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Dilip K Chakrabarti



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Article

Nationalism in the Study of Ancient Indian History

Dilip K Chakrabarti

Abstract

The historiography of ancient India has been an ideological battleground since the very beginning. The histories of ancient India written during the colonial period by Europeans were heterogenous in nature. On the one hand, there were works with clear imperialist imprint such as the ones by E J Rapson, and on the other hand, we have the pioneering works of Vincent Smith, which are not as imperialist as they are made out to be. The works of nationalist historians such as R K Mukherji, R C Majumdar, U N Ghoshal and others were mainly in response to works like those of Rapson. These pioneering historians of the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century have been characterized as "Hindu revivalists" by a section of later Indian historians who mostly belong to the Communist fold. The purpose of the present paper is to put this accusation in the context of the history of research on ancient Indian history and archaeology and judge if this is at all true or merely a communist propaganda and ploy to build up a 'progressive' versus 'obscurantist' divide among the historians of ancient India. The paper will also examine how certain currents of thought in modern Indian archaeology pose a danger to Indian security.

The accusation that the pioneering Indian historians of ancient India who wrote in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries were 'nationalists', 'Hindu revivalists', believers in 'Hindu militancy', 'unhappy with the Muslim invasions' and generally 'pernicious', was levelled against them first in 1959¹, and this has continued in various forms since then². From R S Sharma to Upinder Singh the thread which binds them is that they are communists or former Communist Party of India members like Sharma, or 'left-liberals' and self-declared 'secularists' like Thapar and Singh. The purpose of this paper

Prof Dilip K Chakrabarti is Professor Emeritus of South Asian Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, and Distinguished Fellow at VIF.

is to put this accusation in the context of the history of research on ancient Indian history and archaeology as a whole and judge if this is at all true or merely a left-wing propaganda ploy to build up a 'progressive' versus 'obscurantist' divide among the historians of ancient India.¹ The will also examine how certain currents of thought in modern Indian archaeology pose a danger to Indian security.

Developments till c. 1850

There is enough evidence to show that the knowledge of ancient Indian texts was continuous in India, and thus, the fact that there was an ancient India did not have to dawn suddenly upon anybody. For us Indians, the textual side of ancient India was always a living reality. For the Europeans it was not certainly a living reality but not an abrupt or sudden development either. The Greeks and Romans had been writing on India since Herodotus in the 6th century BC, and although in mediaeval Europe the stream thinned down to a trickle, it does not seem to have been entirely lost. The European knowledge of India got rejuvenated during the Portuguese rule in certain parts of west and south India and was further supported by the writings of European travellers in the Mogul territories. These travellers were familiar with the major rock-cut monuments of western India and the temples with *gopurams* in south India. This general curiosity developed by the middle of the 18th century into the beginning of a systematic and scholarly interest in the writings of the French Anquetil du Perron with interest in the Upanishads and of the Danish Karsten Niebuhr who thought that India was 'one of the oldest nations of the world'. The mid-18th century was also the time when the French geographer J. B. D' Anville initiated, based on Graeco-Roman sources, a phase of identification of ancient Indian sites. This led to the publication of a major historical geographical publication on India by du Perron, J. Tiffenthaler and James Rennell, the last credited with the identification of ancient Pataliputra with modern Patna. There was a further reason behind the European interest in India in the 18th century. It was the period of French Enlightenment, a philosophical school, which in its quest to seek non-Biblical origins of civilization, focussed first on China and then on India. For instance, Voltaire wrote that everything had come down to us from the banks of the Ganges.

After the East India Company's triumph over the Nawab of Bengal in 1757, one could no longer deny the increasing importance of the British in India's fortunes and would also appreciate the increasing curiosity of the Company officials of various kinds in different aspects of life and history of this newly acquired territory. When one remembers, along with this fact, that by the closing years of the 18th century, 'Societies' grew up in many

1 The theme of the article has been elaborated in Dilip K Chakrabarti, *Nationalism in the Study of Ancient Indian History*, Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2021.

British cities with the support of the local gentry and the newly risen class of manufacturers to inquire into the manifold character of the British land and people, one appreciates the basic political and intellectual context of the establishment of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta on 15 January, 1784 under the Presidentship of William Jones and the patronage of the Governor-general Warren Hastings and the members of his Council. The first volume of its journal, *Asiatick Researches* was published in 1788 and a museum of the new Society was founded in 1814.

