
The Archaeology of Childhood: Play Things in Indian Bronze Age- A Historical Reading

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Received: 01 July 2023; Revised: 08 October 2023; Accepted: 30 October 2023

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11.1 (2023-24): 430-437

Abstract: *This research article intends to bring to light the childhood under the Harappan civilization in the history of early India. The study of Childhood is comparatively a new academic concern as far as the context of South Asia is concerned. The idea of childhood became prominent with Philip Aries work 'Centuries of Childhood'. The present study focuses on the childhood toys of one of the major toy civilizations in the world, the Harappan Civilization. With more academic specializations inaugurated by the scientific spirit of the modern period, the study of Children by deconstructing the androcentric views emerged and largely impacted Archaeology. It led to the emergence of the archaeology of childhood. At present childhood began to play a key role in archaeological studies, being omnipresent in almost all archaeological cultural sites. It tries to place the agency of children in the Indian proto-historic times as the users and makers of miniature art forms like toys.*

Keywords: Childhood, Philip Aries, Bronze Age, Toys, Craft, Play, Terracotta

Introduction

Archaeology is considered the sole discipline which could provide the solid first-hand remains of the humans of the bygone age and therefore the early part of their life, childhood deserves special mention. The study concentrates on one of the neglected areas of South Asian Social research which is the study of childhood. The archaeology of childhood is an area of inquiry that makes explicit archaeological interests in children, childhood, childrearing, and related topics. (Jane Eva Baxter, 2008). Theoretical developments methodological innovation and conversations about childhood are taking place among an ever-diversifying pool of scholars in the discipline (Baxter 2008).

With the emergence of new domains of scholarly research, including feminism the issue of marginalization began to address in the academic realm, including the area of childhood studies. The archaeology of childhood has gone on to highlight how evidence of children can be found in nearly every category of archaeological data, including skeletal remains, landscapes, architecture, and artifacts. The study looked at the symbolic value of children, and how the cultural category of a child not only

defined roles but also held particular cultural resonance. Children are the primary analytical focus of archaeological study and are treated as a unique and valuable population that has much to tell us about the past (Baxter 2008).

The term Archaeology of childhood got significance with the famous exhibition at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology called "Archaeologies of Childhood: The First Years of Life in Roman Egypt," to explore the lives of the youngest inhabitants of Egypt in the Roman period through the rich archaeological and textual remains from the Michigan excavations at the site of Karanis in 2003 (<https://exhibitions.kelsey.lsa.umich.edu>). In a broader sense, investigating ancient texts, digging through archives, and excavating museum storage are also kinds of archaeology that inform our understanding of ancient childhood (Baxter 2008). Sometimes ancient fingerprints were also used to study the children (Kamp et al. 1999). Pre-historic clay figurines, ceramics, wall surfaces, pictographs, etc occasionally give imprints of fingers.

Archaeologically infants and children are visible directly through burials and indirectly the presence of children has been visualised through toys (Menon and Varma 2010: 102). Burials show the diversity of childhood, regionally and historically (Manuele and Heitza 2021). Single and group burials of children have been excavated all over the world. The Peru child burial, child mummies of Egypt, mother and child burials, and child burials with fascinating childhood toys have gained the attention of archaeology since their discoveries. Until the 1990s children had largely been excluded, or certainly marginalized, within human bioarchaeological discourse. Observations of children were primarily concerned with their under-representation at archaeological cemetery sites and likely high mortality rates in the past (Mays et al. 2017). Even then the skeletal remains give a clear picture of the life of children. Many issues of age and gender are easily addressed through the study of the available skeletal evidence. (Becker 2006).

Themes of Childhood in Archaeology

Until Aries children were considered mini-adults and their social roles were not represented adequately. It has been stimulated with the discovery of childhood by searching about the sociological aspects of children's dress, games, innocence, scholastic, and family life. Being one significant section of the human population this mini- bipedal also left its imprint on the ecology of the human habitat led to the development of the archaeology of childhood during the 1990s.

