

The religious practices and believes of Prehistoric Balochistan and its relation with major religions of South Asia

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Abstract

The religious believes associated with man are as old as man himself and this one of the universal phenomenon found around the globe throughout the long history mankind. The debate among scholars whether the birth of religion was before the emergence of human society or it has been contracted after the emergence of social institutions, is long and abortive. Since the emergence of culture/settlement in South Asia is first found in the geographical boundaries of Balochistan, so the present paper is focused on the emergence of religion and rituals associated with it, are discussed. The emergence and evolution of religion and rituals in prehistoric Balochistan is found and its legacy/impact is related with the subsequence cultures and traditions.

The present work is based on the interpretation of symbolisms present in the prehistoric traditions of Balochistan and its continuity into other cultures, hence providing roots to the major religions of South Asia i.e. Hinduism and Buddhism. This symbolic and ritualistic interpretation of believes associated with prehistoric Balochistan cultures and its relationship with subsequent cultures of Indus Valley Traditions, Gandhara Grave Culture and other major religions of ancient South Asia will be the main focus of the present work. The main rational behind the present work is to find the roots of major religions of South Asia in the indigenous cultures if any.

Keywords: *Religious practices, Prehistoric Balochistan, Religions of South Asia*

Introduction

The history of origin of religion is as old as man himself. The nature of origin of religion is a long debate and the

participants of this debate can be categorized into two groups i.e. first group is the divine followers of religion, who suggest that religion is revealed by a “Divine Being” .Who is all

comprehensive, omnipotent, omnipresent and indivisible. The followers of divine religion can also be called “Missionary Religions” as these religions have complete codes of life and a preaching mission. The major religions of this group are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this group is also called the *Abrahamic Religions* (Mathews, 1999). The second group advocates that religion is a social construct and man over a long period of time has devised religion as other social institutions and this group advocates that religion can also be studied in the same manner as other social institutions. This group describes religion in its social and cultural perspective where religion is way or mean for attaining the equilibrium in the society (Heehs, 2002).

There are several schools of thought which define religion in different perspectives. The *essential* school of thought emphasis on actions of individuals or societies once these individuals/ societies become religious, the *normative* school advocates that how or what a religion ought to be (Mathews, 1999). Similarly the *sociological/functionalist* school of thought advocates the working nature of religion in the

society i.e. how religion works in individual and social life of a given society, the *Marxist* school presents religion only a tool through which the exploited class is controlled by the ruling class while *Psychological* school of thought championed by Sigmand Friud advocates the experimental perspective for self-employed psychological catharsis (Mathews, 1999). There is no specific definition of religion on which two schools of thought would agree. We may define religion as a set of beliefs and principles on which the set of rituals or practices are performed by a group of people who consider such principles, rituals and objects as sacred which provide salvation and relief.

In prehistoric Balochistan cultures, the traces of religious belief and rituals are found from cave dwellers to modern period but here only pre-Indus period is described. Man at cave started worship of some supper-natural and powerful deities, whom he could not see but ask for help in the times of grief, disaster and agony (Mathews, 1999). Whether cave dwellers really worshiped those whose images they have depicted in the caves or this only shows an aesthetic

sense of human nature is a long debate among scholars. The cave painting in Balochistan have been found in Zhob and Loralai valley by Dr. F.D Kakar and he associates these caves and its paintings with the Paleolithic people and their belief systems.

During the Neolithic and chalcolithic period, the religious and ritual practices in Balochistan became more prominent. The archaeological data has made it possible that now we can reconstruct the religious beliefs of the people of Neolithic and Chalcolithic era and the major source for such religious account is found in the terracotta figurines and graves cultures rather than caves. The graves have been found in the sites scattered throughout Balochistan but Mehrgarh and Miri Qalat are the principle sites for such a study. Along with grave culture, there are other sources too which give a good account on the religious beliefs of the people and these comprise of terracotta figurines of male, female and animals on one hand and paintings, designs and motives on pottery on the other hand (Allchin B. A., 1997).

