Creating Suitable Evidence of the Past? Archaeology, Politics, and Hindu Nationalism in India from the End of the Twentieth Century to the Present

Anne-Julie Etter

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6926>

DOI: 10.4000/samaj.6926

ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Anne-Julie Etter, « Creating Suitable Evidence of the Past? Archaeology, Politics, and Hindu Nationalism in India from the End of the Twentieth Century to the Present », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 24/25 | 2020, Online since 03 December 2020, connection on 15 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6926> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6926>

This text was automatically generated on 15 December 2020.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Creating Suitable Evidence of the Past? Archaeology, Politics, and Hindu Nationalism in India from the End of the Twentieth Century to the Present

Anne-Julie Etter

- 1 Stating that archaeology and politics are closely linked is quite trivial. Archaeology has a double function, whose respective borders tend to overlap: a scientific one, which is to produce and disseminate knowledge about the past, and an ideological one (Demoule 2020:7). Such interference has been in place since the nineteenth century. Chronology is important here: archaeology developed as a discipline at the time of nation-building in Europe. Nations turned to the past to create narratives illustrating their grandeur as well as the prestige of their origins and achievements. In that regard, archaeology helped to construct their historical legitimacy. It also nurtured European countries' rivalry on the international stage and accompanied their expansion overseas. It was thus instrumental in the creation of both national and imperial identities.
- 2 The relationships between archaeology and politics have been extensively discussed and explored since the end of the twentieth century (Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Diaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Meskell 1998; Meskell and Preucel 2007; Hamilakis 2007; Hamilakis and Duke 2007). The geopolitical context of the time, with the collapse of the communist bloc and the emergence of new nationalisms, notably in Central and Eastern Europe, contributes to explain the development of this scholarship, which has paid much attention to nationalism and how it puts archaeological knowledge to a wide range of uses, misuses and abuses. Leaders and thinkers of nationalist movements resort to archaeology to sustain their essentialist vision of the nation and its so-called cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic homogeneity, and to defend the political project that is associated with it. Archaeology offers means to materialize concepts and

ideological narratives, which are often embedded in mythical roots, into actual places and objects, and thus give credence to origin stories.

- 3 The very materiality of archaeological remains can induce one to think or claim that they bear some kind of self-evidence. This is something quite common in the way archaeology is conceived of and (mis)used. It is as if material relics such as stones, bones, or potsherds were less doubtful and more reliable than literary works. They supposedly provide us with a direct and unmediated connection to the past. It is alleged that certitudes and truths about ancient times can be derived from them. This is of course not true: material remains, just as is the case of any other source, remain mute as long as one does not strive to make them speak. Archaeological data are based on analytical frameworks and interpretative concepts, which make them anything but neutral or objective. Yet, this semblance of objectivity remains attached to archaeology and it accounts for the convenient allegation that its underlying political and ideological postulates need not be questioned. In addition, “the obvious triviality of archaeology for overt political action makes it a cloaked but significant weapon in struggles over the past” (McGuire 2008:16). Its impact has rather to do with the symbolic sphere and archaeologists are seldom protagonists in political struggles and actions. For all these reasons, it can be tempting to cover up the political scope of archaeological research or to pretend to do so. Archaeologist Randall McGuire (2008) described archaeology “as the secret writing of nationalism” (Pp. 22–8).
- 4 There are countless examples of how archaeological knowledge and politics are intertwined and how this knowledge is manipulated so that it can enhance national or nationalist agendas.¹ As far as contemporary India is concerned, one case is frequently mentioned: the demolition by Hindu militants of a sixteenth century-mosque in the North Indian town of Ayodhya in 1992, as the culmination of a dispute in which archaeology came to be largely mobilized. This event occurred precisely while new concerns were emerging amongst scholars over the linkages between nationalism and archaeology. Writing about it a few years later, Reinhard Bernbeck and Susan Pollock (1996) inscribed what they called the “Ayodhya drama” within this broader context, stating that “identity building has become a major theme in the contemporary world with the resurgence of nationalist and ethnic conflicts in the past few years” (P. S140). However, the case of Ayodhya quickly stood out, since it seemed to exemplify the political bias of archaeology as pushed to its worst limits. At Ayodhya, “the triviality of archaeology has become consequential in horrifying ways,” as McGuire (2008:26) put it, and interpretations over the past had “real political consequences and human costs” (Zutshi 2009).² The destruction of the monument launched violent riots with a high number of casualties. More than 2000 people, mainly Muslims, were killed shortly after the demolition of the mosque. Around a decade later, in 2002, communal killings took place in Gujarat, which was then led by Narendra Modi, after Hindu pilgrims died in a train coming back from Ayodhya.
- 5 This case is analyzed in this article, which deals more broadly with the nationalist value and use of archaeology in India since the late twentieth century. In the course of that period, the Sangh Parivar, a body of Hindu nationalist organizations led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), gained prominence, including on the political stage. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won several state elections at the beginning of the 1990s and formed a short-lived government after the 1996 general election. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance was in power from 1998 to 2004. During the

