography or mythology of the goddess Durga, had their attributes and the general concept of the divine feminine (Shakti) integrated into the broader Hindu pantheon, which contributed to the rise of the prominent goddesses like Durga in later traditions. Even the cults of Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, came to be prominent during this period. Probably the most important development which took place in this period was the writing of the text called the *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashati*, by Sage Markandeya, which is a key text in Shaktism that glorifies Durga as the supreme goddess and details her victory over Mahishasura. This text was instrumental in providing a theological basis for viewing other goddesses as aspects of her being.

However, it has been noted in D.D. Kosambi’s “Myth and Reality” that the Goddess Durga has ancient roots in

³Kuiper, F. B. J. “The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion.” *History of Religions* 15, no. 2 (1975): 107–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061926>.

prehistoric Mother Goddess and fertility cults. Although today she is known as a powerful warrior goddess, her origins are intrinsically linked to earlier deities associated with fertility, agriculture and life cycles. This even finds its mention in Kautilya's Arthashastra, where the Devi is referred to as the spirit of vegetables, in connection to the sowing of seeds, highlighting an association with the agricultural abundance.⁴

The religious developments during the period 6th-13th century CE, shows continuities with the preceding centuries, according to Upinder Singh. At the level of popular worship, the focus was on the devotional worship in temples and on the pilgrimage. The Hindu cults, especially those associated with the worship of Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, became increasingly popular.

An important development during this period was the composition of the Shakta text, which was composed in the area of Assam or in the adjoining part of Bengal. It reflects the diverse forms of the worship of Devi. The goddess is described as having both a benign and a terrifying form. In her Shanta (calm) form she has a strongly erotic character. In her Rudra manifestation, she is best worshipped in a cremation ground.

II

The village or folk tradition in India, centred on the worship of predominantly female deities, almost certainly has roots reaching back to pre-Aryan times (Whitehead 1988: 11, 17). Although this tradition differs in many respects from the Brahmanical or "great" tradition of goddess worship, it also shares deep continuities. Unlike the Brahmanical goddesses, who have pan-Indian appeal, the village or guardian goddesses (gramadevatas) are linked to specific

⁴Atre, Shubhangana. "THE FEMININE AS ARCHETYPE." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 92 (2011): 151-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43941279>.

localities and are worshipped primarily by the inhabitants of a single village. Some villages may house more than one such deity, with certain goddesses remaining completely unknown outside their locality. Others, however, have acquired broader regional influence—such as Manasā in eastern India and Mariyamman in the South. As scholars like Alaka Malwade Basu noted, cultural differences shaped the way communities understood these deities: for many South Indians, Mariyamman was functionally equivalent to Śītālā in the North.

The name “Mari-amman” itself reflects the goddess’s ambiguous nature. The word mari can mean both “death” in Sanskrit and “rain” in Tamil, suggesting her power over both destructive disease and life-giving fertility (Beck 1969: 571). Ethnographer Brenda E. F. Beck also notes that she is sometimes called Paccaiyamman, the “green goddess,” a colour associated with rain and vegetation. Even today, despite the decline of smallpox and similar epidemics, many village, folk, and tribal communities continue to celebrate an annual festival for Mariyamman. This usually occurs in the Tamil month of Ādi (July–August), historically associated with seasonal outbreaks of fever and disease. Ādi is considered inauspicious; marriages, new business ventures, and even childbirths are avoided. Children conceived or born in this month are sometimes regarded as unlucky, marking the enduring cultural weight of the goddess’s influence.⁵

Goddess Manasā, the serpent deity, remains an important object of popular worship in Bengal and neighbouring regions. Like other folk goddesses such as Śītālā and Śasthī, she was originally worshipped by tribal or “primitive” groups before gradually entering orthodox Hinduism. Her name appears

⁵Kochar, V. K. “Village Deities of the Santal and Associated Rituals.” *Anthropos* 61, no. 1/2 (1966): 241–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40458237>.

only in later Purānas—the Padma, Bhagavata, and Brahma Vaivarta—and scholars like A. Bhattacharyya argue that large parts of eastern India and the Deccan retained significant pre-Aryan cultural features, including Śakti worship. This, he suggests, explains why the anthropomorphic serpent goddess is found primarily in Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and parts of the South. Manasā is especially prevalent in rural Bengal among communities traditionally considered lower in social hierarchy, including Hinduised aboriginal groups such as the Dom, Bauri, Keot, Mai, and Bagdi. In places like Birbhum district, there is hardly any village where her worship is not performed.

