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## Fragments of the Past, Lives of the Little: An Archaeological Perspectives on Children and Childhood in South Asia

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### Abstract

Historically, children constituted a significant proportion of past populations, yet archaeological investigations often overlooked them in favour of adults, political structures, and economic activities. In recent decades, the archaeology of childhood has emerged as an important field, emphasizing children as active social participants whose experiences, learning, and interactions contributed to societal development and continuity. Despite South Asia's rich archaeological record, the study of childhood remains relatively underexplored, particularly in India. This paper examines archaeological evidence for childhood in South Asia and explores how children's lives can be reconstructed through material remains. Drawing on evidence from settlements, burials, toys, miniature objects, learning tools, ornaments, and bioarchaeological data, it investigates patterns of play, socialization, learning, work, health, and identity formation. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Civilization, Chalcolithic communities, Early Historic urban centres, and selected medieval sites is analysed to trace continuities and transformations in childhood experiences.

The paper critically engages with theoretical approaches to childhood archaeology, particularly concepts of agency, personhood, and the social construction of childhood. It argues that children were not merely passive recipients of cultural traditions but active participants in the creation and transmission of knowledge, skills, and social values. Addressing the methodological challenges of identifying children in the archaeological record, the study highlights the potential of interdisciplinary approaches, including bioarchaeology, ethnoarchaeology, and material culture studies. By recovering these often-overlooked lives, the paper broadens archaeological interpretations of South Asian societies and underscores the integral role of children in shaping cultural change and continuity.

**Keywords:** Childhood, Mothering, Material Culture, Bioarchaeology, Toy, Miniature, Feeding Cup, Methodologies, Rock Paintings, Socialization, Past societies

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## **I: Introduction: Conceptualizing the Archaeology of Childhood**

Archaeology seeks to piece together the long human past by systematically examining and interpreting cultural material remains, which include objects, structures, and varied landscapes, whether geographical or cultural, that were created, used, altered, and discarded by various social groups over time. These groups encompassed not only kings and paupers but also women, children, and marginalized groups, irrespective of their age and gender. However, in archaeological scholarship in general and in historical discourse in particular, male or so-called active participants have traditionally been emphasized, and the lives and contributions of subaltern groups such as women and children have been notably underrepresented or even invisible in mainstream archaeological discourse addressing prehistoric and protohistoric periods. The reasons for the conscious systematic omission are deeply rooted in the foundational principles of cultural and civilization research. The sources of textual traditions and material remains used to reconstruct the antiquity of the human past were historically created, selected, preserved, and passed down within adult-centric and androcentric social structures. Although archaeological data are ostensibly more inclusive, they are interpreted through the frameworks of archaeologists and anthropologists who have been influenced by adult-centric assumptions. For instance, Sherwood Washburn and Irvén Devore (1961), later Richard Lee (1968), and Washburn and Chet Lancaster (1968) interpreted their fieldwork from this perspective. Consequently, both the selection and interpretation of archaeological data and their analysis have been shaped by adult and gendered roles and power dynamics, which have been labeled as “biased interpretation”. This dual-layered adulterism has produced a significant lacuna in archaeological practices and historical writings. Children have been rendered absent from material cultural studies in two principal ways. First, their presence is muted or obscured in sources authored by men, which rarely document their independent roles, skills, or contributions and agency, and even their visual representation is ignored. Second, in the rare instances where their contributions are acknowledged, they are often depicted in secondary or supportive roles, seen as extensions of adult authority rather than as independent participants in social, economic, and ritual spheres. Thus, the interpretive frameworks of traditional archaeology have inadvertently reinforced a narrative in which children appear marginal or irrelevant to the cultural processes that shaped past societies. This perspective has created a significant gap and void in archeological investigations and practices, as is readily discernible across numerous studies of past societies.

For contemporary archeologists, this poses a critical methodological and epistemological question: is it possible to reconstruct children’s roles and contributions through archeological research when

sources are mute and remnants of children are absent from the traditional corpus of sources? In response to this, new archaeology and later theoretical advancements asserted that their pictures could be illustrated, but only if we widened and expanded the definition of acceptable archeological evidence and thoroughly investigated the assumptions behind existing databases. Scholars have contended for the formation of new source categories, the reexamination of archaeological collections, and the use of analytical frameworks that are sensitive to social diversity, gender, age, and embodiment to address this interpretive shortcoming (Conkey and Spector, 1984; Gero and Conkey, 1991; Conkey and Gero, 1997; Sørensen, 2000; Nelson, 2004, 2006). The marginalization of children in archaeological investigations is not simply attributed to a lack of interest in childhood, but to long-standing disciplinary biases that historically silenced women's gender and agency, consequently obscuring children's role in archeological interpretation. This bias can be seen in the work of Sherwood Washburn and Irvén Devore (1961), Richard Lee (1968), and Washburn and Chet Lancaster (1968), who presented women as gatherers, passive members of society, and the source of the perception that women have contributed less to cultural development in both ancient and modern times, prompting extensive research into the "division of labor" and its impact on human culture and civilization. The "Man the hunter-woman the gatherer" myth, which relegated women to child-rearing roles while men hunted, depicted men as the most active members of society. This notion of passive women and motherhood has been challenged by feminist and gender studies in anthropology and archaeology (Slocum 1975; Wright 1996:15; Conkey 2003:873; Nelson 2006; Gero 2007; Wylie 2007; Bolger 2008:352–355; Claassen 1992; Roberts 1993, Whitehouse 2006; Fowler 2004). Deetz claimed: "Archaeology's prime value to history lies in its promise to take into account large numbers of people in the past who either were not included in the written record or, if they were, were included in a biased or minimal way" (Deetz 1993:12). Research has demonstrated that women participated in hunting alongside men. Such scholarship raises questions about women's roles. If it is accepted that women primarily remained at home, did they merely raise children, or did they engage in other activities? Investigations have revealed that women engaged in various crafts, including basket making, ceramics production, and household organization and decoration (Wright 1991; Kennedy & Watson 1991; Bern 1993; Soffer, Adovasio & Hyland 2000; Peñín 2014). When we have downplayed the importance of women collaborating alongside men, we have entirely overlooked the little one they have brought into the world. The omission and limited documentation of children's agency in archaeological records is rooted in the same epistemological and methodological biases that historically led to the marginalization of women in this discipline. Feminist scholars in history, archaeology, and anthropology have challenged the invisibility of women, thereby opening avenues for the examination of other overlooked groups, such as children. This critical reassessment of archaeological interpretation has given rise to the field of

