

Ecology, Anxiety, and the Emergence of Gods and Supermen An Ecological–Psychological Theory of Transcendence, Power, and Religious Imagination

Avanindra Singh*

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Abstract

The origin of gods, divine kings, and superhuman figures has traditionally been explained through theology, metaphysics, or purely sociological models. This paper advances an alternative framework grounded in ecology, survival anxiety, and embodied cognition. It argues that concepts such as *atimānav* (superman) and *atindriya mānav* (God) arise not from metaphysical insight but from ecological instability, inequality, and existential insecurity. Societies facing harsh or unpredictable environments externalize control into transcendent figures, while societies with relatively stable ecological conditions—most notably the Indus Valley Civilization—show an absence of divine kingship, monumental temples, and centralized gods. Extending this framework, the paper proposes an ecological inversion model of heaven: paradisiacal afterlives are imagined as sensory opposites of lived environmental suffering (cool and watery heavens in hot regions; warm and comforting heavens in cold climates). Religion is thus interpreted as an adaptive cognitive response to ecological and material conditions rather than an expression of universal metaphysical truth.

Introduction

Human civilizations across time and geography display recurring figures of gods, divine rulers, heroes, and saviors. Classical explanations treat these figures as products of innate religiosity [1], symbolic meaning-making [2], or social cohesion [3]. While these frameworks illuminate important aspects of religious life, they often neglect the material and ecological conditions under which such concepts emerge.

Recent work in cultural materialism and cognitive anthropology suggests that belief systems are shaped by environmental constraints and survival pressures [4,5]. Building on this insight, the present paper argues that transcendental figures emerge primarily as responses to ecological difficulty and social inequality. Gods and supermen function as compensatory cognitive constructs that manage anxiety when material control over life is limited.

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) presents a critical case that challenges the universality of religion and divine authority. Its apparent absence of god-kings and monumental religious structures suggests that transcendence is conditional, not inevitable.

Ecology, Survival Anxiety, and Cognitive Compensation

Ecology shapes cognition. Environmental unpredictability—floods, droughts, extreme heat or cold—creates chronic stress and survival anxiety [6]. Psychological research demonstrates that

uncertainty increases the human tendency to seek patterns, agency, and control, even where none objectively exist [7].

From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety demands resolution through:

Explanation (why suffering occurs),

Control (who governs outcomes),

Predictability (moral or cosmic order),

Hope (reward beyond present conditions).

When material control is insufficient, humans externalize agency into supernatural entities [8,9]. Gods thus function as cognitive stabilizers, not metaphysical discoveries.

The Indus Valley Civilization and the Absence of Transcendence

The Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600–1900 BCE) remains exceptional among early urban cultures. Archaeological evidence indicates advanced urban planning, standardized infrastructure, extensive trade networks, and relatively egalitarian city layouts [10].

Notably absent are:

Royal palaces,

Monumental temples,
 Divine kingship,
 Large-scale weaponry,
 Royal burials or god-statues.

This absence has puzzled scholars accustomed to associating urbanization with centralized religious power [11]. However, from an ecological perspective, the IVC's fertile floodplains, predictable monsoon cycles, and decentralized economic organization reduced survival anxiety. Under such conditions, there was little need to project power into gods or kings. Rather than vertical transcendence, power appears to have been distributed horizontally.

The “Proto-Shiva” Problem and Anachronistic Projection

Attempts to identify certain Indus seals as depicting “Proto-Shiva” exemplify methodological anachronism. The Shiva concept—as ascetic, cosmic destroyer, and yogic deity—develops much later, crystallizing during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods [12].

Similarly, systematic meditative practices (dhyāna, samādhi) are clearly articulated in Buddhist and Jain traditions of the 6th–5th centuries BCE [13], with later codification in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras.

Projecting these later concepts onto the Indus Valley violates basic chronological discipline [14]. A seated posture alone does not imply meditation or divinity. A more parsimonious interpretation is that such figures represent human leisure or social presence within a stable ecological context.

Ecological Stress and the Proliferation of Gods

In contrast to the IVC, civilizations developing under harsh ecological pressures exhibit strong religious hierarchies. Mesopotamia faced unpredictable floods, producing volatile and punitive gods [15].

Egyptian religion reflects deep anxiety about death and afterlife amid ecological dependence on the Nile [16].

Ancient China developed the “Mandate of Heaven” in response to cyclical environmental and political collapse [17].

Ancient Greece, marked by scarcity and conflict, imagined anthropomorphic gods intervening constantly in human affairs [18]. In each case, divine authority correlates with ecological insecurity.

Heaven as Ecological Inversion: A Sensory Compensation Model

A central contribution of this paper is the observation that heaven is imagined as the inverse of lived environmental suffering.

In hot and arid environments, religious traditions describe heaven as:

Cool,
 Shaded,

Flowing with water or nectar.

Islamic Jannah explicitly emphasizes rivers, shade, and freshness [19]. Vedic and later Hindu cosmologies similarly describe cool, abundant celestial realms.

Conversely, in cold or harsh northern climates, afterlife imagery emphasizes:

Warmth,
 Fire-lit halls,
 Feasting and comfort.

Valhalla in Norse mythology exemplifies this thermal inversion [20].

This pattern supports an embodied cognition model: religious imagination is grounded in bodily experience and ecological deprivation [21].

Gods as Embodied and Material Constructs

Gods are not abstract entities; they eat, drink, rest, punish, and reward. Heaven is sensory, not metaphysical. This materiality reveals religion as a bodily response to environmental constraint, rather than a revelation of cosmic truth [5].

Extreme heat produces fantasies of cool nectar; extreme cold produces dreams of warmth. The boiling pan of lived experience generates paradisiacal opposites.

Atimānav and Atindriya Mānav: Power and Compensation

The figures of atimānav (superman) and atindriya mānav (god) differ primarily in degree. Both represent concentrated agency projected outward to resolve helplessness [22,23].

The superman remains within history; the god transcends it. Both emerge where inequality, scarcity, and ecological stress intensify.

Kingship as an Ecological Artifact

Divine kingship often arises where centralized authority is required to manage scarcity and conflict [24]. Kings present themselves as divinely sanctioned to legitimize inequality.

The absence of kings in the Indus Valley suggests that hierarchy is not a natural human destiny but an ecological response.

Implications for the Study of Religion

This ecological–psychological framework reframes religion as:

Historically contingent,
 Materially grounded,
 Anxiety-driven.

Religion persists not because it is universally true, but because anxiety persists [26].

Conclusion

Gods and heavens are not timeless truths but ecological inventions. Where life is stable, humans remain human. Where life becomes harsh, humans imagine transcendence. Heaven is simply what the body lacks most.

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