

Indian Art: Materials, Techniques and Artistic Practices
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Lecture – 4

We will continue on our discussion on the Harappan sites and their material culture. And here from the terracotta, we have also found that there are some of the other materials which have been really important and that gives us a sense of different kinds of material practices. So, from bricks from the terracotta figurines, we have also found that have been used this soapstone or steatite.

So, soapstone is a material which is soft and it is very much like talc and it is a very soft material when it is carved and then once it is treated with water and then it becomes hard. And it is also the material we have also found in some of the Hoysala temples in the much later time period. However, there are some of the soapstone sculptures that we find from the Harappan sites, from the Indus valley sites and those are the ones which are of high importance.

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So, the one we have on screen, this is considered to be the priest king and I will come into its iconography, but before that just a small thing about its process. So, it has been considered that it is not just made with the soapstone and then treated with water for its hardness, but it is also low fired. So, perhaps it has not been fired as the terracotta figures or the bricks, but it

has also been low fired for its stability and that is how we see that today this sculpture the way it appears.

It appears almost stable as stone and perhaps also that is the reason all these details and everything on this particular sculpture had survived for its durability. So, what we see on this sculpture, it is a burst of a man and in this particular sculpture what we find that there is very individualistic characteristics those are depicted in this figure. So, for example we have these wide cuts for the eyes which might show that this particular figure is has half-closed eyes.

So, the half-closed eyes in the later times we will find that how that had also been part of the yogic practices. And that is also something that we find to be in the profusely used as part of the depiction of Hindu gods and goddesses and that is how some of the connection had been made. Perhaps those are also some of the things why this figure is related to a priest. And so, the half-closed eyes in brief we can say that the half-closed eyes in the Hindu and in the Buddhist depiction.

We find that has a much closer relationship with spirituality and that is a reason the half-closed eyes of this male figure had also been equated with perhaps a priest or someone who is a spiritual practitioner. Now apart from those wide eyes that we find half-closed wide eyes, we also have a straight nose of this figure that also adds the individual characteristic. And then we have high cheekbones and then wide lips.

So wide lips are something those are considered to be part of the overall the population in this region in the South Asia as well as like part of in Southeast Asia and in Northern Africa and so on where like the wide lips are been prominent in many of the people. So, it had been considered that whether that is the kind of connection that is made or it is also something that was a choice by the people who had created these images.

So apart from the wide lips, then the straight nose, these eyes, we also see there is a very strong suggestion of the beard and the beard that we have here it is simplistic in some ways, at the same time it is also clever that have the moustache and the beard that continues in this man's cheeks. And the area of the beard had been very strongly or like prominently distinguished from the skin and that is how we find this line that sort of runs on his face that separates his skin from the beard.

And the beard then is represented by those straight vertical lines which run parallel with each other. So those are the lines that we know as to be like simplistic depiction of the hair. And of course, we find a reflection of that hair of the beard in the priest king's head as well. So, in the head, we find that he also has a headband, not a headdress but a headband, and that also perhaps held a jewel in its forehead.

That is the reason there is this circular shape that suggests perhaps there is something much more precious or prominent that had been featured in this particular in this ornament. And then the image from its back or like the three-quarter view on the right side of the screen, we find that how this headband that we have in the front image that is being tied in the back. So, all those details of this person's hair and then like this the hair which is parted in the middle.

And then all the hairline that is suggested with these vertical parallel lines were very similar to that of the beard. And then what we have is how this headband is tied at the back of his head and the ribbons dangling behind his shoulder. So, this is something that we find that this eye for precision, the eye for details, a tendency that we find in the bull, the bull seal that we have already studied earlier and some of the other sculptures.

So, this also tells us that perhaps this craft specialization that had already been there, there were group of sculptors, there were group of artisans who have specialized in doing this kind of details and they have a left no detail in whatever they are depicting. So, those things are there, but at the same time we also find that there are much more simplistic depictions of the human bodies.

For example, the terracotta figurines that we have studied and their peculiarity in terms of how the vertical clay strips were put together for making them. So, this kind of different attributes and characteristic features that we find in these images, they tell us about the breadth of the material culture in this region during the Indus valley period that is 2600 BC to 1900 BC, the measured phase.

So, apart from these details what we also find is that we have this the elaborate depiction of the fabric. So, fabric is also another very important area for us to consider. What we have here is this priest king or this man he has his one shoulder bare and then his left shoulder is

adorned with this piece of fabric, which sort of covers his body. So, in the image from the front that only shows part of this sculpted fabric.

And the image from the back that shows how it almost covers the entire part of his back. So, what we also see in this fabric is that how the motifs that that appear on the fabric, they appeared to be three petaled flowers or leaves. They have been repeated all along in this entire fabric. So, it might also suggest that there had been the practices of doing repetitive motifs on the fabrics.

And as I have already mentioned it earlier that this region was very much active in interregional as well as the trade which is not really within this region, but outside of that and both like intra and interregional trade was active in this region. So, and we also have found some of those textile fragments from Egypt which seems that those are the ones which were imported from the Harappan sites that suggest that there had already been use of pigments on the fabric.

