

RESEARCH PAPER

Indian Archaeology and Postmodernism: Fashion or Necessity?

Ajay Pratap*

This paper begins by considering the origins and trajectory of growth of Indian Archaeology, from an Antiquarian stage, through to its present state, which may best be described, positioned between cultural historical, Positivist and Post-positivist approaches. The school of archaeological thought informed by Positivist Philosophy has been called variously as the New Archaeology, Hypothetico-Deductive Archaeology, and more lately as Processual Archaeology (Paddayya, 1990). The school of Indian Archaeology influenced by the Philosophy of Post-positivism or Postmodernism are called variously as the New New Archaeology and Postprocessual Archaeology. This paper traces the growth of Indian Archaeology through its various stages such as Antiquarianism, Indology, Colonial Archaeology, Modern Archaeology, the New Archaeology and now the Postprocessual Archaeology. It seeks to estimate chiefly the impact of the Postprocessual applications in Indian Archaeology.

Introduction

We may tentatively characterize the broad paradigmatic development of Indian Archaeology (**Table 1**) in the following way:

Antiquarianism

Speaking of the antiquarian and Indological traditions of Indian Archaeology, it would be pertinent to mention the role of the Asiatic Society of Bengal which was established by Sir William Jones at Kolkata in 1784 (Kaul, 1995). For the better part of the 18th and the 19th centuries, this Society was very active in research however their publications on Indian archaeology was for that time very piecemeal and thus their notes and news pertaining to Indian antiquities published during the 18th century maybe called Antiquarian at best. This is true also because no systematic surveys were undertaken at this time, and hence both reports of antiquities and their interpretation were random, piecemeal and subjective. Historical interpretations were very intuitive ones.

Indology

The later work by this Society, however, on Indian History and Archaeology was more profound and synthetic and has thus been called Indology. In this phase, mostly for the better part of the 19th century, Brahmi and Kharoshthi scripts were deciphered, ancient Indian works of Sanskrit like the Vedas were translated, and soon an outline of a nascent Ancient Indian History began to emerge. The discovery of the great ancient Indian ruling dynasties – The

Nandas, the Mauryas, the Indo-Greeks, the Sunga, the Kanva, the Kushan up to the Gupta Period, and then again from Harsha, the Gurjara-Pratihara, the Pala and Sena, the Rashtrakutas, the Pallavas, Chera, Chola and Pandya of the pre-Medieval Period of Indian History. The discovery of Buddhism exercised great influence on ancient Indian polities through coins and inscriptions. Inscriptions were found around the country pertaining to a variety of big and small rulers and dynasties. Excavation of Buddhist centers of education like Nalanda, Vikramshila or seasonal residence of monks such as at Ajanta and Ellora, Udayagiri and Khandagiri, Karle, Bhaja and Kanheri.

Colonial Indian Archaeology

The birth of modern Indian archaeology or Colonial Archaeology (Ray, 2007) dates perhaps to the first part of the 20th century, when the finds of Harappa and Mohenjodaro were made in the 1920s. But the work of the very first surveyor general Sir Alexander Cunningham, in the mid-19th century is rightly regarded by many as the coming of age of Indian or colonial archaeology. Most of the notable excavations in India (Nalanda, Sarnath and Bodh Gaya) date to this period as Cunningham was interested to identify the historical places mentioned in Hieun Tsang's account and his travel in India called the Si-Yu-Ki. However, the 19th century was also a time when some inkling that India had a prehistory too began to emerge in the works of those such as Robert Bruce Foote, Valentine Ball and A.C.L. Carlleyle.

The excavations of Sir John Marshall, M.S. Vats and E.J.H Mackay's at Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Chanhudaro, which yielded to Indian history a much longer or deeper a time span than had that of the work of Sir Alexander Cunningham. Whereas Alexander Cunningham's work

* Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India
drajayprt@yahoo.com

Antiquarianism	18 th century	Odds and ends
Indology	18 th -19 th centuries	Texts and interpretation, study of scripts, epigraphy and coins, survey of monuments, study of archaeological sites including occasional digging
Colonial archaeology	19 th and 20 th centuries	Systematic survey and excavation
Indian archaeology	20 th century mainly after 1947	Survey, excavation and dating
b) Processual or Positivist Phase	1960s to 1980s	Research designs and Hypothesis testing approach
c) Postprocessual, Post-positivist or Postmodern Phase	1980s onwards to the present and ongoing	Interpretation, alternate archaeological narratives, public archaeology, cultural resource management

Table 1: Development of Indian archaeology.

