CA☆ FORUM ON ANTHROPOLOGY IN PUBLIC

Archaeology at the Heart of a Political Confrontation

The Case of Ayodhya[1]

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Despite its recourse to scientific (laboratory) investigations, archaeology is a social science, researching the cultures of past societies through their material culture residues. No social science proceeds in an ideological vacuum, and historians or geographers who claim not to be theoretical may simply be unaware of the conceptual or ideological underpinnings of the paradigms they use. Being "apolitical," in turn, often amounts to an acceptance of the status quo. Thus archaeological methods and paradigms are bound to be ideologically inscribed in some way. Moreover, the past is too important for societies to leave the matter to their academics. The earliest known "history," the Sumerian King List (ca. 2000 B.C.), for instance, was in all likelihood composed at the behest of a ruling dynasty that had usurped power and lacked a Sumerian pedigree. In the postcolonial context, it is often in the process of delineating the past that societies construct their identities. Therefore it is not surprising that archaeological interpretation is prone not only to controversy but also to politicization.

Archaeology has become central to the current conflict over sacred space in the North Indian town of Ayodhya, located on a northern tributary of the Ganga River. There, it has been claimed, a general of Babur (the founder of Mughal rule in India in the sixteenth century) destroyed a temple of the deity Rama in order to build

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a mosque. While political parties that claim to speak for Hindus are demanding the "return" of this site, others deny the existence of historical or archaeological evidence of the destruction of an earlier temple at the site. Since 1950 there have been civil suits filed by Hindus and Muslims claiming entitlement to the site. In 1987 the Supreme Court of India decided that these suits would be grouped together and heard by a special bench of the High Court of Allahabad, sitting in Lucknow. On orders from that court, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been excavating at the site since the beginning of 2003.

I shall outline the political background and show how archaeologists were drawn into this adversarial situation. Then, taking the position that this is no innocent debate about the details of this or that artefact or stratigraphic sequence, I shall attempt to initiate a discussion of why this happened—touching briefly on some of the conceptual baggage of the discipline, on the use of archaeology in a somewhat similar situation 50 years ago, and on what we can expect it to deliver.

The Background

It was in the nineteenth century that the dispute over the site began. If we are to believe the records of the colonial administration, there was a tradition that the mosque at Ayodhya stood on the site of a temple commemorating the birth of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana* who came to be deified as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The British records were based on oral information, and there is no documentation in medieval sources for any such destruction (although sources from that period do speak of the destruction of dozens of other temples by Islamic invaders and rulers [Eaton 2000–2001]). The British had annexed the wealthy state of Awadh (of which Ayodhya was the capital until 1740) in 1856. Long before that, however, they had (in 1819) taken control of the civic and revenue affairs of the town of Ayodhya even while Awadh was recognized as a sovereign state. Several matters, including this annexation and the disaffection of Indian soldiers, precipitated an uprising which spread across northern and central India in 1857 and 1858. During this rebellion, the British were besieged for five traumatic months in Lucknow, then the capital of Awadh. This siege united Muslims and Hindus, as did the uprising in general, with all rebels recognizing Bahadur Shah as their ruler—with the result that a British official noted that this was one occasion when "we could not play off the Mohammedans against the Hindus" (Bipan Chandra, Tripathi, and De 1972:45). Surprised by the uprising and thoroughly shaken by the massacres, especially because in Awadh "1857" was much more than just a soldiers' mutiny, British officials turned against the Muslims. After regaining control over Awadh, they ransacked the palaces of its nawab, spoke of Muslims as ferocious fanatics, and curtailed their recruitment into the administrative services (Metcalf 1965:298–301).

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Early British histories of India insisted on an inbuilt and universal antagonism between Hindus and Muslims, a position contested by many historians today. True, religion had not been totally separate from politics in precolonial times, when the prestige of ruling dynasties could, on occasion, be closely tied to the temples that they endowed or patronized. Yet royal cults were not mere contests or confrontations between sects and religions. There were overlapping interests. For instance, Van der Veer (1997 [1988]) shows that in Ayodhya (Hindu) Shaivite militant ascetics fought in the armies of the Shiite (Muslim) nawabs and were ousted in the eighteenth century by other militant Hindu ascetics, devotees of Rama, who in their turn came to receive the patronage of the nawabs.

Bipan Chandra (1984:240–49) documents about half a dozen official statements, recorded between 1858 and Independence (1947) by secretaries of state in India and politicians in Britain, concerning the threat that would be presented to British rule if Indians were to unite. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the secretary of state was informing the viceroy, for instance, that if the religious communities of India were united in thought and action it would be "very dangerous politically" and that civic strife, though "administratively tiresome," was "the least risky." Agreeing with Tagore that "Satan cannot enter until he finds a flaw," Bipan Chandra does not generalize that British policy was a cause of religious antagonisms; he notes nevertheless that the policy of *divide et impera* pronounced by Elphinstone in 1858 was a subtle one, involving turning a blind eye here, stoking a conflict there, and ignoring inflammatory statements when convenient. We also need to remember that British administration in India proceeded on certain practices—such as population censuses and the application of the law according to religion and community, not to speak of the later practice of acknowledging particular individuals as spokesmen for certain religious groups in political matters—that accentuated or even structured religious and caste differences. This meant that groupings that had been "fuzzy" and fluid, with blurs and overlaps, gave way to either this or that as a person's fixed identity (Shodhan 2001).

The conflict over the site of the mosque built in Babur's time began,[3] as far as the administrators' records show, around 1853, when Hindu ascetics seized the precinct, claiming that it was the site of an early temple on the *janmabhumi* (birthplace); a Muslim counteroffensive was followed by attempts at a compromise. During the uprising of 1857, it is recorded, the heads of the Nirbani ascetic sect at the Hanumangarhi temple in Ayodhya gave shelter to several British families (Srivastava 1991b:24–25, 45–46); in 1859 one of the ascetics took over part of the precinct of the mosque, building a platform there to mark the claimed sacred birthplace, and got away with it. Such events, together with the bias of

British officialdom, could have fed the belief that the mosque was built after the destruction of a temple, and by 1860 official British reports were recording that Babur's general had destroyed an ancient temple and had used its stone pillars for the mosque. (Having once given credence to this and the oral traditions [Van der Veer 1997 (1988):36], Van der Veer later remarked [1994:161] that he and Bakker [1986], the author of the authoritative work on the textual material about Ayodhya, had been naïve to accept the local traditions in British records at face value.) It is also significant that by 1900 the Nirbani sect had become the wealthiest of all the Vaishnava sects in Ayodhya, having received lands from the British as a reward for their loyalty in 1857; by 1900 they were doing well in trade and moneylending (Srivastava 1991b:44).

To see how tradition can be more construction than something preexistent, let us look at another instance. Having read in an excavation report about an old and persistent cult of the goddess of seafarers at and around the Harappan site of Lothal near the Gulf of Khambat, in Gujarat in western India (see Rao 1979:134–35), and having seen a recently built cement structure on the site (with the name of the deity inscribed on it) in the 1970s, I asked local people if I could question some elders about the goddess. Many informants confirmed the existence of the cult but said that the elders would not have any more extensive information to give me. When I persisted in asking how, then, they knew about this deity, all replied that they had learned about it from the officers of the ASI (during the years when the excavations were going on). Thus, when hearsay comes from people in authority and then gains entry into written records, a tradition, if not history, can be created. Moreover, at Ayodhya other spots too have been claimed as the birthplace of Rama, as scholars and journalists recorded in the 1980s and 1990s, and oral traditions about important Rama temples lying under two Mughal-period mosques have aroused little zeal for rehabilitation in spite of the fact that those mosques are now in ruins (Srivastava 1991a:48).

In 1949, after a nine-day continuous reading of the *Ramayana*, idols of Rama and his consort Sita were surreptitiously placed in the mosque precinct, and as crowds gathered the police locked the premises. The district magistrate refused to remove the idols, claiming that that would cause violence; he had, before locking the precinct, asked the imam of the mosque to leave (Srivastava 1991b:15).[4] Prime Minister Nehru was deeply disturbed. A series of civil suits was filed between 1950 and 1961 by Hindus and Muslims, each claiming title to the property.

Ill-advisedly attempting to win over aggressive sections of Hindus after having surrendered to the wishes of conservative Muslims over the rights of divorced Muslim women, Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister allowed the removal of the locks on the precinct in 1986 to facilitate

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3. Much of the information that follows in this section comes from Gopal (1991)—especially Srivastava (1991a) and Panikkar (1991)—and Srivastava (1991b).

4. He was later to become a member of Parliament for the Jana Sangh Party (Noorani 1991:72), the precursor of the present Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP.

Hindu worship. Henceforth Muslims were not permitted to pray there. While this order was being appealed, a movement arose advocating the building of a temple for Sri Rama at the site. When in 1989–90 Gandhi's successor, V. P. Singh, attempted to push through a bill reserving 27% of government jobs for certain backward castes, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stepped up the temple campaign. Its president rode, in 1990, in a Toyota truck dressed up as a temple chariot (*ratha*) on a campaign from Gujarat to the northern plains in a *yatra*[5] that incited street clashes and left a trail of deaths. When its leader was arrested in Bihar, the BJP withdrew from the coalition government at the centre, bringing Singh's tenure to an end. Finally, in 1992, with the Congress Party back in power, the administration did nothing to control a mob that had gathered at Ayodhya, and the mosque came down. Three leaders of the BJP who are now cabinet ministers, including the deputy prime minister, were present at the demolition and were accused of inciting this act of vandalism. Meanwhile, the title suit is being heard in Lucknow by a special bench with instructions from the Supreme Court to sit every day and expedite the matter. Archaeologists and historians have appeared there to testify for one side or the other.

Before we proceed, we should consider the current political climate. Two instances may suffice. In 1999, on the occasion of a solar eclipse, the then-BJP government of the northern hill state of Himachal Pradesh ordered offices to close, thereby taking us back into medieval superstition masquerading as religious tradition. Throughout 2002 controversy raged over new textbooks published by the National Council for Educational Research and Training. (The minister in charge, incidentally, was one of those accused in the mosque vandalization case.) In the *Social Sciences Textbook for Class VI* (eleven-year-olds) there is a chapter on Vedic civilization in which (p. 89) children are told that in that era (1500 to 500 B.C.) there was punishment by "expulsion from the kingdom or by death" for the killing of cows. In fact, no part of Vedic literature is prescriptive. It is made up of hymns, incantations, and sacred formulae for propitiating various deities, prose explanations and commentaries on these rituals, and metaphysical texts on introspection and contemplation. Reward and punishment are discussed only in the later Dharmashastras, in which, incidentally, the five major sins do not include cow slaughter (Roy 2003). (At the same time, there is archaeological evidence at several first-millennium B.C. sites for the cooking of beef, Vedic hymns refer to the sacrifice of cattle, perhaps with the exception of fertile cows, and in the great epic the *Mahabharata* cows were slaughtered to welcome honoured guests [Lad 1983:4].)