Burial rituals

The Balochistan Tradition's religious perspective can be studied in a better way in grave and burial rituals. During Early Food Producing Era (MR I, II 7000 BCE to 5500 BCE) the burial rituals were based upon the system of rich grave goods (Jarrige J. J., 1995). The dead body was painted with red ochre and there were animals sacrificed which would accompany the dead body, the grave goods would consist of terracotta bangles, pottery, bitumen baskets, lithic objects comprising of axes, cherts and arrow heads, the ornaments and beads made up of sea shells, precious and semiprecious stones of lapis lazuli, steatite and turquoise were also placed in grave along the dead (C. J. Jarrige 1995) (Kenoyer 2000)(Pearsall 2008). The concept of placing goods along with the dead body might reflect the belief in the life after death and the people would think that the dead body might need these objects in the next life so the belongings of the deceased were placed along the dead. The precious items, for example sacrificed animal and precious, semiprecious stones and stone tools suggest that which kind of economy was

at that time. The presence of animals show that the people had been engaged in animal husbandry while exotic materials (precious and semiprecious objects) makes it clear that people were engage in long distance trade as these objects are not locally available (Kenoyer 1998).

The concept of grave goods changed after 5500 BCE as now the dead body did not accompany precious and scarce good like sacrificed goats and exotic goods while terracotta bangles, pottery and stone tools were still buried along with dead (Jarrige J. J., 1995). This can be due to change in the ideological and economic systems of the period. As with passage of time economy grew, the exotic material become more precious and livestock as a source of wealth so people stopped burying such items along with deceased as the items could be used by decedents of the dead person and this would result in the circulation of such wealth in the economy rather than being damped in or buried along dead body. Another reason of change in the ideology of grave goods can be the avoidance of treasure hunting. The people of the locality knew that how many precious/ valuable items have been

placed with dead body and the treasure hunters could reopen the graves and can steal the valuable items. This would result not only the stealing of precious goods rather this can be taken as dishonoring the deceased which offend the ideology and feelings of descendants of the deceased.

But this practice of reducing the precious grave goods only to few vessels and stone tools was not universal in Balochistan Traditions. As in the southern Balochistan (SohrDamb/Nal I) the graves were still rich in terms of grave goods. The dead body was ochre-covered and the grave goods would consist of beads made up of agate, lapis lazuli, carnelian, steatites and sea shells having red pigment on one hand while vessels and stone tools including grinding stones and stone weight (Pearsall 2008). There is another aspect in the study of grave goods as one finds the vessels of one type or place of origin in other parts of Balochistan i.e. the Togua Ware, Kechi Beg and Faiz Muhammad Wares are found in Nal, Shahi Tump and Mehrgarh cemeteries which show a close cultural interaction among these sites (Cardi, 1964). The burial practices also show that the

people had common belief systems with very slight differences as all cultural sites depict that life after death was a common belief among the people and Nal cemetery shows there might be communal burials (Pearsall, 2008) (Besenval, 1993). But this communal burials (multiple body remains in one grave) may not be common practice rather the people might have used one grave in multiple times as old dead body's bones were not completely removed and the next dead body might have been buried in the same grave which resulted in multiple bodies found in one grave by excavation teams.

Figurines of Prehistoric Balochistan

The origin of ancient religious practices is always associated with two things i.e. cave paintings and terracotta figurines. The cave paintings are associated with the worship of animal cult and find of good hunting games while terracotta figurines are related with fertility. This fertility concept is dual in nature as the fertility of human beings and fertility of agricultural products are associated with these figurines. The people might have made anthropomorphic figurines for ritual and worship purpose, as by

worshiping abstract gods and goddess through making there figurines and making offerings, men would seek the blessings of these gods and goddesses who would fulfill their wishes and bring good fortunes to them.

The presence of terracotta figurines in Balochistan suggests that people here might have worshiped "mother goddess cult". The figurines have been found from aceramic period to post Harappan period. The first appearance of terracotta figurines were found in Mehrgarh I period with simple structure but the time of Mehrgarh III, IV (4800 BCE to 3800 BCE) saw the peak of figurine cults with well-structured and shaped anthropomorphic figurines (C. J. Jarrige 1995) (Jarrige J. , 1991). The structures of these figurines vary from site to site and time to time but here only the common features of these figurines are presented. The terracotta figurines were made. The figurines types were male, female and animal figures. The male figurines have turbans or headdress while the female figurines have different hair styles and ornaments, jointed legs and the breasts sizes are extended/ large which show the fertility and baby feeding of feminine character (C. J.