It is important to outline the basic theoretical idea of William Jones, who “tried to link Indian history to Universal History as it was then understood. Its important source was the ten ‘discourses’ Jones delivered on various topics between 1784 and 1793 (published between 1788 and 1793) as President of the Asiatic Society. When he delivered his discourses, the biblical theory of human creation was still dominant. There was no doubt about the unitary origin of mankind from a common ancestor. In this way all branches of the human family were thought to be linked and likely to show survivals in various spheres of life that would reflect their common ancestry and spread from a single place of origin. One of the main issues before Jones was to understand these survivals in the Indian context and to demonstrate how ancient India and Indians were historically linked to other human groups in the world. This theme is recurrent in virtually all his discourses. Jones’s idea of the affinity of Sanskrit with several other ancient languages neatly fitted into this thought-pattern. In the third discourse delivered on 2 February 1786, he argued that the speakers of Sanskrit ‘had an immemorial affinity with the old Persians, Ethiopians and Egyptians, the Phoenicians, Greeks and Tuscans; the Scythians or Goths, and Celts; the Chinese, Japanese and Peruvians; whence, as no reason appears for believing that they were a colony from any one of these nations or any of these nations from them, we may fairly conclude that they all proceeded from some central country...’³

For William Jones and his contemporaries, the aim was to correlate the emerging knowledge of India with the contemporary European notions concerning the origin of culture and civilization and within the framework of the unitary origin of man as laid down in the Bible. These provided a significant framework for interpreting the Indian past. Jones’s linguistic hypothesis linking Sanskrit to Greek, Latin and other languages, is only a part of this interpretive framework that evolved in the context of pre-evolutionary thinking.

One also notes the emergence of two distinctly separate trends by this time. The first trend is represented by Edward Moore’s *The Hindu Pantheon* (1810) which, to quote William Dalrymple, is “remarkably encyclopaedic and accurate guide to Indian mythology”⁴ and by Charles Stuart’s *Vindication of the Hindus* (1808)⁵ which was written to evince “the

excellence of the moral system of the Hindus”, a moral system whose excellence came to be strongly disputed by the newly emergent class of Christian missionaries in India. The second trend was reflected by the first volume of James Mill's *History of British India* (1817)⁶ which contained a strongly disparaging assessment of the Hindus in the ladder of civilization. Mill's item by item rebuttal of all the positive points claimed for the Hindu civilization was disputed by some of his contemporaries including the famous Sanskritist of his time, Horace Hayman Wilson who pointed out the inadequacy of both his data and arguments and argued that Mill's negative attitude was likely to lead to a serious rift between the British rulers and the Indian ruled. One would also add that Mill's volume laid the foundation of the strong racist undercurrent of Western Indology since then.

The most important Asiatic Society personality after Jones was James Prinsep. His role in Indian archaeology was principally as the decipherer of the ancient Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts, ushering in a new phase of ancient Indian studies marked by the study of Ashokan and other ancient inscriptions. As the Secretary of the Asiatic Society, he founded a new journal of the Society where he invited contributions from the members on field-discoveries. Many students of Indian archaeology carry the warm memory of what he wrote in 1838 in this journal: "What the learned world demands of us in India is to be quite certain of our data, to place the monumental record before them exactly as it now exists, and to interpret it faithfully and literally".⁷

The decipherment of two 9th-10th east Indian inscriptions by Charles Wilkins initiated the process of deciphering the Brahmi script, which was completed by Prinsep by 1837, and a major role in the decipherment of the Kharosthi script of north-western India was also played by him. The ability to read short inscriptions on old coins have opened-up a whole new history of the ancient Indian dynasties and the study of their coins, with Prinsep playing again an important role in the entire process. James Tod was another important numismatist of the period. Among the areas where archaeological discoveries began to be noted are the north-west where the European officers of Ranjit Singh's army excavated the Manikyala stupa near Rawalpindi and Alexander Burnes, a British Indian military officer, was an ardent investigator of the stupa remains. Various parts of northern India, including Saharanpur and Ujjain, also came to be noted for their archaeological remains. Megalithic graves of south India also began to be investigated during this period. After Prinsep's early death, the mantle of archaeological investigation in India fell primarily upon the shoulder of Alexander Cunningham, who in 1843 published an article on the identification of the ancient Buddhist city of Sankisa near modern Farrukhabad.

Archaeological Survey of India till 1950

Alexander Cunningham derived his method of site-identification from the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Fa Xian in the 5th century and Xuan Zang in the 7th century. He was keen on expanding the scope of his enquiries at Sankisa on a much wider scale with the support of the government. In a sense this was an attempt to relate ancient texts to the countryside. Attempts of this kind go back in Britain to the 17th and 18th centuries. Taking the account of Pausanius as his guide, M W Leake established by the early 19th century the location and name of virtually all ancient Greek sites. In 1838-1852 E Robinson settled the general question of Biblical sites and their topography. Cunningham's field-research belongs to this tradition. Cunningham headed the government-approved archaeological survey in 1861-65 and in 1872-1885.

