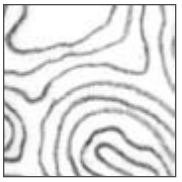
HANDBOOK OF POSTCOLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Jane Lydon and Uzma Z. Rizvi
Editors

Walnut Creek, California



16

COMMENTARY: ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA AND THE SCIENCE OF POSTCOLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Ashish Chadha

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is grounded in a colonial epistemology that can be characterized as somewhere between what Bernard Cohn calls the "historical modality" and the "survey modality" (Cohn 1996: 5). Cohn defines these categories as the "investigative modalities" of knowledge production mechanisms invented by imperial ideology, subsequently perfected in colonies to produce "facts" that could be classified to govern their subjects. For Cohn, the historical modality is a means of knowledge production instrumental in "the ideological construction of Indian civilizations," whereas the survey modality is involved in "mapping and bounding to describe and classify the territory's zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history, and sociology" (Cohn 1996: 7). On the one hand, ASI (established in 1861) was an instrument of survey that scientifically discovered, excavated, and classified India's past, and, on the other, it was an agency that provided empirical evidence for the construction of an ideological history of India's past through the analysis of architectural remains, epigraphical inscriptions, and archaeological excavations. In its postcolonial incarnation, ASI continues to embody this colonial, ideological, and epistemological framework in the scientific-bureaucratic construction of Indian civilization.

Postcolonial Evolution of ASI

The partition of South Asia in 1947 forced ASI to reevaluate the archaeological heritage that came under its purview. By 1948, ASI had relinquished jurisdiction of a substantial portion of the Old Frontier Circle, covering the entire region of erstwhile West Pakistan and parts of its Eastern Circle, comprising areas in East Pakistan. This necessitated the reconfiguration of the boundaries and personnel and the creation of new areas of operations. As a result of this reconfiguration, the number of circles went from seven to nine (Thakran 2000: 45). Some of the most

prominent Buddhist archaeological sites, such as Taxila and the northwestern Buddhist Gandhara complex, had gone to Pakistan. Furthermore, the loss of jurisdiction over Harappa and Mohenjodaro represented the biggest blow to the organizational subjectivity of postcolonial ASI, since these sites had constituted the professional essence of ASI in the last decades of its colonial legacy. However, soon after partition, by the early 1950s, ASI began a systematic exploration of the western states of independent India (Ghosh 1952, 1956, 1959; Thakran 2000: 48). Eventually, these explorations led to the large-scale excavation of the Harappan sites of Lothal (1955–1963), Rangpur (1953–1956), Kalibangan (1960–1969), and Surkotada (1971–1972).

With the Constitution of India coming into effect in 1950, archaeology was made a concurrent subject under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution. ASI was now the central authority involved in all aspects of archaeological exploration and excavation: maintenance, conservation, and preservation of archaeological sites; chemical preservation of monuments and antiquarian remains; architectural survey of monuments; epigraphical and numismatic studies; setting up and running site museums; training students in archaeology; bringing out archaeological publications; archaeological expeditions outside India; running horticultural operations in and around ancient monuments and sites; and implementation and regulation of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (1958) and the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act (1972). It had the legal jurisdiction to provide licenses and permission for any archaeological exploration and excavation throughout the country. This jurisdiction gave ASI not only power over the vast archaeological heritage of the subcontinent, but also hegemonic control over the nature of archaeological knowledge produced in the country. No individual or institution could undertake any form of archaeological work without a legal license issued by the ASI.

Today, ASI is an organization attached to the Department of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, with its headquarters in New Delhi. ASI has its own head, designated as the director general, who is assisted by an additional director general, a joint director general, and a group of other directors. Administratively, the country is divided into 24 circles, each headed by a superintending archaeologist responsible for the upkeep of the protected monuments in its jurisdiction. Alongside, there are six excavation branches, one prehistory branch, one building survey project, two temple survey projects, two epigraphy branches, and one science branch functioning in the ASI. ASI employs several thousand workers throughout the country, is responsible for the protection of 3,663 monuments, and has excavated close to 292 sites since independence. Its annual budget in 2005– 2006 was Rs. 251 crores ($56,114,000), which was almost 30 percent of the total budget of the Ministry of Culture.

