
The Story of the 'Dancing-Girl' of Mohenjo-daro: Interpreting the Social Life of a Bronze Figurine

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Abstract: *This paper looks at the changing social life of a 4500-year-old bronze figurine famously known as the "Dancing-Girl" of Mohenjo-daro. Using a "biographical approach," I present a case study of how contexts become crucial in understanding the multiple meanings that get attached to art historical and archaeological objects. My larger aim is to show that archaeological artifacts are not just inanimate objects from the past. Rather they are active agents in constructing historical realities that animate our world.*

Keywords: Dancing-Girl, Mohenjo-daro, Bronze, Figurine, Social Life, Archaeology, India

Introduction

In the very first gallery on the ground floor of the National Museum in New Delhi, a small bronze statuette of a naked girl in what appears to be a dancing pose is displayed in a glass showcase. It was cast around 2500 BCE... The statuette indicates that a Bronze Age Civilization existed in India 4,500 years ago, possibly the most advanced human civilization in the world of that ancient time. This is a forgotten period of Indian history which was only recently discovered. India in its subsequent history would have periods of achievement but it would not have the distinction of being the most advanced society in the world again (Sadasivan 2011: 5).

These were the opening words of Balaji Sadasivan, a former neurosurgeon and Minister of State in the Parliament of Singapore, in the first chapter of his book titled *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*. In fact, so fascinated was Sadasivan by this bronze figurine that the very first chapter of the book on the Indus Valley Civilization, itself was titled "The Dancing Girl." However, other than the brief description given above, neither in this chapter nor in the entire book does Sadasivan ever go into details on who or what was the "dancing girl." But what is quite obvious to a reader is that he considered this ancient bronze figurine as one of the most important markers of the advancement of ancient Indian civilization and was quite proud of it. While someone

new to South Asian history would find Sadasivan's narrow focus on this image as symbolic of a whole civilization's achievements quite odd, a person well acquainted with the political debates of the last three decades in the Indian subcontinent can easily make out that Sadasivan was using one of the most controversial images that had haunted art history, archaeology and even politics of the region in some way or the other. Perhaps it was a marketing strategy or maybe Sadasivan was reminding us of its importance and its chequered history. Indeed archaeologist Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni, who discovered this object in 1926, while excavating the Lower town of Mohenjo-daro, would perhaps not have thought that what he was about to show the world would not just change the very way one would look upon the Indian civilization, but also question the very contours of 'Indian art history' and even its "secular logic" (Guha-Thakurta 2004: xviii, 266).

In this essay I sketch out the biography of this ancient object. In doing this I draw on the rich scholarly literature that advocates a "biographical approach" to studying art objects. For according to Igor Kopytoff, such an approach "can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure" (Kopytoff 1986: 67, Davis 1997). My larger aim is to present yet another case study that argues that art historical and archaeological interpretations of material objects and artifacts are themselves historical constructs that are produced in certain contexts. My argument is that such interpretations are more of a historical phenomenon and they are best understood when looking at the social, political and economic circumstances in which they were produced. I argue that there is nothing fixed, natural or given about any art historical interpretation. They vary constantly across time and space. The point at which an interpretation is given can itself be seen as a historical moment in the social life of the object. Thus, while the object, in this case a bronze figurine, remains the same, the meaning or historical significance that we attach to it is actually ephemeral.

Discovery and "Colonial Life" of the "Dancing-Girl"

The discovery of the ancient city of Mohenjo-daro, which literally means the "Mound of the Dead" in Sindhi, in the early 1920s on the banks of the River Indus, in what is today Pakistan, was a significant moment in the history of the Indian sub-continent. The high level of urbanization and advancement that could be seen in this city struck the archaeologists. Carefully planned streets that intersected at right angles, a well-thought out drainage and sanitation system and structures such as the 'Great Bath,' found few parallels in the civilizations of that period. Indeed, John H. Marshall, the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, from 1902 to 1928, could not help commenting that:

Hitherto it has commonly been supposed that the pre-Aryan peoples of India were on an altogether lower plane of civilization than their Aryan conquerors...a race so servile and degraded, that they were commonly known as Dāsas or slaves.Never for a moment was it imagined that five thousand years ago, before ever the Aryans were heard of, the Panjāb and Sind, if not other parts of India as well, were enjoying an advanced and singularly uniform

civilization of their own, closely akin but in some respects even superior to that of contemporary Mesopotamia and Egypt (Marshall 1931: v).