Village goddesses serve diverse functions. Brubaker (1983:148) notes that some preside over marriage, conception, or childbirth; others promote agricultural fertility; some protect herds, wells, granaries, and village boundaries; still others exorcise ghosts, prevent snakebite, or cure specific diseases. Their festivals often involve highly charged ritual activity—“overheating” or even chaotic—which mirrors the community’s struggle against epidemics. The collective energy of the ritual is seen as a symbolic attempt to expel disease, much like the body fighting an infection.

Mariamman is often depicted holding fire pots. Vessel symbolism is widespread and ancient, appearing in goddess worship across cultures. Many ritual pots have been shaped like women or designed with female faces. Erich Neumann sees the vessel as the central symbol of the feminine—the “life vessel” that protects, nurtures, and gives birth (1963: 42, 120). Drawing on G. E. Smith, he argues that the “Mother Pot” is a universal religious motif, deeply rooted in ancient belief. Briffault similarly notes the presence of pot-shaped goddesses in South India.

The colour red plays an important symbolic role in the imagery of Hindu goddesses. Many are clothed in red or painted with red pigments. This colour represents blood and therefore reflects both the life-giving and destructive powers of the goddess. It symbolizes menstruation, fertility, childbirth, and the blood of sacrifice (Neumann 1963: 279). While worshippers may not consciously interpret these symbols, they preserve them across generations because these rituals continue to satisfy fundamental emotional and social needs.

South Indian village goddesses typically have male guardian deities whose images stand outside their shrines. These male attendants protect the goddess and carry out her commands but remain subordinate and servile (Whitehead 1988: 18). One prominent example is Kattavarayan, known across many Mariyamman shrines; his name means “guardian king,” from *ka*, meaning “to protect.”

In Bengal, mother-goddess cults have attracted extensive anthropological attention.⁶ Scholars such as Ralph Nicholas and Das Gupta have linked these village-level practices to themes like epidemic control and the social mobility of rural groups such as the Mahishyas. Nicholas famously remarked that “Mother herself is a person to be worshipped in Bengal,” reflecting the deep reverence given to motherhood in regional culture. Among Vedic goddesses, Das Gupta highlights Prithvī, the earth-mother, as especially relevant to Bengal. Later texts identify Prithvī with Śrī or Laksmī, the goddess of harvest and prosperity. Prithvī is symbolically paired with Dyans (the sky) as the “field” to be inseminated by seed, reflecting agricultural metaphors of fertility (Leela Dube). During the Ambabachi ritual, Bengali cultivators treat the

⁶Bagchi, Jasodhara. “Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 42/43 (1990): WS65–71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396894>.

earth as menstruating; ploughing and even cooking are restricted so as not to “disturb” the mother earth.

Durga worship, Bengal’s most important autumn festival, lasts about four days. Das Gupta suggests that it likely developed as a merging of the fierce goddess Durga with the earth goddess. This association with agricultural prosperity strengthened the worship of Śakti—the feminine principle—across social classes, despite limited sanction in the male-dominated Vedic pantheon. Over time, Shakti worship became deeply embedded in Bengali cultural and religious life, and it played an important role in nationalist symbolism as well.

Many forms of the mother goddess, including the Mahavidyas, originally belonged to diverse folk cultures and social groups. Between the first and tenth centuries CE, these various local goddesses were gradually integrated into the concept of a single universal mother (Das Gupta 1977: 72). In Parvati legends, traits such as sexuality, nourishment, and headlessness are common. Similar themes appear in the concepts of Śrī and Laksmī.⁷

Sexuality and fertility are strongly associated in many tribal traditions. The outstretched-leg or semi-squatting posture seen in tribal art—for example, in the youth dormitory (gotal) paintings of the Muria of Bastar—signals sexual readiness and fertility (Elwin 1998: 36). Tribal groups such as the Oraon, Santal, and Munda also link sexuality with agricultural fertility (Bagchi 1980: 162–163). Many village fertility goddesses combine these elements, embodying both sexual and vegetative symbolism. This logic appears widely in Indian art, where erotic imagery merges with fertility motifs (Lannoy 1971: 41–42).

⁷MISHRA, BABA, PRADEEP MOHANTY, and P. K. MOHANTY. “HEADLESS CONTOUR IN THE ART TRADITION OF ORISSA, EASTERN INDIA.” *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 62/63 (2002): 311–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42930626>

The goddess Śrī, associated with farmers and vegetation, possessed strong connections to sexuality and nourishment. She was assimilated with Laksmī, Prithvī, Śasthī, Rākā, Jaya, and other goddesses before the first century CE (Gonda 1900: 217). Her cult also entered Buddhist tradition, where she appears between two elephants pouring water over her or in personified yoni figurines found at Sanchi, Bharhut, Kosambi, and Bodh Gaya. Śrī was identified with grain in Vedic texts and described as “lotus-headed” in the Purānas, linking her to vegetative fertility.