ASI and Its Scientific Aspirations

The postcolonial (post-partition) evolution of ASI has been shaped by a series of review

committees set up by the government to assess its departments every two decades. This evaluative convention originated with the Leonard Woolley Report of 1939. Until 2001, there were three similar high-profile reviews of postcolonial ASI. The first of these reports was the Wheeler Review Committee Report of 1965 (Ministry of Education 1965), followed by the Mirdha Review Committee Report of 1984, and the B. B. Lal Review Committee Report of 2001. These review reports have had an important role in the career of ASI as a postcolonial statist institution and represent both its apathy to transformation and its lack of agency—arising from the maze of systemic entanglements of postcolonial bureaucracy. The quasi-legal status of these review committee reports was responsible for bringing about major bureaucratic changes, causing a significant organizational transformation of the ASI. The recommendations of these review reports were taken seriously by the bureaucratic system, although implementation was more often than not delayed by years, if not decades.

Of the several recommendations that gathered dust in the files of the postcolonial bureaucratic system, one of them had the potential of transforming the professional essence of ASI. In 1984, the Mirdha Committee Report announced that, based on the context and content of the work that the ASI conducts, the organization should be declared a scientific institution (Basu 2005: 8). This mandate was the outcome of decades of aspiration on the part of ASI bureaucrat-archaeologists to be considered scientists. The ASI considered itself scientific on the basis of its disciplinary intervention with regard to protecting the heritage of ancient India and, more importantly, its knowledge production capabilities. All the other major survey organizations came under the purview of the Department of Science and Technology, and there was a simmering professional discontent that ASI was still attached to the Ministry of Culture. However, the concern also had professional ramifications, the most prominent among them the possibility of acquiring a higher pay scale. In 1989, a group set up by the Department of Science and Technology further recommended that ASI be declared a scientific and technological department; however, the shift has not occurred to date. The Ninety-First Report of the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee of Transport, Tourism, and Culture was devoted to the functioning of ASI. Headed by Nilotpal Basu, a senior member of the Parliament, the report severely pronounced:

> No concrete action was taken by Ministry of Culture and Archaeological Survey of India for developing Archaeological Survey of India as a Scientific and Technical Department, which amply indicates the administrative apathy towards the whole issue. . . . The Committee is of the view that the Archaeological Survey of India needs to reinvent itself, not merely as an administrative wing of the government, but as an agency for protecting and safeguarding our national heritage, which involves a lot of scientific and technical work. Unless the Archaeological Survey

> of India converts itself fully into a scientific and technical organization, the basic role and function of the organization will be defeated. (Basu 2005: 10)

The links between science, state, and bureaucracy within archaeology are best illustrated by the existing struggle between the Ministry of Culture, which does not want to transfer the ASI, the most financially prized organization under its ministry, and the Department of Science and Technology, which, although administratively willing to admit the ASI under its wing, is still disciplinarily reluctant (Basu 2005: 9–10). The tension was between ASI's bureaucratic character as a large heritage management and conservation organization and its aspiration as a scientific organization. This tension—between governmentality and science, bureaucracy and archaeology—which is at the center of ASI's postcolonial archaeology, has had a powerful impact in the way it produces knowledge, such as in the context of the Ayodhya Babri Mosque controversy.

ASI and Ayodhya Archaeology

The political blending of science, history, nationalism, and mythic past was an intrinsic historical process through which archaeology evolved in postcolonial India, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996; Shaw 2000). For all those who were involved in the archaeological and historical knowledge production of the Indian past, this ultra-nationalist disciplinary collusion was apparent (Engineer 1992); however, it came to the attention of the international archaeological community in a disturbing way during the 1994 meetings of the World Archaeological Congress in New Delhi (Colley 1995; Golson 1995; Hassan 1995; Muralidharan 1994; Rao 1994, 1999). The destruction of the 16th-century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists brought into sharp focus the politics of ethics (Vitelli 1996), the science of archaeology, and nationalism, not just in India but also in the world of archaeology at large.