The Survey was disbanded in 1865 and organized again in 1871. In the first phase, he worked alone; in the second, he was allowed two assistants. Over a total of nineteen years he went over the ground, sometimes repeatedly, of a surprisingly large amount of territory which included the whole of the Gangetic valley, Panjab and the North-western Frontier Province, central India and Rajputana. The results of surveys done either by him or by his assistants are contained in the twenty-three volumes of his Reports, published between 1862 and 1887.

Cunningham's successor in the Survey, James Burgess took on the tradition of architectural studies established by James Fergusson and undertook and organized a series of architectural surveys of some of the principal monuments of west and south India. The journal he established in 1872—*The Indian Antiquary*—became the repository of many major publications on different aspects of ancient Indian studies, principally inscriptions and related studies. The study of inscriptions was put on a more secure footing with the appointments of J F Fleet (1883-1886) and E. Hultzsch (1886-1903) as 'government epigraphists' and the publication of *Epigraphia Indica*, first in 1888. This was also the time when Indian scholars appeared significantly on the scene—Bhagavanlal Indrajī⁸ and Rajendra Lal Mitra being two outstanding examples from two different parts of India.

What is apparent is that by the end of the 19th century the antiquarian remains of India, especially the mounds and structural remains, were largely mapped with clear ideas of their historical significance and identifications. This was accompanied by clear ideas of inscriptions, coins, art, and iconography. What was lacking was an understanding of the life as lived in the famous historical cities. This was provided by the leadership of John Marshall, who aimed to achieve this by pursuing a comprehensive archaeological policy of

exploration, excavation, conservation, and publication. In this he was actively supported by the Viceroy Lord Curzon who laid down the basic guidelines of this work “to dig and discover, to classify, reproduce, and describe, to copy and decipher, and to cherish and conserve.” The primary result of the archaeological research under John Marshall was important:

No part of India remained untouched by the spade or the prying eyes of the Director-General and his colleagues, and what was built up, step by step, was an understanding of the actual material base of ancient India, whether it was at ancient Rajagriha in the east, Taxila in the northwest, or Adichanallur in the deep south.⁹

The most glorious episode of Indian archaeology under John Marshall was the discovery of the Indus Civilization at Mohenjodaro (1921) and Harappa (1922). The typical identifying mark of the civilization, the square or rectangular steatite seals with distinguishing inscriptions and animal figures, were found at Kalibangan, Harappa, Bhuj and several sites in Iran and Mesopotamia but their significance was not understood till the excavations at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The occurrence of these typical seals in several Mesopotamian sites and the site of Susa in Iran in Bronze Age contexts showed that this civilization was a Bronze Age civilization too. Marshall's definitive declaration of this civilization dates from 1924 and his three-volume report, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization* (1931), alongside the reports of his colleagues, E J Mackay (Mohenjodaro) and M S Vats (Harappa) will always have its place as an all-time great in Indian archaeology. Due note must also be taken of the conservation policy instituted by Marshall; his *Conservation Manual* published in 1923 is a landmark in its field. Till the Archaeological Survey of India closely followed this policy, as laid down by Marshall, India's ancient monuments have remained in safe hands. It is under the comparatively recent influence of the so-called architectural consultants who regrettably have come to acquire some clout in the Archaeological Survey under its new chiefs who come from the Indian Administrative Service and are not required to possess even an ounce of literacy in Archaeology or anything related to it, that Marshall's conservation principles have begun to be grossly violated.

Among the Director Generals who headed the Survey after Marshall's retirement in 1928—J. F. Blackiston, K N Dikshit and Mortimer Wheeler—the most important one was Mortimer Wheeler (1944-1948), who took a total view of archaeology beginning with the Palaeolithic stage and emphasized the need for scientific analyses in archaeology. He also introduced India to the stratigraphic method of digging, demonstrating the significance of this approach to many trainees in his own excavations at Harappa, Arikamedu and Taxila. Wheeler presided over Indian archaeology's transition to modernity. He also incorporated the tradition of Indian prehistoric studies which began with R. B. Foote's discovery of

Palaeolith in 1863 and the Terra-Paterson survey of the prehistoric stratigraphy of the Soan valley in the 1930s.

The Study of Ancient Indian History

Curiosity in what would be called today ancient Indian history goes back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries when there were publications specifically on ancient Indian chronology trying to assess the evidence of the Puranas in the light of the Biblical chronology. The idea of linguistic similarities propounded by Jones in the context of the proposition of all human beings being the descendants of Noah was strengthened and amplified by philologists including Max Mueller. The seed of race-language-culture correlation as an explanatory mechanism of ancient Indian culture was laid around the middle of the 19th century and went on gaining strength throughout the rest of the century till by the beginning of the 20th century, it became something like an axiom. The beginning of proper historical studies of ancient India should be appreciated in this context.