Excursus

When, early in the twentieth century, M. K. Gandhi, who insisted that religion was a personal affair, spoke about Rama-rajya (using an epic metaphor for the ideal state of affairs that came to prevail after the epic hero had been reinstated on the throne of Ayodhya), he had earned the right to do so. Gandhi read extensively on all the faiths of the world and fearlessly discussed his subjective reactions to certain prescriptive texts, his emotional involvement with the message of the *Gita*, and his disquiet with the noise and ambience of certain temples. But the Ayodhya battle being fought in the name of Rama represents, to my mind, not religiosity but the co-optation by politicians of religious identity. The *ratha* which launched the Ayodhya temple-building campaign was painted with the symbol of the political party, and it was a politician, not the idol of a deity, who rode in it. For many Hindus, traditional and modern, this was an affront and a sacrilege. The politician who rode in it as the leader of "the Hindus" claimed that he saw religiosity shining in the eyes of people. Significantly, when asked by the press about the book that had left the most lasting impression on him, he said it was Dale Carnegie's bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People.*

No one would deny that the epic narratives constitute a cultural resource that penetrates the day-to-day lives of Indians—that apart from recitations and enactments the epics have inspired modern literature and art, not to mention the themes of Hindi cinema, and have had enormous viewer rates when serialized on state television. Nor can we deny that in a sense violence may be built into the religious procession and that the religious divide is not entirely a recent phenomenon (Van der Veer 1994: 123–24). Processions and public rituals have contributed to group consciousness and claims of superiority, especially when they were associated with royal patronage. Hayden (2002) shows that the tolerance a scholar may perceive in the sharing of sacred sites may well be attributable to the fact that no group can dominate or eliminate the others. Yet there were also traditions of genuine sharing of sacred space by people who did not worship in them *as* Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs (Lahiri 2002), and there was not always a clear distinction between what we call the Hindu and Muslim faiths or their rural shrines (Eaton 1993, Khan 1997, Assayag 2003).[6] Also, whether rulers of one faith destroyed the shrines of other groups or encouraged or financed their construction depended on the political circumstances. The Hindus of Ayodhya were Brahmin *pandas* (ritual specialists) and ascetics (Tyagis, Naga *sadhus*, and Rasiks), and, as we have seen, some of these sects received patronage from the Shiite nawabs of Oudh.

Violent confrontations between religious groups are the culmination of processes that begin by instilling anxieties in people's minds and sowing suspicion and resentment of other religions. Thereafter a religion comes

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5. Normally a *yatra* occurs on a festive occasion. The idol of a temple is clad in fine fabrics and adorned with jewellery and taken out in procession in a temple chariot. Hundreds join to pull the chariot through the streets, and even those denied entry to the temple can gain a glimpse of the deity.

6. And this is not necessarily syncretism in the true sense.

to be portrayed as endangered, rumours are fanned, and one or another cultural practice becomes a fetish. Street frenzy comes as a kind of climax. Such processes occur in the contexts of social change and severe identity crises, and we cannot overlook the appropriations of real estate, the business rivalries, and the electoral calculations that go with them. (While the mosque was being vandalized in 1992, the houses of hundreds of poor Muslim residents of the town were burned or demolished.) Thus it would be simplistic, if not incorrect, to ascribe the Ayodhya conflict to "religion."

With this background in mind, let us now move to the role of archaeological evidence in the dispute.

The Archaeological Dispute

The "prehistory" of the archaeological dispute over Ayodhya lies in a research project undertaken in the 1970s by B. B. Lal, a retired director-general of the ASI, to explore the remains of settlements mentioned in the two major epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (for the most recent version see Lal 2002), and the debate over the origin of some black stone pillars with carvings, clearly not Islamic, that had been used in the construction of the mosque. The aim of the project on the epics was to gauge their historicity by studying the settlements connected with the events. Ayodhya, where Rama's father had ruled as king and Rama was born, was one such settlement. The density of the current built-up area of the town necessitated that excavation be scattered in 14 different places. As for the stone pillars, no one had been able to establish conclusively that they came from a Vaishnava (specifically a Rama) temple.

In the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology* (Ghosh 1989) the entry on Ayodhya, written by Lal, makes no mention of traces of any temple in the trenches dug near the mosque. However, in 1990 a few archaeologists joined the movement that was demanding the "return" of three sacred sites—Ayodhya, Mathura, and Varanasi—to their "original" Hindu owners so as to correct the perceived errors of former times. No one denies a professional archaeologist the right to join a political movement, but eyebrows were raised when, at this particular juncture, claims emerged that traces of a temple had indeed been found during the excavations of the 1970s. One of the trenches at Ayodhya, it was now said, contained two rows of rectangular bases made of brickbats. It was argued that these were the supports of the stone pillars of a temple destroyed in order that the mosque be built (Gupta n.d.:6; Sharma et al. n.d., reiterated in Lal 2002). This trench had not hitherto been discussed—or even illustrated with a photograph—in any of the ASI's annual reports. It was further claimed that when the debris of the mosque was being cleared and the land around the structure was being levelled, stone sculptures and architectural pieces indicative of a Rama temple had come to light (Sharma et al. n.d.) and that a large in-

scribed stone slab had been found inside the mosque during demolition.[7]

A rebuttal was published in 1993 by an experienced excavator (Mandal 2002 [1993]) who used a recently published trench photograph (fig. 1) to show that the alleged "pillar bases" did not belong to the same stratum. It was clear from the photograph that one rectangle of broken bricks stood on a floor that sealed another floor or stratum. The "pillar bases" could not possibly have been associated with the same floor and could not, then, have been part of the same building. By the simple expedient of drawing lines along the edges of the "pillar bases" on the photograph, it was, furthermore, shown that there were no rows, let alone two parallel rows, of such features. There has been no rejoinder to date to this critique of the stratigraphy. Mandal also questioned the validity

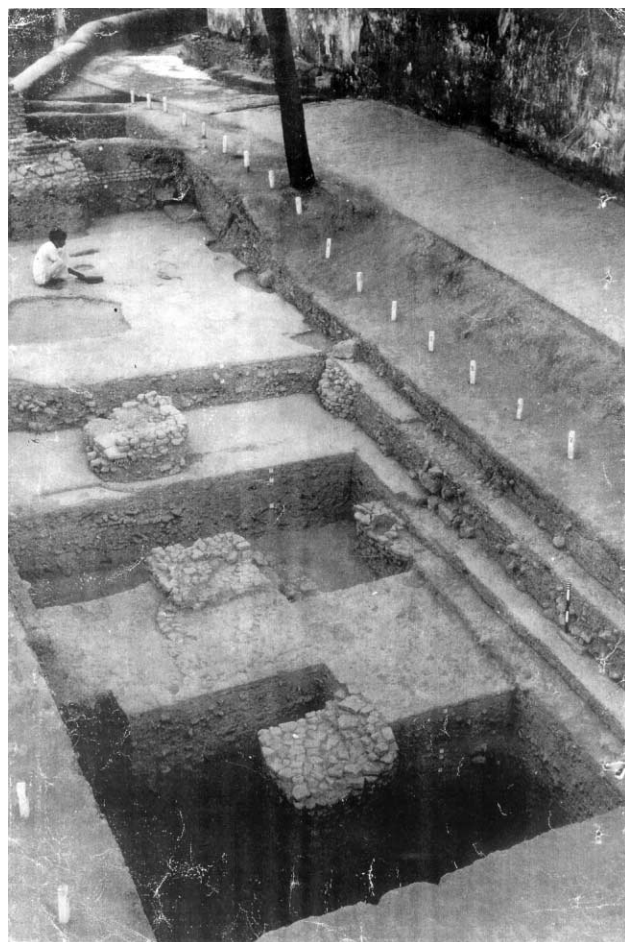7. A lengthy discussion appears under the heading "Evidence for the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir" on the web site *Nation of Hindutva*, dated 1998. http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/9089.

FIG. 1. *Trench at Ayodhya with alleged "pillar bases" (Mandal 2002 [1993]).*

as archaeological evidence of finds that had been made during bulldozing and during acts of mob violence.

The circumstances and content of the argument for a temple and the political context in which they have developed leave no doubt that archaeology has been co-opted by some Indians to push sectarian agendas. It has become part of a majoritarian movement that seeks to divide citizens on the basis of their religious affiliation, and in the process, it appears, its aims have been forgotten. In a note on the excavations at Ayodhya (www.wac.uct.ac.za/croatia/lal.htm) for the World Archaeological Congress in Croatia in 1998, B. B. Lal, former director-general of the ASI, defends both his position on the archaeology of the epics and his interpretation of the "pillar-base" trench. He has every right to do so, but in his concluding paragraph he says of the mosque: "It is well known that the mosque had no architectural pretensions whatsoever. It must have been for this very reason that no director general of the Archaeological Survey of India, right from the days of Sir John Marshall, ever thought of including it in the list of 'protected monuments.'"[8] He goes on to argue,

> And if in spite of the foregoing we are enthusiastic about the reconstruction of the mosque, how do we go about it? The mosque has been completely erased. Thus, it will have to be done de novo. As per archaeological principles, we ought to reconstruct the mosque exactly as it was and not just any mosque. Can we achieve this? The answer is a big "No."

Stating that neither the plans nor the materials to build a replica of the mosque are available, Lal concludes:

> If we do not do that [construct an exact replica] we would be distorting history and doing a great injustice to the pride of the great Mughal who wanted to remind the vanquished of the event by putting up those pillars from the destructed Hindu temple against the piers of the mosque. Let us think twice before taking a plunge.

The Courts

The combined civil suit, *OOS No. 4 of 1989, Sunni Central Board of Waqfs, UP and Others (Plaintiffs) v. Gopal Singh Visharad (now deceased) and Others*, which concerns the ownership of the disputed site, is being heard on certain issues framed by the court. Among these issues are whether the structure was actually a mosque

8. The Constitution of India, pt. 4, art. 49, states: "It shall be the obligation of the State to protect every monument or place or object of artistic or historic interest, declared by or under law made by Parliament to be of national importance, from spoliation, disfigurement, destruction, removal, disposal or export, as the case may be." This article grants official bodies the power to make local rules to protect monuments; it is a piece of legislation that empowers officialdom. It does not grant anyone the right to vandalize monuments that are not listed for protection.

(whether the stone pillars in it have images of Hindu deities and thereby belie its Islamic character), whether Muslims have been in possession of the property since 1528, whether the site has been a place of Hindu pilgrimage since ancient times, and, relevant to this discussion, whether the structure was constructed on the site of a temple after the demolition of the latter.

A legal dispute is structured on precise evidence, in this case mainly archaeological. Now that the court has ordered the ASI to make fresh excavations at the site, the matter will turn on walls, wall collapse, the levels from which foundation trenches were dug, pits and the floors that seal those pits, and so on. This will be a major stumbling block for those—academics included—who see religious antagonism as inevitable, for those who assert that matters that are timeless and divine have no place for historical documentation or chronology, and for those who repeatedly use the cliché of the "injured Hindu psyche" in public and private debate as justification for the demolition and the expected building of a new temple on the site.

In any case, protagonists of both views had deposed as witnesses (in hearings to which the public was denied admission) before the excavation was ordered by the court. A strange situation has thus come about. An archaeological controversy will now be decided by the courts, and the rules of argument have in a sense changed. Experts may well depose in court, but it is the trial lawyer who assimilates the evidence and structures the argument, deciding what is crucial and what is incidental. The trial lawyer must be well enough acquainted with the field to be aware of how the subject is changing, not be distracted by jargon, and detect untruths and inconsistencies in the archaeologists' testimony. And it is the trial lawyer who translates the knowledge of archaeology and history into the framework of law, another discipline altogether. The "true factual position" that lawyers seek is thus no longer in the hands of the academics: the past will, in a sense, now be (re-)written by the court under the sanction of law.