Archaeology of Childhood, which emphasizes the need to view children not merely as age-defined categories but as active participants in social, economic, and cultural processes. This paper examines the significance of studying childhood within historical contexts from diverse archaeological perspectives. The paper is structured into several distinct sections. The initial section examines the conceptual foundations, development, and methodological approaches of the Archaeology of Childhood. The subsequent section critically assesses the current status, challenges, and opportunities for childhood studies within Indian archaeology. The third section employs bioarchaeological methods to understand children's lives, focusing on health, nutrition, growth, and lived experiences. The fourth section provides a contextual analysis of archaeological findings related to children from Kalibakmngan. Finally, the concluding section considers the study's implications and outlines future directions for the advancement of childhood archaeology in South Asian archaeology.

## **II: Child Archaeology: Peeping into the Life of Little One**

Child Archaeology, also referred to as childhood archaeology is an emerging field within the discipline of archaeology that examines the lives, roles, experience and the agency of children in the past societies. It seeks to reconstruct childhood as an active and culturally shaped category. Archeological investigations have traditionally focused on adults, mostly men, marginalized children as passive and insignificant members of society (Baxter 2005; Bugarin 2006, Derricourt 2018). The archaeology of childhood, or archaeology of children, began only in the last decade of the 20th century. The field of childhood straddles the traditional dualism of nature and nurture, a dualism that is particularly salient in the anthropological study of age-based categories such as childhood. As definitions of gender and childhood are culturally specific constructions around the biological categories of sex and age, the meaning of these categories can be expected to vary widely among cultures (Prout & James 1990:8). Therefore, one facet of the archaeology of childhood is the development of method and theory that will enable the investigation of how a particular stage in our physical development comes to have meaning in a particular historical and cultural context. (Baxter 2004: 3). Gender and childhood also are associated through the process of socialization, a cultural process that transcends the culturally specific construction of age and sex categories. In every human society, children have to be taught the culturally specific roles, activities, and behaviors that define childhood and gender, as well as other cultural information necessary for survival as a member of a particular social group (Baxter 2004: 3). In the 1970s and early 1980s, pioneering works on the archaeology of childhood began to appear (e.g., Bonnicksen 1973; Hammond and Hammond 1981; Knutsson 1986). The pivotal publication that truly established the field was Lillehammer's 1989 paper, "A Child is Born: The Child's World

in an Archaeological Perspective". This work served as a rallying cry for archaeologists to devise methods for studying children. Lillehammer urged the examination of both direct evidence, such as children's remains from burial sites and material culture like toys that can be directly linked to them, and indirect evidence, using historical and ethnographic analogies. Lillehammer defines "Childhood as a cultural construction developed in retrospect by humans who experienced being children. Childhood is a representation of historical complexity, contradiction, and controversy both as an ideal and as an experience of social, economic, political, and religious networks of particular time, space, and structure. Highlighting that childhood is not just merely a biological stage, but a phenomenon shaped by society and historical context, accordingly childhood should be examined as a dynamic social and cultural construct whose meanings are embedded within the wider "package of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary" (Lillehammer 2018: 39). Two significant, early articles on the archaeology of childhood "Where Are the Children"? (Sofaer Derevenski 1994) and "Where Have All the Children Gone?" (Kamp 2001). Rhetorical questions about the absence of children in archaeological studies were matched by a question posed of anthropology in general in a leading article in *American Anthropologist* whose title begged the question, "Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?" (Hirschfeld 2002).