Jarrige 1995).

There is another aspect of figurine tradition of Balochistan that the figurines have been found scattered throughout site rather than being placed in a particular building or place. This suggests that there might not have been a central temple in the Balochistan sites rather people would worship and make offerings on individual bases. Besides, these figurines might have been made for a particular religious event or offering and once the event/offering was over, these figurines were used by kids as toys rather than a sacred symbol (Kenoyer 1998) (Possehl, 2006).

Prehistoric Balochistan and roots of South Asian religions

Defining religious beliefs or ideology on the basis of cultural material is one of the most problematic issues in prehistory. Since we have only few religious patterns on which speculations could be made about the ideology of a given area which vanished long ago. In this perspective, Balochistan Tradition's ideological or religious beliefs can be studied in above mentioned areas (cave paintings, burials, seals and figurines). The discussion here we will start from

cave paintings because these are the oldest available activities associated with human belief systems. The cave paintings and terracotta seals can give a general pattern of symbolism in early people of Balochistan. The images of animals painted in caves might show that people would worship some animal deity or perform some rituals for better hunting of games. These cave paintings have been in practice in almost around the world during the hunting-gathering societies (Green, 1997) and Balochistan Tradition is not an exception. The practice of paintings revolutionized with the invention of ceramics and paintings become the salient feature of ceramic industry. The paintings on the pottery (zoomorphic, geometrical and plant motives) remained the basic theme of ceramic industry. This continuity of image making/paintings, from caves to ceramic industry, can be associated with some cultural and ideological beliefs as there were no place left empty or uncolored on the exterior of pots and almost entire exterior of pots were painted with zigzag or cross-cross lines so that these potteries might be saved from demons. Furthermore, the images of fish in the water were also constructed which would bring some

good fortune for the pot and eatables, placed in such pots to save them from demons so that these food items would remain pure (Kenoyer 1998).

Balochistan Tradition is defined on the basis of its ceramic industry, so a general conclusion can be made that the beliefs associated with pottery paintings of Indus Civilization has its roots in Balochistan. The continuity of painting in the religious beliefs remained intact throughout Indus period as one can observe the presences of motives during and after mature Indus Valley. The images of human, plants and animals can be seen in latter religions of Subcontinent especially Hinduism and Buddhism. The images of almost all Hindu gods and goddess are painted and they are worshiped. Similarly, Gautama Siddhartha commonly known as Buddha is always depicted as sitting beneath a tree (pipel tree) while worshipping, preaching and contemplating. The image of a pipel leave can be found on Quetta Ware, Nal Ware and later on throughout Indus Tradition which shows that pipel leaves or tree has been one of the sacred images in Subcontinent's symbolism which has its roots back in pre-Indus period of Balochistan Traditions.

Another aspect of early symbolism can be found on the seals which were made during Mehrgarh phase. These seals might have been used on the embroideries especially for buttons because the shape and a hook like structure at the interior of seals give similar impression. The symbols on the seals at an early stage show that there were some rectangular, cress-cross and swastikas like designs (C. J. Jarrige 1995) (Kenoyer, 1998). The button like seals were in various shapes and designs i.e. circular, rectangular and triangular in shape with incurved designs and these might have been used by different people. The material of these seals were also diverse (lapis lazuli, turquoise, steatites and terracotta) and this diverse material also shows the social stratigraphy of the society because exotic materials were not in the access of common people and these people would only copy the design of seals and make it by terracotta. These symbols on the seals can also be associated with belief system of the people as we find similar symbols in the later Hindu mythology especially making of swastikas for showing the cosmic activity and the wheel of law which shows uniformity and generally the