Discussion

In analysing the situation in terms of the discipline of archaeology, we may begin with the "prehistory" described above, the pursuit of the literal truth of the epics. The epic narratives were transmitted in oral form for centuries, however, and they have come to us, highly "inflated," in written manuscripts that are no earlier than A.D. 1000. Where a tradition has developed and acquired accretions and interpolations over a period of centuries, it is not very meaningful to look for the "kernel" of events in one or another archaeological period without devising a methodology for sifting through the text itself. (I shall not elaborate here on the point that the version ascribed to Valmiki is often projected as the national and authentic epic even though many others have been current through the centuries or on the fact that the epics are not reflections of the concerns of ancient society in

general but heroic narratives centred on the lives and social values of aristocratic warrior Kshatriya families.) Leaving aside the futility of attempts to demonstrate the historical accuracy of the Old Testament or the *Iliad*, such a project would have benefited from critical scrutiny of the scholarship on the epics (see Sankalia 1973 and Lad 1983) and the associated written evidence (see Bakker 1986). The text material is not self-evident. There is a Buddhist narrative that identifies Rama and Sita with the ruling family of Kashi, not Ayodhya; Guruge (1988: 9–17), pointing out that this Buddhist text has a verse in common with the *Ramayana*, suggests that there was an early "floating" literature from which both traditions derived. This floating literature would have been largely bardic, so that even though the *Ramayana* of Valmiki is a carefully crafted poem, stock phrases and catchwords remain in the verses (pp. 19–29). It also appears that present-day Ayodhya was called "Saket" in ancient times, acquiring its present name (and an identity as the city of Dasharatha and his son, Rama) only when it became a centre of the cult of Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu. This occurred, Bakker (1986) finds, when the imperial Guptas transferred their capital to Saket sometime after A.D. 400 and began to promote the cult. That the present town of Ayodhya was associated with a cult of Rama before the fifth century, therefore, is uncertain.

Sankalia and Lad have, I think, shown that one way to correlate text and archaeological remains is to search the respective critical editions (which have isolated the oldest manuscript material of the epics) for diagnostic elements—not the exaggerated descriptions of a city or of the weaponry used by the adversaries (Sankalia emphasizes the transformation of adversaries into demons in the *Ramayana* and the ultimate transformation of Rama into a deity as signals that we cannot seek the literal truth) but matters such as the (yellow) silk sari worn by Sita, Rama's signet ring (so crucial to the plot), and the significant absence of idol worship.[9] Seeking to discover stages in the development of the epic by reference to such material, Sankalia comes to the conclusion that the narrative took its final shape around the fifth century A.D. (although the initial events date to the first millennium B.C.). He suggests that the version ascribed to Valmiki acquired many subsequent inputs in the period 200 B.C. to A.D. 300. No such critical sifting of textual material seems to have been integral to Lal's "archaeology of the epics."

It is time we initiated a discussion of the curious neglect of the teaching of cultural anthropology to students of archaeology in Indian universities. Alongside subjects such as prehistory and protohistory, environmental archaeology, physical anthropology, archaeological chem-

istry, and geology, etc., university curricula more often than not include a heavy component of ancient Indian political history, epigraphy, art and architectural history, numismatics, and religion. In fact, the major university departments that I know of are named departments of "archaeology and ancient Indian history and/or culture." Certainly, ancient Indian history and culture are extremely important, and we have seen archaeological hypotheses fail that were constructed without reference to later times and traditions. Yet such organization of curricula implies that archaeological data will help establish "our" old lineages of culture. Should archaeology not also nudge us into enquiries about *other* peoples, "other" because they were living in times and conditions quite different from our own? For one thing, viewing prehistoric societies as necessarily "Indian" opens up the huge question, frequently contested today in the social sciences and in literature, of what constitutes Indianness.[10]

Emphasis on familiarity with sites and antiquities, in turn, is certainly important, but fieldwork needs to be placed in the context of academic problems. Moreover, the person who has found the latest collection of seals or burials cannot be given the last word on the subject of seals or burials, for the latest is so only until the next discovery is made. In addition, the interpretation of prehistoric societies as different from ours requires suitable tools of analysis. In this context, I know of no archaeology department in the country[11] in which a qualified cultural anthropologist (or any archaeologist, for that matter) teaches the theory of pre-class social structures, religions other than Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, pre-market economies, or political institutions such as chiefdoms. There are no prescribed readings or lectures on orality (in contradistinction to literacy) or the oral transmission of narrative, let alone on the characteristics of ancient epics as a narrative form.[12] As I have shown elsewhere (Ratnagar 1998:40–49), archaeologists engaging in ethno-archaeology have often made the objectionable assumption that certain rural groups in India represent the Stone Age and have seen no change since prehistoric times.

Connected with such empiricism is a survival of Orientalist thought. In the current political climate scholars are increasingly giving voice to the idea that cultural

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9. Sita is the only protagonist who is clad in a *kausheya vastra* or silk cloth (sari)—the others wear linen—and because of its yellow colour her sari shines. The issue for Sankalia is the dates of the Chinese silk imports and the production of silk in India. Rama's ring had his name inscribed on the bezel; the archaeological record suggests that it was the Bactrian Greeks who introduced this ornament to northern India. As for idol worship, it dates to the early centuries of the Christian era.

10. How "Indian," for example, was the Harappan civilization that extended into the high mountains of Afghanistan but not into the lower Ganga plain?

11. The chief departments are, to my knowledge, located at Pune, Baroda, Allahabad, Varanasi, Chennai, Dharwad, and Tirupati(?); there is also the ASI's School of Archaeology in Delhi. (The Benares Hindu University, Varanasi, offers an introductory course in anthropology, physical and cultural, which introduces the concepts of culture, evolutionism and diffusionism, and the distribution, subsistence, and material culture of tribes in India, and in Pune there is a generally descriptive course in ethno-archaeology—but that is as far as it goes, on the whole.) Many dynamic young archaeologists fully appreciate the need to study cultural anthropology, but with resource cuts and decades-old neglect of the subject in India, the lacuna cannot be easily filled.

12. Many departments of anthropology in India, however, require students to take one course (out of a total of, say, eight) on prehistoric archaeology.

anthropology and allied disciplines are unsuitable for the Indian context because the uniqueness of Indian civilization renders the universalizing social science approach invalid. It is said that Western academic traditions, being rooted in modernity, focus on the physical and material and overlook the spirituality that constitutes the vitality of Indian civilization. As an editorial in the journal of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla would have it, archaeology and anthropology cannot reach "the heart and soul of Indian culture" (Editorial 1999). Indian archaeology in its "Indological" mould has not sloughed off its preoccupation with India as a land of enduring traditions. It has often been repeated that people in Sind today use a bullock cart like the one used in Harappan times. Yet a phenomenon common to the twentieth century B.C. and the twentieth century A.D. cannot be ascribed to a continuing tradition unless we can document its existence through the intervening centuries: traditions survive only in their practice and cannot be put into cold storage to be resurrected now and again. Perhaps it is not tradition that makes the two phenomena alike but similar constraints of raw material, tools and technology, etc.

Carrying a heavy Indological legacy, Marshall wrote in the first excavation report of the Harappan site Mohenjo-daro (1931:vii) that the Indus religion was "so characteristically Indian as hardly to be distinguishable from still living Hinduism." This set the trend for numerous interpretations of the Indus religion. Almost inevitably, when Munshi was writing about the famous Shaivite temple of Somnath in the 1950s (1976 [1951]:1–2) he cited a particular set of Mohenjo-daro seals on which Marshall had (I think wrongly) identified Pashupati, a form of Shiva. Inferring that Shiva was "worshipped five thousand years ago in the Indus valley . . . as Pashupati," Munshi then claimed that the shrine of Somnath was "certainly prehistoric." Such linkages and claims to antiquity continue to be made also by Jains and Buddhist Dalits,[13] who for their part interpret this so-called Pashupati figure as Tirthankara and an early Buddha, respectively.

The way archaeology is taught, then, combined with its technicalities, the absence of theoretical understanding of premodern societies, and, most important, the insistence on India as spiritually unique and with undying traditions, impedes the required distancing of the enquirer from the object of enquiry.

But how has bare-bones archaeology, without its jargon, media hype, or claims to long lineages of tradition, served the public cause in matters of urgency? This question is particularly relevant today because of the ASI's current excavations at the disputed site. Van der Veer (1994:146–51) has brought to our attention the relevance to the Ayodhya issue of the case of the Somnath temple. In the public imagination this important Shaivite centre is connected with the wrong perpetrated on the Hindu religion by the Muslim invader Mahmud of Ghazni in

13. Many Dalits, formerly treated as untouchables, have over the past few decades converted to Buddhism.

the eleventh century. Soon after Independence a kind of redressal was attempted with the building of a new temple at Somnath. Van der Veer states that the excavation of this temple precinct filled some gaps in the historical sources, but it needs to be added that it raised unexpected questions.

Although the historical evidence of repeated Muslim destructions of the temple of Somnath of Prabhas on the south coast of Saurashtra (Gujarat) is equivocal (as Romila Thapar has said at numerous conferences [publication awaited]), it has repeatedly been said that the destruction was a "historic injustice." Munshi pressed the view, soon after Independence, that "Indians" would not really feel free until the temple was rebuilt (1976 (1951): 90): "It was . . . a symbolic projection of the unexpressed wish of myriads of hearts of all generations who yearned for Somanatha's resurrection." The decision to reconstruct the shrine was announced in 1947, and in 1949 an advisory committee convened by the director-general of the ASI resolved that the precinct would be systematically excavated in order to ascertain the sequence of construction and the identity of this structure as the temple that Mahmud of Ghazni had looted and vandalized in A.D. 1025 and the twelfth-century ruler of Gujarat, Kumarpal, had rebuilt or restored. After a first bout of digging proved unsatisfactory, B. K. Thapar of the ASI was deputed to make another set of soundings. He did so in September-October 1950, and on October 19 the shrine was demolished to make way for a new one, to the displeasure of many scholars. After the rebuilding of the temple it was claimed that the collective subconscious of India had been reassured.

The excavation of the Somnath temple was said (Munshi 1976 [1951]:144) to have "proved beyond doubt that the temple has stood on the same spot for over 1,500 years." Thapar (1976 [1951]) dug trenches under the *garbagriha* (sanctum) and the *mandapa* (the hall that stood before it), both of these down to natural soil, and a third trench connecting them. The excavations uncovered stone walls and their foundation pits with rubble packing, stone plinths in successive phases, successive bases for the icon (the *linga*), a few pillar bases, and carved stone sculptures and embellishments. From the time of the lowest level onward, there was a water outlet in the same place in the north wall of the sanctum. This is an essential feature for rituals in a *linga* sanctuary and the clearest indication that there were three successive rebuildings of the sanctum and three successive floors.