Archaeologists and anthropologists interested in the study of children were readily convinced of the importance of children in understanding human societies and of their significance as a topic of study in their own right (Schwartzman 2006). Guner Coskunsu (2015) argued that, Archeologists have been neglecting the role of children in antiquity for several probable reasons : (1) the supposed intangible nature of childhood in the archaeological record and the a priori assumption that children lack easily recognizable archaeological correlates.(2) conceptualizations that see children as socioeconomically unimportant.(3) acceptance of a universal/stereotypical view of childhood.(4) gender biases (5) cultural biases.(6) the lack of substantial interdisciplinary collaborations on the subject. A.T Chamberlain (1997) noted there is no question that children existed in ancient times and are represented in the archeological record, irrespective of whether we archeologists are careful or competent enough to recognize them.? In the archaeological study of childhood, its origins and development have been conditioned by three perspectives:(1) social history of childhood, which has helped to show the diversity of childhood throughout centuries, undermining its universal and ahistorical meaning. (2) cross-cultural observations concerning cultural diversity and various forms of being a child. (3)New sociology of childhood, partly based on these two perspectives, but with its own methodology and theory of childhood. Contemporary Childhood Studies and the archaeology of childhood emphasize that biological age and social age cannot be equated. Several other terminologies such as "child's

world” and a “child’s culture” have been produced which refer to the social environment of childhood (Lesnik-Oberstein 1998; Mouritsen and Qvortrup 2002; Olwig and Gulløv 2003). Thus, childhood is not a universal or static state but a historical category constructed, defined, and redefined by each society. (Welinder 1998; Hiner and Hawes 1991; Reynolds 1990). Derevenski (1994) asserted that the term children is culturally loaded and a product of western culture. The modern western usage of the term ‘child’ is problematic in that it is a blanket term for individuals at a variety of stages of development with widely differing levels of dependence and independence. This need not be congruent with age categories and conceptions of maturity or immaturity in other societies. There is a need to problematize the investigation of children along with a reconceptualization of the concept of ‘child’. Applying it universally can obscure diverse childhood experiences and render children less visible in the archaeological record. Consequently, the concept of child requires critical reconceptualization within different cultural and archaeological contexts (Derevenski 1994: 7-20).

The persistent assumption that the limited archaeological evidence for children’s activities reflects their negligible contribution to past societies is both methodologically and theoretically untenable. Such reasoning conflates an absence of targeted investigation with an absence of archaeological evidence. If archaeological research has seldom sought to identify children’s material practices, learning processes, or social participation, it cannot legitimately conclude that these were insignificant. The issue, therefore, is not the absence of children from the archaeological record, but the inability of prevailing analytical frameworks, methodological approaches, and interpretative paradigms to recognise and evaluate their material signatures. Rather than being archaeologically invisible, children have been rendered methodologically invisible through adult-centred research agendas that privilege normative models of skilled production, economic activity, and social agency. Addressing this long-standing bias requires a fundamental reorientation of archaeological inquiry towards theoretical and methodological approaches capable of identifying, contextualising, and critically interpreting children’s contributions within past societies.

### **III: From Absence to Presence: Children and Childhood in the Archaeological Discourse of India**

Work on child and childhood in South Asian context is comparatively understudied, many dimensions of childhood still receiving limited Archaeological and historical explorations, nevertheless the growing body of scholarship has begun to illuminate Children’s agency in various cultural and chronolog-

ical contexts, providing a foundation for expanding childhood studies in South Asia (Balakrishnan, 2011; Bowen & Hinchy, 2015; Dar & Kannan, 2023; Goswami, 2012; Kannan, 2023; Saraswathi et al., 2017; Tambe, 2019). Studies on children and childhood through material culture in India remain limited but have been conducted sporadically (Rogersdotter 2006,2007, 2008,2011,2013 Varma 2010 & 2018,2023 Pratap 2016 A.Sajna 2023). Archaeological visibility of children has been conducted predominantly through bioarchaeological analyses, while terracotta artifacts such as toy and miniature assemblage constitute the principal Categories of comprehending child presence. However, children's agency and participation in lithic industry, ceramic production and rock creativity and other domains of past social practices remain significantly underexamined except for a few works( Menon Pratap). Between 2006 and 2013, Elke Rogersdotter worked extensively on archaeology of play in harappan civilization mainly in Bagara site of Gujarat and Mohenjodaro. Her studies, "Negligible Details? On a study of Terracotta Miniature Carts from a Harappan Site on Gujarat" (2006 a) and her another work "The Forgotten: An Approach on Harappan Toy Artifacts" (2006b), these works established categorisation of playthings and tiny carts, contesting their frequently discounted status in traditional archaeological interpretations. In subsequent publications (2007, 2008, 2011) She contends that intergenerational communication, and communal memory all can be comprehended with toys. According to Rogersdotter, toys are a medium or a social tool that create a path for children to internalise with cultural values, cognition which lead to different technical abilities. Her work goes beyond straightforward classification, and she established that play and games were essential to social cohesiveness in Harappan urban contexts, according to her 2011 PhD thesis, which combines spatial analysis with phenomenological viewpoints. These results are situated within the larger European theoretical framework on materiality and interaction in her 2013 book "The Playful Archaeologist", Rogersdotter makes a significant contribution by demonstrating that little artefacts are pertinent for reconstructing the performative and emotional aspects of ancient life mainly the life of little one, rather than being incidental. Later work in this regard conducted by Supriya Varma and Jaya Memon, these two excavated the site of Indor Khera in upper ganga plain, their excavated data come out in the form of a seminal article titled "Children Playing and Learning: Crafting Ceramics in Ancient Indor Khera" (2010), which provides a pertinent case study that positioned children as active participants in pottery production at potter house. Through morphological and comprehensive contextual analysis of miniature vessels, varma and menon illustrates that how miniatures pots, firing error, asymmetrical shapes of largely the single form category of small bowls, with uneven rims, walls, and bases, with drying cracks and uneven firing suggest that these were the work of children, perhaps between five and eight years old (Varma & Menon 2010: 107). They have the view that this category of remains serve as learning tools in addition to toys, integrating the transmission of embodied knowledge with

