

Tracing the Path and Significance of Karma in the Lives of the South Asians Beginning from Indus Valley Civilization

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to trace the existence of the concept of Karma in the lives of the South Asians and the role it played in shaping the history of this land. As, it seems difficult to separate this concept from the religious ideologies of the people who belonged to this area. The term Karma in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain philosophy means somebody's current and future lives are determined by that person's behavior in this and previous lives. In other words, Karma is the sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence and is viewed as the deciding factor for their fate in the existing and future lives. This concept of Karma was prevalent over a wider geographical area, as we know that there is a common world myth about the 'Immortal Soul'. Hence, it can also be easily linked to the concept of immortality, which is also part of the three monotheistic religions of the world and can be traced in the history of every land, nation and civilization. Moreover, when we trace the religious history of this land, this is the one and only element that is similar between all the indigenous religions (Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism) of this land and which in a way also binds all the religions together, despite of many dissimilarities. This concept of Karma can also be traced back to the time of the Indus Valley Civilization with the help of their archaeological remains in the absence of decipherable script.

Keywords; Religion, Karma, Immortality, South Asia, Soul

Introduction

Asia was home to the first civilizations on Earth.¹ It is believed that tens, or hundreds of thousands of years ago people migrated from Africa to Asia. These Stone Age hunter-gathers initially settled in the mountain caves of Asia. For food they hunted wild game with the help of weapons made from stone tools. For reasons still unknown, about 10,000 years ago the supply of wild animals in Asia began to reduce.² This drove Stone Age hunters out of the mountains and into the lower lands near the river waters. According to Andre Wink, they moved to the vast variety and abundance of river landscapes along an immense coastline, running from Zambezi in East Africa to Euphrates and the Tigris, to Indus and its tributaries, the Ganges and Yamuna, the Brahmaputra, the rivers of the Indian peninsula, and, beyond, to Irrawaddy, Chao Phraya, Mekong, the Solo, and Brantas and the other rivers in its eastern parts. The most striking feature about many of these rivers is the extraordinary magnitude that help them to reach deeply inland. Unlike the Mediterranean region, most of the civilization that arose in the Indian Ocean area from protohistoric and ancient times onwards were typically alluvial river-plain and delta civilizations.³ A recent excavation in a place called Tell Abu Hureyra in northern Syria supports the theory that such societies in Southwest Asia were inhabited for thousands of years. For example, the people of Tell Abu Hureyra, near the Euphrates, were engaged in farming as early as 9500 BCE.⁴ They learned to grow crops, domesticate animals, and developed technologies that were essential for their livelihood. A most important technology was the potter's wheel, because it enabled man to store water and food. The development of communication, through trade, helped the people to grow and develop linkages.⁵ These developments helped the civilizations to grow into proper states and empires.

Asia is also the birthplace of all great established religions of the world, whether it be Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism or Confucianism. The reason behind its evolution there is that Asia was man's first home even long before the foundations of civilizations were laid. Man, who was born with a consciousness of a divine force, became more aware of this fact when he started settled life within groups and as civilizations grew. Domestication of both plants and animals brought man closer to nature and

elements. He knew that despite doing everything right on his end, he sometimes had good yields, sometimes bad, and sometimes failed altogether. He learnt that some things where natural forces were at work were beyond his reach and comprehension. He also learnt the benefits of communal work and its profitable results. It was the unknown that brought man closer to the concepts of the Divine.

Hence, since man's beginning the idea of a divine force has prevailed in different forms in different areas - sometimes in the form of a mother goddesses as found in Spain; in female or male sculptures as found at Catal Hoyuk; in the painted pictures of man, beasts and vultures found in shrines in the same vicinity, or in the plastered skulls probably to be associated with ancestor cult found all over the Near East. Burials with elaborate grave goods and painted red ochre were indeed indications of man's capacity to seek a divine force. Archaeologists and anthropologists tell us today that even among the most primitive, underdeveloped peoples, there is evidence of worship of some form. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* says that "as far as scholars have discovered, there has never existed any people, anywhere, at any time, who were not in some sense religious."⁶ Hence one can conclude that religion satisfies a basic human need, much as food satisfies hunger.

