



EDITORIAL ARTICLE

The Goddess Who Wouldn't Retire: Marshall's Mother-Goddess Label from Colonial Archaeology to the UPSC Coaching Notes

Dr. Pallavi Mohanan 

Assistant Professor,

School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
IILM University, Greater Noida, UP, India.

✉ pallavi.mohanan@iilm.edu

📅 Published: 28 September 2026

📄 PPI: **v1i2/op/03**

🔗 DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23079690>

🔗 Article URL:
<https://publicpast.org/ppi/v1i2/op/03>

ABSTRACT

Somewhere in India today, a civil services aspirant is underlining a line in their notes: "The Indus Valley people worshipped a Mother Goddess." The sentence sits comfortably next to facts about drainage systems and granaries, presented with the same air of settled certainty. It will likely appear, in some form, on an answer sheet this year. What the aspirant is unlikely to know is that this "fact" is a nearly century old interpretive guess, one that the discipline of archaeology itself has long since been complicated, qualified, and in many cases abandoned. This editorial is about that gap, between what historians and archaeologists now understand about the Indus Valley Civilization, and what continues to circulate as unquestioned truth in India's civic and educational institutions.

KEYWORDS

Indus Valley Civilization • Mother Goddess • Public History • UPSC Historiography



© 2026 Dr. Pallavi Mohanan. Published in *PublicPast: Journal of Public History* under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). Non-commercial reproduction with attribution permitted. Commercial use requires prior written consent.



The Origin Point

The claim originates with Sir John Marshall, director general of the Archaeological Survey of India, in his 1931 report on the excavations at Mohenjo-daro (Marshall, 1931). Confronted with numerous small terracotta figurines of standing women, often bearing elaborate headdresses and jewellery, Marshall proposed that these represented a "Mother Goddess," and that the civilization practised a fertility cult centred on her worship. His reasoning drew heavily on comparative frameworks fashionable in early twentieth century scholarship, particularly the idea, popularised in studies of the Mediterranean and Near East, that agrarian societies universally venerated a female fertility deity. Marshall read the Indus figurines through this lens, treating formal resemblance, a female figure, exaggerated body features, as sufficient evidence of cultic function and belief.

It was, by the standards of the time, a plausible inference. It was also, crucially, an inference, not a demonstrated fact. Marshall had no accompanying textual evidence, no clear ritual context for most of the figurines, and no certainty that the objects served religious rather than domestic, decorative, or entirely unrelated purposes. Yet the label stuck, and it stuck hard, because it offered a tidy, legible narrative for a civilization that otherwise resisted easy interpretation.

The Scholarly Correction

In the decades since, archaeologists working on the Indus Valley have substantially revised this picture. Possehl (2002), in his survey of Indus civilization studies, cautioned against reading singular religious meaning into a diverse and formally inconsistent body of terracotta figurines, noting that their find contexts rarely support the idea of organised goddess worship. Kenoyer (1998) has similarly urged restraint, pointing out that assuming cultic function from form alone risks projecting later, better documented religious traditions backward onto a civilization whose belief systems remain, in the absence of a deciphered script, largely opaque to us.

Parallel to this archaeological recalibration, gender historians have interrogated the assumptions embedded in the "Mother Goddess" framework itself. The reflexive equation of female figurines with fertility worship rests on essentialist ideas about womanhood, reproduction, and the sacred, ideas that scholars such as Chakravarti (2006) have shown to be projections of later patriarchal and colonial frameworks rather than secure readings of ancient evidence. The current scholarly consensus, to the extent one exists, is not a rejection of any religious significance for these figurines, but a plurality of possible interpretations, domestic ritual, apotropaic use, or something not yet legible to us, held with appropriate uncertainty (Possehl, 2002). What was once presented as fact is now, at best, one hypothesis among several.

The Afterlife in Public Education

None of this scholarly recalibration appears to have meaningfully reached the textbooks and coaching material that shape how millions of Indian students encounter the Indus Valley Civilization. NCERT texts (e.g., NCERT, 2007) and the vast ecosystem of UPSC preparation material continue to present the Mother Goddess theory as an established finding, often as a single bullet point requiring no further scrutiny. The uncertainty that responsible archaeologists now build into their accounts, the hedges, the alternative readings, the acknowledgment of limits, is entirely absent. What remains is Marshall's original, confident claim, stripped of its historiographical context and repeated as civic knowledge.

This is not a marginal case of textbook lag. It is a structural feature of how public history operates in India, where the sheer scale and competitiveness of the examination system rewards memorisable certainty over interpretive nuance. A coaching note has no room for "possibly" or "one interpretation among several." It has room for a fact, and so a decades old inference is flattened into one.

Why This Gap Matters

The persistence of the Mother Goddess label matters for reasons that go beyond antiquarian correctness. First, it models a flawed relationship to evidence itself, teaching aspirants that archaeological interpretation is settled and singular, when the discipline's own practice involves debate, revision, and acknowledged uncertainty (Kenoyer, 1998). A student trained to reproduce inherited conclusions rather than engage with method is poorly served by any historical education, however factually accurate the details.

Second, the label carries an unexamined gendered assumption into civic knowledge at scale. Presenting ancient female imagery as self evidently religious and reproductive naturalises a narrow, essentialist view of womanhood as inherently tied to fertility and the sacred, a view gender historians have worked hard to unsettle (Chakravarti, 2006). When this passes into public education unchallenged, it does quiet ideological work under the guise of neutral fact.

Third, and most directly relevant to the concerns of public history, this case illustrates a broader disconnect between the sites where historical knowledge is produced and revised, university departments, peer reviewed journals, archaeological reports, and the sites where that knowledge is actually consumed by the public, textbooks, coaching centres, competitive examinations. Public historians have tended to focus their interventions on museums, memorials, and heritage sites. The examination and coaching ecosystem, despite shaping the historical consciousness of millions of young Indians every year, remains comparatively under-examined as a site of public history in its own right.

Marshall's Mother Goddess has had a long institutional life, considerably longer than the archaeological confidence that once supported her. She persists not because the evidence for her worship has strengthened, but because the infrastructure of civic education has no mechanism for retiring outdated interpretations once they have been absorbed into the curriculum. The task facing public historians is not merely to correct this one label, though that correction is overdue. It is to ask what other colonial era inferences, quietly reproduced across generations of coaching notes and textbook editions, are still awaiting the same scrutiny.

References

- Chakravarti, U. (2006). *Everyday lives, everyday histories: Beyond the kings and Brahmanas of "ancient" India*. Tulika Books.
- Kenoyer, J. M. (1998). *Ancient cities of the Indus Valley civilization*. Oxford University Press.
- Marshall, J. (1931). *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus civilization* (Vols. 1--3). Arthur Probsthain.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2007). *Themes in Indian history, Part I*. NCERT.
- Possehl, G. L. (2002). *The Indus civilization: a contemporary perspective*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.