domestic apprenticeship. Varma in her (2018) work expands this framework to the Harappan civilization, suggesting that artifacts traditionally labeled as “toys” or “miniatures” should be viewed as material evidence of cognitive and social learning. Varma reinterprets the archaeological notion of play as an important socio-economic phenomenon by fusing apprenticeship ideas with household and domestic archaeology. In South Asian archaeology, there has been a conventional presumption that objects are ambiguous or minor functions were assigned. probably used for religious or ritual purposes, without considering other possible social contexts in which they might have been used. This perspective, which mainly focuses on adults, has been challenged by Ajay Pratap (2016), who looked at terracotta items from Mohenjodaro from the angle of “childhood archaeology.” He suggested that many of the figurines, toys with wheels, rattles, whistles, and animal figures were more likely associated with children’s play and instructional activities rather than religious practices.

#### **IV: Bioarchaeological Approach to Children in the Indian Context**

Bioarchaeological investigations into the lives of young individuals focus on the study of their skeletal and dental remains to gain insights into growth patterns, health, diseases, nutrition, mortality, and life experiences in past populations (Lewis, 2007: 10-14; Buckberry 2018: 60-64). In this discipline, the term “subadult” is preferred over “child” as it is grounded in biological criteria rather than cultural definitions. This category encompasses individuals who had not attained full skeletal and dental maturity at the time of death, including fetuses, infants, children, and adolescents (Buikstra & Ubelaker, 1994; Lewis, 2007). The use of this terminology is essential for avoiding the imposition of contemporary cultural perceptions of childhood onto ancient societies, thereby providing a consistent framework for osteological analysis (Halcrow & Tayles 2011: 334-336). Bioarchaeological investigations, in conjunction with artifact analysis, have played a vital role in comprehending the health, nutrition, and mortality of children in prehistoric and proto-historic India. The earliest osteological evidence of children in the Indian subcontinent derives from the mesolithic Bhimbetka, yielded five skeletons of subadult category (IAR, 1972–73: 18–19; 1975–76: 23–24; 1976–77: 29–30; Kennedy et al., 2002). Damdama, Lukacs, 1990; 1996; 2002; 2004; 2007; Lukacs and Misra, 1996; Lukacs and Pal, 1993; 2003; 2013; Robbins et al., 2004; Robbins Schug et al., 2012) Gormati ni khan (IAR, 1989–90: 23–24) and Lekhahia (Lukacs and Misra, 1997; 2000; 2002) yielded additional skeletons of the child of the period. In the neolithic period Ramapuram, Andhra Pradesh has yielded the largest documented assemblage of subadult Burials, comprising approximately 100 individuals (IAR, 1981–82: 3–8; 1982–83: 3–6; 1983–84: 3–6). The Chalcolithic site of Inamgaon, Maharashtra, produced a more substantial corpus, with approximately 225 subadult burials, representing one of the

largest juvenile mortuary assemblages reported from South Asian archaeology (Lukacs, 1978; 1981; 1985a; 1985b; 1987; 1999; 2007; Lukacs and Badam, 1975; 1981; Lukacs and Minderman, 1992; Lukacs and Walimbe, 1984a; 1984b; 1986; 1998; 2000; 2005; 2007; Lukacs et al., 1983; 1986; 2001a; 2001b; Robbins Schug, 2011; Robbins Schug and Goldman, 2014; Walimbe, 1998; 2007; 2009; 2012; Walimbe and Gambhir, 1994; Walimbe and Kulkarni, 1993; Walimbe and Lukacs, 1992). Among the historical sites Kumhar Tekri (Gupta et al., 1970; Mushrif-Tripathy, 2008) or Watgal (IAR, 1988–89: 34) are few early historical sites that have yielded documented child burials. For the early medieval period Sanjan site of Gujarat yielded 20 subadult burials (Mushrif-Tripathy and Walimbe, 2012). While for the late medieval period Balupur, Madhya Pradesh and Jotsoma, Nagaland, site (Mushrif-Tripathy, 2015; Mushrif-Tripathy et al., 2009a) remains the only sites which yielded child burials. Despite their archaeological significance, subadult skeleton remains from these contexts have received only limited bioarchaeological investigations, some have been studied extensively, some partially and while some remain unstudied for instance Ramapuram. Contemporary bioarchaeological studies recognize immature sub-adult skeleton collections as indispensable for understanding childhood in the past, given their capacity to illuminate patterns of growth and development, morality, physiological stress and human environment interactions. S.R. Walimbe asserted that “the study of sub-adults is an important component of biocultural studies in India because children are most sensitive to adverse genetic, nutritional, epidemiological, and environmental factors and metabolic upsets. Their death at a young age means that there was less time to recover and for their bones to remodel the evidence of developmental stressors (Walimbe 2016; 485). Lukacs, Nelson, and Walimbe (2001), studied dental enamel of different prehistoric populations across India and west asia, using a comparative data set of 136 subadults (258 deciduous canine), the team examined the localised hypoplasia of primary canines following FDI and DDE standards. The results demonstrate that LHPC was widespread among Jorwe and Kish, indicating moderate to high perinatal physiological stress and establishing deciduous enamel hypoplasia as a reliable indicator of children’s health in the prehistoric population of South India. Tripathy further extended the palaeopathological discourse through a comprehensive appraisal of skeleton remains distribution and analytical status of assemblages in under-scoring the importance of documentation, curation across India, highlighting the pressing need for standardized bioarchaeological methodologies. (Tripathy et al. 2016: 496-497). The analysis of the Sangannakallu skeletal assemblage identified six subadult individuals, including two infants (6–8 months), one child (1.5 years), two children (2–2.5 years), and one adolescent (15.5 years). The predominance of infant and young child deaths suggests high childhood mortality in the neolithic community, while the fragmentary preservation limited sex debate and broader demographic interpretation. Tripathi after conducting various analyses such as pathology, dental attrition and chipping, dental caries concluded