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, JAN. 14, 1928.—42

A NEW CHAPTER IN ARCHÆOLOGY: THE PREHISTORIC CIVILISATION OF THE INDUS.

By SIR JOHN MARSHALL, C.I.E., L.H.D., F.S.A., Director-General of Archaeology in India. (See Illustrations on Pages 43, 44, and 45.)

The following article is a continuation of that given in our last issue, in which Sir John Marshall described the extensive excavations at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, and the nature of the buildings found, the oldest of which he dated to about 3500 B.C., discussing also the racial origin of the ancient inhabitants, their dress and its materials, their domestic animals, and the wild animals of that time. His object in the whole article has been to summarise, for the benefit of numerous enquirers, the conclusions reached regarding the age, character, and affluence of this great prehistoric Indian civilisation, the discovery of which has been an epoch-marking event in the history of archaeology.

AGRICULTURE.

Big cities with teeming populations like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro could never have existed save in an agricultural country which was producing its own food on a large scale. Though little has yet been discovered of the processes of agriculture and irrigation then in vogue, it is worthy of remark that the specimens of wheat found in Mohenjo-daro resemble the common variety grown in the Punjab to-day. Touching this question of agriculture, it is also noteworthy that there are strong reasons for inferring (a) that the rainfall in Sind and the Western Punjab was then substantially heavier than it is now; (b) that Sind was then watered by two large rivers instead of one, and as a consequence was at once more fertile and less subject to violent inundations. The two rivers are, of course, the Indus and the old Great Mitrān—otherwise known as the Hakra or Wahindah, which once received the waters of the Sutlej and Ravi to east of the Indus, following a course which roughly coincided with that of the Eastern Rara canal.

FOOD.

Besides bread and milk, the food of the Indus people appears to have included beef, mutton, and pork, the flesh of tortoises, turtles and gharial, fresh fish from the Indus and dried fish imported from the sea-coast. Evidence of these various articles of diet is furnished by bones—sometimes in a half-burnt condition—found among the houses. For the identification of these and other bones and for much interesting information concerning them, I am indebted to Major R. B. Sewell, I.M.S., and his assistants of the Zoological Department of India, to whom my grateful acknowledgments are due.

PERSONAL ORNAMENTS.

The ornaments of the rich were of silver and gold, or copper plated with gold, of blue faience, ivory, carnelian, jadeite, and multicolour stones of various kinds. For the poor, they were mainly of shell or terra-cotta. Many examples of both kinds have been recovered. Especially striking are the girdles of carnelian and gilded copper, and some of the small objects, e.g., earrings and "netting" needles of pure gold, the surface of which is polished to a degree that would do credit to a present-day jeweller.

METALS.

Besides gold and silver, the Indus people were familiar with copper, tin, and lead. Copper they used freely for weapons, implements, and domestic utensils, daggers, knives, hatchets, sickles, celts, chisels, vessels, figurines, and personal ornaments, amulets, wire, and so on. Most of these objects were wrought by hammering, but examples of cast copper are not unknown. Copper was easily obtainable—on the west from Baluchistan, on the east from Rajputana, and on the north from Afghanistan. Tin was more difficult to get, and was probably imported from Khorasan, or through Sumer from further west. It is found, not as a pure metal, but alloyed with copper to form bronze, which was used mainly for tools requiring a hard cutting edge—namely, razors, chisels, celts, and saws, but also for vessels, statuettes, bangles, beads, buttons, and other ornaments. The bronze is of a high grade, containing from 6 to 12 per cent. of tin; but, in spite of its advantage over copper being well recognised, the number of bronze objects is comparatively small, doubtless owing to the difficulty and cost of procuring tin.

