



the mother goddess was associated with the waters, and waters could be ritualized and sanctified. the river is central to the ritual life of india, and is an important focus of sacred space. (fig. 6) it is the site of creation, where the cosmic powers, the waters, the earth, and the sky meet. it is the place where the deity is born, which is why many deities have birth stories that are set in rivers or other watery settings. even the goddess mother, the earth goddess, is born in water. 7) the river is the place where the deity is reborn, and it was here that the goddess mother was born. in the worship of the mother goddess the river became an agent, mediating the energies of the divine world and of nature, and the worshipers a symbol of that mediation. the goddess was also associated with the moon, because she was believed to control the tides. it was also believed that the sea was the place of the soul of the worshiper, and that the goddess would protect the worshiper. the worshipers were said to have been reborn as the goddess, and in the river, the sea, and in the many lakes that dot india, the goddess would dwell. the worshipers identified themselves with the goddess, which is why they poured water on themselves to enact the powers and blessings of the goddess. these ancient stories so often retold today are deeply rooted in the indus valley civilization, which was first discovered in the 1920s when excavations were begun in two sites along the indus river¹⁴ of over 2,600 sites discovered, 150 have since been excavated and five cities of populations between 40,000 and 80,000 are known today. these have revealed a remarkable collection of artifacts pointing to an advanced urban culture, home to indigenous peoples called dravidians, who according to a widely accepted, but still controversial, theory¹⁵

we can add another example of mythological fulfillment to the list. the kalighat paintings, of a sacred dance performed to hindu gods and goddesses in a healing temple in calcutta, india, have been retold in many books, including one by ernest fenollosa, an american poet, artist, and professor at the university of california, berkeley, who gave the indian dance his name. the kalighat paintings reflect the ancient legend of the three-faced hindu deity, the goddess kali, who dances with blood from her breasts. (fig. 12) in this legend, blood is a symbol of rebirth, since after being killed by a rival goddess, she is resurrected through a self-inflicted wound. thus, in the kalighat, the goddess dances with blood, but the blood flows from her own body and does not stain the dance floor.²⁴ for more than 2,000 years, the ancient stories of the indus valley civilization have been retold in song, dance, music, drama, and literature. today, in india, people not only sing the epic of the mahabharata as a part of their daily lives, but also in the process of instruction, they learn that the mahabharata is a true account of the time of their ancestors. the stories of the ramayana and the puranas, the later epics, are retold in the same manner, thus providing the individual with a sense of his or her cultural continuity, a sense of the past and the present in a single narrative. these stories have formed the basis of many public sculptures, both in temples and in roadside shrines, for example, a group of reliefs from the fourth century ce in the yayati temple, orissa, some 100 km to the northeast of gaya, and the five-relief shrine of lord vishnu from the fourth century ce at jagannath temple, odisha. (fig. 13) these sculptures, carved in terracotta, gypsum, and stone, are religious statements about the human condition, reflecting the cultural continuity of the indus valley civilization and the interplay of human and divine activity in human experience. itihasa, the language of history, is the principal vehicle for the transmission of this continuity from generation to generation, just as it was with the primitive israelites, the greeks, the romans, and those of all cultural traditions who have ever lived. 5ec8ef588b

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