Thapar's report is difficult to understand because it describes the sequence in terms of both phases and temples. The published section (dated April 1951) of the sanctum trench (fig. 2) shows three phases. Temple 5, the structure that was demolished in 1950, dates to the latest phase, III, and stood above temple 4 of phase II. The distinction between temples 3, 2, and 1 of phase I is unclear. The red stone foundations of the sanctum of temple 3 go deep into the natural soil, and within it the stone base for the *linga* also goes as deep. Two ground surfaces are ascribed to temples 2 and 1 on the section, and a retaining-wall remnant some 6 metres south of the
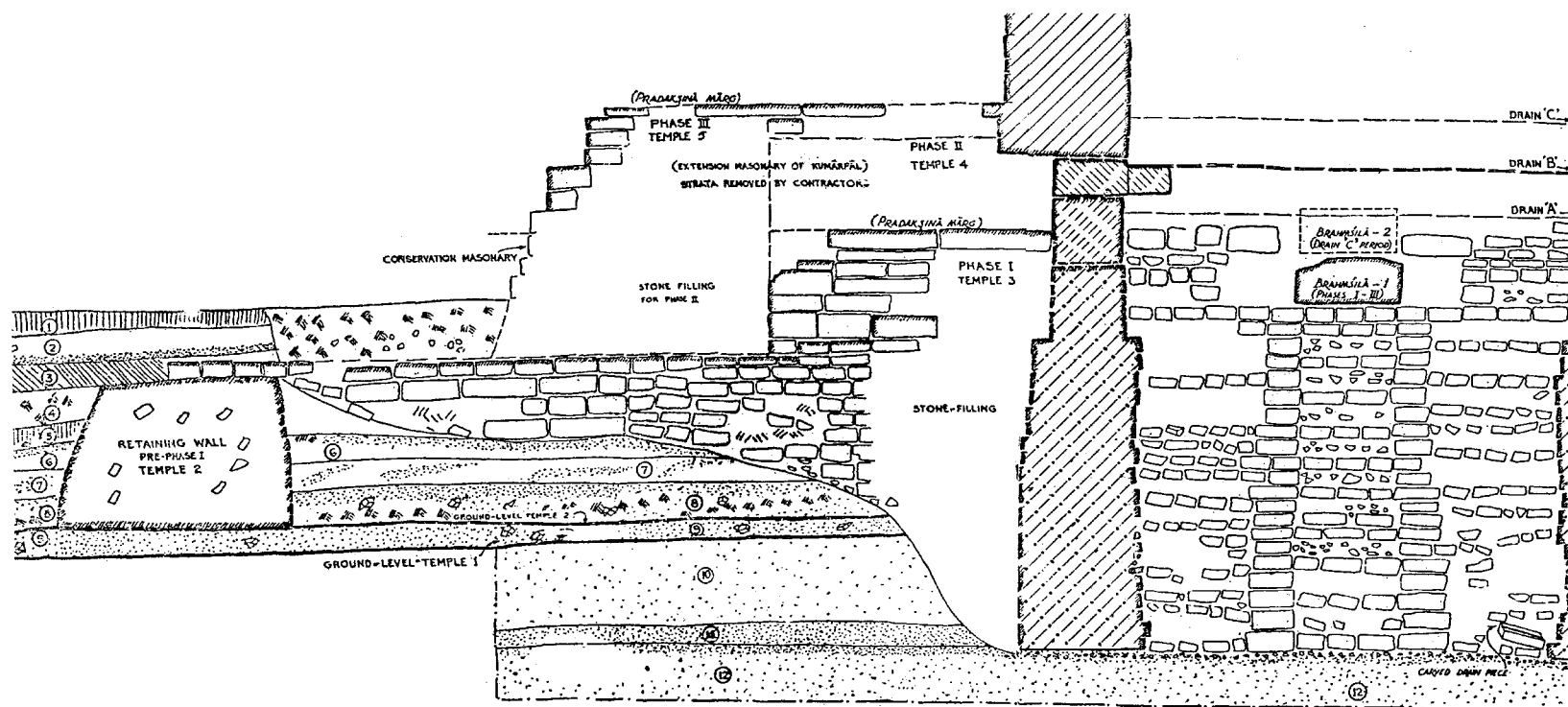
FIG. 2. *Part of a section across the sanctum of the Somnath temple, looking west (adapted from Thapar 1976 [1951]). The variously cross-hatched areas, from the top, represent (1) the Kumarpal temple, built in A.D. 1169 (phase III, temple 5, contemporary with drain "B"); (2) the Bhoj-Bhim temple, built in A.D. 1030 (phase II, temple 4, contemporary with drain "B"); (3) the temple destroyed by Sultan Mahmud in A.D. 1026 (phase I, temple 3, contemporary with drain "A"); and (4) Kanjur stone fill. The retaining wall at left is of Kanjur stone with weathered surfaces. The remains of temple 1 consist only of debris. Drain "C" was created in the fifteenth century A.D.*

sanctum is overlaid with the paving stones of temple 3 and therefore ascribed to temple 2, but no sanctum walls or interior floors are ascribed to the two earliest temples. The *mandapa* plinth and the steps of temple 3 (phase I) bore marks of destruction; there were patches of floor that were charred, and an enclosure wall on the sea face had apparently been demolished, for a phase II wall stood on the sloping debris of an earlier wall. It was the *mandapa* foundations of temple 5 (and for some reason not of the white stone temple 4, constructed directly on top with a new *linga*) that contained a filling of broken architectural pieces and broken stone sculptures indicating the demolition of an earlier structure. In the debris was part of a *shikhara* or carved temple pinnacle (Munshi 1976 [1951]:74, 97). Meanwhile, some recarved *shikhara* pieces were used in the plinth and other carved pieces were reused as the steps of temple 5. (No sanctum plinth remains from temple 4, phase II.)

In an inscription found at Prabhas Patan, Kumarapala, a ruler of Gujarat after A.D. 1144, says that he repaired a temple that had become "dilapidated"; he also refers to the rebuilding of a temple [the same one?] that had been "destroyed" (Munshi 1976 [1951]:145–51). Because of the evidence of destruction mentioned above and some architectural characteristics of the eleventh century[14] present in the phase II structure, Thapar was confident that the phase I structure (temple 3), perhaps dating from the eighth century, was the one destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni, that phase II was probably a short-lived post-Mahmud construction, and that the phase III structure (temple 5) was built by Kumarapala around 1169 with a new orientation and plan. But there is no "proof," no definitive excavated evidence, for this interpretation. An inscribed stone dated on palaeographic grounds to the period of Valabhi rule (A.D. 480–767) in the masonry of the last temple (5) and a stone dating around A.D. 1590 in the same structure can hardly be treated as evidence of destruction by Mahmud of Ghazni; we have seen that temple 3 bears only a few signs of destruction and debris was packed in the foundations of temple 5, not 4.

Secondly, the walls of the sanctum of temple 5 ascribed to Kumarapala (phase III) stood in place until the demolition of 1950—this in spite of statements by historians about the attack of Ala-ud-din Khalji in the late thirteenth century, the destruction said to have been wrought by Mahmud Begda in 1459, and the alleged conversion of the structure into a mosque during the rule of Aurangzeb (d. 1707). In fact, Thapar states—and Munshi (1976 [1951]: 93) agrees—that a Persian source of 1760 makes no reference to the building's having been used as a mosque. Instead, he refers to the neglect of the temple and the placement on its roof of heavy British artillery as a defence for the neighbouring port of Veraval in 1838. For his part Munshi mentions (p. 65) having seen a soldier's pony tethered inside the precinct on his first visit in 1922. There was therefore indifference and neglect of the sanctuary for

over a century at least, and not all of its decay can be ascribed to Muslim invasions or attacks.

There is yet another unanswered question that arises from Thapar's report. He found that some flooring stretched north beyond the floor of the *mandapa* of phase I, and beneath this northern flooring he found a 4-inch packing of "lime-pebble accumulation" on top of a floor of Kanjur stone. He could not say what relation these strata had with the temple but referred to them as pre-phase I (Thapar 1976 [1951]:123–24). In the sanctum trench, moreover, he found that the foundations of the eighth-century temple 3 stood in a pit packed with carved stones and other debris. He notes (pp. 74, 121, 132) that there must have been "a still earlier structure" nearby "the debris of which was used for the foundation-filling." Together with the broken carved stones there were shards of Red Polished Ware, dated to the early centuries of the Christian era (p. 132). Thapar thus, with his characteristic honesty, asks (p. 133) whether the earliest temple at the site might have been (not a *linga* temple but) a temple of Surya, the sun god,[15] that either had been demolished or had fallen into ruin. We may add that if such a temple had simply fallen into ruin, so could the later phase I (temple 3) structure. Why is only the evidence associated with the latter read as vandalism? If, alternatively, it had been destroyed, it would have been, by Thapar and Munshi's dating, before A.D. 750 or so, and therefore not by Muslim enemies. It appears that this entire issue has been given a quiet burial. Meanwhile, the existence of the Somnath temple "since time immemorial" (its lack of logic does not prevent fundamentalists from using this phrase ad nauseam) continues to be asserted.

Matters of the conservation of heritage were not articulated in those days as they are now, but even so, it is telling that the trust deed approved by the government and executed in May 1950 stated that the first object of the trust was "to *restore and reconstruct* the said temple of Somanatha" in a manner determined by the advisory committee (Munshi 1976 [1951]:83).[16] One takes this phrase to mean that the structure was to be radically repaired. Apparently, it was initially believed that a new icon could be placed within the restored temple. Munshi writes (p. 76), however, that it was subsequently agreed that the structure was beyond repair and that "religious injunctions . . . stood in the way of installing the deity in ruins which could not be renovated as prescribed." One might counter that neither factor provided justification for the demolition of a monument that was seven centuries old. A comment in the *National Herald* (Lucknow) on April 26, 1951, stated that even Ahalyabai Holkar of Indore, when she annexed this region to her kingdom around 1783, did not pull down the old shrine but built a new one nearby. One cannot but remark, also, on

14. These consisted of a "seemingly octagonal arrangement of the *mandapa* pillars for the nave" (Thapar 1976 [1951]:117).

15. Puranic texts attest to the importance of Surya worship in this region in the early first millennium A.D.

16. In fairness to Munshi let us note that clauses *d* and *h* of the trust deed made clear that entry to the temple would be permitted to all Hindu worshippers whatever their caste and also to non-Hindu visitors.

the very short interval between the conclusion of the excavation and the demolition of the old structure.