The initiative came from several British scholars, not all of whom were contemptuous of the ancient Indian past as James Mill and his ecclesiastical followers, who were unhappy with the slow progress of Christianity in India, were. I find the writings of the following scholars interesting in their own ways: Hugh Murray (1832)¹⁰, a geographer; G R Gleig (1830-35)¹¹, a soldier-priest; J. C. Marshman (1836 and later)¹², a missionary; Edward Thornton (1841)¹³, compiler of gazetteers; Robert Sewell (1870)¹⁴, Indian Civil Service; and W. Hamilton (1820)¹⁵, a geographer. All, except the missionary Marshman, had belief in the high antiquity of the Indian civilization, and some of them maintained that the Brahmins were late-comers in India being preceded by the aborigines in the hills.

The British writers mentioned here did not write exclusively on the history of ancient India. Even Mountstuart Elphinstone devoted only a part of his 1500-page book on Indian history to the ancient period¹⁶. He had his doubts about the Aryan hypothesis and his book remains a wonderful mix of geography and history. Elphinstone clearly denoted the ancient Indian civilization as an early and independent civilization, in some ways superior to that of Greece: internal institutions less rude, behaviour with the enemies more humane, considerably more general learning among people and a more sophisticated knowledge of the being and nature of God. The way he used his knowledge of India of his time to explain the caste system, ancient revenue practices, etc., retains its importance.

Three major publications of Vincent Arthur Smith are noteworthy—*The Early History of India* (the first edition in 1904 and the fourth in 1924), *the Oxford History of India* (1919, but edited since then by others) and a monograph on *Asoka* (1901) under the 'rulers of India'

series¹⁷. He also wrote a major study of the history of Indian art¹⁸. He was a numismatist in his own right, having published catalogues of ancient Indian coins. All in all, he was not merely a civilian but somebody profoundly aware of the ancient Indian historical sources and their contents. A member of the Indian Civil Service, he always remained aware of his own identity as a British ruler of modern India, but he tried his best to remain objective as a historian of ancient India. A close study of his books reveals that his attitude to foreign influences on ancient Indian art partly varied from time to time. At one point, he was rather categorical about the influence of Alexandrine art on the bas-reliefs of the post-Ashokan art but at another, he was aware of the originality of this art. Whatever external influence it had, it had assimilated it to such an extent that there was no 'foreignness' about it. This is also his conclusion about the influence of the Achaemenid art on the Mauryas. Classical traits in Gandhara art excited his attention. Although he knew that aesthetically it was less pleasing than many other schools of ancient art, he certainly did not forget that it was the prototype of sculptures over a large part of central and east Asia. He did not agree with Coomaraswamy's opinion on the quality of spiritualism being an essential element of beauty of ancient Indian art.

Vincent Smith devoted a substantial part of *The Early History of India* to the historical geography of Alexander's invasion but was aware that the Greek influence never penetrated deeply. He was not the one to be influenced by Risley's system of classification of Indian people based on head and nasal measurements. On the basis of his own experience, he did not hesitate to think that the lower caste *chamars* and the *bhangis* of U.P. were occasionally more handsome than the Brahmins. More importantly, he thought that the mixture of races had been going on for a long time on the Indian soil and it might be foolish to look for unsullied abstract racial or physical types in India. He, however, was a strong believer in the Aryan hypothesis and did not hesitate to accept that Hinduism stretched back to the Rigvedic times. He was also astute enough to know that there was no Buddhist or Jaina period of ancient Indian history, the adherents of Brahmanism being significantly present throughout.

Vincent Smith was sure that the pan-Indian unity was achieved first under the British and that even the Mauryan power did not extend to the country's every corner. The small kingdoms in the post-Harsha period constituted an era of darkness for him. One of the striking points, however, was an element of unity running through all the political and other diversities of the country. This unity was based on Hinduism's civilizational identity. This idea, as we shall see later, is identical with the idea of fundamental unity of Indian history, as it was advocated by R K Mukherji¹⁹. Whether Smith accepted Mukherji's idea, which was published around that time, or it was his own idea, is difficult to say, but even

if it was originally Mukherji's idea, the fact remains that Smith as a colonial administrator accepted it. This also shows that Smith is not as great an imperialist as he is occasionally made out to be. In fact, on close reading, it is impossible to characterise Elphinstone and Smith as imperialist and anti-India historians. This cannot be said about E J Rapson, a Cambridge University Sanskrit professor, the editor of the ancient Indian history volume in the Cambridge History of India series, and the author of brief book, *Ancient India*, meant for the Indian Civil Service candidates. To Rapson there never was any originality in ancient Indian history, which was also a collection of histories of many separate countries.