following decade, the BJP was the main opposition party, before winning the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Hindu nationalist organizations' growing prominence in the public sphere has entailed a large dissemination of their ideological program centered around the concept of Hindutva. Hindu nationalists postulate an equivalence between the nation and the majority population, the Hindus. They define Indian identity as Hindu, excluding other groups or communities, especially Muslims. India is envisioned as a sacred land, whose boundaries are largely defined by mythology. Modern Indians' ancestors are supposed to be indigenous to that land and autochthony is key to the Hindutva version of Indian history. Talking about nationalism in general, McGuire (2008) stated that it "often rests on the idea of a golden age of ethnic and linguistic uniformity and promotes a culture that is supposedly still connected to that past" (p. 23). The role of archaeology is then to embody this idea of homogeneity and continuity through the ages, and to make the nation coincide with its territory. This describes well the way archaeology has been mobilized to serve the Hindutva agenda.

- 6 This paper explores how archaeology has accompanied the rise of Hindu ideology and politics, showing—if proof were still needed—that Indian past(s) have become a vigorous and harsh battle arena.³ I first give an overview of the Indian archaeological stage as it has developed since the nineteenth century, insisting on features that shed light on Hindutva's successful appropriation of this field. I then describe the archaeological politics of the BJP through the lens of a project launched in 2020, before detailing two examples: the Ayodhya dispute and the controversies on origins and identity. Both cases are in the forefront of archaeological and political stages and illustrate two related uses of archaeology. At Ayodhya, archaeology has been yoked to the project of erasing, both symbolically and physically, Islamic heritage and the place of Islam in India's culture and landscape, while nurturing the politics of exclusion through the character of the Other—the invading Muslim. In parallel, archaeological knowledge has played an instrumental role in the Hindutva project to endow Indians with what is supposed to be a brilliant and indigenous ancestry.

Archaeology and politics in colonial and postcolonial India

- 7 The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is the main organization in charge of archaeological research and the protection of cultural heritage in India. Part of the Ministry of Culture, this body was founded during the British Raj. Alexander Cunningham was Archaeological Surveyor between 1861 and 1865. The survey was put on a firmer footing in 1871, when it was "revived as a distinct department of the government" (ASI 2020). The end of the century was marked by several difficulties⁴ and the survey was again restored in 1901 by Lord Curzon, then Vice-Roy. John Marshall's Director-Generalship (1902-1928) was marked by a major event: the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization. It was first identified at Harappa,⁵ which was excavated in 1921-1922 under the supervision of Daya Ram Sahni, and Mohenjodaro. These two large urban settlements displayed impressive remains such as citadel mounds, fortifications and sophisticated water systems. Contemporaneous with the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley Civilization is one of the world's earliest urban civilizations. Its discovery was a landmark in world history as well as South Asian history and archaeology.

