

Among social course.
the cult of the
goddesses



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Among ancient men in all societies, the domination of the feminine principle in the process of the creation was most obvious.

The worship related to the mother goddess must be the oldest and longest surviving ingredients of the religions of the ancient world¹. The origin of mother goddess worship is a fascinating one. It has been answered, by all religions in different ways. Whatever be the answer in the religious thinking the belief in the supernatural being is seen in all the religions. The origin of the mother goddess is to be traced in the early Neolithic societies of the stone age². Hinduism is unique among the world religions, its rich tradition of goddess worship. In India mother goddess have been worshipped from antique past as the guardian and punishing the believers, protectors of community and society, solver of human problems, example of virginity and purity, the mother of fertility of the crops and human beings, supporter and mediator between human being and deities. The worship of goddess in India has invited the attention of Indian and foreign scholars. The different aspects of the female deities and the evolution of goddess cult have been studied in various perspectives. The historians have put forward various interpretations regarding the evolution of goddesses and their cult in the framework of their involvement on the social course.

The cult of the goddesses in the primitive society and her influence on women, her universal acceptance in most of the early societies, the psychological representation, feminism and the goddess's naturalism and the material reasons for the adoption of the goddesses are some important theories propounded to assess the existence of goddesses in the context of the social practices. The mother goddess cult in primitive society has been

theorized by the social scientist in terms of its impact upon the status of women in the society. According to the social scientist J. Bamberger (1974) “ both the goddesses and the women had a predominant position in primitive society” 3. In the view of R.

Eisler's (1990) “ points out that the equality in partnership between man and woman some five thousand years ago was noteworthy”. According to him the elevated social status of women in primitive society, he accepts, was due to the impact of predominant status of mother cult 4. Bamberger and Lamphere (1974) states, “ that there was the common notion of the people that the females had some elements of mother goddesses and, hence, the women were honored in the society”. The worship of Mother-goddess in pre-historic times has been traced in countries like India, Egypt, Mesopotamia . The feasibility of material perspective in introspecting growing and changing faces of the female deities has been elaborately discussed by N. N. Bhattacharyya (1999, 1974).

He has probed in detail the material reasons for the adoption and the adaptation of the female deities. To him the material mode of human life played an important role in the origin and acceptance of deities in the society. It is the “ material need of any community that provides rationale for the type of deity and the manner of worship”, he says. In every place the mother goddess is mainly concerned with vegetation and fertility 5. The cult of Mother Goddess that prevailed in India in the Prehistoric times continued to dominate the Indian thought in the times to come. As N. N.

Bhattacharya⁴ puts it, " In primitive society, theclan centered on woman on whose responsibility rested the essentially importantfunction of rearing up the young and of imparting to them whatever could be characterizedas the human heritage at the pre-hunting stage. All cultural traits, includinghabits, norms of behavior, inherited traditions, etc. were formed by andtransmitted through the females.

The woman was not only the symbol ofgeneration, but also the actual producer of life. Her organs and attributeswere thought to be endowed with generative power, and so, they had been thelife giving symbols. In the earliest phases of social evolution, it was thismaternity that held the field, the life producing mother being the central figure ofreligion" 6. THE worship of mother goddess or earth goddess wasan essential feature of harappan religion. the three aspects of the mothergoddess as creator, preserver and destroyer were clearly indicated by the mothergoddess figurines excavated from the sites. Since the Harappan scriptstill remains un-deciphered, assumptions with regard to their political, economic and religious life are based totally on the numerous clay figurines, seals, amulets and phallic symbols discovered from the various Indus sites. From the motifs occurring on the seals and sealings and the figurines excavated, it has been accepted that the Harappan religion centered mainly around theworship of the feminine principle and that the main deity of the Harappans wasa Mother Goddess.

Holding his belief in the cultural diffusion theory, Sir JohnMarshall observes: " The generally accepted view concerning them is that theyrepresent the Great Mother or Nature Goddess whose cult is believed to haveoriginated in <https://assignbuster.com/among-social-course-the-cult-of-the-goddesses/>

Anatolia (probably in Phrygia) and spread thence throughout most of Western Asia⁷. The worship of Mother Goddess or the Earth Goddess was an essential feature of Harappan religion. In the words of Oppert, the Indus Valley people, "believed in the existence of one supreme spirit of Heaven with whom was associated and admitted to an equal and eventually even superior share of power, i. e.