Today, on the surface many religions in existence seem quite different from one another, but if we strip them of the things that are mere embellishments and later additions, or if we remove those distinctions that are the result of climate, language, or peculiar conditions of their native land, and other factors, it is amazing to see how similar most of them turn out to be.⁷ For example, we find that certain teachings and beliefs are almost universal among them, such as the doctrines about the immortality of the human soul, eternal torment for the wicked, heavenly reward for good people, purgatory, or a mother-of-god or queen-of-heaven goddess. There are many legends and myths that are also common among them. For example, man's fall from divine grace due to his illicit attempt to attain immortality, the need to offer sacrifices to atone for sin, the search for a tree of life or fountain of youth, gods and demigods who lived among humans and produced superhuman offspring, and a catastrophic flood that devastated nearly all of humanity. Those who believed in these myths and legends not only lived far from one

another geographically, but their cultures, traditions and social customs were also very different and distinct from one another. Yet, when it comes to their religion, they believed in many similar ideas. It is also true that not every one of these peoples believed in all the things mentioned, but all of them believed in some of them; all of them drew their basic beliefs from a common pool, some more, some less. As time passed these basic beliefs were modified and other teachings developed from them, still the basic substance is instantly recognizable. The basic substance of many world religions is enough evidence to claim that they all have a common origin and did not begin in their own independent and separate way.⁸

Discussion and Results

To further elaborate this point, I think it is a promising idea to study the different mythologies prevailing in the world today, which can help us to find the roots of many world religions. The most common legend among many religions of the world is one that narrates that humankind began in a golden era, when man was guiltless, was free from sickness and death and was living happily and peacefully in close communion with God.

To further emphasize the unity of these early accounts, we can trace the common threads in the mythology of different people of the world. By myth we mean a story usually of unknown origins by which a group attempts to express its culture, its place in the universe, and its sense of identity and purpose, while the term mythology refers both to the study of myths and to the collected myths of a culture. Thus, we speak of Greek mythology, or Asian mythology. The most common themes of myths are the stories related to creation, stories of gods and goddesses or the stories of the heroes of that culture. They are so important that often religion, because of its innate mythological nature, lends authority to it. This stance is valid for the so-called primitive animistic cults as well as the equally arbitrarily defined massive world religions. A religious story is a holy scripture to a believer, but it is just a myth to someone of another culture or belief system. For example, Muslims and Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, while to a Buddhist or Hindu this story and its events are clearly mythical, as it describes a phenomenon that is beyond human comprehension and experience. The same is true for Muslims and Christians who find the story

of the elephant-God Ganesh or the resurrection of the ancient Egyptian god-man Osiris as perhaps religious, and even beautiful, but certainly bizarre and mythological rather than literally true. Therefore, it is difficult to separate myths from religion. Also, religion is often concerned with ritual, theology, ethics, and other elements as well as myths - for myths are considered to be the sacred stories of religion. They are those narratives that are used to support, explain, or justify rituals, theology, ethics, and so forth.⁹ It is true that many myths may be based on fiction, but there are others, that are based on fact, for example, the myths and legends that are found worldwide giving the story of a great flood.

A main reason for examining myths is that they are the foundation for beliefs and rites still found in many religions today. A good example “the immortal soul”, a concept which can be traced from ancient Assyria-Babylonian myth to Egyptian, Greek, and Roman mythology to Christendom, where it has become an underlying principle of theology.¹⁰ Stories about creation, flood, false gods, immortal soul, and sun worship are some of the most common threads in the large patchwork of world mythology today. When we strip away details, common themes emerge. If this is the case, one might suggest that maybe all these myths are either a distortion or exaggeration of a historical fact or to believers, God’s word, sent to us through Adam and a succession of Prophets for man’s guidance. Almost all these myths can also be traced back to the historical events mentioned first in the Old Testament of the Bible and later in the Quran.

To further elaborate this stance, let’s discuss the myth of an immortal soul. Man, since eternity has been trying to find God, it is for this purpose that he has clutched at straws or is deluded by the illusion of immortality of the soul. We will see whether it is a myth or a belief in an immortal soul with many variations that are a legacy of man that has come down to him through generations and his ancestors.