And there might have been use of some kind of blocks or repetitive techniques of adorning textiles. So, those are some of the things that also make us think that how fabric was also a diversified practice during this time. And since the textile or fabric that is also something that is very much part of this trade exchanges and cultural as well as economic currency that is the reason perhaps a sculptor here had also made so much details of this fabric to adorn the body of this priest king.

So, if this material was of no importance, they might have not put so much importance in depicting all the details here. Now coming back to why this particular sculpture is considered to be a priest king, so we do not really have this kind of individual depiction of figure what we consider to be like a royal figure from this site. And that is also one of the reasons why there had been on the speculations that there was no king as such in these places, but there were those governing bodies.

So, if this is the truth, then we can also think that this person can also be someone who was of high social stature. But we do not really know whether this is a ruler or this is a spiritual leader. And as I have already mentioned it before that with these half-closed eyes, with his prominent beard and so on, those things resemble the later depiction of the priests and the

spiritual practitioners which led the archaeologist, historians and art historians to assume that this might have been a priest.

And since they come in with its very prominent display of jewellery and this very intricately detailed fabric that sort of adorns its body, those also gives us a sense that perhaps this person was of high social structure, not as a priest but as a king or a ruler and that is the reason this particular figure is considered to be somewhere in between a priest and a king. But it remains unresolved whether this figure is actually either of them or something else.

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Then we also have some of the other images. And this is one of the images that we found and this is from the third millennium BC that is 2700 BC. And that is what we have on screen is a man and this man we find is a small seated male figurine which has a cobra umbrella behind him. So that suggests that this particular figure that we have here it also might have carried some importance and what we have here on the on this image.

So, this is a crudely made image and this image also has like very minimal details. And with whatever details we find in this particular figure that we have this man is seated with his hands resting over his knees. And then what he also has is that there is this hooded snake and that that makes an umbrella over his head. So, it might have been a seven hooded snake in its entirety, but now parts of the snake had been broken.

However, when we see that there is a suggestion of this snake that is broken and which also creates a kind of canopy behind someone's head that already gives a kind of supernatural

connection to it. And it can be this kind of snakes were imagined and they were made as part of the royal seat or the seat where the governing bodies would sit there during their governance, but it can also be a metaphoric representation, we do not know what kind of significance it held.

However, the other details that we find in this figure they are fairly simple. So for example, those additional clay strips perhaps been added for making the necklace on this figure as well as the jewellery on its upper arm and the small bracelets. And at the same time, we find that there are some suggestions of the eyes those have been made here. And for making the eyes we see that grooves were created.

And then the section where the eyes are made very minimal, but effective strokes those are created there for suggesting that how the human eyes are there. And then there is also a suggestion of nose and then just like one tiny suggestion of lip. So, all these things are there. And in the body we find that perhaps there is something that runs from his left shoulder to the right and which seems it can be part of an ornament, it can also be part of a fabric or we do not know what it is.

However, there is also something we find that there is some suggestion of pigment and there is also some suggestion of this red and white pigment in this figure, which shows that after this figure was created, it was painted with these pigments and the painting them with particular pigments and having this kind of adornment that also suggests something about their importance.

So, they are not as bland as the other male figurines that we have found the standing ones which are found in quantity, but these are the some of the rare figurines that we have found, which also it does not really follow the same kind of the making principle. For example, two vertical clay trips are not joined in this case, but they come to represent perhaps some kind of important figures in their context.

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Now, from there we also come to talk about some of the other things that we have from this Indus valley sites and that is to do with this particular one figure and this is one of the very few surviving icons that we have from the Indus valley that shows the high craftsmanship in terms of the use of bronze. Now, the question can come that if we are talking about clay, if we are talking about terracotta and so on, then why we can connect it to the bronze.

But in this figure perhaps we do not really see the use of clay, but clay was indirectly used in it. So, this particular figure that we have on screen which is considered to be this dancing woman or a woman who is standing with her one hand in her waist, so this is a particular figure that we have, it is a tiny figure, whether it is of high importance because of its technique and its sophistication in its making.

So, this particular figure that we have on screen, this one is actually something that is considered to be made from this lost wax process. And lost wax process is something that is in which the wax models are created first. So, we have the wax that is melted and then that is shaped according to the artisan's desire and then like the additional details, for example like the bangles that we have on her hand or then the necklace and then the adornment in the hair and so on.

All those things that we have here, those are what has been added with extra strips of wax. And then once the entire figure is made, then it is sort of put in this mould made of clay. And in today's time, we have the use of plaster of Paris and different kinds of other materials, which can be used for making the mould, but during those time as we can understand in the

second and the third millennium BC, these kind of materials like plaster of Paris and so on were certainly not available.

So, the only available material was clay for making the mould of this wax model and then what happens in those clay moulds there several channels are created and then when it is heated, then this this wax, this figure, then the wax actually melts away and it goes by those channels which are created in the mould. And then with the heat the mud also becomes firm and thus like in the terracotta moulds are created.