The headless goddess Lajjā Gaurī embodies the combined aspects of sexuality, fertility, and nourishment. Her iconography often incorporates Śaiva, Śākta, or Vaisnava symbols, showing syncretic development. She appears frequently alongside Saptamatrika figures (Bolon 1986: 51). Scholars like Mishra (2000) argue that Lajjā Gaurī represents an early form of the Durga-Parvati-Laksmī complex. Similar traits appear in other mother-goddess forms such as Chinnamastā and Śākambarī, who also combine headlessness, sexuality, fertility, and the nourishing function.⁸

To conclude, the broader implication of this history is that mother-goddess worship extends back to the beginnings of Indian civilization. From the first century CE onward, numerous local mother goddesses emerged, and although they differed in form, they ultimately converged into the figure of a single universal mother. Daniel Ingalls believes that the worship of the Goddess never really ceased in India. He says: The two-thousand-year silence of the record may be explained by the fact that all our texts from that period are either in Sanskrit or closely related languages, and there is no doubt that the Aryan-Sanskrit culture was strongly oriented toward

⁸Dhavalikar, M. K. “LAJJĀGAURI.” *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 39 (1980): 30–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42931321>.

masculine goals . . . The men and women who worshipped the goddess are not likely in that period to have written at all; almost surely, they did not write in Sanskrit. Our earliest Sanskrit hymns to the goddess, according to this view, are the continuation of an old religion, not an innovation.⁹

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Chapter 5

The Other Gender of Antiquity: Representations of Women in Cultural Documents of Mauryan & Gupta Era

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to acquire an understanding of the status of women in ancient India through art and literature. The cultural imagination of ancient India is deeply intertwined with the ways in which gender was conceptualized, represented, and preserved within its literary, artistic and political traditions. Among these, the portrayal of women during the Mauryan (c.322-185 BCE) and Gupta (c. 320-550CE) eras stands out as a critical field of inquiry, revealing shifting socio-cultural values across two of the subcontinent's most influential dynastic periods. The Mauryan Empire, shaped by Buddhist ethics, administrative centralization, and a pragmatically ordered society produced inscriptions, treatises and artistic programs that framed women within moral, domestic, occasionally political spheres. In contrast, the Gupta period-frequently idealized as a "Golden Age"- generated refined literary narratives, classical artistic forms and courtly traditions that recast female identity through ideals of beauty, virtue, fertility and intellectual grace. A close examination of cultural documents from these eras— reveals both continuity and transformation in gendered representations.

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to acquire an understanding of the status of women in ancient India through art and literature. The cultural imagination of ancient India is deeply intertwined with the ways in which gender was conceptualized, represented, and preserved within its literary, artistic and political traditions. Among these, the portrayal of women during the Mauryan (c.322-185 BCE) and Gupta (c. 320-550CE) eras stands out as a critical field of inquiry, revealing shifting socio-cultural values across two of the subcontinent's most influential dynastic periods. The Mauryan Empire, shaped by Buddhist ethics, administrative centralization, and a pragmatically ordered society produced inscriptions, treatises and artistic programs that framed women within moral, domestic, occasionally political spheres. In contrast, the Gupta period-frequently idealized as a "Golden Age"- generated refined literary narratives, classical artistic forms and courtly traditions that recast female identity through ideals of beauty, virtue, fertility and intellectual grace. A close examination of cultural documents from these eras-ranging from Ashokan edicts, *Arthashastra* prescriptions, didactic Buddhist literature and terracotta figurines to Gupta inscriptions, classical Sanskrit poetry, temple art, and courtly aesthetics—reveals both continuity and transformation in gendered representations. Women emerge alternately as custodians of dharma, vehicles of prosperity, objects of aesthetic contemplation, and symbolic embodiments of political legitimacy. Yet, these portrayals also expose underlying hierarchies, normative expectations, and ideological constructions that shaped women's lived experiences. By analyzing these textual and visual sources in tandem, this study seeks to interrogate how the "other gender" of antiquity was envisioned within the cultural discourse of

the Mauryan and Gupta eras, and how these representations contribute to broader historical understandings of gender, power, and identity in early India.