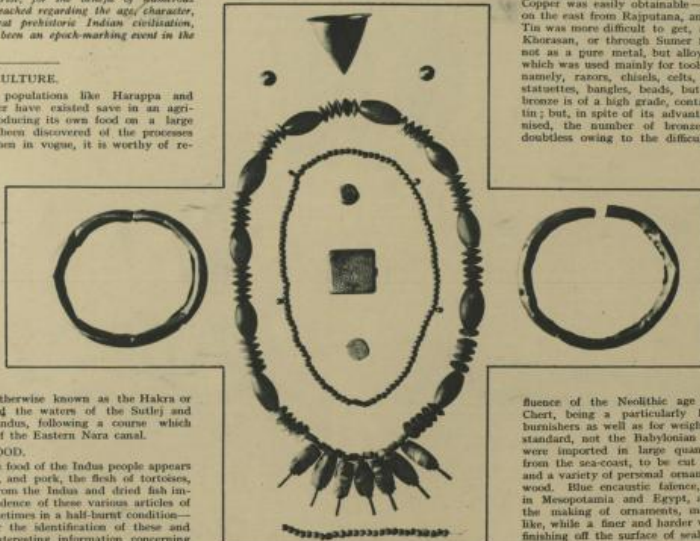
WEAPONS AND KNIVES.

The paucity of weapons at both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro is surprising, the only ones yet found being a few mace-heads, axes, daggers, arrow-heads, and possibly spear-heads. It looks as if these cities were but little acquainted with warfare! While copper was used, and used freely, for all sorts of utensils, knives made from flakes of chert were also common, and show, like the stone axes and celts, that the influence of the Neolithic age had not entirely passed away. Chert, being a particularly hard stone, was also used for burnishers as well as for weights, which followed a local Indian standard, not the Babylonian or Elamite one. Shells (shank) were imported in large quantities, as they were in Sumer, from the sea-coast, to be cut up into dippers, bangles, beads, and a variety of personal ornaments, or used for inlay work in wood. Blue encaustic faience, of a kind similar to that found in Mesopotamia and Egypt, also played an important part in the making of ornaments, miniature vases, amulets, and the like, while a finer and harder variety of this paste was used for finishing off the surface of seals.

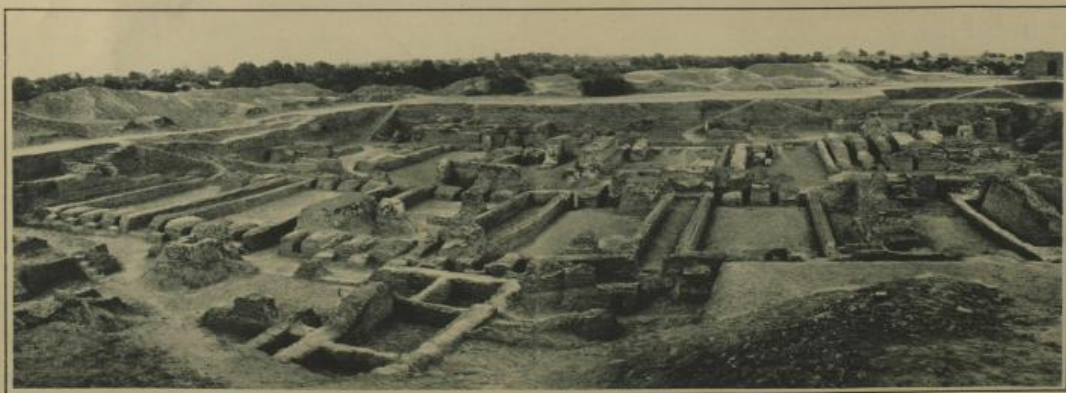
POTTERY.