swastikas were made when there would have been some chaos and by making swastikas the ritual was performed to restore the calmness in the cosmos (Heehs, 2002). The presence of cosmic impressions on the seals, pottery and architecture show a close relation of beliefs and associated mythologies which have its roots in the thousands of year's history, starting from early Mehrgarh to mature Indus and up to Hindu-Shahi period. The cultural continuity of symbolism in South Asia can be studied in the symbols of swastika, starting from simple terracotta button seals of Mehrgarh to the complex, cosmic and main concept of *Dharma Chakra* or the *Wheel of Law* of Hindu religion. This shows that over the period of time, the beliefs associated with primitive symbolism evolved into a complex philosophical mythology Hinduism in general and Hindu Laws of life in particular. This can also be evidence that the religions evolved in South Asia have an indigenous root rather than being imported from any foreign migration, invasion and diffusion.

The study of prehistoric religions without figurines and grave rituals is

incomplete because most of the religious beliefs and rituals are associated with graves and figurines. The emergence of figurines in Balochistan Traditions is found during aceramic or Mehrgarh I period. During this period the simple terracotta figurines were made. With the passage of time, there were some changes in the shape and material of figurines and these were undergoing an evolutionary process of moving from simple to complex forms but the basic theme remained same. The sculptures of Hinduism and Buddhism might have its roots in the prehistoric figurines as the concept of giving gods and goddess anthropomorphic shapes were existing in the pre-Indus and mature Indus periods, so the cultural continuity in terms of figurines can be clearly found in the South Asia from Neolithic to Hindu Shāhi period. The concept of figurines was present in almost all regions and cultures from prehistoric to modern times and there were variations in figurines because of cultural choices but the basic concept remained same. Similarly the burial rituals were in practice in cultural sites of Balochistan Traditions (Shaffer, Balochistan Traditions, 1992) and it has also undergone evolutionary process. There

were variations in the grave goods, as the early burials of Mehrgarh (7000 BCE to 5500 BCE) had rich grave but the chalcolithic period reversed the tradition of grave goods. During this period no animal sacrifice was practiced and graves goods were limited to daily usable items and pottery. The grave or burial cultural rituals continued during mature Indus period (2600 BCE to 1900 BCE) and post-Indus with similar grave items which suggest that the ideology of Indus and post Indus period had its roots in the Neolithic traditions of Balochistan. Interesting studies can be made during the Gandhara Grave Culture (1500 BCE to 1000 BCE) and there are similarities in the burials. The Gandhara Grave Culture or pre-Buddhist period has two types of burial methods i.e. cremation and inhumation (Faccenna, 1964). The cremation is purely a latter development but inhumation can be connected with greater Indus Valley Traditions which has its roots in Balochistan Traditions. The grave goods of the Gandhara Grave Culture would consist of pottery, daily usable items and some graves would contain more valuable items made by precious and exotic materials. These grave goods would depict the social

status and gender of the deceased as the precious items, beads, ornaments and other items were placed in graves, the female ornament would mention the gender while precious items would show that the grave might be of some prominent personality of society (Faccenna, 1964) (Shaffer, Prehistoric Balochistan:(with Excavation Report on Said Qala Tepe), 1978). The methods and beliefs of such burials can be associated with cultural continuity of early Indus traditions because of similarities in the grave goods and rituals associated with it. Although most of the scholars relate Gandhara Grave Culture with Aryan's invasion and their cultural influence on Subcontinent but recent research posed serious questions on the *Aryans Theory* (Allchin B. A., 1999). The *contextual school of thought* presented a new perspective of interpreting available data in its contextual sense while making some connectivity of cultural continuity (Trigger, 1989). If the Gandhara Grave Culture is studied in its contextual perspective then lots of similarities can be found in this culture and its preceding ones which shows cultural continuity especially in the rituals associated with graves and burials because the grave

goods ritual had been started during Neolithic period of Balochistan Traditions and it remained part of dominant belief system during chalcolithic period, Indus period and Gandhara Grave Culture.