, the Goddess of Earth." ⁸ . The Mother Goddess figurines from Indus valley sites are commonly of the same type . Terracotta figurines are commonly excavated from the sites along with statues of metals like the "dancing girl", which was made of bronze and proficiently crafted . Irene Gajjar points out that, "the terracotta tradition of Indus Valley, as regards its relationship with western cultures, shows evidence of fundamental links, especially with reference to the Mother Goddess cult. The similarity is not so much in form as it is in the underlying concept- the concept of fertility and plenty".

Crudeness in modeling is another characteristic feature of these Indus Mother Goddess figurines.

The faces seem to have been stuck together in a hurry, "the features often being represented by lumps of clay stuck onto the face". A few of the terracotta figurines also have horns attached to them. While the figurines from Mohenjodaro are painted with red slip or wash as in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Malta, those from Harappa retain no trace of paint. Sir John Marshall calls these figurines as representations of "Mother" or the "Great Mother", the prototype of power "Prakriti" which developed into that of Shakti in India.

She is represented by the "gramadevatas", who personify the same power 9. Ernst Mackay reveals the relation between the Indus Valley Mother Goddess and the present day village deities. According to him, "in India today, she is the guardian of the house and the village who presides over child-birth and takes a more human interest in their needs. She is altogether closer to her worshipper than any of the recognized Hindu Gods" 10. An interesting factor is that these Mother Goddess figurines, found at all levels of habitation suggest that they were also the objects of daily domestic worship .

The Mother Goddess figurines from Chanhudaro are also of the Mohenjodaro type, the only difference being that they stand upon a flat, more or less open base which recalls the figurines from the pre-Harappan sites of Northern and Southern Baluchistan . The fan-shaped headdress (is a unique and rare feature of the Indus Mother Goddess figurines. According to Mackay, "this portion is quite unique outside India, and at Mohenjodaro, it appears to be confined to the figurines of Mother Goddess. A band round the forehead, apparently of some kind of woven material served to support them...in some of them, soot-like stains still remain..." 11. This remarkable headdress stretched over the ears made the wearing of earrings or fashioning of the ears almost impracticable.

According to Marshall, "the head-dress worn by these figures (female figures) was also that worn by the better class inhabitants of Mohenjodaro, for it has always been customary to dress a deity in a familiar costume. It is probable that she was a Goddess with attributes very similar to those of the Great Mother Goddess, "Lady of Heaven" and the special patroness of women, whose images are found in large numbers at many early sites in

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Elam, Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean” 12. The unique headdress, hairstyles and ornamentations of the Indus Valley figurines have been dealt in detail by E. C. L.

Casper . According to him, “ a larger study at present in progress reveals an astonishing proliferation of head-dresses and hair-styles among these terracottas”. Mackay also puts forth that this hairdress was a feature of Mother Goddess figurines, “ In fact, what are generally regarded as images of an Earth or Mother Goddess are practically always nude, save for quantities of jewellery, a wide girdle and their remarkable head-dress” 13 . The clay figurines were kept in every house and streets of Harappa and Mohenjodaro as a tutelary deity much as the Mother Goddess. They are still followed in India as the guardian of the house and the village with offerings for daily needs. These may be the manifestations of Mother goddess whose worship is prevalent even today in most parts of India . Some nude figurines of the Mother Goddess from Indus Valley, has been excavated which shows the goddess in a stage of pregnancy. The most important feature of this type of figurines is that the head of the goddess is in the shape of an animal while the body is shape like that of a human (fig.

22). A few mother and child figurines have also been discovered from Indus valley . These remains show the motherly feature of the Goddess.

The responsibilities of mother has been well illustrated in these figurines.

A number of legless figurines discovered from the Harappan sites have been identified with the Goddess Earth by Sir Aurel Stein on the basis of Buddhist and Hellenic iconography¹⁴. Mackay , on the other hand, considers these figurines as “ household deities kept on a shelf or a little recess in the

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wall” 15. Piggot 147 regards these figurines as “ a grim embodiment of Mother Goddess whois also the guardian of the dead as underworld deity concerned alike with thecorpse and the seed buried beneath the earth”.

It seems that these are similar to the Earth Goddess figurines of later Hinduism where she is portrayed as halfemerging from the ground 16.

Alongwith the terracotta figurines, the Mother Goddess images also seen on the sealsdiscovered from the Indus Valley sites. Some seals shows Mother Goddess figures proving the existenceof Mother cult of the period.

In the seals Mother Goddess is usually connectedwith trees and animals, the a good number of frequent trees being Pipal andAcacia and the foremost animals associated with the Goddess were tiger, buffaloand the unicorn.

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