Statecraft In Script: Re-Reading Kautilya's Arthashastra

Arthashastra is one of the most prominent instances of ancient literature which revolved around the images of women during the 3rd century BCE. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya is a work on politics, statecraft, law, administration, economy and social order during Mauryan period. The literary piece situates women within a structured patriarchal framework reflecting the norms of its time. It contains interesting data on women belonging to diverse societal backgrounds. According to the *Arthashastra*, the women population in Mauryan culture was sub divided into two.¹ It contains interesting data- as her family establishment ² Female figures- against women ³A ganika- yarn ultimately ⁴The Gupta era-shaping family ⁵Meghaduta offers-Chandragupta II ⁶Ganika's are-to operate ⁷female art- intricate ornamentation.⁸The Ajanta cave- of Indian art.

parts- i) the upper class women earned their livelihood, associated themselves with making handicrafts (*silpavati*) and spinning yarn. Their societal occupations allowed them to blend naturally into environments avoiding suspicion in any royal or political setting which made the administrative power employ them as spies. But among those working women the widows, maidens, women with physical defects and the *prostitas* who had left their home and lived separately were looked down upon and considered as bad omen. Looking at their faces was considered as a punishable offence. They were restricted from collecting the raw materials by themselves from the yarn and textiles houses. Thus, spinning was a major industry providing livelihood

to needy women. References to women of lower orders have been frequently found mentioned in the literary piece as they were easily pressed into the service of the state for spying and doing menial jobs. Moreover, as they constituted a significant labor force, Kautilya provided rules concerning them. According to him, just like the recent world, women of antiquity who contributed equally to the family through farming, agriculture and animal husbandry were known as *Ardhasitikas*. Field studies have shown that these women were responsible for their families' subsistence and survival. This implies that women who contributed equally should be held accountable if there was a loss. Otherwise a wife shall not be liable for the debt incurred by her husband without her contribution.

Kautilya looks upon prostitution as an occupation and mentions several categories of prostitutes- **Ganika**, **Pratiganika**, **Rupajiva**, **Bandhaki** etc. In the male dominated patriarchal society prostitution was a socially sanctioned profession. Ganika was no ordinary prostitute but had a state appointed institutionalized position. She received a salary of one thousand panas as her family establishment.¹ A ganika could come from the family of ganikas or from some other family but she had to be endowed with beauty, youth and expertise in arts. Although a ganika had access to arts and wealth, she was not free to follow her own inclinations and her dealings were strictly regulated. Nevertheless, violence against her was severely punishable. Apparently, she was an important treasure of the state, and the safety of her mother (*matrka*), daughter (*duhitrka*) and female slave or attendant (*rupadasi*) was of great importance, as killing of any of these was to be punished with the highest fine of violence. On the other hand, devadasis were the female slaves dedicated to gods as a euphemism for temple prostitution. Unlike the

Rupajivas and Rajadasis the devadasis were not allowed to serve the state in some politically useful way. However, all these women in their old age revert to spinning yarn ultimately.³

Carving The Feminine: Female Imagery And Symbolism In Mauryan Art

Among the period's diverse art forms, representations of femininity occupy a significant position, revealing both aesthetic preferences and ideological meanings embedded within Mauryan visual culture. Female figures such as *Yakshis*, tree spirits, attendants, and courtly women appear prominently in terracotta figurines, polished stone sculptures, and architectural carvings. The Didarganj Yakshi (**Chauri Bearer**) is the most famous example. It is the life-size, freestanding sculpture from Didarganj (now in the Bihar Museum). Carved from polished Chunar sandstone, the figure is noted for its strong, well-proportioned anatomy, detailed ornamentation and a garment that creates a translucent effect. Her voluptuous body, characterized by large bosoms, a narrow waist, and broad hips, was an idealization of the female form, emphasizing fertility and abundance. These figures were worshipped as protective deities and symbols of prosperity and good health, reflecting the continuation of pre-Mauryan indigenous traditions of nature worship into the historic period. A Bharhut sculpture depicts the figure of a woman riding a horse fully caparisoned and carrying a standard. We may add that the image of a woman hunter cutting flying birds into pieces is as old as Rig-Veda and a 12th century sculpture from the Varaha-Shyama mandir, Bhinmal in Rajasthan, shows a woman hunter carrying a stick on her shoulders with the animals hanging from each side of the ends and a man standing on the left handing her arrows. She could be a woman from a Bhila or *Khirata* tribe. It is likely

that the female bodyguards of Chandragupta Maurya too were recruited from the same tribes, who were described by Kautilya as brave, fighting in the open and many in number. The *Atavikas* had compelled Ashoka to follow a policy of conciliation as well as punishment. It is a moot point whether religious images of Hindu goddesses wielding numerous weapons and killing theomorphic demons go back to early tribal projections of male fantasies serving '*to mask widespread violence*' against women.² In conclusion, the female images of the Mauryan era stand as cultural signifiers that bridge religious symbolism with socio-political realities, revealing a nuanced understanding of womanhood in early Indian civilization.