Archaeology has been providing myriad representations of children in the bygone ages. There is evidence of accepting their innocence in the forms of different type of toys, their forms either as part of veneration or sometimes used in black magic, child bones, dietary habits, dress, costumes, etc. are themes in modern archaeological studies (Aries 1962). The childhood years demanded special care as evidenced in early Egypt, Rome, and similar earlier civilizations due to the high infant mortality rate out of diseases and difficulties which a child could not resist properly. Evidence of magical

objects like the amulets with the gods and goddesses was common. Children as gods were part of Egyptian religious tradition. Horus, Harpocrates the archetypal divine child, is a special form of a god for the need of parents and children.

Methodology

The empirical investigation of archaeological and historical sources has been taken as the method of writing the article. Reading, gathering in-depth insights on the topic, exploring ideas, and summarising and interpreting documentary evidence through a qualitative approach has been adopted for the consummation of the article.

When Toy Models Become Cultural Objects

Toys had an important role in the transformation of cultural traits from generation to generation and they had an intimate relationship with many of the social science disciplines like Education, History, Geography, Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, and the like (Onder 2018). Many of the toys used by human beings from the earlier period were interlinked with their social surroundings and were the miniaturized objects of their day-to-day life. These toys played a vital role in the socialization of the child with society and in one way or the other assisted the children to be prepared for real-life situations in the future (Dostal 2015). Disciplines such as Archaeology, Ethnography, Cultural Anthropology, Pedagogy, and Psychology were directly involved in the studies related to the toys from the ancient past and helped in the historical reconstruction of the ancient civilizations. Recent studies of the historicity of toys made it clear that the characteristics of toys belonging to various civilizations have not undergone cardinal changes rather than the materials used for its production.

The study of toys gives insight into the cultures of the globe. The materials used to make toys and the technologies used are different in each civilization. This itself provides a clear idea of the progress of humanity and realizes the circumstances under which man went through different periods. From the Mesopotamian Civilization, the oldest human civilization to the present, humans used a wide variety of toys for entertainment and education. Mesopotamians used clay for making potteries, clay tablets, and bricks used for educational purposes (Oppenheim 1964). Game boards made of clay were used by the Sumerians to play and they used a type of dice in their board games. Mesopotamian toys include bows and arrows, boomerangs, slingshots, rattles, hoops, and miniature figurines of animals, carts, chariots, boats, etc.

People who belonged to ancient Egypt used different types of toys and archaeologists discovered several toys such as the figures of mice, crocodiles, horses, and toy balls. Some of the figures such as crocodiles and horses had moving parts and probably these toys were used by children and belonged to rich families. Many of the toys were made by using clay, linen, and wood. Board games were popular in the Egyptian Civilization and a board game named 'Senet' was popular among them. Archaeological excavations carried out within the geographical boundaries of the Athenian civilization caused the digging out of toys used by the Athenians. Professional doll craft men existed in

Athens who produced miniature figurines and clay toys and these toys were known as koroplathoi or koroplastes (Sommer and Sommer 2017). The dolls were known by different names according to their character and specifications. Some of them were korai, plaggonas; articulated dolls made of clay or wood, nymbhai; a doll designed like a bride, and rospasta, a puppet. The varieties of dolls in their design, character, ornamentation, and other specifications showed the economic disparity in the society. The rich and the poor brought toys for their children and the wealthy families had dolls with more specifications. Archaeological excavations helped to find out so many large centers of toy production in and outside Attica and the evidence showed that some centers were concentrated on the production of specific items.

According to Philippe Aries (1962) "Some toys originated in the spirit of emulation which induces children to imitate adult processes while reducing them to their own scale. Aries gives the example of the hobby –horse and spinning mill to detail it. The horse was the principal means of transport and traction in the early days copied in the toys of the children. The little sails spinning round on the end of a stick may be the imitation by children of a technique, the windmill introduced in the middle Ages. The same reflex governs the children of today when they imitate a lorry or a car. "But while the windmill has long ago disappeared from our countryside, the child's windmill is still on sale in toyshops and markets or fair- grounded stalls". In this sense, Aries argue "Children form the most conservative of human societies" (Aries 1962).