that these children perhaps did not experience chronic health (Tripathy 2022:46). Tripathy highlights the essential role of recording context and conducting comparative analysis, pointing out that insufficient documentation and unfavorable conditions for gathering additional data significantly limited interpretation. She contends that making meaningful and methodologically valid conclusions is quite challenging without appropriate context and comparative frameworks. Tanni Chakraborty (2015; 2020; 2023) has pioneered the study of children and childhood within the archaeological context of India and South Asia. Her research challenges the conventional adult-centric focus in archaeology by emphasizing the significance of little one across diverse cultural periods, from prehistoric to early historic times. By integrating ethnographic methods with bio-archaeological evidence, such as skeletal remains, and material culture, she has opened new avenues for understanding the roles and experiences of children in ancient societies. This multidisciplinary approach allows for a reevaluation of how children contributed to and interacted with their environments. The study proposes several potential avenues for future research, including comprehensive bio-archaeological investigations of the skeletal remains of young individuals, the examination of burial and funerary customs associated with children, the analysis of artistic depictions of children, and the exploration of children's roles in rituals, household tasks, and economic activities (Chakraborty 2021 see introduction of these chapter no 1). Chakraborty posits that the persistent oversight of children in archaeological research stems from the discipline's emphasis on adult experiences. She advocates for recognizing childhood as a distinct category in archaeological analysis, contending that this is essential for attaining a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of historical societies.

## **V: Kalibangan and the Archaeology of Childhood: Feeding Cup and Burials**

The Archeological evidence from Kalibnangan provides significant evidence for comprehending the material dimensions of childhood in the Indus civilization as well as the South Asian context. The site demonstrates that Children were not merely passive members of Harappan household but were incorporated into social and material worlds through specialized objects such as rattle, animal figurine, toy carts, gaming objects, and feeding vessels. Among the most remarkable finds from Kalibnangan is the terracotta feeding cups an artifact, these evidence are significant not only because of their utilitarian functions but also because of the artistic expression and craftsmanship, these feeding cups provides rare evidence for the archaeology of infancy and child care in south asia. The site has yielded thirteen feeding cups of different size and shapes, including two zoomorphic specimens modelled as cow and buffalo face, highlighting a distinctive aspect of Harappan childcare care material culture. The zoomorphic character of these feeding cups deserve particular attention. Shaping child care objects into

animal forms indicates that Harappan potter did not separate utility from visual expression, as animal imagery was deeply embedded within material culture appearing on a range of artifacts (Marshall 1931; Mackay 1938; Vats 1940; Rogersdotter 2006a-b-2016; Pratap 2016; Menon & Varma 2010 ). In the case of the feeding cup the animal representation may have transformed an everyday caregiving object into a meaningful and engaging object within the child sensory environment nevertheless interpretation regarding symbolic meaning such as fertility nourishment not protection should remain cautious because they cannot be directly demonstrated from the artifact alone. From the perspective of childhood archaeology, such vessels are impertinent because they challenged the prevalent bias of confined mothering (Hrdy 1946 reprint 1999; Ortnor 1974; Leacock 1978; Conkey & Spector 1984; Wilkie 2003; Salisbury 2017; Romero & López 2018; Gowland & Halcrow 2020) feeding is not only a biological process but also a socially organized practice. Objects associated with infant care provide insights into the relationship between Children and caregivers, the transmission of domestic knowledge and the cultural management of infancy in proto-historic society. For instance, studies of prehistoric Europe demonstrate that small spouted vessels interpreted as infant feeders can reveal practices of supplementary feeding and weaning supported by scientific analyses such as lipid residue studies (Dunne et.al 2019; Salisbury et.al 2021; Hawkins 2025). However the Kalibnangan repository at present lacks such biomolecular confirmation; therefore interpretation as a feeding implement remains based primarily on morphology and archaeological classification rather than direct evidence of content. As Madhu Bala noted that “the feeding cups have the mouth of a buffalo and cow respectively made on it and this could be liked by the child who could fiddle and play with the figure while sucking milk besides the fact that it indicates cow’s or buffalo’s milk was given to the children”(Bala 2020: 1177).