The Babylonian culture believed in an afterlife. The surviving version found at the library of Nineveh is a condensed variation of the Sumerian myth ‘Inanna’s Descent to the Underworld’. In the myth the goddess decides to go to the land of no return that is dark and gloomy, which is ruled by Ereshkigal (princess of the great earth). She demands entry into this place by threatening

to smash the gates down and let out the dead who would then eat the living. As in the Sumerian myth she is stripped of her accoutrements. Because of Ereshkigal fatal curses, Ishtar dies. Her death has drastic consequences on earth: all copulation among beasts and man comes to an end. Ea also known as the Sumerian Enki, creates a handsome eunuch to visit Ereshkigal; he wins Ishtar's corpse through flattery and revive it with the Water of life. According to this myth, Ereshkigal ruled the subterranean world.¹¹

The Egyptians also believed in the immortality of the soul. Every soul had to be weighed against Maat, the goddess of truth and justice, who was symbolized by the feather of truth. Some gods like Anubis (the jackal-headed god) and Horus (the falcon) helped during this procedure. Osiris final approval would take the soul to the blissful land of the gods.¹²

In old Chinese mythology it is also believed that there is survival after death, and the need to keep one's ancestors happy. The ancestors were believed to be living and to have powerful spirits, who were concerned with the welfare of their descendants, but at the same time were very much capable of punitive anger if displeased. They also believed in giving sustenance to the dead. Therefore, some Shang kings were found buried with anywhere from a hundred to three hundred human victims, who were supposed to be his attendants in the next world. A point to be noted here is that this practice links China with many other places across the world that include Egypt, Africa, Japan, India, and many others.¹³

Likewise, the Greeks were also concerned with the dead and their destination. Having formulated many gods, they had assigned Hades (the son of Cronus and brother of Zeus and Poseidon), to oversee the realm of murky darkness. In the myth he appears as the common grave digger of mankind. The Greeks often buried their dead with a coin under the tongue, so that their soul could be carried to the underworld land of the living. The Greek mythology not only influenced its own scholars, like Plato, but also left its marks on Romans and Christian thinkers too.

The myths of the immortality of the soul are also found in South America, in the myths of the Aztecs, Incas, Maya and many more. Death was also a mystery to them as it was to other people living in the various corners of the world. They performed various rituals and participated in ceremonies to help

them reconcile themselves to this concept. A famous archaeologist, Victor W. Von Hagen in his book "The Ancient Sun Kingdoms of the Americas" says, "The dead were in reality living: they had merely passed from one phase to another; they were invisible, impalpable and invulnerable. The dead ... had become the unseen members of the clan." Further he says, "the [Inca] Indian believed in immortality; in fact, he believed one never died, ... the dead body merely became undead, and it took on the influences of the unseen powers."¹⁴ According to Mayan mythology, there existed one soul, thirteen heavens and nine hells in every human.

The African mythologies also believe in the surviving soul and in the continuity of the soul after death. *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* states, "This belief is bound up with another - the continuing existence of the soul after death. Magicians can call on souls to aid their powers. The souls of the dead often transmigrate into the bodies of animals or may even be reincarnated in plants." Thus, the Zulu do not kill some snakes as they believe that they are carrying the spirits of their relatives. On the other hand, the Masai of southeastern Africa believe in a creator called Ngai, who places a guardian angel by the side of each Masai soldier for protection, and at the time of death this angel takes the warrior's soul to the hereafter. With variations this myth also exists in other African tribes, such as the Bechuana, Basuto and Baronga.¹⁵

The Quran also speaks about the immortality of the soul; according to it, when the body dies the soul is preserved till the day of judgement, at which time every soul will be judged for its deeds. Those who were righteous are promised heaven and eternal life, while those who are found guilty would be sent to hell, which is full of fire and snakes. Some verses from the Quran describe this.

The righteous will be amid gardens and fountains of clear flowing water. Their greetings will be 'Enter ye here in peace and security. And we shall remove from their hearts and lurking sense of injury. They will be brothers, joyfully facing each other. There no sense of weariness shall touch them, nor shall they ever be asked to leave (Qur'an 15:45-8).

This is what you were promised - for every returner [to Allah] and keeper [of His covenant]. Who feared the Most Merciful unseen and came with a heart returning [in repentance]. "Enter ye therein in Peace and Security; this is a Day of Eternal Life! (Qur'an 50:32-4).