Historians of the toys, dolls, and toy miniatures, always had considerable difficulty in separating the dolls, the Child's toy, from all other images and statuettes like objects of a household or funerary cult, relics from a pilgrimage, etc. The children are not the only ones to use the replica of the adult objects. The ambiguity of the dolls and the replica continued in Middle Ages; the dolls were also the dangerous instrument of the magician and the witch (Aries 1962). This taste for representing in miniature the people and things of daily life, nowadays confined to little children resulted in an art and industry designed as much to satisfy adults as to amuse children (Aries 1962). Aries also mentions the significance of these miniature replicas sometimes as the toys of children, aesthetic art objects, fashion models, and so on. To him, by the 1600s the toy had become an infantile specialty. And the present-day toys have clear gender demarcation as Barbie dolls for girls and teddy bears for boys but during 1600 there was no such difference in the usage of dolls as the childhood dress or other objects did not begin to demarcate the children based on their sex. It was at the end of the Middle Ages that the infantile specialization in toys and the dress began to define. Thus Childhood was becoming the repository of customs abandoned by the adults (Aries 1962).

To begin with, there were studies on childhood archaeology that brought to light the fascinating stories of childhood in the excavated sites. India is no exception to this. In the Indian context, the history of childhood can retrieve from the pre-historic periods onwards because one of the earliest human fossils itself belonged to a baby, a

preserved skull within a laterite mould from South India (Singh 2008). There are prehistoric petrographs and petroglyphs to depict the presence of pregnant women and children, though there were very few studies on these topics. The historic period of India which begins with one of the Bronze Age civilizations of the world, the Harappan culture has been notable for its abundance of excellent architectural and art objects. Among them, toys deserve special mention. The Harappa people made brilliantly naturalistic models of animals, especially charming being the tiny monkeys and squirrels used as pinheads and beads. For their children, they made cattle with movable heads, model monkeys that would slide down a string, little toy carts, and whistles shaped like birds, all of the terracotta. Besides this household articles such as the baking pan model were also found in the cities of the civilization. "Some of the animals have movable heads. Whistles might take the form of birds and animals might be mounted on wheels and oxen might be yoked to toy carts. These little toy carts are particularly interesting as being among the earliest representations of wheeled vehicles known to us, approximately contemporary with the chariot depicted on a stone slab at Ur (3200 BC) and the model of a wagon from Anau. Similar to modern farm carts of Sindh made of less durable materials than terracotta and have perished in the course of the ages. (Marshal 1931) Mackay opined the antiquity of Harappan toy carts more than that of other similar Bronze Age artifacts (Kenoyer 2004). For games, they had marbles and dices of agate, onyx, slate, and other hard stones" (Osada 2006).

Some objects that have assigned toy status might have been used for amusement and for teaching children to socialize their role as adults. The main materials used for making toys include terracotta, faience, stone, shells, copper, and bronze. The abundance of terracotta artifacts indicates the easy availability of clay locally. The images of domestic and wild birds and animals are common. Objects with moveable heads and holes for attaching wheels are also said to have been used as toys. Squirrels, monkeys, parrots, ducks, snakes, mongooses, and tortoises are among other creatures which are realistically created and at times colored. The type of animals and birds were seen during that time skillfully copied in clay by the Harappans (Chawla and Patel 2017). It is interesting to state that almost all of the Bronze Age has the features of toy culture. While most toys had unearthed from the burial sites of the children in the European context, Indian toys were excavated from the cultural sites of Harappa. Apart from child toy artifacts, the Harappan sites yielded a good number of playthings, especially for games like game boards usually scratched in brick, game utensils, dice, etc. Objects used for games are not plenty. Cubical dice of pottery, round rattles of pottery, balls, marbles of different materials such as shells, and different kinds of stones. List of games men in different materials that are ranked according to popularity with faience, pottery, and shell as most common (Rogersdolter 2010: 76).