So, when the terracotta moulds are created, then the terracotta moulds are also used for metal casting. And that is how the bronze casting as we can see here, this very sophisticated bronze casting had been taken place. So, terracotta or clay here again plays an integral part in shaping this kind of bronze casting that we see in the Harappan context. So, this kind of different activities as we can find that how this bronze casting was implemented.

And that shows that in this different range of practices material handling, and different kinds of techniques and so on they were very efficiently handled by the artisans in this area. And another thing that we can also think about the use of the bangles because in this particular figure we have the woman figure which is depicted here, so she has a very tall and slender body and in this one we have very minimal suggestion of her breast as well as her genitals.

And then the other thing that we find is that I mean her hands the seem to be slightly exaggerated and that can also be interpreted that how those hands are made as part of like supporting the entire structure. So, that is perhaps the reason the hands are given much more prominence than other parts of the body. And in the face, we also have this very half-closed eyes and to be specific slightly a flat nose and these wide lips and then there is a suggestion of a hairdo in its back.

So, all these different things are there. However, in the left hand in the left arm, we find there are those bangles which adorn her right, which adorn her upper arm as well as the lower arm. So, this is some of the things that that make us think about the use of the bangles, something that we have also seen in that Pashupati seal or that yogi seal, the seal which was either been considered to be a seal of a yogic figure or with Pashupati.

So, this kind of like the use of the bangles it might also mean that there were some kinds of practices, which were common for the both the male and the female members of the society. And thus, it also puts a question to different kinds of gendered use of ornaments and adornments the way we understand them today, perhaps it was very different by then. The other thing that we also find very interesting in this particular bronze figurine is that the balance.

This figure is very carefully balanced and that is something we find that the head of the figure is slightly raised, it is not looking straight, but it is slightly raised. And then as we can see that the right arm that supports her waist and then the left arm sort of dangles over her thigh. And then her left leg is slightly raised whereas her right leg is firmly placed on the ground similar to like the contrapposto pose that we find in the West in much later times.

Now, the thing is that this is also a pose that we find in the later times in the various Indian sculptures and so on because in the Indian sculptures, in the Indian paintings, and in the visual arts in general there had been a high significance of different kinds of shapes and different kinds of bodily gestures. So, the gestures we will find them later on to be connected to various dance forms.

And in the sculptures profusely different kinds of these gestures are used and in some of the forms for example if we think about some of the later terms which are used in Sanskrit for Samabhanga and then Atibhanga, Tribhanga and so on. So, here we find perhaps this tri-body bent or Tribhanga that is depicted in this figure efficiently. And that is depicted by this slight raise of the head here. And then how there is this bend that is punctuated by her right arm supporting her waist and then the left leg slightly raised.

So, there are those three bends in this entire body that had been created and that is something that we consider to be part of this entire idea of this tri-body bent or Tribhanga. For those reasons, we find this particular this very tiny figurine that is made of bronze to be of high importance that it not only just talks about the material advances that people have made during this time, but they have also taken these practices much further and that is to do with the significances, the various symbols they have used.

For example, the use of the bangles if that had something to do with the gendered practices or not and then also this fine sense of balance that had been implemented in this particular sculpture or this figurine if I can call it. So, these are the different aspects of it which makes us think about its high significance in Indian art. Now, this particular technique even though its much in later times but we find this similar kind of technique that had also been continuing in parts of southern India.

For example, if you see the bronze casting in Swamimalai in Tamil Nadu and that at least from the Chola period in the ninth century that kind of bronze casting had been continuing. So, there we find a very similar kind of practice or the process where the figures are made of wax and then this wax model figures then put into make these moulds and then those moulds are being used for the bronze casting.

So, this is something that we find a practice which had started during this Harappan period, we do not have other evidences to relate it directly to the Chola bronze making practice or the other bronze making practices in other parts of the subcontinent, but there are some of these fragments of them, we can see them being implemented. And thus, we can also imagine that how some of these related practices have evolved over time.

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Those are some of the things we also find to be related to some of the other practices in the Indus valley sites, for example the way the beads are utilized. So, while making the bronze sculptures, while making the use of metals, we see that they have also been mastered the use of different kinds of metallic tools. And the metallic tools involved like polishing, making,

shaping different kinds of stones and bones and different kinds of hard material to make them in form of beads.

So, that is also something that we find to be very much prominent in the bead sculptures and the bead, the ornaments those are found from the Harappan sites. So, this is also as we can see on screen that I mean there is this very sophisticated bead necklace that we have here and this bead necklace that actually has used some semiprecious stones and some other stones, which are all standardized.

So, it also gives us some suggestions that there might have been tools for doing this kind of standardized practice. So, this kind of tools, which are mostly made of metals and then before that as we have already spoken about the use of metals for casting and so on, so both for making things as well as for using metal for doing the objects. So, for tools as well as the material for making the objects in both ways we see that metal was also utilized alongside their fondness for clay and terracotta. Thank you.