- 8 Curzon's impact on the field of archaeology and conservation of monuments in India is well known.⁶ He saw the discovery, documentation, and protection of antiquities as part of the so-called "civilizing mission" of the colonizers. This feature points to the close relationship between politics and archaeology during the colonial era. The British defined the nature and contents of the Indian past and this was a highly significant instrumentality of rulership: it enabled them to deepen their knowledge of Indian territories and populations, and better control them (Cohn 1996:10). They appropriated the Indian past through various means, both symbolic and material: historiographical tropes,⁷ archaeological exploration, the constitution of collections and the creation of museums. In India as in other parts of the world, archaeology acted as an instrument of power, legitimizing the hegemony of imperial centers over colonies (Diaz-Andreu 2007:210). Indians were long kept in subaltern roles and excluded from any kind of responsibilities in that area.⁸ There was a growing Indianization in the ranks of the ASI from the twentieth century onwards, notably in the field of epigraphy. However, practical and financial considerations were at stake: it was a way of keeping costs down (Guha 2015:122). The first Indian to be appointed Director-General was Daya Ram Sahni, who was in charge from 1931 to 1935.
- 9 The ASI survived the division of the British Indian Empire. It was maintained in the Republic of India, whereas a Department of Archaeology was created in Pakistan. Partition entailed that archaeological assets—sites and museum collections—were divided between the two new countries. As the most emblematic sites of the Indus Valley Civilization, such as Harappa, Mohenjodaro, and Taxila, now lay in Pakistan, extending the ambit of Harappan culture eastward and southward was a matter of high concern for the new Republic of India. In the 1950s, important sites such as Alamgirpur (Uttar Pradesh) and Lothal (Gujarat) were excavated and massive exploratory work was undertaken in the following decades, notably in Haryana, Punjab, and Gujarat. It involved the ASI, but also state archaeological departments, such as the Gujarat State Department of Archaeology, and universities, like Baroda University. The endeavor was crowned with success: by the 1990s, around 1,400 Harappan sites had been identified in India.
- 10 A nation-serving archaeology developed in Independent India. It was meant to substantiate its politics of secularism and depict India's cultural unity, as illustrated by the works of H. D. Sankalia (Guha 2015:28). Archaeology has remained embedded in national and political concerns since then. The will to demonstrate the triumph of the nation and shape a narrative of its historical achievements and cultural cohesiveness continues to skew archaeological practice and theory. A similar position has been endorsed by historians of Indian archaeology.⁹ This nation-serving archaeology and its historiography share similarities with British archaeology in colonial India, in terms of methods and aims (Guha 2015:27–9, 232–40). Both rely on a positivist approach to material remains, tending to view them as valid and unquestionable evidence, disregarding the fact that archaeological data and knowledge do not exist in nature but are artefacts of history.
- 11 As for the ASI, its role and scope have remained largely unchanged. As premier archaeological organization of the country, it is able to pilot large excavations, that is to say also excavations which are liable to have an impact on the scientific and media sphere. The spectrum of its activities is much wider than that of any other structure conducting archaeological research and excavations, such as university departments.

The ASI draws authority from its status as a state organization and simultaneously regards itself as the guardian of a national material past (Varghese 2019:104). The ASI is often described as a bureaucratic institution lacking in efficiency and transparency. It is criticized for not properly managing the 3,678 monuments of national importance that lie under its supervision. In 2013, a “performance audit” of the ASI conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) pointed out several deficiencies, such as the disappearance of more than 90 of these monuments and the lack of reliable and updated information on many others. Historian Nayanjot Lahiri, who investigated the action of the ASI over the past 70 years (2017a), underlined other problems such as the lack of a proper scientific laboratory and the questionable qualifications of people who were appointed (2017b). According to her, “archaeology should be taken out of the corridors of the government:”

There’s no getting away from the government when you do archaeology in India. In some ways, it is necessary because a lot of funding comes from the government. [...] It is unfortunate that the ASI is not autonomous. As a department of the ministry of culture, it has to go by the political priorities of the government in power. And that is never a healthy trend. (Lahiri 2017b)

An interaction between archaeology, politics, and nationalism has been at work in many countries. In India, its potentialities and effects have been greatly increased by the existence of a structure such as the ASI, as Rachel Varghese (2018) has put it: “Archaeology, world over, has had an important role in endowing nationalist imaginations with materiality and authenticity. In the case of India, this is a role that has been strengthened to through the bureaucratic authority of the ASI.”¹⁰

- 12 Given all this, it is little wonder that organizations such as the RSS and BJP have readily resorted to archaeology as a useful tool to consolidate the concept of Hindutva.