Anyone who comes to His Lord guilty will deserve Hell, **wherein he never dies, nor stays alive (Qur'an 20:74).**

There are still many myths - like that of sun worship, human sacrifice - which have common threads among the mythologies of different people of the world. This brief view was presented to give you an idea about the similarities and common features among not only this mythology but also among some of the monotheistic established religions of the world today. These links indicate common features, many of which can be traced back to Babylon, the Mesopotamian cradle of most religions. We can see common threads, whether in creation, myths, in accounts of the Great Flood, or in the basic concept of the immortal soul.

The myth of the immortal soul suggests a belief in an afterlife. A belief that almost exists in all living nations of not only the ancient world but can be found in the contemporary world too. Hence, we witness a similar belief in the South Asian region too. The history of civilization in South Asia begins with the Indus Valley civilization.

Therefore, let us now discuss the religious beliefs of the South Asians - Indus people, what religion was practiced by them in ancient times and during the Indus time is what is still unknown. We find a lot of suggestions and assumptions on this subject by various Indus and religious scholars of the world, but no one has ever taken this aspect of the Indus people very seriously. By saying this I do not want to demean the efforts of others or be disrespectful towards anyone, but to emphasize that many of us take this aspect of the Indus civilization very lightly or for granted, but I want to suggest that religion was the main element on which the very foundation of Indus civilization stood. It not only kept the civilization united but also prosperous for a long time, and that also without the use of any armaments or force. This factor differentiates the Indus region from its contemporary counter parts and suggests that the people of this land also believed in an

afterlife. In the absence of the deciphered Indus script, we can only depend on the archaeological remains of this great civilization.

An important example to back this concept is their burial practices. The burial items of this civilization were very basic and included, a goat, few pots, body covered with red ochre leather shreds or a few jewelry items. These burial items are nothing in comparison to what we witness in the contemporary civilizations of either Egypt or Mesopotamia. Although this evidence of burial goods does suggest a definite belief in an afterlife, yet their scarcity suggests that they did not believe in using these items in their afterlife, as was seen in the case of Egypt.

On the base of this observation, it can be suggested that the people of Indus civilization did not believe that grave goods could help them in their afterlife, and on the other hand only honorable deeds would accompany them, hence their scarcity.

Another even more crucial factor is that they might not have believed in the accumulation of wealth with the deceased, rather they believed in the circulation of wealth between the living people, which meant more prosperity among the living. This concept of circulation and distribution of wealth between the kin's is also part of the religious beliefs of many world religions today including Islam.

To further emphasis this point, let us discuss the documented religious history of the sub-continent, which begins with the *Vedas* scriptures of the Hindus written in approximately 1500 BCE, but the question that arises is who were the Hindus? When and where did they live? To answer questions about the origin of the Hindus, Jim Wills¹⁶ gives us two theories based on recent archaeological discoveries. According to one theory the Indo-European Aryans either invaded or migrated to India through the Khyber Pass (into present-day northern Pakistan), where they found a stone-age people whose agricultural way of life was already ancient. Archaeologists have discovered many goddess figurines associated with these people, indicating religious affiliations with agricultural and fertility practices. But they also found an ancient seal engraved with a figure sitting in a yoga position. According to another theory based on more recent archaeological excavations and data found in the northwest of India (present day Pakistan) Hinduism just might

prove to be much older than what scholars initially thought and might have arisen completely independent of the Aryan cultural influence. In short, Hinduism predates the Aryans by centuries and could have a historical identity with the Indus Valley civilization.