Sir William Jones and the 19 th century	Indological approaches
Sir John Marshall – Sir Mortimer Wheeler	Colonial archaeology
H.D. Sankalia, A.H. Dani, B. Subbarao	Cultural, historical and Processual approaches
K. Paddayya, M.L.K. Murty, V.N. Misra, M.K. Dhavalikar, S.N. Rajaguru, D.P. Agarwal and others	New Archaeology: Extending Processual investigations, Precise or Direct Dating, Ethnoarchaeology, Geoarchaeology, Palaeobotany, Palaeontology, Theoretical Archaeology, Exploring the merits and the demerits of both Processual and Postprocessual schools

Table 2: Paradigmatic changes in Indian archaeology.

was concentrated in Central India Sir John Marshall, a Cambridge trained archaeologist, chose to excavate the urban history of India such as represented at Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Not only did John Marshall's work usher in a new era of modern techniques of excavation and the recording of excavated data and their analysis, it also laid down sound principles of archaeological administration in the form of Archaeological Survey of India (Pratap, 2013). These procedures were then here to stay and to over-ride not only the methodology of archaeological studies of the preceding period but also to lay the foundations of a proper system for heritage management than previously (Thapar, 2009). As enshrined for the first time in the Ancient Sites and Monuments and Archaeological Remains Act of 1904, the Indian Archaeological Heritage Management system sought to lay the foundations of a single administrative structure governing all the archaeological heritage of India, rather than localized ones as had been the practice with Cunningham's system.

For colonial archaeology then it was left for Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the very last of British Director Generals, to excavate such notable sites as Brahmagiri, Chandravalli, Arikamedu, Harappa and to train formally first generation of Indian archaeologists at his famous Taxila School; where teaching the General Pitt-Rivers Stratigraphic Method of excavation was the chief purpose. They created a breed of well-trained Indian archaeologists, on the eve of decolonization and the birth of an Independent Indian Archaeology. Amongst the products of the Taxila School conducted by Sir Mortimer Wheeler was H.D. Sankalia, one of the fathers of modern Indian Archaeology. In time he also became the founder of the department of archaeology at the Deccan College in Pune, which remains

to this day one of the best and most comprehensive departments of archaeology in India. Dr. Sankalia's *The Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan* (1978) is today regarded as one of the earliest and best accounts of Indian archaeology, which elucidates and summarizes the pre and protohistory of India on a state-wise basis. As such it stands as a monument heralding an independent Indian Archaeology.

Now, if the contributions of the Sir William Jones and the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the 19th century have been able to rise above the Antiquarianism of the 18th century and led to the birth of Indology; if the contributions of Sir John Marshall and the Archaeological Survey of India have led to the growth of Colonial Archaeology; then certainly the contribution of Professor H.D. Sankalia and the Deccan College have facilitated the use of cultural, historical and Processual approaches on large scale.

Thus very briefly we may chart the paradigmatic changes in Indian archaeology (see **Table 2**).

Processual Archaeology in India

The New Archaeology or Processual school arose in the west mainly as a reaction to what was called the culture-history approach. Workers such as Lewis Binford in the USA and David Clarke and Colin Renfrew in the UK argued that archaeology had thus far been seen as a social science or an art, and was thus seemingly dedicated to picturing dynastic and other sort of cultural histories whereas it should rather be seen as a science whose aim was to discover general laws of human behavior. Philosophy of Science was studied and applied widely to give archaeology and archaeological interpretation a sound positivist frame of reference and methodology. It was argued that

archaeological interpretation until now was mainly an intuitive exercise whereas an epistemology that would give a greater reliability to archaeological inference ought to be based along scientific lines and therefore that of the most favoured scientific epistemology or Theory of Knowledge which is Positivism. Concurrent with such fundamental changes in archaeology in the west, Indian archaeologists espoused the New Archaeology's methods wholeheartedly as the logic that archaeology should aspire to be a science inasmuch as archaeological deductions ought to be testable and verifiable. From the 1970s full-scale archaeological teaching and research basing itself upon the New Archaeology approach was initiated in India. The full thrust of this approach is to be seen in the works of H.D. Sankalia and his students such as K. Paddayya, M.K. Dhavalikar, and R.V. Joshi, R.S. Pappu, Z.D. Ansari and S.N. Raja guru. Their works ranging from prehistoric surveys and excavations to geomorphological, palaeoclimatic, palaeontological and palaeobotanical investigations, have today given Indian Prehistory a very firm basis. The works of G.L. Badam, M.D. Kajale, P.K. Thomas, S.R. Walimbe, P.C. Deotare, Vasant Shinde and P.P. Joglekar are notable in such a regard.