Common domestic vessels were of earthenware. Their great variety of shapes—each evolved for some particular purpose—evidences a long period of antecedent development, though it is curious how few of the vases are provided with handles. Most of the pottery is plain, undecorated red ware, but painted ware is by no means uncommon. As a rule, the designs are painted in black, on a darkish red slip, and consist of geometric and

(Continued on page 43.)



INDIAN JEWELLERY 3000 YEARS OLD, AKIN TO A MODERN FASHION: A NECKLACE (THE LARGER ONE) OF GREEN JADEITE AND GOLD, WITH PENDANTS OF VARIOUS PARTI-COLOURED STONES, AND OTHER TRINKETS FOUND AT MOHENJO-DARO.



RECALLING THE STORE-ROOMS OF THE MINOAN PALACES IN CRETE: A LARGE BUILDING EXCAVATED AT HARAPPA, PROBABLY A STORE-HOUSE OR TREASURY (NECESSARILY SPACIOUS IN THE DAYS OF TRADE BY BARKER WITHOUT METAL COINAGE), WITH TWO PARALLEL SERIES OF HALLS AND CORRIDORS, DIVIDED BY AN AISLE DOWN THE MIDDLE—A VIEW TAKEN FROM THE WEST.

Photographs by Courtesy of Sir John Marshall, Director-General of Archaeology in India.

Figure 1: Sir John Marshall, C. I. E., Litt. D., F. S. A., Director-General, "A New Chapter in Archæology: The Prehistoric Civilisation of the Indus," *Illustrated London News*, London, England, 14 January 1928: 42.



Figure 2: "The Art of India about 3000 B. C." *Illustrated London News*, London, England, 14 January 1928: 45.

It was during the excavation of a group of houses in Mohenjo-daro in the archaeological season of 1926-27, that Daya Ram Sahni, the then Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of India, came across this bronze figurine. He described his discovery in the following words:

At one end of this paving is a little fireplace, by the side of which was lying one of the most interesting antiquities unearthed during the season. It is a bronze statuette of a naked, slender-limbed dancing-girl...cast in the round. It is 4.25 inches high and in good preservation save for the feet, which are broken off. The figure is characterized by negroid facial features, and executed with some primitive vigour. The hair is gathered in a heavy coil over the right shoulder, the left leg is bent forward and the right hand placed on the right hip. The left arm, which hangs down is covered with bangles from the shoulder to the wrist...The right arm is adorned with only two bangles above the elbow and with another round the wrist (Marshall 1931: 209-210).

Daya Ram Sahni's description and label for this figurine as a "dancing-girl" was further embellished by Marshall in the following words:

This is a small figurine of rather rough workmanship with disproportionately long arms and legs. Almost, indeed it is a caricature, but, like a good caricature, it gives a vivid impression of the young aboriginal nautch girl, her hand on hip in half-impudent posture, and legs slightly forward, as she beats time to the music with her feet. Small, too, as this figurine is, the modelling of the back, hips, and buttocks is quite effective, and in spite of obvious defects shows sound observation on the part of the artist (Marshall 1931: 44-45).

Daya Ram Sahni and Marshall's interpretations were carried forward to an international platform by *The Illustrated London News*, which published these images (Figures 1 and 2) in January 1928.

Ernest Mackay, another experienced archaeologist who had conducted extensive excavations in Egypt and Palestine, before arriving in India, went on to connect this figurine to the temple dancing-girls or *Devadasis* who were quite visible in early twentieth century India. According to him, this figurine may well have been one of the temple-dancers of Mohenjo-daro (Mackay 1935: 94). Sir J.A. Hammerton also used a similar interpretation in his encyclopedic work titled *Wonders of the Past: A World-Wide Survey of the Marvellous Works of Man in Ancient Times*. The photograph of this bronze figurine was captioned in the book as the "Prehistoric Indian Dancing Girl." The contributor went on to explain that, "As the Nautch girl of medieval and modern India is a common feature of daily religious life, so did she play her part in the Indus civilization" (Hammerton 1937: 664).