A glimpse into Hindutva archaeology: the BJP’s project to create five iconic archaeological sites (2020)

- 13 In February 2020, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union budget for the year 2020-2021. She alluded to several measures dealing with heritage and conservation, amongst which the development of five archaeological sites “as iconic sites with on-site museums” (Sitharaman 2020:21). These sites are all located in states ruled by the BJP or alliances including the BJP: Rakhigarhi (Haryana), Hastinapur (Uttar Pradesh), Shivasgar (Assam), Dholavira (Gujarat), and Adichanallur (Tamil Nadu). The list sheds light on the kind of archaeological policies which are promoted by the BJP and the way the latter conceives of archaeological knowledge and activities.
- 14 Two sites out of the five, Rakhigarhi and Dholavira, are Harappan ones. This illustrates the continued concern for the promotion of Indian Harappan sites, which also prompted the project of a maritime museum at Lothal, “the Harappan age maritime site near Ahmedabad” (Sitharaman 2020:21). The case of Adichanallur is different. Over the course of the excavations conducted by the ASI in 2004-2005, burial-urns with skeletons were exhumed, but the report was not made public and it was only in 2019 that samples were analyzed. According to carbon dating results, Adichanallur is believed to date back to 905 BCE-696 BCE, thus becoming one of the most ancient

known sites in Tamil Nadu. In that perspective, the decision to highlight Adichanallur means that the site “gets its due, finally” (Sudhakar 2020). It should also be interpreted in the light of another case in Tamil Nadu, the site of Keezhadi, which will be dealt with at the end of this article.

- 15 Hastinapur is described in Hindu texts as the capital of the Kauravas. It was part of the project on the “Archaeology of the Mahabharata Sites,” led by the ASI in 1950-1952. This reminds us that texts have guided archaeological exploration in India since the nineteenth century, with the aim of identifying sites that they mention. Yet, given BJP’s intention to give material credence to Hindu mythology and history, this general trend acquires renewed meaning and one can easily understand why a site such Hastinapur was targeted by the Modi government. Finally, Shivsagar was one of the capitals of the Ahom Kingdom, which developed in the Brahmaputra Valley from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The fact that its rulers got Hinduized and managed to resist Mughal expansion probably has to do with Shivsagar appearing on the top list of iconic archaeological sites. The choice of an Assamese site is also significant. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) was first implemented in Assam, a border state with important immigration from Bangladesh, where intense protests took place against both the NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Act. Adding Assam to the abovementioned list can be interpreted as a way of symbolizing both the integration of this Northeastern state into the Republic of India and the central state’s control upon it, while aligning the province’s history with the general picture of the Indian past that Hindu nationalists mean to enforce.
- 16 Mingling history with mythology, setting aside the Islamic components of Indian history: these are enduring characteristics of Hindutva’s politics of archaeology and they came to light very clearly in Ayodhya.