That there were protests is clear from the few and passing references Munshi makes (pp. 75–76, 179) to people "more fond of dead stone than live values." A letter (May 14, 1951) from C. Banerji, a professor of history at Hooghly (West Bengal), protested that the ruins were "still magnificent" and that to demolish them would be "something like an act of sacrilege"; also, demolition would be breaking the law on the preservation of ancient monuments. The Indian Rationalist Association of Madras wrote to Munshi (June 27, 1951) that this had been a "retrograde step" in violation of the constitution.[17] But the most forceful condemnation I have seen came in the editorial in the *National Herald* cited above. This was a "revivalism" that amounted, the paper said, to a "new vandalism not less painful than the old," and the Archaeological Department should have objected. In fact, in a letter published on January 1, 1967, Munshi recorded the fact that "the Archaeological Department clamoured for the ruins of the temple on the ground that it was an ancient monument" and that it was H. M. Patel as home minister who overruled these objections in 1948.[18]

At Somnath, stratigraphic excavation confirmed the continuous use of the structured base on which successive *linga* icons would have stood; excavation gave credence to (though no proof for) the view that this shrine was destroyed in the eleventh century. Yet it also raised the possibility that the shrine that was thought to have been destroyed had itself been raised on the ruins of another temple, destroyed or in disuse. What, then, of Ayodhya? The current excavations must determine the stratigraphic relationship between the mosque foundations and floors, on the one hand, and any structure that lies immediately beneath them, on the other. The temple theory will stand disproved if (1) there are neither destruction levels beneath the mosque foundations and floor nor an earlier and damaged plinth nor walls that give the coherent outline of single large structure, (2) if any structure that occurs in the lower levels is separated from the mosque stratum by, say, sterile or humus layers or in some other way represents a time much earlier than Babur, or (3) if the material in the lower levels consists of the remains of ordinary habitation: potsherds, animal bones, and kitchen refuse in general. There could, however, be an argument for the existence of a Rama temple (1) if broken stone reliefs, sculptures, or architectural members are found packed into the foundation trenches of the mosque walls, (2) if there is evidence of a destruction stratum that was levelled for the mosque, its foundations cutting through that stratum, or (3) if pits containing masses of broken sculpture with clear and diagnostic iconography are found sealed by surfaces contemporary with the mosque floor.

17. I was able to read these letters in the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Mumbai.
18. Patel stated that "Hindu sentiment" would not be "satisfied" by "mere restoration of the temple or by prolonging its life" (Munshi 1976 [1951]:75–76).

We have seen how the attitudes of two directors-general of the ASI regarding ancient monuments have differed in two different cases over a span of four decades, but yet another bitter truth must be faced. The case of the Somnath temple proves that already at Independence archaeology had been commandeered for a revivalist political movement that was condemned but not stopped by leaders like Nehru. As government servants (as we call them in India), officers of the ASI apparently have to take orders from senior bureaucrats and ministers, and no one has identified the line where this should stop.

What are the implications for the discipline of archaeology? Patterson (1999:168) has taken note of the way public opinion turned against archaeologists in the United States over their differential treatment of white and Amerindian burials. Not being producers of essential goods or services, Patterson says, archaeologists were seen as insensitive to social concerns. In the case of Ayodhya and the ASI's seven-month excavations there, cartoons and spoofs have appeared in the daily newspapers about their hitting on a temple at long last only to find that they had actually reached Angkor Wat. As the intelligentsia finds that archaeology is ideology-laden and sometimes politically opportunist, insists on things' being the same "since time immemorial" (why do archaeology at all, then?), sometimes, as in the case of Somnath, is unable to distinguish the remains of a vandalized temple from those of one in ruins, and may unearth problems that will only be swept under the carpet, will the discipline continue to enjoy public esteem and public acquiescence in the expenditure on it? (While no official figures are available to me, the current excavation at Ayodhya, employing as it does hundreds of labourers and security personnel, must be costing the country a fortune.)

I began with the statement that present-day ideology is inevitably inscribed into depictions of the past, but the problem goes farther and is more complex. I have explored one aspect of the problem—Indian archaeology focuses too narrowly on an imagined Indianness, in brief, on "roots," with the result that general cultural laws and cross-cultural references are shut out and material cultural residues are expected to substantiate one or another body of tradition. Preoccupation with roots, I suggest, prepares the gound for nativism. Because it is part of a package that evokes cultural pride, the "roots" framework is, in addition, open to politics. Politics can then prey on archaeology, and thereby it becomes prone to political expediency in the name of an imagined national interest.

Beyond this, a sober and open presentation of the potential and limitations of the discipline, without media hype, is essential. We can no longer afford to cloak our discoveries in an aura of technicalities, drama (the recovery of treasure), or false claims to scientific precision. We need to show the public and our academic colleagues that, while archaeology may not be a hard science capable of "proving" everything, it can in fact proceed with methodological rigour and that it is possible to refute a

hypothesis through the construction of research problems and the systematic discovery of new finds.

Finally, for those who would still insist that understanding culture is the key, I quote from an April 17, 1950, letter from Prime Minister Nehru to the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh about the 1949 events in Ayodhya (Gopal and Iyengar 2003:184–85):

> These recent occurrences in the U.P. have greatly distressed me. . . .
>
> I have felt for a long time that the whole atmosphere of the U.P. has been changing for the worse from the communal point of view. Indeed the U.P. is becoming almost a foreign land for me. I do not fit in there. . . .
>
> . . . All that occurred in Ayodhya in regard to the mosque and temples and the hotel in Faizabad was bad enough. But the worst feature of it was that such a thing should take place and be approved by some of our own people. . . . It seems to me that . . . we have been far too lenient with this disease, that has been spreading all over India and in our own province.
>
> . . . The fact of the matter is that for all our boasts, we have shown ourselves a backward people, totally lacking in the elements of culture, as any country understands them. It is only those who lack all understanding of culture, who talk so much about it.

Comments

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Conquests with religious overtones often involve the conversion of places of worship associated with earlier religions. Islam's expansion from the seventh century onwards was no exception, as many religious localities, especially those of Christianity and Zoroastrianism, were converted to mosques in newly conquered territories. One can think of such examples as the church of St. John, converted to the great mosque of Damascus (Flood 2001), and a number of fire temples in Iran (Creswell 1989:6–8; Shokoohy 1985). In regions where Islam is still the dominant religion these structures continue to function as mosques, their pre-Islamic foundations being of interest only to archaeologists and historians of architecture. But in regions where Islam failed at broad conversion of the population or there was a revival of an earlier religion, there is room for conflict, the Temple Mound in Jerusalem and the Babri mosque in Ayodhya being two prominent examples.

Ratnagar's study of the demolition of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists is a welcome new insight into the studies of misinterpretation and/or misrepresentation of archaeological evidence to serve various political, religious, ethnic, and nationalistic sentiments that have been receiving well-deserved attention in recent years. In other examples of abuses of archaeology we usually see politicians as primary perpetrators, appropriating and distorting archaeological evidence to serve their purposes. This is also the case in Ratnagar's study, but here we also see a group of archaeologists providing fodder for politicians of the BJP party by publishing a controversial monograph (Sharma et al. n.d.) granting scientific legitimacy to unsubstantiated popular claims. It is interesting to see that these popular claims are predominantly based on the *Ramayana*, which, according to Thapar (1993), has been revised and rewritten over the centuries to suit the prevailing religious and political climate and is therefore of little historical value.

Ratnagar, however, digs deeper into the affair of the Babri mosque by exploring its colonial roots and pointing out how the British, to serve their own colonial objectives, transformed an oral tradition into official history. It was this fateful action that provided Hindu leaders in the years following India's independence with the opportunity to conceal their political objectives with a religious smokescreen, appealing to the deep religious sentiments of the Hindu general public. This is another thread in the complex legacy of the colonial powers that deserves closer inspection in India and other countries with a colonial history.

Apart from cultural currents in Indian society, Ratnagar sees shortcomings of archaeology programs in universities in India as partially responsible for affairs such as the demolition of the Babri mosque, as unfamiliarity with or indifference towards current (and not so current) anthropological theory leads to problematic research and questionable conclusions that seem to subscribe to popular rather than scientifically grounded notions about Indian culture and history. In this regard India is not so different from other developing countries where, because of the lack of an organic development of archaeology, the predominantly bureaucratic nature of the archaeological apparatus, and other research priorities (Trigger 1984), archaeology curricula are more oriented towards history and the history of art and architecture than towards archaeology in the Euro-American sense (for a critique of archaeology programs in Iranian universities, see Abdi 2003).

I find myself in general agreement with Ratnagar that archaeological research should avoid politicization, but in an age of freedom of information, with increasing public access to archaeological literature that used to be buried in professional journals in specialized libraries, it will soon be almost impossible to block nonprofessionals, including those with less than scientific interests, from delving into the fruits of our labor and (mis)using them for their own purposes.

Ratnagar may be challenged by some for confusing the realms of objective and empirically grounded scientific

research (in this case archaeology, although she may not fully subscribe to this definition of the discipline) and beliefs rooted in ideological and religious systems. She reminds us that there is no conclusive evidence for the existence of a temple of Rama at Ayodhya or a temple of Shiva at Somnath, but existence and archaeological evidence are irrelevant for the believer. What is important is the religious sanctity attached to a locality, regardless of its concrete basis. Once a locality was conceived as sacred, it would attract believers of different faiths over the millennia as a suitable spot for a place of worship. Conquerors such as Babur or Mahmud of Ghazni, whether out to propagate Islam, humiliate the Hindus, or simply plunder their riches, were unconsciously playing into this notion—of course, assuming that there was in fact a temple of Rama at Ayodhya or a temple of Shiva at Somnath.

With the ongoing lawsuit at the High Court of Allahabad, what is truly disconcerting is that the archaeological evidence will be translated into judicial terms and concepts to be used in the court of law not by archaeologists but by lawyers. May the gods have mercy on archaeology!

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Ratnagar presents a discussion of the role of religion and history in political mobilization and reflects on its position in an academic discipline such as archaeology as a discursive practice. In critically examining archaeology's position in the rewriting of history for (Hindu) nationalist purposes, she questions the discipline's claim to objectivity, in particular the production and evaluation of "scientific" and "historical truth" in the case of the Ayodhya dispute. She points out that the archaeological interpretation of evidence produced to support the argument that there was once a temple on the site "is prone not only to controversy but also to politicizisation." In the course of the article, she identifies a lack of historical and archaeological tools for differentiation that, in her opinion, has encouraged the abuse of the discipline for political means. The article raises many interesting issues, but for reasons of space I will focus on the possible effects of the Ayodhya dispute on the fabric of civil society and nationality.

In exploring how the dispute took shape in the colonial and postcolonial eras, Ratnagar sidelines the development of the cultural nationalist Hindutva movement alongside a chain of election campaigns through which the nationalist BJP attempted to increase its political power by playing the "Hindu card." Many of these campaigns were accompanied by riots between Hindus and Muslims all over India (Jaffrelot 1996).

Her discussion of the creation and handling of archaeological evidence and of archaeology as a discipline that

runs the risk of being instrumentalized for ideological interests is very important. In the 1990s the Hindu right began to use the dispute in Ayodhya to come up with an archaeological excavation of a different kind–to present to the public a stratigraphy of Hindu history through which the Hindu people could be presented as a united fraternity with a mythical past and roots in an ancient nation. The beauty of this Hindu Golden Age was then dramatically intensified by the narrative of the Hindu people made "homeless," suffering humiliation, martyrdom, and death for several centuries, because of foreign invasion and rule. In this historiography, an aggressive Muslim stereotype has been shaped that dramatically affects the treatment of minorities in secular India today. A key aim of the Ayodhya dispute is to strengthen the demand for the restoration of Hindu pride and the healing of historical wounds by reconstructing the Ram temple on the site of the demolished mosque. The question of producing "credible" archaeological evidence for the temple argument in Ayodhya is thus also linked to a nativism in which Muslims are asked to commit themselves to Ram and his temple. Muslims, so the argument goes, have to accept that communal harmony and national welfare require solidarity with their Hindu brothers: the Ayodhya case is a testing ground for their loyalty. It is thus also the question of citizenship with respect to India's religious minorities that is at stake when we try to contextualize the relevance of archaeology in the political field of Hindu nationalism.