| Zoomorphic Feeding Cup                                                                                                                                           | Report Description                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  <p data-bbox="203 777 535 808"><b>Buffalo-faced Terracotta Feeding Cup</b></p> | <p data-bbox="573 556 980 661">Terracotta, broken feeding cup; buffalo-faced, having in turned horn, big eyes, nostrils and mouth, having perforation for feeding. From a late level of Period II. (KLB-2, Reg. No.17622).</p> |
|  <p data-bbox="219 1270 527 1302"><b>Terracotta Cow-faced Feeding Cup</b></p>  | <p data-bbox="573 1066 980 1171">Terracotta, feeding cup; with cow-faced spout, hand-made, having open wide folded rim, of the receptacle. From a late level of Period II. (KLB-1-2, Reg. No. 21832).</p>                      |

Major excavations in the South Asian context were conducted long ago. At that time, excavators simply documented many such remains as miniature. Their spatial context and scientific analysis were not adequately addressed, although their study could have yielded a significant insight into children's activities, usage processes, and socio-cultural contexts. The wider terracotta assemblage from Kalibangan strengthens this interpretation of childhood material culture. Excavation reports classify terracotta objects into categories including playthings for little children (rattles and whistles), playthings for children (human, animal, and figures, toy carts, wheels, hopscotches, decorated balls), and feeding cups (Bala 2020:1177). These categories demonstrate that childhood was materially recognised within Harappan domestic life ((Marshall, 1931; Vats, 1940; Pratap, 2016). For example, terracotta rattles from Kalibangan, including animal-shaped examples with internal pellets producing

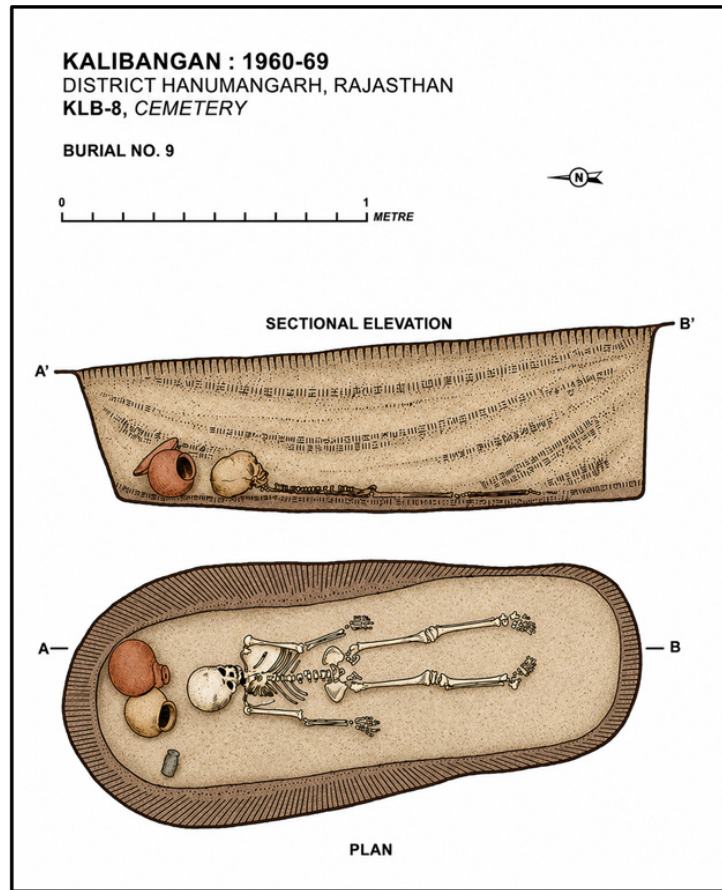
sound, indicate objects specifically designed for sensory engagement and early childhood interaction

The child burials from the Kalibangan constitute an important source of evidence for reconstructing childhood in the Indus Civilization. These burials provide valuable insights into mortuary practices, age-specific funerary treatment, health, and the social recognition of children within Harappan society. The careful documentation of grave architecture, body position, and associated grave goods enables us to investigate the cultural status and lived experiences of children, making the site significant for advancing childhood archaeology in South Asia (Sharma 1999).



KLB-8 Burial no.9

Sources: Lal 2020 Fig. 22.14



KLB-8 Sectional elevation and plan of Burial no.9 ( Redrawn from B.B. Lal [et.al](#) 2020)

At Kalibangan, direct osteological evidence of childhood is comparatively limited. The excavations yielded one securely identified child burial (Burial No. 9) and an isolated deciduous molar preserved within a casket, indicating deliberate treatment of juvenile remains. In addition, several urn burials have been suggested to represent child interments based on their size and mortuary context, although their attribution remains tentative in the absence of preserved skeletal remains. Among these, Burial No. 9 provides the most substantial evidence for investigating childhood. The following section presents a detailed description of the burial, followed by an examination of its pathological characteristics and archaeological significance.