Seen in the context of the colonial politics around temple-prostitution and native dancers in the early decades of the twentieth century, none of these interpretations seem surprising. Though historical evidence exists, that these practices had been going on for ages in different parts of the sub-continent, "missionary pressure" and a "general Westernization of influential public opinion led to the banning of temple dancing at the beginning of the twentieth century" (Smith 2003: 107, Soneji 2012). Contemporary scholarship has shown that various Indian dance forms such as Kathak and Bharatnatyam, were getting redefined and modified during this period to make it look more "respectable" in the eyes of the colonial masters and the educated Indian middle class (Chakravorty 2008, Katrak 2013). The word, "nautch" itself was an Anglicized word for the Hindustani word *nach* for dancing (Chakravorty 2008: 27). Seen in the context of such a social milieu, Daya Ram Sahni, Marshall or Mackay's interpretations do not seem surprising. Their interpretation that this was indeed a predecessor of the modern nautch girl or temple dancers must be seen in the context of what was readily available to them. Indian historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta has argued that, "All history writing...is premised on the present. Pasts become meaningful and usable only when they are activated by the contemporary desires of individuals and communities" (Guha-Thakurta 2004: xvii). In this case the bronze figurine with its bent legs, showed possible similarity to the dance poses of these temple dancers and other dance forms. Additionally, the fact that this object was discovered near a fireplace added to the colonial imagination of this figurine actually being part of a religious ritual and possibly related to temples and ritual dancing, given that fire is an important component of Vedic rituals even today.

Post-colonial Tropes of the "Dancing-Girl"

With independence and partition in 1947, the bronze figurine of the "dancing-girl" was retained by India. In the post-colonial period, historians like A.L. Basham began to look at Indian history in a new light making a radical departure from the colonial

historiography. He “questioned the wisdom of looking at ancient India from the modern point of view” (Sharma 2009: 274). According to him, there was no proof that the bronze figurine represented a “dancer, much less a temple dancer” (Basham 1954: 21) However, in spite of Basham’s criticism, tropes of the “dancing-girl” still fueled the popular imagination. At one level, books on the history of dance still began with reference to this bronze figurine. This is best exemplified in Rina Singha and Reginald Massey’s book, *Indian Dances: Their History and Growth*. In the Introduction to their book, the authors contend that:

The earliest civilizations discovered in the Indian subcontinent are those of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley, and are dated at about 6000 B.C. It would appear that by that time dance had achieved a considerable measure of discipline and it is likely, but not certain, that it was connected with religion. In any case it must have played a part of some importance in society, for one of the finds at Mohenjo Daro was a beautiful little statuette of a dancing girl. Not surprisingly however, almost nothing is known of the dance technique of this early period (Singha and Massey 1967: 17).

At another level, though Basham’s intervention had planted doubts in everybody’s minds, the original label of the “dancing-girl” continued to prevail. History textbooks right from school to college level, continued to call this figurine, the “dancing-girl” and right till the late 1990s, the “dancing-girl” gazed blissfully back at several generations of students and visitors as a marvel and an enigma from the past, both in the textbooks and in the museum. Little was the “dancing-girl” aware that a storm was slowly brewing up; one that would nearly threaten her existence as one of the iconic images of the Indus valley civilization.