Ayodhya or the climax of the collusion between Hindu nationalism and archaeology

- 17 Ayodhya occupies an important place in Hindu sacred geography, as the city of origin of the god Rama, and even more so in Hindutva ideology, which promotes Rama as a prominent figure of the Hindu pantheon as well as a historical figure. The town’s recent history is linked to the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi dispute. The mosque called Babri Masjid owes its name to Mughal Emperor Babur, who reigned from 1526 to 1530, even if it was built by one of his commandants, Mir Baqi. The dispute emerged out of the belief that the mosque was erected at the exact birthplace of Rama (*Ramjanmabhumi*), where a temple dedicated to that god is supposed to have stood before it was destroyed by the Mughals. It has been the site of communal conflict since the nineteenth century. The British divided the site into two parts, establishing a kind of compromise which lasted until 1949, when an idol of Rama was introduced inside the mosque. This occasioned the closure of the space and several suits were thereafter filed.
- 18 In the 1980s, the Hindu nationalist organization called Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) launched a campaign to liberate the birthplace of Rama and build a new temple. The foundations of a Ram temple were laid on land adjoining the Babri Masjid in 1989, while a vast campaign was organized the following year, including a huge and mediatized procession from Somnath (Gujarat) to Ayodhya led by the President of the BJP, L. K.

Advani. The project to build a temple (*mandir*) at the place of the mosque figured prominently in BJP's campaigns for general elections in 1989 and again in 1991. On December 6, 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished by a crowd of Hindu volunteers called *karsevaks*. A land title case was filed with the Allahabad High Court, which pronounced its verdict in 2010. The site was divided among the three claimants: the Sunni Waqf Board, the Nirmohi Akhara, a group of Hindu ascetics who worship Ram, and Ram Lalla Virajman, the infant deity, along with the birthplace (Ramjanmasthan), represented by members of Sangh Parivar organizations. The area under the central dome was directed to be handed over to Hindu parties. The claimants appealed to the Supreme Court which, in 2019, ordered the disputed land to be handed over for the construction of the Ramjanmabhumi temple, while requesting that the government give another piece of land to the Sunni Waqf Board to build a new mosque. Modi laid the foundation stone of the temple on August 5, 2020.

- 19 The pro-*mandir* movement constitutes the backdrop of BJP's electoral victories in the 1990s and has been central to Hindutva politics since then. Its proponents called upon archaeology to substantiate the temple thesis through material evidence, thus placing it "at the heart of a political confrontation" (Ratnagar 2004:239). Braj Basi Lal, Director-General of the ASI from 1968 to 1972, conducted excavations at Ayodhya in the late 1970s as part of a program entitled "Archaeology of the Ramayana Sites."¹¹ He detailed the results of his work in the ASI official publication, *Indian Archaeology: A Review*. In 1990, he published an article in *Manthan*, the journal of the RSS, in which he mentioned an element absent from his previous reports: the discovery of pillar bases of a temple. This controversial claim was later on transformed into evidence proving the existence of a temple under the mosque, along with other so-called discoveries made in the course of land-leveling operations in June and July 1992. Even if the *Ramayana* archaeological project was not framed within Hindutva logics, it was successfully mobilized by the Sangh Parivar while orchestrating the Ramjanmabhumi movement. This marked an important step in "Hindutva's epistemological appropriation of archaeology's discursive legitimacy to pursue its divisive politics" (Chadha 2011:70).
- 20 The destruction launched debates among archaeologists regarding excavation methods and what constitutes facts and evidence in archaeology. Dhaneshwar Mandal, for instance, examined all available data and scrutinized the validity of the purported discoveries. He stressed that the stratigraphic context of the finds had not been taken into account (Guha-Thakurta 2004:276). The "new" and "fresh" discoveries, as he called them (Mandal 1993), were nonetheless presented at the World Archaeological Congress organized in New Delhi in 1994. Archaeologists such as B. B. Lal, M. N. Deshpande and B. K. Thapar used this event as a forum to promote evidence in favor of the Ramjanmabhumi Temple (Guha-Thakurta 2004:364, note 25). After the success of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance at the 1999 general election, the issue of excavations grew in importance. Ordered by the Allahabad High Court in 2002, they were conducted by the ASI the year after. The excavation report was submitted by the ASI to the High Court in 2003. It guided the Supreme Court's ultimate verdict in 2019, even though it has given way to a wide range of criticisms, dealing both with methodology and the interpretation of the finds.
- 21 According to the ASI report, there is evidence of a temple under the demolished mosque. This was a crucial element in the subsequent legal settlement of the dispute. Yet, only a few lines were devoted to this topic in the excavation report, which was