The Feminine Script: Decoding Women's Roles In The Gupta Period.

The Gupta era, often known for its literary brilliance offers rich portrayals of women through the works of Kalidasa and Vishakhadatta. Their texts depict women not only as symbols of virtue and beauty but embodies them as figures of emotional intellectuality, resilience and political influence. In *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, Sakuntala portrays grace, purity and inner strength. Her love and suffering shaped the moral heart of the piece. In Kalidasa's play, there is a projection of Sakuntala both as a woman and a character providing for historical interface between literature and history. Her attitude is not of a submissive subject. She is a woman from a different society who sees herself as equal in status to the men. Kalidasa has presented her dignity and motherhood as sources of moral power representing the central role played by women in shaping the family.⁴ Meghaduta offers a different shade of femininity by portraying Yakshini separated from her exiled husband Yaksha. She becomes a symbol of emotional strength and marital devotion-qualities that the

Gupta society deeply valued in women. Her presence fills every line with beauty, sorrow, longing and her remarkable delicateness. His piece shows how women were perceived as custodians of affection, memory and stability.

Although women in Kalidasa's works were framed through male-centric virtues such as chastity, loyalty, beauty and devotion. Even characters like Sakuntala and Yakshini were given the same attributes, reinforcing a notion that a woman's worth was tied to emotional endurance rather than autonomy. This kind of idealized passivity is itself a subtle negative portrayal, as women are rarely given political and intellectual freedom. In Kumarasambhavam, Parvati represents the spiritual and ascetic strength of womanhood. Her determination, penance, and agency in seeking Shiva reflect a more empowered image of women- showing them as capable of both pursuit and personal choice. She also acts as an agent of choice and discipline. Whereas, Vishakhadatta adds a different dimension to female images, in Devichandraguptam queens like Dharini and Iravati plays an active political role in protecting Chandragupta II.⁵ Their involvement highlighted women's participation in governance and royal decision making. Mudrarakshasa, though largely political, includes references to influential queens and female attendants within the court, suggesting that women held subtle yet meaningful authority in statecraft. Texts such as Kamasutra, though sophisticated, also contribute to a dualistic portrayal of women. Ganika's are simultaneously depicted as educated and accomplished but also as figures of manipulation, economic calculation and erotic commerce. Their portrayal reflects social ambivalence towards woman who operated outside traditional domestic roles. The literature of Gupta period offers a rich yet complex portrayal of women, blending admiration with multiple constraints. The texts mentioned

above also reflect the underlining patriarchal framework of this era. Thus, literature of Gupta era presents a dual image of womanhood-one that celebrates feminine grace and moral authority, even as it subtly reinforces the social boundaries within which women were expected to operate.⁶

Sculpting Serenity: The Gupta Vision Of The Ideal Woman

Female art forms in the Gupta period reveal a sophisticated visual culture wherein the representation of women served religious, aesthetic, and symbolic functions. Gupta artists produced highly refined portrayals of femininity across sculpture, painting, terracotta art, and numismatic imagery, collectively shaping one of the most distinctive artistic idioms in ancient India. Sculptures of goddesses like Durga, Lakshmi, Parvati, and Saraswati illustrates the spiritual investment of the period in female divinity; rendered in harmonious proportions, soft facial expressions, and detailed ornamentation.⁷ These figures encapsulate the concept of Shakti and place women as crucial sources of cosmic order, prosperity and knowledge. Besides these divine forms, idealised female figures like Yakshis, Apsaras and celestial attendants continued earlier aesthetic traditions while adopting the Gupta characteristics of subtle sensuality and serene emotionality. The Ajanta cave murals executed under significant Gupta influence further enrich this visual repertoire by depicting women in diversified contexts royal women, attendants, dancers, musicians, and bodhisattva retinues portrayed with nuanced gestures, elaborate textiles, and expressive physiognomies. These paintings capture women not only as aesthetic subjects but also as participants in courtly, ritual, and domestic life provide important insights into contemporary social roles and elite culture. The terracotta plaques from various sites like Mathura and Bengal extends this representation. to ordinary women, such

as mothers, performers, and decorated female busts, which reveal popular artistic practices and regional interpretations of feminine identity. Further, the recurrent depiction of Lakshmi on Gupta gold coins demonstrates the political deployment of female iconography wherein the goddess stood as a symbol of abundance and legitimating royal fortune, and auspicious rule. Together these artistic forms provide a multidimensional image of women in the Gupta period celebrated for beauty, fertility, prosperity, devotion, spiritual significance while reflecting simultaneously the ideals of culture and the hierarchical structures that were shaping gender identities in this classical age of Indian art.⁸