ASI was central to this controversy.[1] First, it was the excavation in Ayodhya, conducted as part of the Archaeology of the Ramayana project (1970–1985) by B. B. Lal, that provided the scientific rationale for the destruction of the Babri Masjid by the Hindu fundamentalist forces (see Archaeological Survey of India 1977). ASI was ordered by the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad high court to conduct scientific excavation of Ayodhya once again, to ascertain if there was indeed a temple under the mosque. In 2003, ASI conducted the most high-profile postcolonial archaeological excavation in India. The four-month-long excavation was conducted under the daily surveillance and sharp public scrutiny of the national media and the judiciary. An excavation report was tabled in the court in less than two months—the fastest archaeological report ever written by the ASI. This was a miraculous feat, considering that out of 292 excavations conducted by the ASI between 1950 and 2002, only 45 had seen detailed publication. The most recent archaeological report of the Kalibangan excavation was published more than 30 years after the

completion of the excavations (Lal et al. 2003). Dilip Chakrabarti, in an op-ed written in the *Hindustan Times*, entitled "It's the Archaeology, Stupid!" (2003b), notes with mock jubilation and a shade of cynicism the completion of the Ayodha report in two months: "Considering that only 15 percent of all the archaeological excavations undertaken in India since Independence are properly published, the submission of a full report on any excavated site in the country should be a matter of great rejoicing among archaeologists" (see also Chakrabarti 2003a).

If ASI intended to fashion the Ayodhya report under the jurisdiction of the court as evidence of scientific archaeology, then its legitimacy was seriously challenged. Stringent criticism was leveled against the conclusion the ASI came to: that a temple did exist under the Babri Mosque. Methodological discrepancies were noted by critics who challenged the general premise of the archaeological excavation as conducted by the ASI. Most critics argued that by conducting a methodologically flawed excavation, the ASI came to a preconceived conclusion—which had the political sanction of the Hindu nationalist government in power. They argued that by employing archaeo-juridical evidence, the ASI justified the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalist forces (Bhan 2004; Mandal 2004a, 2004b; Roy 2004). This report, although tabled in the court in 2003, has yet to be published, further jeopardizing the scientific credibility of ASI. More recently, the role of ASI came under sharp public scrutiny in the controversial Sethu Samudran project. Its expertise was seriously undermined by the present Congress regime, which withdrew the affidavit filed by the ASI in the Supreme Court questioning the historical existence of the Hindu god Ram. Thus the postcolonial subjectivity of the ASI as a knowledge production organization has been fraught with the tension between its role as a postcolonial statist organization and a scientific institution.

Conclusion

Contemporary ASI archaeology is driven more by the thrust of postcolonial bureaucracy than by the desire to produce knowledge—although the eminence of knowledge has been employed to increase its authority about the Indian past. Science and its rhetoric play a central role in emphasizing the influence of ASI. The scientific practice of archaeology is subverted and exploited by the governmentality of ASI to essentialize its objective authority over the Indian past. Although science in ASI archaeology is craft, it has a powerful objective valence. This craft is viewed as the most efficient and ideologically objective practice in the production of knowledge (Shanks and McGuire 1996). ASI is simultaneously both a postcolonial bureaucratic institution and an organization that produces archaeological knowledge. There is a disjunctural tension between these two professional practices, embodied in a single institutional organization, which affects the way knowledge is produced at an archaeological site. ASI is at once a symbol of the postcolonial state and practitioner of a marginal science struggling to produce objective knowledge about the

past. It is the dual character of this institution that makes it distinctive from an organization that solely produces knowledge, because ASI is significantly also an instrument of postcolonial governmentality.

Note

1. See Ratnagar 2004; Abraham 2005; Mandal 2003; 2004a, 2004b; Roy 2004; Chakrabarti 2003a; Johnson-Roehr 2008.

References

Abraham, J. 2005. Archaeology and politics: A case study of the Ayodhya issue. *Material Religion* 1 (2): 253–260.