edited by Buddha Rashmi Mani and Hari Manjhi.¹² It is referred to at the very end of the document which, unlike the rest of it, is not signed, through the mention of remains presenting the distinctive features of North Indian temples, namely a massive structure (of which only a western wall was found), pillar bases and architectural fragments. Archaeologists like Dhaneshwar Mandal and Shereen Ratnagar (2007), as well as Supriya Varma and Jaya Menon (2010), questioned the kind of evidence that was used and objected to the results. Varma and Menon reached a different conclusion with the same pieces of evidence and interpreted them as pointing to smaller mosques or Buddhist stupas. They held that a mosque, possibly dating back to the thirteenth century, was underneath the Babri Masjid and that its western wall had been used for the foundation of the latter. Varma and Menon's reading of the excavation was informed by the fact that they had attended it as observers on behalf of the Sunni Waqf Board. They had then warned against a series of shortcomings in the creation and documentation of archaeological record, which did not follow the basic methods and rules of the discipline. They contributed to the filing of 14 complaints between May and June 2003, having to do for example with selective collection of artifacts and differential recording of material from the same deposits; a major concern had to do with the creation of evidence regarding the pillar bases (Varma and Menon 2019). As a result of these complaints, the director of the excavations, B. R. Mani, was replaced with H. Manjhi.

- 22 As an anthropologist studying archaeology in postcolonial India, Ashish Avikunthak¹³ (2019) described the 2003 excavation as "the most unusual excavation in the history of archaeology." In any case, it was unique in the history of the ASI. The site was excavated from March to August, that is to say a very short period of time compared to the normal duration of works in sites of a similar kind. More than 50 personnel from the ASI as well as 130 laborers took part in it. They worked in difficult conditions (long hours, little rest, extreme weather conditions, close surveillance and scrutiny from various actors—observers and nominees of the claiming parties, police, media) and were not allowed to talk about the excavation.¹⁴ The drafting of the report took place in highly peculiar conditions as well. It was written in 10 days, right after the excavation ended. This stands in sharp contrast to the considerable amount of work and time which is commonly necessary for an excavation team to analyze all finds and compile them into a report. Only a few people from the ASI were allowed to see the report: it had the "life of a top secret state file rather than an archaeological report" (Avikunthak 2019).
- 23 Excavation at Ayodhya departed greatly from the ASI's usual practices and more generally from the founding principles of archaeological work. Rachel Varghese (2019) argued that this was due to the fact that it was ordered—and actually controlled—by the High Court of Allahabad. The judiciary intervened at all stages. It formulated the research question as to whether there was a Hindu structure below the mosque and whether the mosque was constructed after the temple was demolished. It gave directives on how to conduct excavations (time, duration, extent, location) and to collect, document, and interpret finds. Such interference meant that the judiciary influenced the process of knowledge production and controlled the nature of the evidence that was created. Simultaneously, it relied on the expertise of the ASI—itsself deriving from its institutional stature—to guarantee the validity and credibility of the report. The judicial institution deprived the ASI of the effective authority over the excavation, which gave way to conflicts of interest between them. In the whole affair,

the ASI did not have much choice but do what it was asked to do. Yet, the Ayodhya case revealed how much the judiciary's and ASI's vision of expertise and archaeology was similar, archaeological work being considered and practiced as a truth-finding enterprise leaving little space for contrasted interpretations. It brought to light the "ASI's positivist notions regarding archaeological practice and its claim to superior knowledge and authority deriving from its location as a statist bureaucratic/scientific institution" (Varghese 2019:103). It therefore stands as a good illustration of the role the ASI has played in the production of national(ist) pasts in India. There were scholars who criticized the methods of the excavation and refuted the ASI's conclusions, but efforts were made to control academic debate by circumscribing it within judicial limits.¹⁵