It is against characters like Rapson that Indian scholars of ancient India wielded their pens. I single out Rajendra Lal Mitra, Bhagavanlal Indraji, R G Bhandarkar, Ramesh Chandra Dutta and Hara Prasad Sastri in the closing years of the 19th century and Radha Kumud Mukherji, Kasi Prasad Jayaswal, R C Majumdar, and some of their contemporaries in the 20th. Mitra (1822-91) is famous for his publications on Orissan antiquities (1875, 1880), Bodh Gaya (1878) and a two-volume collection of essays (1881) dealing with different aspects of material life in ancient India²⁰. In his Odisha volumes he strongly advocated the independent origin of Indian stone architecture and earned the wrath of James Fergusson, the most established architectural historian of India of that time. In the volume on Bodh Gaya he argued for the existence of true arch in an early context in the Mahabodhi temple, and among his essays on the ancient Indian material life he cited copious data on beef-eating and the practice of spirituous drinking in ancient India. Bhagavanlal Indraji, originally of Junagad but later based in Bombay, not merely contributed some major articles on the rock-cut caves of western India to the relevant volumes of the Bombay Gazetteers, but also excavated the Buddhist stupa site of Sopara and spent two whole years in the field in different part of India, studying and publishing sculptural and architectural remains and inscriptions. In the Deccan, his successor was R G Bhandarkar who published his volume on the early history of the Deccan²¹ primarily on the basis of inscriptions, arguing that the historian's approach to the past should be like that of a judge. Ramesh Chandra Dutta's books on the history of ancient Hindu civilization and ancient India from 200 BC to 800 AD are known for their emphasis on the Aryan migration as denoting the most important watershed of Hindu civilization²². Hara Prasad Sastri wrote a book on the history of ancient India²³, again attributing an important position to Aryans and dating their period, curiously, to 4000-1500 BC.

Radhakumud Mukherji's book on *Indian shipping*²⁴, published in 1912, dramatically changed the scenario of writing books on ancient India, by focussing on her material achievements, including maritime activities and commercial and manufacturing interests. The Aryan invasion was not forgotten; Mukherji, in fact, calls it a momentous event in

the world's history, if not its most important. In his *The Fundamental Unity of India (from Hindu Sources)*²⁵, 1914, he points out the element of geographical unity of the country and argues that this unity or at least its perception was not a contribution of the British but lay in the historic consciousness of the ancient Hindus. Mukherji's *Local Self-Government in Ancient India*²⁶ (1919) and *Ancient Indian Education*²⁷, the bulk of the latter written in 1918-20, vigorously put forward Mukherji's nationalist ideas and arguments in the respective contexts. The main argument is that through 'indigenous machinery of appropriate institutions', ancient India could preserve her organizational identity through centuries of political domination. One would argue that these four books by Radhakumud Mukherji introduce a strong gust of nationalism in the ancient Indian studies without a single slip in his data and arguments.

Kasiprasad Jayaswal's major work is *Hindu Polity*²⁸ which was aimed at elaborating the experiments which 'the Hindu race' had made 'in great and various systems of state and political machinery'. The starting points were the sovereign and judicial assemblies of the Vedic times. These were followed by discussions on the following: Hindu republics, 1000 BC to 600 AD; Hindu kingship from the Vedic times to 600 AD; Assembly of the capital, 600 BC to 600 AD; Council of Ministers, 1000 BC to 600 AD; judiciary under Hindu monarchy, 700 BC to 600 AD; taxation, 1000 BC to 600 AD; Hindu imperial systems, 1000 BC to 600 AD; and finally, decay and revival of the Hindu constitutional traditions, 650 to 1650 AD. People have occasionally derided him for roping in even weak bits of evidence as arguments in his favour, but what comes through is his lawyer's passion to declare democracy as an integral part of the ancient Indian political tradition.

R C Majumdar's *Corporate Life in Ancient India*²⁹, published in 1918, i.e. around the time when Jayaswal finished writing his *Hindu Polity*, partly overlaps with the latter publication because both these publications underscore the strong tradition of republicanism in ancient Indian political life, beginning with the Rigvedic *Sabha* and *Samiti*. Both the authors also put emphasis on the elective character of the monarchy. Majumdar partly moves away to draw attention to the democratic character of guilds and other collective bodies like caste organizations, including those of the Brahmins.