In January 1997, the inclusion of a photograph of the “dancing-girl” figurine in the diary given out by the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation created a furor. Members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Delhi objected to the blatant use of a nude figurine in a government diary, even if it belonged to the ancient past. According to BJP MLA Poornima Sethi, “The theme of the diary symbolizes 50 years of Indian independence. If they had to show dancers, they could have shown depictions of dance from our different regions, such as Kuchipudi and Bharat Natyam. But a picture of a naked woman carries with it a completely different connotation. If our children and youth are exposed to such works, it will not have a good influence.” Nand Kishore Garg, another BJP MLA was thoroughly shocked at seeing this image in the diary: “When I opened the table diary and saw the reproduction I was shocked. This diary is kept in public places and if people see a nude statue, they will be shocked. It could have been included in an exhibition. People watch nudity in films but that does not mean that nudity be shown in public places.” K.R. Malkani, a BJP Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament and party ideologue, reported that, “Twelve years ago when I wrote the book *The Sindh Story*, I wanted to use a reproduction of this dancing girl but my wife objected, saying that it was not in good taste. My wife is not exactly a purist but she did not want me to use the sculpture of a nude woman. I obliged...” (*The Sunday Times of India Review*, 19 January 1997: 1).



Figure 3: You Said It by Laxman, *The Times of India*, 9 December 1998:1

Going with my previous contention that meanings are created in specific social, political and economic circumstances, I once again argue that this new framework of looking at the “dancing-girl” through the lens of the ‘female nude’ was a product of more contemporary politics that were at work during that time. The 1990s saw a revival of the Hindu fundamentalist groups in India. The demolition of the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque allegedly built over a Hindu temple, in 1992 can be taken as an important, if not the most important landmark in the Hindu fundamentalist politics. Attacks on artist M.F. Husain’s nude painting of the Hindu goddess Saraswati and vandalizing several of his art works in galleries across the country in 1996, was another step in the projecting the newfound “Hindu” morality (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 245-246). V.S. Vajpayee, editor of a Hindi-language magazine in Bhopal published an essay titled, “Yah chitrakar hai ya kasai? [Is he an artist or a butcher?], along with a reproduction of the artist’s nude Saraswati painting that had been made sometime in the 1970s. Soon the Mumbai police filed criminal charges against the artist and within days, a gallery of Husain’s paintings was vandalized in Ahmedabad (Ramaswamy 2011: 15). According to Guha-Thakurta, “In an overt communalization of the charges, Husain has[had] been “cast in the role of a Muslim sexual predator, where his act of painting nudes is[was] seen as an act tantamount to ‘the rape of Hindu goddesses’” (Ramaswamy 2011: 178).

The same year, protests against the Miss World contest that was to be held in India for the first time, became so sharp and life threatening for the contestants that the bathing suit round of the contest had to be held finally in Seychelles. Women’s organizations such as the Women’s Awakening Movement led by Ms. K.N. Shashikala, “had argued that wearing a bikini was an offence under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code as it amounted to indecent exposure.” One man even “burnt himself to death...in protest against the contest.” Other protestors carried around Bangalore city, the venue of the contest, “a 10-foot drawing of the contest organizer, film superstar Amitabh Bachchan, shown naked” and yet others held “banners which said ‘Stop Miss World Pageant – Save National Honour.’” One of the BJP leaders, Uma Bharati referred to Amitabh Bachchan as “Big B Means Bring Bad Culture to Bharat.” Bharati even “vowed a bloodbath,” saying: “We will give our lives, we will take away lives but we will prevent the Miss World contest.” Finally, the contest was held peacefully, under the protection of about “ten thousand policemen” (Smith 2003: 106-107).

Seen in the context of all these events, the sudden uproar over the use of a nude figurine in a government publication is not surprising. It is interesting that the BJP leaders did not find anything contradictory in talking about preserving Indian culture, national honor and values and finding a 4500-year-old figurine objectionable. English orientalist, William Crooke, in an article titled, “Nudity in India in Custom and Ritual,” published in 1919, had pointed out that nudity “among the more primitive races” was “rapidly disappearing” as they slowly came “under the influence of Hinduism” (Crooke 1919: 237). Scholars have even pointed out that even as late as the 1880s, Hindus themselves were not sure of what Hinduism or Hindu community meant

(Bhattacharya 2007: 924). Hence, it is worth thinking whether these Hindu fundamentalists were actually arguing for a truly “Indian” culture or was it a modern Hindu identity that was being imposed on the masses under the garb of saving “national honour and values”? The famous Indian cartoonist, R.K. Laxman, aptly summarized this contradiction in a cartoon published in *The Times of India* on 9 December 1998 in the aftermath of this controversy (Figure 3). Alluding to the Shiv Sainiks, who had vandalized Husain’s paintings and their objection to nudity, Laxman’s cartoon implied that it was worth imagining that the next attack would be on ancient ‘objectionable’ monuments and sculptures themselves that did not conform to their vision of what “Indian” or “national culture” actually meant.