### Burial No. 9

*Table 2: Archaeological Summary and Feature Record for Burial No. 9 Quadrant 1 of Square A7*

| Category                                 | Archaeological Observations & Technical Details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Individual Profile</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Estimated Age:</b> Approximately 8–10 years (Child)</li> <li>• <b>Biological Identity:</b> Immature skeleton</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Grave Location &amp; Dimensions</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Grid Location:</b> Quadrant 1, Square A7</li> <li>• <b>Pit Shape:</b> More or less oblong</li> <li>• <b>Pit Orientation:</b> North–South axis</li> <li>• <b>Dimensions:</b> Length: 1.61 m   Width: 0.58 m</li> <li>• <b>Depth:</b> 0.48 m (to skeleton)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Stratigraphy &amp; Preparation</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Stratigraphic Context:</b> Pit cut through upper brownish cloddy clay into dirty greenish sandy loam</li> <li>• <b>Base Preparation:</b> Thin layer of brownish cloddy clay mixed with greenish sandy soil spread over the base before body deposition</li> <li>• <b>Incline:</b> Skeleton and ceramic grave goods placed on a slight North-to-South downward slope</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Burial Orientation &amp; Position</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Burial Type:</b> Extended inhumation</li> <li>• <b>Body Position:</b> Extended and perfectly supine (face upward)</li> <li>• <b>Articulation State:</b> Skeleton preserved in near-complete anatomical articulation</li> <li>• <b>Head Position:</b> At the north end of the grave pit</li> <li>• <b>Cranial Displacement:</b> Skull lay slightly twisted to the left and slightly displaced from the vertebral column</li> <li>• <b>Gaze / Eye Orientation:</b> Directed toward the South-East, specifically facing Burial No. 8</li> </ul> |

|                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Grave Goods &amp; Ceramics</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Total Ceramics:</b> 4 ceramic vessels accompanying the burial</li> <li>• <b>Small Beaker (1):</b> Placed North-West of the skull, close to the edge of the grave</li> <li>• <b>Vases (3):</b> 2 medium-sized vases and 1 small vase laid on their sides with mouths facing the skull (deliberate arrangement)</li> <li>• <b>Lid / Covering:</b> A bowl or lid rested directly on top of the three vases</li> </ul>                                                                  |
| <b>Skeletal Preservation &amp; Condition</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Anatomical Articulation:</b> Preserved in good anatomical articulation overall</li> <li>• <b>Cranial Condition:</b> Intact and in good condition, except for minor damage at one or two spots</li> <li>• <b>Intact Bones:</b> Frontal, occipital, and right parietal bones fully intact</li> <li>• <b>Pathology / Cracks:</b> Frontal bone exhibits several fine cracks</li> <li>• <b>Morphological Features:</b> Forehead is more or less straight; lambda is prominent</li> </ul> |

This child burial represents one of the most debated cases in South Asian bioarchaeology because the unusually enlarged cranium associated with parallel perforation has been interpreted as evidence of hydrocephalus and possible therapeutic trephination. However, this observation should be approached in light of advancements in palaeopathology and archaeological sciences. The marked enlargement globular appearance of the cranial is consistent with the hydrocephalus, a pathological condition characterized by an abnormal accumulation of the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) within the ventricular system of the brain. In infants and young children where the cranial suture remains unfused, increased intracranial pressure results in progressive cranial expansion, thinking about delayed future closure and the frequent development of accessories (wormian or sutural) bone. Clinically and treated hydrocephalus may produce headache, neurological impairment, development delay, seizures and visual disabilities due to the elevated intracranial pressure (Roberts & Manchester 2010). The presence of numerous wormian bones on the skull of Kalibnangan was noted by Sharma, is therefore compatible with the prolonged intracranial expansion rather than being an isolated anomaly. The three perforation on the right squamous temporal region together with the evidence of localized burning were interpreted by Sharma as primitive surgical intervention intended to relieve intracranial

pressure. If this interpretation is correct, the operation represents an attempt to treat a surviving child suffering from a severe cranial pathology demonstrating empirical and anatomical knowledge and understanding the cranial intervention could alleviate symptoms such an interpretation suggests that Harappan communities not only recognize the pathological condition, but also develop the practical therapeutic response, implying the existence of a specialized healer and a degree of medical experimentation. Nevertheless from a modern biochemical perspective caution is warranted. The absence of detailed microscopic radiographic analysis or C.T. based analysis makes it difficult to determine whether the perforation was produced by *anti-mortem*, *peri-mortem* or *post mortem*. Evidence such as bone remodeling osteogenic response or healing around the margin is essential to establish survival following trephination (Ortner 2003; Roberts & Manchester 2010). The interpretation of their opening as a successful surgical procedure remains Hypothetical.

Comparative evidence further illustrates the diversity of trephination practices. At Burzahom, multiple cranial perforations lacked evidence of healing and have generally been interpreted as post-mortem ritual modifications, possibly associated with ancestor veneration or the production of cranial amulets (Sharma 1967, Basu and Pal, 1980; Sankhyan & Weber, 2001, Fonia 2020: 397-398). Similarly a child from Lothal exhibited a cranial defect on the parietal bone, but there is no evidence of healing suggesting that death occurs shortly after the intervention or that the opening was made after death (Rao 1985). Unlike this example, the Kalibangan case has been proposed as therapeutic because of its association with hydrocephalus, although this remains to be verified. Also global comparison is pertinent as trephination has a long prehistoric history, with documented examples from Neolithic Europe, the Andes, and parts of Africa. Archaeological studies demonstrate that trephination serves multiple purposes including treatment of cranial trauma, relief of intracranial pressure, management of neurological disorders, and ritual or symbolic practices and its function can only be inferred from contextual evidence and evidence of bone healing (Arnott, Finger & Smith, 2003). Therefore, the Kalibangan child should be interpreted within this broader spectrum rather than assuming an exclusively medical purpose.