Overall, the volumes by Jayaswal and Majumdar demonstrate the depth and breadth of the ancient Indian political organizations and that the Hindu political thought including the legal ideas behind it was basically democratic, having space for popular representations. This is certainly a matter to be proud of and both the authors put forward their case with a substantial amount of indisputable data. Majumdar also developed the concept of 'greater India' in the mainland and island zone of southeast Asia, researching the

primary data from every major region and offered a detailed and data-based account of the Indian presence in this vast territory³⁰. Indian languages and scripts, Indian iconography and art styles, Indian temple architecture, inscriptions in Sanskrit, kings bearing Indian names, Indian ritual—all these have been intimately intertwined with the history and archaeology of such a diverse and yet unified region. They were not certainly 'colonies' in the modern sense of the term; there was no exploitative machinery involved for the benefit of the colonizing territory, but there were 'Indianized' states all right, as there were in ancient Xinxiang and many parts of central Asia, including Afghanistan and territories from Turkmenistan to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

One of the outstanding features of Vincent Smith's books was their focus on the dynastic history of ancient India in all its areas. Among the Indian scholars, R D Banerjee's book on the general history of ancient India³¹ stands out in this regard because of his command over all the regional epigraphic and numismatic data, the twin bed-rocks of the dynastic history of the country. H C Raychaudhuri's book on the political history of India³² takes off, in a sense, from Pargiter's volume on the ancient Indian dynastic tradition. The achievement of Raychaudhuri is that he relates it to the proper scaffolding of dynastic succession as testified by the unimpeachable sources. Raychaudhuri's study comes down basically to the Gupta period, but H C Ray knew enough of the relevant epigraphic sources to offer a panorama of dynasties and their relationships in the post-Gupta period, with special emphasis on what is known as the 'tripartite struggle' between the Gurjara-Pratiharas, the Rashtrakutas and the Palas for the control of Kanauj or the ancient city of Mahodaya in the central Ganga plain³³. In the context of the south, the foundations of dynastic history were laid down by S K Aiyangar³⁴ and K A N Sastri³⁵, especially by the latter whose work on the Cholas has still not been bettered by any south Indian historian.

This was also the time when the study of regional histories took off. The history of Bengal edited by R C Majumdar³⁶ and Ghulam Yazdani's editing of the Deccanese history³⁷ set a new standard of scholarship. There were many scholars specializing in regional studies during this period like Rama Shankar Tripathi on Kanauj³⁸ or A K Narain on the northwestern history of the Indo-Greeks. Among the Indian scholars, N C Bandopadhyay³⁹ first offered a frame of ancient Indian economic studies, which has survived even now. The study of the ancient Indian revenue system was put on a new pedestal by U N Ghoshal⁴⁰. R P Chanda's monograph on the beginning of art in eastern India contains analysis of several Mauryan examples. The study of ancient Indian art history gained primary impetus from the book by Coomaraswamy⁴¹. Ancient India's scientific achievements in their various dimensions were worked out clearly by B N Seal⁴² and Benoy Kumar Sarkar⁴³, with Sarkar's volume being more simply written and thus easier to understand.

Developments since the 1950s

The research which has been outlined above continued well into the 1950s and later and has possibly been best expressed in the five volumes on ancient India in the series *A History of Indian People* edited by R C Majumdar and sponsored by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. In a sense, these volumes formalise and systematise the existing scholarly production regarding ancient India.

The first grumbling against the Vidya Bhavan style of writing history was heard in D D Kosambi's *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956)⁴⁴, which emphasized the value of exploring new data specially in the form of survival of earlier practices and beliefs. R S Sharma's book on ancient Indian political beliefs published in 1959 did not contain anything specifically new but talked about Hindu revivalism of the earlier scholars and the inadvisability of harking back to the glories of ancient India because that would upset Muslim sentiments. This trend assumed a clearer form in 1968 when Romila Thapar brought in the element of Hindu revivalism along with Hindu militancy to characterise the earlier scholars' books on ancient India. R S Sharma (1965) tried to introduce the concept of feudalism in the history of ancient India in an apparent attempt to bring about a sense of parallelism between European history and ancient Indian history⁴⁵.