One of the underlying hopes of the Hindu right in the 1990s was that if a secular institution could prove the existence of a temple under the demolished mosque and a secular court affirmed the findings as legitimate, Muslim and governmental arguments with regard to Hindu religious fanaticism could be silenced and the role of the Muslim minority and the concepts of secularism and democracy could be reinterpreted according to the Hindutva agenda. The March 2003 court requirement of an ASI excavation of the disputed site has to be considered in this light. Whereas the dispute seems to have died down when the BJP came to form the majority party in the coalition government of 1998, being addressed only by nonparliamentary organizations of the Hindu right such as the World Hindu Council (VHP), in 2002–3 it entered politics again. The BJP has distanced itself to a large extent from its earlier promise to support the reconstruction of the temple, but the VHP is pressuring it because of the coming general elections. It wants not just a Ram temple but the government's commitment to the "Hindu cause." A withdrawal of support by organizations like the VHP could well lead to a loss of Hindu votes for the BJP.

The ASI report of August 2003 claims to prove the existence of a "massive structure," a Hindu temple, beneath the mosque's foundation. Historians and archaeologists have challenged the credibility of the findings with regard to both their historical contextualization and the archaeological methods used. There is talk of ignored and "twisted" evidence: for example, the carbon-dated bones and glazed ware found at the site, according to the

respected historian Irfan Habib, "go against the presence of a temple" and are overlooked in the report (2003:20). In many ways this confirms what Ratnagar has identified as one of the weaknesses of the discipline, its focus on an imagined Indianness. The report was a shot in the arm for the Hindu right. Ignoring critical voices or characterizing them as products of Babri-mosque historians, anti-national leftists, and desperate secularists who cannot face the "historical truth," militants such as Praveen Togadia of the VHP have appealed to Muslims to give up their claim to the disputed site, thereby proving that they want to live like brothers with the Hindus, or risk provoking further confrontation that might well lead to "civil war."

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In 1992 the Babri mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed by a lethal cocktail of religious tradition, political opportunism, and the failure of the instruments of the state; the incident divided archaeologists in India into three groups. The first two are in polar positions, those who hold that there is archaeological evidence that a temple marking the birthplace of the god Rama was destroyed so that a Mughal mosque could be erected (Lal 2002), and those who hold that there is no such evidence (Mandal 2002 [1993]). The third group is the most numerous but least vocal and contains archaeologists who believe that their profession should have no role in the politics of modern India. That archaeology has such a role is now undeniable, as in March 2003 the Allahabad High Court directed the Archaeological Survey of India to excavate the site and resolve the "temple" issue.

There is a possibility that the mosque did replace an earlier temple, as there are well-known examples of such changes. Delhi's Q'tab Minar complex, for example, incorporates pillars from a demolished temple. Equally convincing is the mosque at Bambhore in Pakistan, whose foundations include a *lingam*, the phallic embodiment of the god Siva. This phenomenon is not restricted to South Asia; examples include the conversion of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia from a church to a mosque and Athens's Parthenon from a temple of Athena to a church. Receiving legitimation and power, those making the changes undoubtedly tapped into the proximity of a sacred location. Thus, for me, the issue of whether the Babri mosque was or was not built on the ruins of a earlier temple is not the central issue of the conflict, whether the court believes it to be so or not.

Many commentators, Ratnagar included, attribute a number of South Asia's social and political woes to British policy, suggesting that colonial archaeology was political. I am in broad agreement, but it would be erroneous to ignore the role that archaeology played for the independence movement. The discovery of the Harappan civilization in the 1920s demonstrated the presence of a vast, literate, and urban society millennia before such developments in Europe, and the selection of a third-century-B.C. Asokan pillar capital as the new state's crest underlines its attempts to gain legitimation from the past (Coningham and Lewer 2000). However, the issue of whether colonial/post-Partition archaeology in India was/is political is, again, not for me the central issue of the conflict.

The central issue is that of restitution; that is, to which group/identity should the site be handed? The answer to this question is complex, the more so because South Asia's social and religious identities had fluid or, in Ratnagar's words, "fuzzy" boundaries in the past. Tidy-minded colonial administrators created long-lasting damage because they would accept only single identities. For example, previously mobile castes were formally organized, censuses encouraged single religious entries (Coningham 2001), and Curzon attempted to remove the Hindu incumbent of Bodhgaya because the British viceroy identified it as Buddhist, not Buddhist-Hindu (Lahiri 1999). Such approaches were clearly inappropriate for South Asia, where Buddhist monuments, for example, were patronized not just by Buddhists but by individuals belonging to other faiths and where the religious affiliation of many archaeological monuments is unclear for similar reasons.

"Fuzzy" boundaries still exist in South Asia at Lumbini, the birthplace of the Gautama Buddha. This UNESCO World Heritage Site was identified only in 1899 in ruins surrounding a small Hindu shrine. The sculpture of the resident goddess was soon recognized as a partial sculpture of the Buddha's mother and the shrine rebuilt around it. Annually, the site is visited by thousands of Hindus and Buddhists of many different sects, but conflict has been avoided by keeping the core monument as a sacred garden marked only by archaeological ruins and a non-denominational shrine, whilst buildings of formal religious affiliation are reserved for the surrounding precinct. The irony is, of course, that Lumbini is located in Nepal, the only official Hindu country in the world, whose king has recently been proclaimed Chakravartin or "universal ruler."

The Ayodhya incident is not unique, and it is possible to trace a very worrying acceleration of the destruction of sites of archaeological and religious significance in South Asia. The destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992 and the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 are two well-known cases, but equally disturbing was the suicide bombing of the Temple of the Buddha's Tooth in Sri Lanka, a UNESCO World Heritage site, in 1998 (Coningham and Lewer 1999). If the Archaeological Survey of India and the courts are not to be bound up by decades of claims and counterclaims at every site of cultural and religious importance in India, the only solution is a Lumbini-style plan. Whilst the ASI can only offer archaeological evidence, the courts must provide a solution not just for India but also for South Asia as a whole.

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Increasingly sophisticated critical analyses of the history of archaeology and its intellectual paths and pathologies have emerged in recent years, revealing a complex relationship between archaeology and various forms of identity politics, including, especially, nationalism and colonialism (e.g. Abu El-Haj 2001; Arnold 1990; Dietler 1994, 1998; Kohl and Fawcett 1998; Marchand 1996; Trigger 1984, 1989). Nowhere is this relationship more fraught with explosive potential and embedded in recurrent violence than in South Asia. Hence, Ratnagar's article offers some timely reflections on a case of major significance that brings into stark relief a series of ethical and epistemological issues for archaeology more generally. Ratnagar lays out with admirable clarity both the complex history of the dispute over Ayodhya and the changing political contexts in which it emerged. She also offers a number of trenchant criticisms of Indian archaeology and its role in the affair. My response is limited to a few interested observations.

Ratnagar launches her article with the statement that "no social science proceeds in an ideological vacuum," a position firmly supported by recent work in science studies (e.g. Galison and Stump 1996, Hacking 1983, Latour and Woolgar 1986, Lenoir 1997). I am therefore curious about Ratnagar's own (unstated) position in the analysis she is undertaking. What are her own ideological, political, and professional stakes in this controversy? Rather than the kind of psychologizing reflexivity common in recent Anglophone anthropology, I am suggesting something resembling Bourdieu's (1990) "participant objectivation": that is, placing the author in the analytical field by emphasizing the locations of researchers in fields of competition for social position, professional recognition, etc., and the forms of symbolic capital deployed in these struggles. It is crucial to examine the relationship between the researcher and the research object and the social and intellectual conditions that make possible the analytical project.

Ratnagar further notes that "it is not surprising that archaeological interpretation is prone not only to controversy but also to politicization." I would add simply that politicization is not something limited to the process of *interpretation*. The *practice* of excavation can also be a highly politicized (and politicizing) activity. A widespread tenet of the positivist philosophy of science that dominated epistemology until the 1960s was the distinction, now largely abandoned, between the contexts of discovery and of justification raised by Reichenbach (1959). As employed by philosophers such as Popper and Carnap, this allowed that the context of discovery, the messy world of laboratory life, was rife with careerist intrigue, accidents, social prejudices, and economic pressures. However, once the intellectual product of this worldly arena (a theory or hypothesis) entered the context of justification, it entered a realm of reason where justification consisted of the pure clash of ideas according to philosophical principles and methods. Curiously, archaeologists influenced by positivism have tended to interpret this distinction in almost reverse fashion, seeing the context of justification as the messy space where academic and identity politics and other such forces may "distort" interpretations of the past. What is seen as a rather cleanly "scientific" context of discovery—excavations and laboratories—has been generally exempted from sociological scrutiny. However, the distinction between these domains has broken down in science studies precisely because neither is politically innocent. As Abu El-Haj (2001) has demonstrated with the role of Israeli archaeology in colonialist territorial struggles, archaeologists, in the course of excavation, actually create a new form of material culture (the archaeological site) that actively transforms the landscape in politically charged ways. Moreover, excavation can itself be a form of politicizing ritual (for participants and visitors). One wonders to what extent this is also true at Ayodhya and how participation is mobilized, constrained, and disciplined.

Finally, Ratnagar convincingly implicates British colonialism, with its divide-and-conquer strategies, as a major factor in both the reification of Indian religious boundaries and the promulgation of the story of the destruction of a purported ancient temple at Ayodhya. I would further suggest that many of the characteristics of Indian archaeology that she criticizes (its failure to incorporate anthropological theory, its focus on "roots" and the antiquity of an imagined Indianness) are equally attributable to this colonial legacy. Archaeology was, after all, introduced to India as part of the colonial package of "investigative modalities" that served as bureaucratic instruments of control (Cohn 1996). But the archaeology introduced was that which was developing contemporaneously in Europe, where it was seen as a backward extension of national history. The essentializing search for the origins of new "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) in the deep past resulted from an absorption of ideas from nineteenth-century Romantic nationalist historiography (Dietler 1994, Trigger 1989, Veit 1989). This in turn provided an attractive model for emerging postcolonial states trying to construct and authenticate new national identities by anchoring them "scientifically" in a precolonial past. However, the alternative vision of archaeology proposed by Ratnagar (i.e., the American model of engagement with anthropological theory and comparative analysis) is not without its own ideological problems and historical connections to colonialism (Dietler 2001; Patterson 1986; Trigger 1984, 1989).

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The struggle to "rebuild" Ram's temple at Ayodhya has moved from the bloodied streets into the parliament and

the law courts and through the latter embedded itself in the archaeologist's stratigraphy. Ratnagar, an archaeologist herself, shows how Indian archaeology is now being deployed as a tool of adjudication in politicized struggles over Islamic sacred sites contested by Hindu nationalists.

Her essay is as much an ambivalent tract of fundamentalist secularism as it is an analysis of archaeology's place in the political struggle over the fate of Ayodhya. She denounces Rajiv Gandhi's currying favor with Hindu nationalists in the aftermath of his concession to conservative Muslims in their opposition to the civil claims of the Muslim divorcee Shah Bano. The Ayodhya movement represents, she writes, "not religiosity but the co-optation by politicians of religious identity."