Conclusion

The cultural documents of the Mauryan and Gupta eras collectively construct a layered and evolving representation of women in ancient India, revealing both continuity and change in the notion of gender. Mauryan sources—from the Arthashastra to inscriptions and early Buddhist literature principally represent women in terms of social order, domestic responsibility and political regulation. While these texts acknowledge women as participants in economy, spies, courtesans, and members of royal households, they remain framed by utilitarian and patriarchal logic, emphasizing discipline and guardianship. State control stands in striking contrast to the Gupta period, which saw a flowering of classical literature and art, and advances a more aestheticized and emotionally complex vision of womanhood. In the works of Kalidasa, Vishakhadatta, and the visual culture of Ajanta and Gupta sculpture, women are depicted as embodiments of spiritual power, moral virtue, artistic refinement, and at times even political agency. Despite this rise in artistic and literary portrayal, Gupta representations continue to reflect social hierarchies that limited women's public participation and

autonomy. Together, the two periods reveal how femininity in antiquity was a creation of both an ideological reverence and structural restraint. Whether approached through political treatises, religious narratives, drama, poetry, or visual art, the image of the woman emerges as central to cultural imagination while simultaneously constrained by the gender norms of their respective ages.

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Chapter 6

Statecraft and Strategy in Vishakhdatta's Mudrarakshasa: A Reflection of Kautilya's Arthashastra

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Abstract:

Mudrarakshasa (The Signet Ring of Rakshasa), composed by Vishakhdatta, is a Sanskrit political drama, set in the aftermath of Chandragupta Maurya's ascent to the throne of Magadha. It shows the political intrigue of Chanakya, who used his diplomatic genius not only to defeat the previous Nanda king but also to win over his loyal prime minister, Rakshasa, to strengthen the political power of Chandragupta. Drawing upon the principles of the Arthashastra of Kautilya, this drama reflects the pragmatic and sometimes ruthless diplomatic measures and aspects of ancient India. This paper analyses Mudrarakshasa as a mirror of the statecraft of the then India, highlighting its nature of being complementary to another ancient Indian political study, Arthashastra.

Keywords: *Mudrarakshasa, Vishakhdatta, Chanakya, Rakshasa, Chandragupta, Arthashastra*

Introduction:

Mudrarakshasa, a seminal work by the distinguished Sanskrit playwright Vishakhdatta, unfolds against the dynamic political backdrop of Chandragupta Maurya's rise

to the throne of Magadha. The drama, structured into seven acts, brings to life a complex world of strategy, loyalty, and shifting political alliances. At its core stand three prominent figures: Chanakya, Chandragupta, and Rakshasa. Chanakya, renowned as both the astute prime minister and the master political strategist behind Chandragupta's ascent, drives the narrative with his unyielding determination to secure the newly established Mauryan empire. In contrast, Rakshasa, the devoted prime minister of the dethroned Nanda king, embodies unwavering loyalty to his former ruler and remains a formidable obstacle to Mauryan consolidation.

Throughout the play, Chanakya employs a wide range of tactical manoeuvres, diplomatic negotiations, and calculated psychological strategies to outwit Rakshasa and persuade him, directly or indirectly, to shift his allegiance. These efforts are not merely personal triumphs but are portrayed as essential steps toward stabilizing the political authority of the Mauryan state.

Vishakhdatta's depiction of Chanakya's strategies to win over Rakshasa offers a vivid dramatization of the intricate challenges embedded in moments of political transition. Through Chanakya's calculated measures, the play highlights how the consolidation of power is never straightforward; it is shaped by shifting loyalties, delicate negotiations, and the ever-present tension between moral ideals and political necessity. Rakshasa's steadfast loyalty to the fallen Nanda dynasty further intensifies these dynamics, making Chanakya's task not merely one of strategy but of psychological insight and ethical navigation. Through its intricate plotting and rich characterization, *Mudrarakshasa* reveals the subtle interplay of power, intelligence, and statecraft, offering a vivid literary reflection of political thought, present in ancient India.