This is how the matter stood till 1972 when the ICHR was established by the Government of India with R S Sharma as its chairman and S Nurul Hasan as its presiding Minister. The members of the Council all belonged to the political left and there was a consistent attempt to fill up the history vacancies in Delhi and elsewhere with fellow-communists. A new university—Jawaharlal Nehru University—was established under the government auspices in Delhi to espouse the leftist cause. The ICHR became the most important source of funding of historical research. With the control of both appointments and funding, historical research in India went completely into the leftist control during this phase. This control was immeasurably strengthened by the simultaneous leftist control of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) which led to a uniform history syllabus at the school level all over the country and the selection of a few communist authors to write books expounding this syllabus. These authors, because of the wide circulation of their books at the school level, gained almost celebrity status overnight. R S Sharma and Romila Thapar were selected for writing books on ancient India. If R S Sharma was keen on putting ancient India's historical development in the framework devised by the communist thinker F Engels, Romila Thapar and her associates were keen to offer explanations of ancient Indian historical processes in terms of the writings of Western social scientists. None of them bothered to enquire if the historical data available

for ancient India warranted such exercises. Both their writings strongly championed the theory of Aryan invasion of India and blindly followed some Western Indological writings on that. Sharma also focused strongly on bringing in a stage of feudalism on European model in the post-Gupta period. Sharma's feudalism theory falls through for many clear reasons. The land-grant inscriptions of the kind Sharma mentions continue to occur in Rajasthan till the 17th/18th century and in the dynastic contexts mentioned by Sharma their number over a period of about 400 years is reputedly no more than 33, an insignificant number to build up an all-India stage of development. What is also ignored is the fact that such grants of land to Brahmins fall in line with a well-known Hindu ritual behaviour of granting Brahmins land on auspicious days after taking ritual bath. More importantly, KP Jayaswal demonstrated in *Hindu Polity* that the kings of ancient India were not the owners of the kingdom's land. This land belonged to the individual owners. Many 19th century British administrators also supported this contention. The point is that the kings of ancient India did not have the legal right to distribute lands among a separate class of retainers and thus it was impossible for them to generate a class of feudal barons based on such donations. In the writings of Sharma's associates, one notes the use of such terms as 'early mediaeval', 'state formation' and 'legitimation' (of monarchy). The term 'early mediaeval' has been loosely used for a long time but the basic politics of this use in recent times is to suggest the existence of an 'early mediaeval' Hindu India merging smoothly into the 'mediaeval' Muslim India, thus obviating the drastic difference between the two.

'State formation' has been a continuous process in Indian history and was certainly not a novel feature of the post-Gupta period. Scholars who use the term 'legitimation' in the context of post-Gupta Hindu dynasties forget that Hindu kingship was never a theocratic kingship and the kings did not require the support of a particular deity. The pitfalls of applying Western social science concepts to ancient Indian historical data can be seen in Romila Thapar's exercise to isolate linear development from lineage-centred tribes to states in the ancient Indian context where the boundaries of neither tribes nor states are clearly or rigorously defined. That this 'social science approach' can lead to disaster is suggested by a Ph. D thesis submitted by Shireen Ratnagar under Thapar. While examining the issue of Indus-Mesopotamia trade, this thesis reduced the Indus civilization to the position held by India in the British empire as a supplier of raw materials. Kumkum Roy was another of her Ph. D students and her book on the emergence of monarchy in Vedic India arranges certain portions of the Vedic texts in an arbitrary developmental order and postulates on that basis the 'emergence' of monarchy. Exercises of this kind may or may not be 'social science', but certainly this is not honest history.

If Sharma and Thapar are not overtly anti-Hindu, writers like Upinder Singh certainly are. Her repugnance to find any echo of Hinduism in the religion of the Indus civilization is absolutely amazing, because everybody with knowledge of Marshall's analysis of the Indus religion will know that the basic parameter of that analysis was Hinduism. How on earth does Upinder Singh deny it, especially after the discovery of a terracotta replica of *lingam* in a *yonipatta* in the mature Indus context at Kalibangan? How on earth do historians like Upinder Singh explain Jainism and Buddhism as examples of multi-religious diversity in ancient India when both these religions were offshoots of Hinduism? The blind belief of this type of scholar in Aryan invasion is palpably rooted in their belief that Hinduism, like Islam and Christianity, are immigrant religions in India.

The way the Communists have been the prime dictators of ancient Indian historical research for more than 50 years is also due to some of their clever propaganda ploys. The first five volumes of the Vidya Bhavan series, which basically summarise the knowledge derived from the labours of researchers stretching back to the late 19th century or earlier, do not contain even an iota of distorted facts. So, how is it that the Communist historians of ancient India built for themselves a 'progressive' image vis-à-vis the nationalist/communalist historians? They did this by a simple device. All religions—name whatever religion you like—have fringe groups claiming exaggerated glories or importance for themselves. Hindus also have their own share of such people. They are far from the professional field of history. However, the Communists set their opinions as professional historical opinions and dubbed themselves 'progressives' as opposed to these obscurantists. This is as devious a plot as any. An upshot of this ploy is that the opinion of the Hindu fringe group is currently on the verge of entering the mainstream. The truth of this claim will be obvious if we note the increasing space being claimed these days by people who date texts by astronomical configurations or think of writing history on the basis of mythology. It is important to put on record that this emerging group is as harmful for the cause of objective historical studies of ancient India as the Communists and their fellow-travellers.