By this reasoning, neither Israel's Gush Emunim nor the Protestant reformers who sought to craft the modern English state were truly religious. The normative zeal of those who declare Al-Qaeda to be un-Islamic partakes of the same logic. To argue that politicized religion is not religious is to occlude the power structures immanent in collective religious practice and the foundational belief, indeed, faith and inviolable space, integral to the operation of national sovereignty (Friedland 2002). As Asad has argued (2003), the modern nation-state was grounded in the conceptual grammar of the secular, a social domain upon which a nation and a separable category of religion were understood to rest—a domain of fact produced by law and modern historiography as opposed to a domain of faith consigned to the private sphere and the interior of the believer's soul. An expert on the earlier Harappan civilization, Ratnagar points to Indian archaeology's narrow focus on "Indianness," neglecting both cross-cultural influences and the earliest preclass strata. Indian archaeology is a practice of secular nationalism not unlike the deployment of Israeli archaeology to serve the territorial claims of the Jewish state—to ground in fact what has had to be imagined.

Indian archaeology is currently being drawn into religious nationalism's gravitational field. The contest over "ownership" of the Ayodhyan site is before the courts, which have mobilized a massive corps of archaeologists to determine the length of Islamic possession of the site, its earlier existence as a Hindu pilgrimage site, and whether the prior Hindu site was destroyed by Muslims. Ratnagar frets that archaeological factual claims will not translate properly into legal argument, but, in fact, the Indian archeologists are being used as outside ritual specialists—purveyors of secular facts in a struggle that depends neither on law nor on fact. Like India itself, it is an imagined territory that does not depend on a verifiable past. Ayodhya mimes the partition of India itself, which depended not on fact but on decision, on faith and fear, and on a constitutive violence (Friedland and Hecht 1998).

The archaeologists are being cast in this role by political forces seeking to recenter the nation-state in this sacred space. These professionals are part of a politicization of sacred space that has already led to the death and rape of tens of thousands. In August 2003 the Ar-chaeological Survey of India reported its results, indicating the presence of a North Indian temple beneath the mosque. Both sides claimed that it supported their position. As indicated by the case of Somnath, where archaeologists failed to substantiate unambiguous evidence of Muslim destruction, even if the current archaeological corps had found that the Hindu nationalist historical account was wrong, it would not necessarily matter. The nationalists have built Ayodhya in the political imaginary as a central symbol, not as a site. As Meron Benvenisti, the son of the eminent pre-Partition geographer, used to say about Jerusalem, one can divide a city, but a symbol one cannot divide. The historicity of Ayodhya's site is only contingently related to its productivity as a symbol, as the history of racism in the twentieth century clearly demonstrates.

By finding that the Hindu nationalists are at least partially right, they have participated in the ritual legitimation of the mosque's destruction. Their position is not so different, in structural location, from that of the medical scientists deployed by the Nazis to conduct scientifically productive research on the living dead in the concentration camps. In their failure to question the conditions of possibility of their archaeological research, they also remind one of the ethnologists employed by the colonial powers to decipher the "natives" whom they were charged to rule.

Indian archaeologists have become a party to this operation of displacement. They are an interested party, and their interest makes them complicit with the religious nationalists who threaten to overwhelm their professional calling. Their authorized digging, whatever its result, builds the centrality of the site, a manifestation of the state's care. They have also become a party to the decision and, after the fact, supporters of the right of the state to expropriate, erase, and partition the sacred properties of its Muslim communities—a right that can never be assimilated either to law or to archaeology. Their facts become part of the production function of truth beyond their ken and their control. The rigorous secularity of their practice, with its spatialization of material artifact and its corollary extrusion of text, oral tradition, and social structure, becomes an antihermeneutic ally of a new political theology. Whatever their intentions, their personal political religiosity, they become party to a historic crime. More than one sacred space is being violated.

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I am largely in agreement with Ratnagar's main points and would like to offer a few observations about the larger political and theoretical context.

The most important question here is the political importance of the "facts" of the Ram Janmbhoomi. Even if archaeologists reach agreement on what lies beneath the now destroyed mosque, it will do little to change the

politically motivated stance of the militant factions of the Sangh Parivar who were responsible for destroying the mosque. Nor will it shake the belief of many devout Hindus that Lord Ram was born in Ayodhya—this is not a matter that can be disproved by scholarly "evidence," archaeological or textual. Militant Hindutva groups would be unable to tap into a large base of support for their sectarian agenda were Ram and Ayodhya not so clearly linked in the popular imagination. These groups have "discovered" that there was a Ram temple at his birthplace that had been destroyed by Mughal invaders and converted into a mosque. Whether there was once a temple there, whether the temple was actually devoted to Ram, whether it was destroyed, and, finally, whether it was destroyed by Mughals have not been proven by accepted standards of scholarly verification. The absence of scholarly verification is not likely to change the demand for a Ram temple. "If the birthplace of Ram is not there," Hindutva groups will demand, "tell us where it is." In the face of this demand, any argument pointing to the scholarly uncertainty of Ram's status as a historical figure with roots in Ayodhya will be summarily dismissed, and no archaeologist who is skeptical of the claims for the present site—for those very reasons—is likely to find his "true" birthplace anywhere *else* in Ayodhya. This leaves scholars who wish to take a "scientific" stance on this issue in a position that, however solid from a scholarly perspective, is politically untenable.

However, as Ratnagar points out, scientific claims are extremely important in that other modernist institution that is central to this controversy—the court. Although the intricacies of legal procedure will inevitably affect the manner in which scientific claims and counterclaims are weighed, the work of archaeologists will be central to any decision. Ironically, a verdict *against* the building of a temple at the present site might help extricate the ruling coalition from a thorny political dilemma. The BJP cannot afford to alienate the radical Hindutva groups that form the core of the party and supply its most dedicated cadres, but it could do without the political and economic costs of further sectarian violence. By pointing to the court decision it can claim to have done its best by its loyal cadres and save face politically against critics both inside and outside the party.

As important as the larger politics of Ayodhya is its micropolitics. A more contextualized and finely textured narrative about Ayodhya that pointed to the *mediations* between the politics of the site where the Babri mosque once stood and the machinations of national leaders would allow for the emergence of different narratives of the events. Ratnagar hints at such an alternative history when she tells us how one sect of a local temple took over part of the mosque without risking action by the colonial government as an implicit reward for having given shelter to several British families during the Great Revolt of 1857. Similarly, she reports that a district magistrate with Hindu nationalist leanings allowed the placement of the idols of Ram and Sita to go unchallenged in 1949. But all her accounts of later periods trace

the action directly to a much higher level of politics. How, one wonders, did local and state politics articulate with national issues? What were the politics of land, and what political rivalries between Hindus and Muslims or *among* different Hindu sects and Muslim groups made that particular site the crucible of national politics? There is a much more complex story to be told here, one that would allow for alternative histories that might decenter the politically hegemonic one. Alternatives to the story told by the Sangh Parivar can be built on the truths uncovered by archaeological investigation but cannot be limited to them. I could not agree more with Ratnagar when she talks of the importance of "methodological rigour" in refuting hypotheses that are historically inaccurate. However, many scholars think that their political task is complete once they have shown that politically motivated claims about the past are false. They decry the "politicization" of academic work and insist on the need for objectivity, locating the origins of the problem in defective scholarship. A different strategy for academic inquiry freely acknowledges the inevitable imbrication of scholarship in politics. In the social sciences and humanities, any pretense to the contrary can allow for the normalization of hegemonic ideas as "nonideological" and, in fact, constrict spaces of dissent.

To say that because scholars cannot possibly shield their work from their political and social positions, all scholarly positions are equivalent would be a grave mistake. This is where questions of rigor, method, modes of questioning, procedures for logical deduction, and rules of evidence are important. The work of those who refuse to abide by these rules will not be recognized as "scholarly," and, indeed, one radical position on the Babri Masjid controversy has been that the unscholarly arguments of its Hindutva proponents should be contested with unscholarly arguments of one's own. Alternatively, one could build *popular* narratives about the site that are consistent with but not necessarily limited to scholarly work in archaeology and other disciplines.

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We should not be startled, Ratnagar tells us, to find that archaeology is deeply ideological. It is never more so than when its practitioners, like politicians themselves, deny the political nature of their calling. Insisting on the purely technical nature of archaeological research and on its concern with "facts," they—surprisingly for scholars concerned with antiquity—ignore the etymology of both "technical" (recall "crafty," *polytechnos*, Odysseus—the man of "many *technai*") and "fact" (something *factum*, "made" or, as we would now say, "constructed"). Ratnagar has exposed some political craftiness here.

As is perhaps appropriate in dealing with the more powerful national entity, she has emphasized a case in

which the dominant majority "crafts" its interpretations as "facts on the ground" (see Abu El-Haj 2001). But her argument risks playing into the hands of the politicians in that we see little either of the local understanding of the site—compare Yalouri's (2001) excellent account of the Athenian Acropolis today—or of the similarity with countless other such cases. Indeed, she leads me to feel that perhaps archaeologists shelter behind a virtual *divide et impera* policy, the exceptionalism of each nationalist ideology serving to hide the probability that all archaeologies, everywhere, are—although in varying degrees—caught up in similar ideological exercises. The concept of "heritage," with the help of powerful political interests, has paradoxically rendered cultural diversity the single unambiguously homogenizing—although not unifying—aspect of globalization.

Globalization implies modernity, and Ratnagar's portrayal of Nehru suggests the "cultural cringe" of a rationalizing modernist who believed in the possibility of a nonideological, supracultural, and utterly dispassionate form of knowledge. We should remember, however, that it was the modernist view of civilization, with its administrative fixation on territorial purity, that also displaced the partial interconfessional coexistence prevalent in the Ottoman at least as much as in the Mughal empire (see, e.g., Stahl 1979; cf. Hayden 2002). This dominant scheme has no place for the idea that Islam could enjoin coexistence; politicians now seriously advocate the exclusion of Bosnia and Turkey from the European Union on the supposedly reciprocal and exclusive grounds that Islam is "not European." Intolerance can apparently be, albeit not exclusively, both European and modernist.

Such historical amnesia is not a necessary condition of European or modernist identity. Early Christianity, for example, even acknowledged its pagan precursors. The incorporation of Classical *spolia* into Byzantine churches evidently signified not the dismantling of the old but its invocation within a generous historicizing embrace (see Papalexandrou 2003)—although, to be sure, similar moves also served later Greek nationalism by obscuring tensions between the religious hierarchy and an antiquarian national bureaucracy.

The increasingly globalized displacement of religious and cultural coexistence by reified notions of exclusive heritage is largely a legacy of the administrative drives of colonial policy. It still, long after the formal end of colonialism, pervades everyday discourse throughout the European colonial empires and in their penumbras. In Greece, for example, as people seize on official rhetoric to justify their self-interested acts of demolition and conservation (see Herzfeld 1991), that rhetoric, having worked to their short-term advantage, in turn commits them ever more inextricably to its exceptionalist logic. The way in which British archaeological narrative authoritatively entered oral tradition, as Ratnagar describes, similarly parallels the British "entextualization" of Indian proverbs as a means of securing an administratively acceptable ethnic hierarchy (Raheja 1996); the effects evidently persist to this day. One result, as Rat-

nagar notes, is that archaeologists must now surrender the adjudication of evidence to lawyers.