From a social and cultural perspective, the burial provides important insights into Harappan attitudes towards childhood and care. If the child indeed suffered from chronic hydrocephalus, survival to the age represented by the skeleton would imply prolonged familial and community support despite significant disability. Such care reflects investment in dependent children and suggests that physical impairment did not necessarily result in social exclusion. Moreover, any attempt at cranial intervention even if unsuccessful demonstrates concern for relieving suffering, indicating that illness was actively managed rather than passively accepted. This aligns with broader bioarchaeological concepts

of the “archaeology of care” where survival with severe pathology reflects sustained caregiving within prehistoric communities (Tilley, 2015). If we examine the funerary process of this burial nothing particularly significant emerges. However, it was systematically buried alongside with funeral pots, as Satrupa Bal noted that “belonging to an affluent high strata of the society, bore evidence of plentiful classical Harappan potteries” (Bal 2020: 4). The feeling of affection, care and love towards children is also proved by the finding that a terracotta ball has been kept near it which was probably for the child to play with. Thus, Burial No. 9 is significant not only as a possible example of early cranial surgery but also as evidence for the intersection of disease, caregiving, and medical knowledge in the Harappan civilization. While the further interpretation of the skull as the earliest surgical trephination remains influential, future re-analysis using CT imaging, microstructural examination, and three-dimensional reconstruction would be essential to distinguish therapeutic intervention from ritual modification and to clarify the biological nature of the pathology.

## **VI: Reconstructing the Childhood: Past and Prospects**

Although child archaeology has significantly transformed archaeological perspectives by recognising children as active participants in past societies rather than passively dependent, its application within Indian archaeology remains limited. The principal challenge is not merely the scarcity of material evidence associated with children but the methodology and manner in which such evidence has been documented, interpreted and incorporated into the border archaeological narrative. As subadult children continue to occupy a marginal position in the archeological reconstructing of the Indian past. One of the most significant gaps identified in the study is the limited attention to already existing child burial dating to early historic and medieval periods. Archaeological investigations have generally privileged prehistoric and protohistoric burials mainly the harappan, while later burials often received comparatively limited documentation and interpretation, for instance the pertinent PGW site of Bhagwanpura (IAR, 1975–76: 16–17) and Harsh-ka-Tila IAR, 1987–88: 28–31; 1989–90: 27–32) yielded subadult burials from Ghaggar plain. This tendency reflects a chronological bias in archaeological practice, whereby the perceived research value of a burial is frequently influenced by its antiquity rather than its archaeological and historical potential. Such an approach is problematic because the significance of a burial is not in its age but in the information it can provide regarding childhood health, mortuary practices and social organization. The feeding cup recovered from Kalibangan exemplifies another methodological limitation: while these artifacts have been reported in excavation records, they have rarely been examined within their precise spatial and contextuality setting. Consequently interpretation concerning their function remains largely descriptive, and might have been used differently as

suggested by many scholars (Salisbury et. al 2021:104-111). Without understanding whether feeding cups were recovered from domestic structured courtyard, other activity areas or some different context, it is arduous to reconstruct patterns of infant feeding, childcare practice and household organization. Future research must therefore move beyond typological classification and prioritize contextual and spatial analyses that integrate artifacts with broader archaeological landscape. The study also highlights a persistent methodological challenge concerning the biological sex estimation of skeletal remains. Conventional osteological techniques and methods provide limited reliability for sex determination before puberty, restricting our ability to investigate gendered experiences during childhood. However, this limitation should not justify the exclusion of gender from discussions of childhood. Instead, it calls for the development and application of innovative interdisciplinary approaches combining bioarchaeology, biomolecular analyses, ancient DNA, isotopic studies, and archaeological context to explore the relationship between biological sex and socially constructed gender during childhood. Another issue concerns the preservation and accessibility of subadult skeletal collections. Poor preservation, inconsistent recovery strategies, and the limited availability of skeletal collections for re-analysis continue to constrain bioarchaeological research on children. Unless excavation protocols, curation practices, and collection management is strengthened, opportunities to investigate childhood through skeletal evidence will remain restricted. Furthermore, this study has not explored the potential contribution of rock art to child archaeology, despite its considerable interpretative value. Recent research has suggested that variations in motif size, execution, and artistic practice may reflect the participation of different age groups (Pratap 2024). Just as toys functioned as media for play, learning, and socialization, rock art may also have served as a medium through which knowledge, skills, and cultural traditions were transmitted across generations. Integrating rock art into child archaeology, would therefore broaden our understanding of children's participation in cultural production and learning, beyond funerary and domestic contexts. Ultimately, the future of child archaeology in India depends not only on the discovery of new archaeological evidence but also on a critical reassessment of existing archaeological practices and interpretative frameworks. Greater emphasis must be placed on contextual documentation, spatial analysis, multidisciplinary methodologies, and the re-examination of previously excavated collections. Only through such approaches can children be restored to the archaeological record as active social agents, whose experiences contributed to the cultural, economic, and technological development of past societies, rather than remaining peripheral to archaeological interpenetration.

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