- 24 Whatever the circumstances of the whole dispute may be, it certainly represents an apex in the disfigurement of archaeology through ideological aims. It demonstrates how pieces of evidence are created so as to give credit to preconceived views, debasing archaeology from its disciplinary standards. It displays the irruption of faith, imagination, and belief into the domain of history and archaeology, whose scientific groundings are thus compromised. Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2004) further argued that "archaeology, even when it has been the most flamboyantly used in defense of the *Ramjanmabhumi* claims, weighs lightly on the main body of the *Hindutva* discourse and on the kinds of popular Hindu histories of Ayodhya it has nurtured" (P. 280). This suggests that archaeological intricacies remain in the hands of politicians and specialists, even though the issue is used to agitate the crowds and does indeed have enormous public resonance. Commenting upon the Allahabad High Court's verdict, Romila Thapar (2010) remarked that it "has annulled respect for history and seeks to replace history with religious faith."¹⁶ She warned against the creation of a dangerous precedent in law courts and the probable emergence of other "*janmasthans*." The 2019 Supreme Court order was followed by attempts, on account of various Hindu organizations, to free places of worship or edifices from the Muslim hold and claim them as Hindu.¹⁷
- 25 The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi dispute shows how much the Hindu nationalist definition of Indian identity depends on the simultaneous construction of an "Other," stated to be radically different: the Muslim—and, to a lesser extent, the Christian. Muslims are vilified as the villains of Indian history and as oppressors. They are presented as invaders, foreigners, alien to Indian values and culture. Hence the importance of asserting and proving that, contrary to them, Hindus are indigenous to Indian soil.

Who are Indians' ancestors? Archaeology and the question of origins

- 26 Indigeneity or nativism is central to *Hindutva* ideology. It goes along with the promotion of the antiquity and superiority of those who are designated as modern Indians' ancestors: the Aryans.¹⁸ The mobilization of archaeology in support of this myth of origin exemplifies the extent to which *Hindutva* supporters have efficiently managed to appropriate archaeological data as powerful resources.

- 27 The claim that Aryans are indigenous to the Indian subcontinent is also known as the “Out of India Theory.” It implies that Indo-European languages originated in India and spread to other areas from there. From this perspective, Harappans are considered as linguistically Indo-Aryans. This theory further implies that the Vedic period is much older than what is generally accepted. Indian civilization’s earliest achievements are made to date back to the purported Vedic Indus-Sarasvati Civilization, which was devised to Aryanize the Indus Valley Civilization. These postulates go against the works of many historians, linguists, archaeologists, both Indian and non-Indian, and have led to extensive criticism amongst Indian professional historians. Yet, this version of Indian history has acquired growing credibility and visibility, including in school textbooks and museums (Markovits 2006:76).
- 28 It has gained prominence since the late twentieth century, as a direct outcome of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and BJP’s ascendancy to power. This ideological and political context favored the production, expression, and circulation of ideas illustrating and reinforcing Hindutva ideology. The Ramjanmabhumi movement seems to have opened a breach favorable to the diffusion of Hindu nationalist views pertaining to origins and identity. Editorial activity on Aryans flourished shortly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid: a sizeable number of works dealing with their origins was published in 1993 and the years following—notably by Voice of India, a publishing house serving the development of Hindutva ideology. Hindutva theses regarding the nation’s origins have circulated widely since then, including amongst scholars not officially associated with the Hindutva nebula or interested in such matters beforehand. This can be analyzed in terms of opportunism.¹⁹ It also has to do with various pressure and coercion measures imposed on scholars and intellectuals who express divergent viewpoints. Mention should be made of the specific case of the ASI. As representatives of a state institution, ASI’s employees do not have much room to maneuver and, in many cases, may do no more than what is expected of them—which does not mean that some of them, including high officials, do not adhere to Hindutva ideology or rally to it in search of promotion through political patronage. Furthermore, the ASI’s institutional stature somehow protects it from criticisms coming from the outside. It holds considerable power over archaeological research in India,²⁰ and this can deter archaeologists—both Indian and foreign—from expressing disapproval of its activities too overtly.
- 29 The Hindutva narrative of Indian history spread in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the meantime, it has been refined, notably thanks to archaeology. To describe this process, one has to step back a few decades. Colonial Indology contributed to the emergence and popularization of a racial theory of Indian civilization, which depicted Aryans as representatives of a superior civilization they supposedly imposed upon the subcontinent’s aborigines, notably the Dravidians.²¹ The Aryan conquerors, followers of the Rig Veda, were supposed to have come from the Iranian plateau around 1500 BCE. The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization brought new elements to the picture. Aryans’ so-called superiority was outshined by the sophistication and antiquity of the great city builders of Harappa and Mohenjodaro.²² The disappearance of the Indus Valley Civilization was a matter of importance, since one explanation was that it collapsed because of the arrival of the Aryans: it thus seemed to corroborate the idea of Aryan conquest or invasion. The origins, ethnic features, and end of the newly exhumed civilization were largely discussed by archaeologists, but also intellectuals