Ratnagar's account would benefit from both more evidence of local response and a more studiously comparative—indeed, a less exceptionalist—framework; her aside about Old Testament and Homeric studies is an overgeneralization that invites reciprocal excess. Juxtaposing Ayodhya with such specific disputes as those over the stewardship of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, or, in Southeast Asia, Khao Phra Wihan/Preah Vihear (on which see Peleggi 2002:53) would instead strengthen her case without demonizing "Hinduism" (as Hindus and Christians have already demonized "Islam"). While wisely avoiding such essentialisms, she seems reluctant to find in religion the same defining ideological commitment that she identifies in archaeology, charging those who claim divine authority for their versions of history with elevating politics over "religiosity." Unless her local tale is balanced by a clear demonstration of its global resonance, potentially applicable to all religions including those ideologically committed to tolerance (see Kapferer 1988), it could too easily serve as a pretext for the very attitudes she decries. The irony of exceptionalisms is their pervasive similarity. An approach that exposes that logical absurdity is the best antidote to their pernicious and ubiquitous hold.

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Ratnagar's article raises important issues about the social production of knowledge in national locations. She makes a plea for reducing the gap between cultural anthropology and archaeology in India with reference to the implications of this gap for the Rama temple–Babri mosque controversy. Her plea stimulates a reexamination of histories of archaeological methods, assumptions about temporality, and theories of cultural anthropology—specifically about collective memory and the interpretation of narratives.

The problem is, in part, institutional. In many Indian universities sociology and cultural anthropology coexist in the same department while cultural anthropology departments are separated from physical anthropology or archaeology departments. Bridging the gap is not a simple matter of providing more training of sociocultural anthropologists or archaeologists in the "other's" field. In the case at hand, the problem of bridging hinges on the incommensurability of text and site. The attempt to reconstruct history by linking literature and archaeological fieldwork has a long pedigree in South Asia, where surviving chronicles are so few. It goes back to the nineteenth century, when Alexander Cunningham, the first director of the Archaeological Survey of India, used references within Sri Lankan Buddhist scriptures to locate

cities from the first millennium BCE. These early efforts not only led to the discovery of the Harappan or Indus Valley complexes of the third millennium BCE but also allowed a reconstruction of the "second" urbanization in South Asia stretching conservatively from 1000 BCE to the fifth century. Most scholars outside of this field have little idea of how many sites we still have from this period or how truly massive some of them are— clear indications that this region was one of the great centers of early urbanization. In this context, during the 1970s, B. B. Lal utilized literary sources—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*—to discover the early phases of the second urbanization. Leaving aside the issue of differences between these epics and Buddhist scriptures, Lal's efforts seem particularly retrograde because they were unnecessary. Extensive professional surveys and hundreds of professional excavations (mostly unpublished for lack of funds) have clearly identified a huge array of sites, many in danger of destruction, that require the application of current technologies and methodologies—not a linkage to texts shot through with interpolations. The true scandal is not the distortion of "scientific" results for "political" purposes, which is intrinsic to any enterprise of knowledge, but the channeling of scarce funding into the quest for ontology through the archaeological method.

Ratnagar explores the dangers of an old-fashioned methodology in her discussion of the excavations at the Somnath temple, prompted by textual references to an attack on it in the eleventh century. She traces the uncovering of strata indicating the presence of five different temples at the site chosen for excavation and concludes that the evidence on the ground provides no support for a specific moment of destruction. She effectively delinks the two types of evidence. However, this leaves us with just another multiphased temple site and an unsubstantiated early chronicle—the gap between literature and excavation is widened rather than closed.

Here is where cultural anthropologists and historians have made significant contributions. From a cultural perspective, the "usefulness" of textual materials lies not so much in providing "evidence" of actual places or events in the "past" that may rest on specific understandings of time, the nation, and "origins" as in their testimony as discourses of knowledge and power. This approach may cut across the purpose of many excavations designed to provide independent verification of textual "facts." The case at hand is a classic example, for the efforts of archaeology have established a temporal framework that calls for cultural interpretation. Assuming, as most practicing archaeologists do, that the textual evidence in the *Ramayana* suggests events occurring in the earliest stages of the second urbanization, we must place this evidence alongside the absence of archaeological evidence for "temples" as we know them before approximately the fifth century CE. Even if we "find" a temple at Ayodhya, for example, how does the collective memory of Rama and his birthplace translate into a structure at least 1,500 years later? This problem does not undercut religious beliefs or demean the value of a

civilization by restricting its temporality; it presents the data within an interpretive framework amenable primarily to analysis by cultural theory.

Cultural approaches remind us that even archaeological narratives (including the "history" of anthropology) are also forms of collective memory and are open to contest or resistance. In India, as elsewhere, many archaeological narratives struggle for hegemony and are not easily resolvable into a binary of "secular" or "scientific" versus "ideological." Archaeologists in southern India, for instance, are often less concerned with the genesis of "Indic" civilization and more easily attracted to a regional analysis within pan-Asian or Indian Ocean networks. Only some of the archaeology in India contributes support for myths and narratives of the state or religiously constructed constituencies. The "ideological" problematic may be unavoidable; what is avoidable is an oversimplified understanding of the way fields may intersect.

Reply

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The concern over this issue shown by scholars the world over is reassuring. I can address only some of the important questions raised in the comments.

Admitting to the role of the colonial power, Coningham points out that much archaeological work has been underscored by nationalist perspectives. The point is that the line has to be drawn between perceptions of the latter sort and those that feed violence against minorities. Coningham and Friedland will agree that secular scholars in India have never supported religious intolerance, let alone violence in the name of religion. So too, while Dietler is certainly correct that excavation and laboratory work are not always politically innocent and anthropological archaeology not devoid of ideological underpinnings or colonial legacies, the hypotheses of the latter are open to the scrutiny of evidence and not clouded by patriotic fervour or claims to faith—both of which carry an element of blackmail. Srinivas and Heitzman say that there is an institutional problem—that bridging the interdisciplinary divide is not a simple matter of introducing a course here or there. Nevertheless, we cannot leave things as they are, with students—and teachers, too—suspicious of any idea concerning societies or polities not structured like their own. Indian archaeologists readily use internationally current concepts about hunter-gatherer society in Palaeolithic archaeology, with no one complaining about "imported theories," and the same should not be impossible for the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Dietler asks how participation in the excavations at Ayodhya was organized. It was a project deputed to the state body, the Archaeological Survey of India (whose stand on the Somnath temple I have mentioned). The

public was excluded. Massive security was in place around the site, with physical searches of all personnel going in. Between the archaeologists of the ASI and persons like myself who were permitted by the court to spend some days on the site there was no communication, and the mutual suspicion was palpable. The report has been "published," but the court has not yet allowed its sale to the public.

Perhaps my paper would indeed have benefited from the global perspective that Coningham and Abdi point to and Herzfeld recommends. The warning that an exceptionalist stand may be playing into the hands of the politicians is warranted, provided that we remember that Ayodhya has never been a simple contest over a sacred site. The dispute has brought together a spurious oral tradition, a procession across the country of a politician riding in an air-conditioned truck dressed up as a temple chariot, claims made by archaeologists at a convenient juncture about the remains of a temple in earlier excavations at the site, the ASI's history of allowing politicians the final say, the induction into the central cabinet of those caught on film hugging one another for joy at Ayodhya as the mosque was brought down, selective attacks on poor Muslim homes in the area at the time of the demolition, and the close connection of these events with elections. One wonders if a similar cluster of events has occurred elsewhere.

Gupta feels that whatever is found in the excavations it will not change the stance of the militant right wing, while Abdi argues that archaeological evidence is "irrelevant for the believer" and Friedland that the confrontation does not depend on archaeological facts. I repeat that more than one shrine in Ayodhya has claims to being the sacred birthplace of Rama and that there are devout believers who do not insist on any particular holy spot's being the object of reverence. Also, Brosius spells out the message that militant Hinduism has sent out to the Muslims during this entire series of shabby episodes. Here Dietler's query about my stake and ideological stand also becomes relevant. First, there is outrage at the active connivance of some of my profession in a violent movement and the destruction of an archaeological site (whatever its sectarian affiliation—I have deplored the official demolition of the Somnath temple). Second, it is time that some untruths were exposed and a particular minority community (to which, incidentally, I do not belong) stood up for itself and showed the country that it will not be pushed around. Third, as Brosius has emphasized, it is citizenship that is at stake. Fourth, the ASI's report may today be seen as a shot in the arm for the Hindu right (Brosius), but over the long term it may bring the disciplinary integrity of the ASI into question. If that should happen, disservice will have been done not only to archaeology but also to the Hindus.

My point that this confrontation has not been a religious one is questioned by Friedland. In response to this, to Gupta's and Herzfeld's query about local responses to the nationwide movement, and to the worry (Herzfeld) that I may be "demonizing Hinduism," let me point out, first, that I cannot be guilty of the latter when I insist that the issue is not a religious one. It is the politicians who have mobilized the lumpen in the name of a vulgar version of Hinduism who are to blame, and with them those archaeologists who have betrayed the principles of their discipline. Second, I quote from a report of Engineer (2003) on a citizens' movement in Ayodhya itself. Engineer went to Ayodhya for a workshop on communal harmony and heard the voices of the local people:

> In the rest of the country only the voice of the Sangh Parivar [the Hindu right wing] and their most aggressive members . . . [is] heard. The media has no time to project the voice of the people of Ayodhya. Perhaps it does not sell. For the Parivar has convinced the world that it is the most authentic voice of 800 million Hindus of this country. . . .
>
> More than anyone else, the people of Ayodhya have paid a heavy price for the dispute, and are still paying. They have silently borne the brunt of the Sangh Parivar's aggression for years. But, it seems, they are no longer prepared to do so. Every time the VHP leaders announce [a mass demonstration] the people of Ayodhya have to shut their shops. [Thousands of people] invade the town, disturbing their normalcy and often inviting prolonged curfews.

Engineer goes on to report on his meeting with the chief functionary (*mahant*) of the Hanuman Garhi, one of the most important Hindu sacred centres of Ayodhya. The *mahant* said, in the presence of his followers, that a temple on the site of the demolished mosque "can be built only when Hindus and Muslims come together. . . . Hindu-Muslim unity is more important than the temple." Engineer continues, "Mahant Gyandas is also against the VHP [the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the most rabid on the Hindu right] and considers it as anti-Hindu. The VHP, he told me, has no right to talk in the name of Hindus." He reports that the local people have founded a citizens' body called the Voice of Ayodhya "in order to fight the VHP plan to convert Ayodhya into a battleground for their war for power. They have suffered silently so far but have now decided to fight it out peacefully and democratically." The *mahants* present at a meeting of this organization voiced their conviction that the call for a public demonstration in Ayodhya on October 17, 2003, was connected with the coming elections in four states.

We know from subsequent events that, with the opposition of the local people and the firm stand taken by the present chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, that "great demonstration" turned out to be a damp squib. It is also now known (Punyani 2003) that some *mahants* of Ayodhya visited poor Muslim homes to reassure their residents that no harm would be done to them on October 17. Punyani asks, significantly, why none of the newspapers or television channels reported an event on November 20 last when "hundreds" of Muslims prayed after the fast of Ramazan at the Hanuman Garhi and had their sunset meal in its precinct.

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