It is worth noting that across the Indian border, the Pakistani government has built a life-size statue of the “Dancing-girl,” near the excavation site of Mohenjo-daro, and are still trying get back the actual figurine from India. As per the Pakistani newspaper, *The Express Tribune*, under the Simla Agreement in 1972, the former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had requested the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for the “King Priest statue” and the “Dancing-girl.” However, Gandhi refused and “told him to choose one of them.” Bhutto then chose “the statue of King Priest over the nude dancer.” But more recently in 2012, the Sindh Culture Minister Sassui Palijo informed *The Express Tribune* that they would “write to the federal government to bring back the statue [of the “Dancing-girl”] from India” (*The Express Tribune*, 17 July 2012)

Conclusion

In this essay, my approach has been historiographical in nature, trying to contextualize each moment at which a new meaning was attributed to the object. I even question whether there is anything called an “authentic history,” “secular logic of art” or even “Indian art.” I argue that all these are themselves socio-historical constructs. Each interpretation, no matter whether it is claimed to be ‘authentic,’ ‘secular’ or ‘Indian’ goes through multiple filters that themselves are products of specific circumstances. It is worth mentioning that more recently, Vasant Dave’s prehistoric novel, *Trade Winds to Meluhha*, published in 2012, uses the bronze figurine of the “dancing-girl” as an inspiration for one of its characters Velli. The setting of the novel is the ancient Indus Valley civilization itself and the entry of Velli into the narrative in the second chapter is worth quoting here:

...she waded out of the water. Slanting rays of the setting sun caressed her dark nude figure and dragged a long shadow behind. A gold necklace laced with colourful beads rested upon her full bare bosom, making its heaving appear more intensive. While there were only a couple of silver bangles on the wrist and upper right arm, they entirely covered her left arm from the elbow to the armpit. The lower left arm was adorned with shell bangles. The silver tinkled as she thrashed dry her long flowing hair and strutted towards her clothes like a peahen (Dave 2012).

What is evident is that indeed the interpretations and usages of this image are endless. Bollywood film director, Ashutosh Gowariker too confessed that the character of

Chaani, played by Pooja Hegde, in his 2016 film *Mohenjo Daro* was inspired by the dancing girl figurine. If lifeless objects are animated by the meanings that we give them, then this would be one of the most radical ways of animating it. It is worth remembering here the 1973 autobiographical television film, *Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the Archaeologist*, made by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), where Wheeler described his favorite statuette, the "Dancing-girl" in the following words:

There is her little Baluchi-style face with pouting lips and insolent look in the eye. She's about fifteen years old I should think, not more, but she stands there with bangles all the way up her arm and nothing else on. A girl perfectly, for the moment, perfectly confident of herself and the world. There's nothing like her, I think in ancient art (Hawkes 1982: 367).

To this description, anthropologist Gregory Louis Possehl added in 2002, "We may not be certain that she was a dancer, but she was good at what she did and she knew it" (Possehl 2002: 114). Indeed, though this object is dated to be 4500 years old, even today she blissfully gazes back at us, unashamed and unapologetic, waiting for yet another interpretation or meaning to be attributed to her. One does wonder whether it is this figurine that is dancing to our tunes or is it we who are actually dancing to her tunes. That perhaps is yet another radical interpretation and so the story of the "Dancing-Girl" of Mohenjo-daro continues because such stories never really end.

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