Archaeology in Modern India

I would be failing in my duty in the nationalist cause if I do not point out that most of the Indian archaeologists in the post-Independence period have played a singularly anti-national role throughout. In the early 1970s, H D Sankalia⁴⁶, the first archaeologist director of the Deccan College, declared India to be always a colony, without any major innovation to her credit. M K Dhavalikar⁴⁷, another archaeologist director of the same institution, compared the Indus civilization sites in Gujarat to the British factories in Mogul-late Mogul Gujarat, assuming that these Indus sites in Gujarat are 'foreign' establishments. V N Misra⁴⁸,

a third archaeologist director of this institution, wrote of 'prehistoric colonisation of India', while one of its more recent archaeologist directors, was willing to give a particular Western archaeologist the status of a mighty *Guru* in the archaeological scheme of India. I cannot also think of a single new nationalist idea emerging from the Archaeological Survey of India in the post-Independence years. The same is true of most of the other institutions involved in doing archaeology in post-Independent India.

On the other hand, there has been a striking amount of new archaeological data from all parts of the country, and in this, many of the Indian archaeologists, including those I have mentioned, have played a positive nationalist role. In fact, in certain sectors of archaeological research India's character as an area of innovations has been adequately highlighted. I cannot explain this strange dichotomy except by claiming that nation or the implications of their conclusions and findings in terms of the nation played no role at all in the mental make-up of most of the archaeologists of the country.

I find the current archaeological scene deeply worrying. The way in which the integrity and homogeneity of the Indus civilization are being denied by a group of archaeologists in the country is disturbing from our nationalist point of view. The Indus civilization is the epitome of the higher cultural tradition of India and incorporates, both in its wide geographical extension and the long chronological frame of c.7000-1200 BC for this civilization and the antecedent cultures, the entire column of the Vedic literature, regardless of its precise position in the archaeological time-frame. To deny its integrity and homogeneity is basically to strike at the roots of the integrity and homogeneity of the Indian civilization. It is now a widely circulated opinion among the archaeologists of Vadodara and Pune and also a section of the so-called Harappa-specialists of the Archaeological Survey of India that the Harappan or Indus civilization was a veneer laid over different regional cultures of Gujarat and other areas including the Doab. When you use such a term as 'veneer' to denote the character of a civilization, that means that is basically like a plywood veneer laid over regional cultures in different regions without any organic connection between the two. The integrity and homogeneity of the Indus civilization is a matter of pride for those who believe in the integrity and homogeneity of the Indian civilization and the only explanation I can give for the lack of belief of certain Indian archaeologists in this is simply that these archaeologists are simply not aware of the national and other political dimensions of the archaeological data and certainly pose a danger to the security of the country.

This indifference to the national aspect of the Indus civilization is surprising because there is already a string of publications by B B Lal⁴⁹ in recent years pointing out the depth and continuity of the Indian civilization. It appears that these publications have fallen on

deaf ears in professional modern Indian archaeology.

The indifference of the communist historians of ancient India to the consideration of national perspective is understandable because ideologically, the communists are seldom nationalists. More surprising is the indifference of a large section of Indian archaeologists to consider implications of their research conclusions to national interest. One of the reasons is that certain archaeologists of the country consider themselves more of 'scientists' than run-of-the-mill historians. Considering the academic background of most of these people, this attitude is not above the level of a joke. If archaeology has to thrive as an academic discipline in a country like India with her own singularly rich history traditions, it has to do so primarily as a historical discipline. Paying obeisance to "new archaeology" on the model of K Paddayya (1990)⁵⁰, another director of Deccan College, will simply not do.

There is another important dimension of the problem of national security posed by Indian archaeologists. The Government of India now pursues an open-door policy regarding foreign participation in Indian archaeology. All that is required at present is that the foreign archaeological group concerned has to operate through a native archaeologist collaborator. The result, as far as I can see, is turning out to be disastrous from the Indian point of view and the Indian collaborators including those in the leadership position at the Archaeological Survey of India are not experienced or even educated enough to understand how the different archaeological theories propounded by these foreigners have already begun to undermine India's national interest.

One of the ways to get out of this situation is to make the study of ancient Indian history and archaeology a little more important in the Indian job market. The basic aim should be to attract bright students to it. As things stand, ancient Indian history and archaeology departments of Indian universities end up by giving refuse to the flotsam and jetsam of the Indian academic scene. Most of these departments are falling down with pass-course BAs and B.Sc.s. There should also be adequate mechanism to make teaching in these departments more regular, streamlined and committed enough to bring the nation within their academic horizon.

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