This drama, though belonging to the world of Sanskrit natya, departs from the conventional aesthetic and romantic motifs of classical Indian theatre. There is no romantic subplot, little emphasis on sringara rasa, and no divine intervention. Instead, it foregrounds political intrigue, espionage, tactical alliances, and diplomatic manipulation, elements which are deeply aligned with the theoretical formulations of Kautilya's Arthashastra, one of the most authoritative treatises on statecraft in world intellectual history.¹

By delving into themes such as power, espionage, persuasion, and statecraft, Mudrarakshasa brings to life the subtle mechanics of political operation in a turbulent historical period. This study seeks to illuminate how the drama functions as a narrative complement to the Arthashastra. While the Arthashastra articulates the theoretical foundations of governance, diplomacy, and covert operations, Mudrarakshasa animates these doctrines within a political landscape. The play thus serves simultaneously as a practical illustration of Kautilyan principles and as a cultural lens through which ancient Indian political thought can be understood. In blending theory with dramatic representation, Vishakhadatta offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities that define the exercise of power.

Historical and Literary Context:

Vishakhadatta's precise date of composition remains a subject of scholarly debate, yet most researchers situate the creation of Mudrarakshasa between the fifth and eighth centuries CE. Although the drama emerged long after the actual Mauryan period, it nevertheless reconstructs the political landscape surrounding Chandragupta Maurya and Chanakya with

¹Sarkar, Ratan Chandra. "The characteristic of mudrarakshasa and analysis on present politics". *International Journal of Sanskrit Research* 3, no. 1 (2017): 14-15.

notable depth and imaginative rigor. In doing so, the play does more than simply revisit a distant historical moment; it transforms the remembered past into a politically charged narrative shaped by intellectual memory, ideological intention, and a deep engagement with the principles associated with Kautilyan statecraft. As a result, *Mudrarakshasa* stands not only as a work of literary creativity but also as a sophisticated reflection on power, strategy, and governance. It offers a dramatized interpretation of early Indian political thought, blending historical recollection with theoretical insight to illuminate the enduring legacy of Kautilya's political philosophy and this depth enhances its relevance for readers.

Chanakya's Diplomacy - A Dramatization of Arthashastra Principles:

Chanakya, also known as Kautilya, embodies the principles of statecraft outlined in the *Arthashastra*, to win over Rakshasa. In *Mudrarakshasa*, his actions demonstrate the practical application of the four diplomatic strategies - Saama (persuasion), Daana (monetary inducement), Danda (punishment), and Bheda (division) - essential for maintaining state stability. Chanakya's primary goal was to solidify Chandragupta's grip on the Mauryan empire by neutralizing threats and securing the loyalty of key political figures.

Dragging Rakshasa into an alliance with Chandragupta Maurya was essential in the political context of establishing a new dynastic rule, as Rakshasa, the loyal prime minister of the former Nanda king, possessed significant political authority and strategic influence that could have threatened the consolidation of the Mauryan government. His unwavering loyalty, administrative expertise, and extensive network made him a formidable figure whose opposition could destabilize the emerging regime. Recognizing this, Chanakya

understood that securing Rakshasa's cooperation was crucial for ensuring long-term stability. Therefore, through calculated tactics, psychological insight, and diplomatic measures, he sought to place Rakshasa in a position where aligning with Chandragupta became not only advantageous but ultimately unavoidable, thereby strengthening the foundation of the new Mauryan state.

As mentioned earlier, the meticulous strategies of Chanakya to win over Rakshasa, had four primary stages, Saama, Daana, Danda and Bheda. Initially, Chanakya attempts to influence Rakshasa for making him an ally of Chandragupta through subtle persuasion, that is Saama, appealing to his rationality and showing his need in the certain political condition. Later on, to weaken the power of Rakshasa, Chanakya began to offer monetary wealth and privileges, embracing the notion of Daana. Gradually, following the philosophy of Bheda, he created hostilities and internal divisions among the remaining allies of Rakshasa, and made him isolated. And lastly, Chanakya had not hesitated to use force and oppressive measures to ensure the final win over Rakshasa, as a reflection of the ideology of Danda.²

The Arthashastra dedicates significant attention to espionage, recommending a broad network of spies disguised in various characters. In Mudrarakshasa, espionage is central to Chanakya's strategies as well as of Rakshasa. The plot involving the forged signet ring, the manipulation of Rakshasa's supporters, and the dissemination of misinformation demonstrate Vishakhdata's engagement with Kautilyan tactics. There is not any single act of Mudrarakshasa, which does not include the active presence of spies. These spies