The above discussion makes it clear that socio-cultural and religious ideology in Balochistan Traditions has evolved over a long period of time and it has taken almost four millenniums (7000 BCE to 3300 BCE) to develop . This extensive tradition gives roots to all cultural/institutional developments an indigenous flavor and if careful studies are made than it becomes clear that there were variations in the socio-economic and religious developments in the all regions of South Asia but the basic concept

remained same. This makes a cultural mosaic of traditions which are scattered over entire South Asia with very strong interaction resulting in the mutual influence of these traditions. This has also helped in the development of regional cultural interactions in terms of economic resources and technological development and there are strong evidences that Balochistan Traditions have provided roots to Indus Valley civilization in terms of religious ideology, economic resources, technological and architectural development one hand and religious ideologies/rituals of Gandhara Grave culture, Hinduism and Buddhism one the other hand.

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Figures

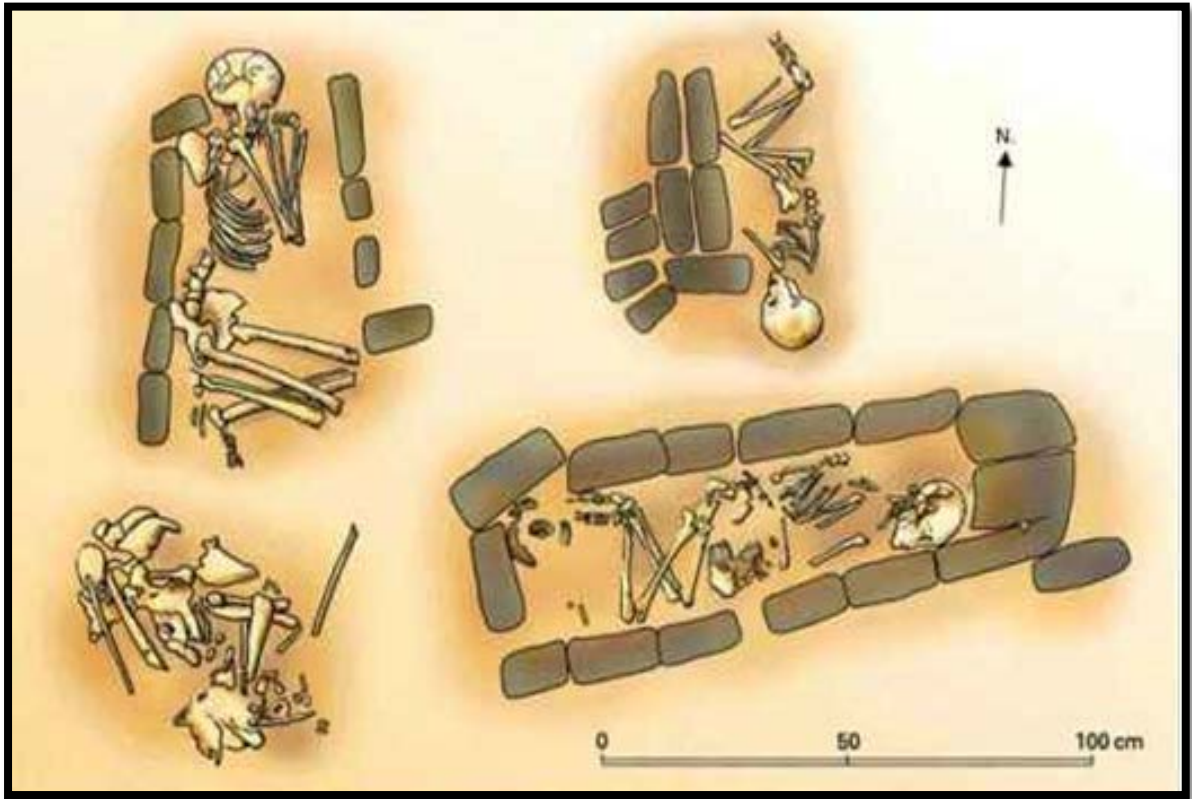


Figure 1. The Mehrgarh burials along with sacrificed animal (Courtesy J.F Jarrige)



Figure 2. SohrDamb/Nal period I. multiple fragmentary burials with grave goods (courtesy Elsevier Inc)



Figure 3. Terracotta figurines of Mehrgarh (Courtesy J.F Jarrige)



Figure 4. Terracotta figurines of Balochistan Traditions (Courtesy J.F Jarrige)