In the succeeding period of Indian history, the Vedic culture pre-dominantly spiritual and patriarchal has been silent on childhood pastimes. The material remains including museum objects and portraits shed very less light on the childhood aspects of the period (Rizvi 1987). Unfortunately, the concepts of childhood before the nineteenth

century represent an unresearched area and therefore the cultural lives of the children are very less in the episteme of Indian history. Though the historical sources are mute on the playthings of the children, Indian myth has been filled with the childhood adventures of some great kings or gods. Undoubtedly it can say that early and medieval India has a good toy tradition as evidenced by the present-day toy villages and cities in India because almost all the toy villages date back to the early Indian cultural phase.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is little discussion about the way toys would have been used by children, the spaces/places of children's activities as well as how there would have impacted the distribution pattern of child artifacts in general. Every excavation report of Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Age cites includes categories of artifacts that are invariably interpreted as children's toys such as marbles, toy carts, hopscotch, and so forth (Menon and Varma 2010: 86). Harappan ceramics are among the most wonderful and finely crafted examples of ceramics anywhere in the world. While Studying the Harappan toys most scholars were confronted with the question of the functional value of these mini objects and sometimes some pre-conceived notions would determine primarily their role in the bygone periods. Ever since the very first excavations of Mohenjodaro in the 1920s, the question regarding the function or purpose with which terracotta was made has dogged archaeologists (Pratap 2010). Terracotta no doubt has long held sway over Indian archaeology, In India, terracotta studies have focused on its execution, workmanship, aesthetics, chronological, and economic criteria governing terracotta production. There are also some comparative studies on the present-day uses of similar terracotta with the living traditions of different parts of India like Eastern India, U.P, Bihar, and Orissa, etc to prove the existence of toys or play things belonged to the Bronze Age. New developments in anthropological and ethnographical studies led to the increasing significance of children and childhood among the most natural areas of interest for all archaeologists. Most studies assertively state the use of these terracotta objects exclusively as that of toys in these cultures. Mackay completely rejected the notion of the religious use of these objects. However, the partly broken or coarsely made, or unfinished figures (missing arms, legs, and other body parts) never did seem to suggest to Mackay that these could have been prepared by child apprentices. Children might have used ceramics as a part of experimentation, learning, and play. The miniature size of products and its deficiency in manufacturing, and simplicity in techniques may indicate a child producer (Menon and Varma 2010). Excavation shreds of evidence show that children were at work and playing in a potter's house at Indore sites.

With the development of ethnological and psychological studies, more research has been done on the functional value of Harappan toy-like objects. Most scholars support the notion of child crafters of the Harappan region while some others like Mackay objected to such ideas. As a part of the secondary socialization, such craft production especially for children as apprentices were a common practice as evidenced from the

abundance of cultural remains such as child toy workshop-like places along with that of adults working places, the child fingerprints at the ceramic potteries and toy objects support this theory. The use of useless play for useful purposes in the cognitive development of children is common in the present. The play has been considered a way of socialisation for children. There is some cross-cultural regularity in the developmental sequence, it may be possible to identify the ages at which children begin certain aspects of ceramic production, by analyzing their use of concepts such as symmetry. The children learn to be craft producers as part of a community, and because of the socialization thereby received. They are small and large sized, painted and unpainted, handmade and wheel-thrown, slipped and unslipped, and, finally, covered with intricate designs, pitting, striations, and all types of stylistics that could not be learned without proper apprenticeship – one dare say, childhood onward (Pratap 2010). In such circumstances, the view that their nature, numbers, variety, and workmanship suggest that they were largely produced for children for their play and learning purposes. The interpretation of artifacts like terracotta which has been suggested as moving in a social sphere, with a 'life' of their own seems invariably connected with children. Thus far, the archaeological interpretation of Harappan terracotta has been subsumed under categories such as art, religious cults, such as Mother Goddess, but never plainly have they been seen, as the excavators of Mohenjodaro Vats, Marshall, and Mackay saw, as children's playthings (Pratap 2010). The empirical research carried out in the Harappan sites supported the notion of childhood toys apart from cultural objects with no functional value to these miniature remains.

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