Postprocessual Archaeology in India

Side by side with such baseline studies of the environment and subsistence types during prehistory, there developed in the west especially from the 1980s onwards a penchant or a preoccupation with the Theory of Archaeology itself. Enshrined mainly in the work of Ian Hodder who was a student of David Clarke, the Postprocessual movement took roots 1980s onwards in Hodder's book like *The Present Past, Symbolic and Structural Archaeology and Archaeology as Long-Term History*. Hodder was of the view that the courtship of archaeology with science was well while it lasted that it was fundamentally a hopeless enterprise to try to arrive at General Laws of Human Behaviour. 1980s onwards, the emphasis in Hodder's writing has been that human cultures are specific in their articulation which results in very specific material culture production, use and discard, which may vary from culture to culture, or as he puts it from 'context to context' and hence reconstruction of past behavior cannot be generalized across time and space. In arguing thus, Hodder was and has been suggesting the return of archaeology, at least epistemologically, to the folds of the humanities and social sciences. Since the 1980s, Hodder and his students like Henrietta Moore (*Space, Text and Gender*), Daniel Miller (*Artefacts as Categories*), Michael Shanks (*The Archaeological Imagination*), and Christopher Tilley (*The Archaeology of Landscape*), to name just a few, and many others independently have worked to re-enmesh archaeological theory or archaeological interpretation with and within social theory (Shanks and Tilley's *Social Theory and Archaeology*). Then attention has been drawn to the Frankfurt School (Jurgen Habermas), Marxist, Structural, Symbolic and Feminist Theories and more lately to the study of Agency such as enshrined in the work of Pierre

Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. The impact of postmodern philosophers like Richard Rorty, Francois Lyotard and Bruno Latour has added further postmodern social theory sort of grist to the archaeological mill. Lately, the Postprocessualist ideas, particularly in the area of archaeology as material culture, have found resonance and acceptance within the Cognitive Archaeology School which has its lineage firmly with the New Archaeology. For this paper, Hodder's idea of varying archaeological pasts depending upon context has also led to the rise of what has been called Indigenous Archaeology in which archaeological pasts are reckoned as Ethnohistory or ethnic-group specific pasts.

What has been the impact of all these new developments on Indian Archaeology? It is against such a background, that Indian archaeology has also responded with some preliminary reflections upon its modernist or positivist era through such works as Paddayya's *The New Archaeology and Aftermath* and D.K. Chakravarti's *Theoretical Issues in Indian Archaeology*. Others Indian New Archaeologists have also responded but rather less judiciously. Chattopadhyaya has argued that postmodernism is a product of late capitalism and commoditizes the past. However, why then the New Archaeology which also espoused by and in 'Capitalist' contexts was spared from this criticism is not clear (1999, 37–50).

However, in our reckoning the mandate of a Postprocessual Indian Archaeology does answer some very urgent and specific needs of the discipline of archaeology beyond rigorous and reliable interpretation of the past. This is in the realm of such issues as Ownership and the Management of the Past, the Past and the Public, and finally whose past is it that archaeologists are perpetually uncovering and interpreting. This also necessarily includes in the Indian context issues arising from the use of alternate media for archaeological purposes. There is ample scope in India to attempt reconstruction of the Indigenous archaeology type and to analyze material culture patterning within archaeological cultures as ethnic markers in prehistory.

Therefore, the salient points arising from this discussion of the impact of Postmodern ideas on Indian archaeology may be summarized as follows:

- a) Under postmodern impact the whole idea of doing archaeology or being an archaeologist has been transformed through or due to a variety of reasons.
- b) Diverse narratives have to be constructed to make the past equitable in terms of accessibility to it.
- c) Diverse narratives assume that the public who consume archaeological outputs have to be rendered different accounts of the same archaeological past in different ways or forms.
- d) The idea of archaeological reports and thickly jargoned texts is becoming old fashioned as these reduce accessibility.
- e) Proliferation of archaeological blogs and websites connected with Indian archaeology themselves indicate the frustration of Indian archaeologists of not being able to build a one to one relationship with

the reading public fast enough using conventional means of disseminating the archaeological past.

Conclusion

To conclude, the impact of postmodernism and its related ideas on Indian archaeology has been that we have stopped thinking of archaeological material culture as a passive entity. Further, we have also begun to see that archaeological evidence hides within itself various narratives or coded texts pertinent to its space and time context which informs us greatly about the lifestyles of contemporary cultures. But more importantly, such narratives may be accessed not only through the methods of scientific inquiry but also through social theory, as discussed.

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