“Scholars cannot pinpoint the exact time when Hinduism began, but they believe that it developed in an early stage of the interaction between Aryans and Dravidians.¹⁷ They further propose that it was during this time that groups and strata of Hindu society began to form. According to them this proposition can be based on two theories; one theory is that the organization of Hindu society began as a result of *varna* (color). The invaded people were dark, while the invading Aryans were light, because the conquerors were of lighter color; therefore, they were superior to the dark-skinned locals. While according to the other theory this class differentiation developed due to psychological preferences. The Aryans were militants and ruling in nature, while the locals were settled urbanites who preferred artisan and merchant activities. It is difficult for scholars to determine which is right, for in the second millennium BCE this differentiation was neither rigid nor universally recognized; it developed in a firm caste system at a much later stage. A *varna* system was also proposed by Massimo Vidale and Heather M. L. Miller in a joint paper in which they stated that the community differentiation might have occurred due to occupational specialization that was pretty obvious during the Mature Indus Phase.¹⁸ Kenoyer also suggests that some people following their ancestor’s occupation may have become richer in comparison to others, which could have led to the beginning of the Hindu caste system or a wide class differentiation by the Mature Indus Phase.”¹⁹

If this is true and the people of the Indus Valley civilization, did fall prey to the caste system, we must keep in mind that the consequences were not crucial till the decline of the civilization around 1500 BCE. Nevertheless, within the next 1000 years the caste system had suffocated the society to such

an extent that to counter its effects two indigenous religious contemporary movements started. One was led by the founder of Buddhism – Gautam Siddhartha Buddha, while the other was led by Mahavira consider to be the 24th Tirthankara of the religion Jainism. Furthermore, during the same time around 500 BCE, “the Upanishads began to be written, probably as a response to the teachings of Buddhism. These scriptures include details about the Brahman-Atman philosophy, the practice of Om meditation, and about the four levels of consciousness”.²⁰

Despite the many differences among the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism; they all agree or accept the concept of *karma*, and *karma* deals with keeping a human being in line. In simple words, whatever one does during his or her lifetime, would eventually affect or would bear consequences either on his or her soul or afterlife. Maybe this is the one and only point that in a way binds these three religions together, despite many huge differences.²¹

For example, a core belief of the Hindus is in the endless cycle of birth, life on earth, death, and rebirth, with each person being reincarnated at a level determined by how they spent their previous existence.

Do not do to another what you would not like to be done to yourself; that is the gist of the law – all other laws are variable. (*Mahabharata, Veda 39*)²²

“Hinduism is the oldest surviving world religion that is still active today. It has covered a time stretch of thousands of years. It is deeply rooted in the traditions and history of India and one can easily trace its origins back to the beginning of the second millennium BCE, but some scholars suggest that it is even older with the earliest-known antecedents in the Indus valley civilization, an area from where civilization on the sub-continent began. The word ‘Hindu’ was first used by the Persians (it derives from the Sanskrit word “Sindhu”), indicating the River Indus. It was not long before the word was applied generally to all the people of India, but today it just refers to the followers of the Hindu religion”.²³

uddha was a Hindu, yet his vital break with Hinduism was his complete rejection of the Hindu caste system and the sacrificial cults associated with

it.²⁴ The Buddhist teachings, lead every individual to attain the stage of *nirvana* (eternal peace), which can only be achieved by understanding the Four Noble Truths and following the Eightfold Path, also called the Middle Way.²⁵

This, O Bhikkus, is the Noble Truth of Suffering; presence of objects we hate is Suffering; separation from objects we love is suffering; not to obtain what we desire is suffering. Briefly, the fivefold clinging to existence is suffering. All existence is *dukkha* (suffering). By Buddha²⁶

Thus, all Buddhist practices were designed to help people eliminate their selfish desires and their attachments to this world; by doing this they would be able to finally free themselves from the cycle of birth, life, and death by following the Eightfold Path, also known as the Middle Way. The eight points explain the nature of Buddha's teachings. It tells us how to escape from the miseries and sufferings of life. All this depends on our *Karma* (the law of cause and effect). Thus, a morally good life generates positive *karma* in the next life, but the goal is not only to achieve positive *karma* in the next life but to be completely released from the law of *karma*, hence achieving the state of *nirvana*.²⁷

One doctrine Jains share with not only Hindus, but Buddhist too is the absolute law of *karma*. Other than Karma, Jains also believe in the absolute nature of the soul (*jiva*), which for them also exist in even the very lowest forms of life; the soul is present, no matter how oppressed the person is with the weight of *karma*. Every soul bears the weight of *karma*. *Karma* is, in fact, the glue that binds humans to the cycle of rebirth, which is the operative element in *samsara* (recurring rebirth of the soul). The soul journeys through infinite incarnation from lower life forms to high, but Jains believe that the human incarnation is the most important, as only through the human form can a person obtain release, and only from human form can a person choose and carry out those thoughts and actions that can bring escape from eons of labor. For Jains there are eight various kinds of *karma*: four are destructive, the other four are nondestructive.²⁸