²De, Ipshita and Sunil Kumar Chaturvedi. "Political Intrigue and Governance in Mudrarakshasa: A Reflection of Ancient Indian Political Thought". *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology* 4, no. 6 (2024): 235-38. DOI: 10.48175/IJARSC-22551

serve the dramatic purpose of the plot to a very great extent, and make enjoyable the diplomatic duels between Chanakya and Rakshasa, the two masters strategists.³

In *Mudrarakshasa*, Rakshasa employs several shrewd and covert strategies to undermine Chandragupta's rule, reflecting his determination and political acumen. Among these measures are the deployment of a Vishkanya, a girl trained in the art of poisoning, and the use of toxic medicines intended to eliminate Chandragupta without open confrontation. Such subtle, silent methods of warfare align closely with the prescriptions found in the *Arthashastra*, where they are categorized under 'Tushni-yuddha', a form of silent or covert warfare. This connection highlights the drama's engagement with established traditions of ancient Indian statecraft.

A recurring theme in both *Arthashastra* and *Mudrarakshasa* is the prioritization of *raja-dharma*, the duty to protect the state over personal moral codes. Chanakya embodies this principle. His decisions, whether ethically questionable or outright ruthless, are framed as necessary for securing the stability of the Mauryan polity. This approach, known as *realpolitik*, allowed Chanakya to advocate for tactics such as espionage, manipulation, and even deceit when necessary to protect the interests of the state.⁴

In one notable dimension of the drama, Chanakya's actions lead to the endangerment of innocents and the exploitation of personal loyalties. Yet, Vishakhdatla does not condemn him; instead, he presents Chanakya as a realist whose vision transcends conventional morality.

³Nath, Dr. Aparna. "Spying in *Mudrārākṣasa* and its impact on Present day". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 6, no. 2 (2018): 600-02.

⁴Deshmukh, Arvind Prakash. "STATECRAFT AND POLITICAL WISDOM IN THE MAURYA EMPIRE: THE ROLE OF CHANAKYA". *Social Science and Educational Research Journal* 13, no. 3 (2025): 9-14.

Mudrarakshasa offers a glimpse into the complexities of ancient Indian political thought, where the state's stability is prioritized over individual ethical considerations. The play vividly brings to life the principles outlined in the Arthashastra, including the use of espionage, strategic alliances, and calculated force, illustrating how these tactics were employed to achieve state security and consolidate power.⁵ Chanakya's actions epitomize Kautilya's philosophy, highlighting the need for rulers to balance moral ideals with pragmatic necessities in the pursuit of effective governance.

By elevating state stability above personal ethics, Chanakya's approach underscores the Arthashastra's central tenet: a ruler's primary responsibility is to safeguard the state, even if it means adopting strategies that blur moral lines. His decisions reflect the notion that ensuring the state's survival often requires navigating complex moral dilemmas, making tough choices a necessary part of leadership.⁶

What makes Mudrarakshasa so valuable is its ability to translate political theory into human drama. If the Arthashastra explains what a ruler should do, the play explores what happens when those strategies collide with human emotions, conflicting values, and unpredictable behaviour. Thus, by animating Kautilya's theoretical principles, demonstrating the challenges of implementing political theory in real life, acknowledging the moral uncertainties inherent in governance, Mudrarakshasa becomes a successful reflection of Arthashastra, as a whole.

⁵De, Ipshita and Sunil Kumar Chaturvedi. "Political Intrigue and Governance in Mudrarakshasa: A Reflection of Ancient Indian Political Thought". *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology* 4, no. 6 (2024): 235-38. DOI: 10.48175/IJARST-22551

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Conclusion:

Mudrarakshasa stands as a unique and invaluable literary embodiment of ancient Indian political thought. Through its vivid dramatization of Chanakya's strategies and Rakshasa's principled resistance, it provides insight into the complex landscape of early Indian governance. Vishakhadatta's work does not merely echo the theoretical principles of the Arthashastra; it brings them to life, demonstrating how political theory functions in practice amid human emotions, shifting loyalties, and the high stakes of power transitions.

By complementing Kautilya's text, Mudrarakshasa enriches our understanding of the pragmatism, realism, and ethical ambiguity that characterized ancient Indian statecraft. Its enduring relevance lies not only in its literary merit but also in its capacity to illuminate the perennial tensions between morality and political necessity.

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