Archaeological Survey of India. 1977. *Indian Archaeology Review 1976–77*. New Delhi: ASI.

Basu, N. 2005. *Ninety-first Report on the Functioning of the Archaeological Survey of India*. New Delhi: Rajya Sabha Secretariat.

Bernbeck, R., and Pollock, S. 1996. Ayodhya, archaeology, and identity. Special issue, *Current Anthropology: Anthropology in Public* 37 (S1): S138–S142.

Bhan, S. 2004. Ayodhya Report (2002–03): Mockery of Indian Archaeology. *Social Science Probing* 16 (1): 75–84.

Chakrabarti, D. 2003a. Archaeology under the judiciary: Ayodhya 2003. *Antiquity* 77 (297): 579–80.

——. 2003b. It's the Archaeology, Stupid! *Hindustan Times*, August 29.

Cohn, B. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Form of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Colley, S. 1995 What happened at WAC-3? *Antiquity* 69 (1): 16–18.

Engineer, Asghar A. (ed.). 1992. *The Babri-Masjid Ramjanmabhoomi Controversy Runs Riot*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.

Ghosh, A. 1952. The Rajputana Desert: Its archaeological aspect. *Bulletin of the National Institute of Sciences of India* 1: 37–42.

——. 1956. Exploration in Bikanir, India. *Miscellanea Asiatica Occidentalis* 18: 102–115.

——. 1959. Explorations in Bikanir, in H. Field (ed.), *An Anthropological Reconnaissance in West Pakistan, 1955*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Golson, J. 1995. What went wrong with WAC 3 and an attempt to understand why. *Australian Archaeology* 41: 48–54.

Hassan, F. A. 1995. The World Archaeological Congress in India: Politicizing the past. *Antiquity* 69 (266): 874–877.

Johnson-Roehr, S. 2008. The Archaeological Survey of India and communal violence in post-independence India. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14 (6): 506–523.

Lal, B. B. 2001. Report of the Review Committee on the Functioning of Archaeological Survey of India. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.

Lal, B. B., Joshi, J. P., Thapar, B. K., and Bala, M. 2003. *Excavations at Kalibangan: The Early Harappans (1961–69)*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.

Mandal, D. 2003. *Ayodhya: Archaeology after Demolition*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

——. 2004a. Report of the Ayodhya Excavation (2002–03): A document of unscientific archaeology. *Social Science Probing* 16 (1): 37–65.

——. 2004b. Ayodhya Excavation Report 2002–03: Some observations on the main question. *JISHA* 1 (1): 151–155.

Ministry of Education, Archaeological Review Committee, Chaired by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, 1965. Republished report in *Committees and Commissions in India 1964–65*, Vol. 6, edited by V. Kumar. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Muralidharan, S. 1994. Questions of ethics: World Archaeological Congress, Delhi. *Frontline*, November 19: 99–101.

Rao, N. 1994. Interpreting silences: Symbol and history in the case of Ram Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid, in G. C. Bond and A. Gilliam (eds.), *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power*. London: Routledge.

——. 1999. Ayodhya and the ethics of archaeology, in T. Insoll (ed.), *Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religions*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Ratnagar, S. 2004. Archaeology at the heart of a political confrontation: Case of Ayodhya. *Current Anthropology* 34 (1): 429–449.

Roy, S. R. 2004. Communal content in Ayodhya Excavation Report 2002–03. *Social Science Probing* 16 (1): 67–74.

Shanks, M., and McGuire, R. H. 1996. The craft of archaeology. *American Antiquity* 61 (1): 75–88.

Shaw J. 2000. Ayodhya's sacred landscape: Ritual memory, politics and archaeological "fact." *Antiquity* 74: 693–700.

Thakran, R. C. 2000. Implications of partition on protohistoric investigations in the Ghaggar-Ganga Basins. *Social Scientist* 1/2 (Jan.–Feb.): 42–67.

Vitelli, K. D. 1996. *Archaeological Ethics*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.