Conclusion

The significance of discussing these three religions was not to count their dissimilarities but their similarities. Though all three originated in greater India all three have their own history, religious leaders, scriptures, rituals, and practices, but they also have some common elements that cannot be overlooked. The common element of Karma that I have highlighted in this paper can be in some way traced to the time of Indus civilization. It seems that this element has travelled through time; its appearance under different religious heads might have changed, but somehow, it has been able to keep its essence alive throughout this region's prehistory and history.²⁹

“There are hardly any icons, imagery or religious buildings from the Indus civilization to associate it with the belief in multiple gods, for whatever supposed religious material has been found (seals, figurines, masks, etc.), could be the property of a limited number of individuals and their application must have been very different, as the iconography of the “One Supreme God” of the Hindus into various personifications came much later to this land.”

Let us now briefly overlook the similarities between the three post-dated religions of the land, and the icons, script and imagery, whose meaning is unknown.

1. The mediating yogi
2. The all in some way are considered as part of the Shamana tradition (renouncers)
3. This tradition is considered to be much older than Hinduism today
4. Supreme god of Hindus is “Brahma”, he is one and all powerful, the rest are his different personifications
5. Jain doctrines also originate from an omniscient and omnipotent being
6. Jainism is considered non-Vedic
7. The concept of Karma is common between all three religions
8. Buddha preached to reach the state of “nirvana”, eternal peace”³⁰

The significance of highlighting these points was to bring before you a wider picture of the people of this land and their age-old religious affiliations. Despite of the dissimilarities between the three established religions of this land the one common element is “*karma*”, which is pretty evident during the Indus time too, though we do not have any text to back it, but we do have their archaeological remains which speak louder than words. The term “*Karma*” in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain philosophy means somebody’s current and future lives are determined by that person’s behavior in this and previous lives. Though we do not know whether the Indus people believed in many lives, but one thing is evident that they spent their current lives doing many good communal deeds and the scarcity of burial goods tell us that they did not believe that material things could help them in their future life. This notion is backed by their various personality traits, which can be described with the help of adjectives like honesty, equality, and unity among many others. This concept of *karma* is present in every religion of the world including the three monotheistic religions. Another very important fact is that all these religions believe in one Supreme Being, whether it is “Brahma” of the Hindus or belief in an unnamed omnipotent of the Janis or the un-talked about god of the Buddhist. We also have come across the term of “Shamans”, (mediating yogi or elders of the family could be a symbol of such men) in association with this region, which definitely goes back a long way, maybe it was the human link between man and God, since Indus times and which is pretty evident even today in the region. We find many such people in the villages and cities of both Pakistan and India playing an active part even today. It only seems fair to assume that the Indus religion was as sophisticated, as just, as equality based, as uniform, as welcoming, like much else in this civilization, and functioned at different levels to serve different classes of people according to their cultural needs and mental capacity, as most advanced religions do. And it is quite evident that the Indus civilization greatly influenced the evolution of religions not only in India but in Near Eastern countries too.

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Dr. Mughal further emphasizes the point by stating cultural continuity rather than discontinuity.

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²⁵ Keene, *World Religions*, 74.

²⁶ Keene, *World Religions*, 74.

²⁷ Umer, "A Brief Over view of the Post dated-Established Religions of the Indus Land – Some Common Features and their Link with Indus Valley Civilization." *Ancient Pakistan*, 79-96.

²⁸ Umer, "A Brief Over view of the Post dated-Established Religions of the Indus Land – Some Common Features and their Link with Indus Valley Civilization." *Ancient Pakistan*, 79-96.

²⁹ Umer, "A Brief Over view of the Post dated-Established Religions of the Indus Land – Some Common Features and their Link with Indus Valley Civilization." *Ancient Pakistan*, 79-96.

³⁰ Umer, "A Brief Over view of the Post dated-Established Religions of the Indus Land – Some Common Features and their Link with Indus Valley Civilization." *Ancient Pakistan*, 79-96.