and nationalists of various horizons. Very shortly after Marshall announced the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization in 1924, it was integrated into Indian, Tamil, and Hindu nationalists' narratives, encouraging a racialized quest for founders (Ramaswamy 2001).

- 30 Marshall and other archaeologists set the tone in asserting that the Indus civilization was Pre-Aryan or Non-Aryan. Indian nationalists acknowledged it was pre-Aryan, while stressing that India emerged out of a harmonious synthesis between its Aryan and non-Aryan elements—the idea of migration, implying interactions between Aryans and indigenous settlers, being preferred to that of invasion. Tamil nationalists designed a different pattern, describing the Indus civilization as Dravidian, and more specifically Tamil. As the Tamil nationalist movement aimed at countering “colonial and Aryanist assertions about the barbaric backwardness of Dravidian India,” Indus Valley Civilization remains were displayed “as concrete proof of the antiquity and primordality of Tamil speakers who were authorised as the original ‘civilized’ inhabitants of India, the creators of its first ‘civilization’” (Ramaswamy 2001:108–9). According to Tamil nationalists, Aryans were the barbaric destroyers of India’s first civilization, which had spread from South to North. They incorporated Harappan material remains into their demonstration of Tamil antiquity, which had so far relied mainly on Sangam poems.²³
- 31 As soon as the late 1920s, Hindu nationalists elaborated their own strategies. They proved concerned to seize the foundational Indus Valley Civilization and also “to salvage and recuperate the glorious Aryan” (Ramaswamy 2001:125). The “Hindu-Aryanist nationalist project” (Ramaswamy 2001:128) was indeed challenged by a discovery which seemed to undermine the role of the Vedas in the constitution of Indian civilization and that of the Aryans as its procreators—and promote in their place another “Other,” the barbarous Dravidian. Authors close to Hindu nationalism’s sphere of influence dismissed the identification of the Indus Valley Civilization as pre-Aryan, non-Aryan, or Dravidian and stated that it displayed influence of Hindu/Aryan civilization. They pushed back the chronological limits of the latter, asserting that the Rig Veda was contemporary, if not earlier, to the Indus Valley Civilization, and depicted Harappan remains as material evidence of what is described in the sacred text.
- 32 This launched a quest for relationships between Sanskrit literature and Harappan material culture, which does not rely on scientific foundations.²⁴ Harappan civilization presents features that are absent from the Rig Veda, and vice versa. To create connections between them, archaeologists and scholars “with a nationalist bent” or “taking the Hindutva position,” as Ratnagar (2007:371) called them, have resorted to means such as ascribing Harappan seals to some Indo-Aryan language and identifying Vedic fire altars and horses in Harappa remains.²⁵ In the early 1990s, archaeologist Shikaripura Ranganath Rao, renowned for his excavations at Lothal, claimed to have found there “evidence of fire altars used in Vedic sacrifice and Vedic deities and myths in the images on the seals,” while reverting to “his old theory that the language of the Harappan seal inscriptions is a variety of Sanskrit” (Ratnagar 2007:369).²⁶ Kalibangan (Rajasthan) was excavated in the 1960s: the Harappan fire hearth was analyzed as a Vedic fire-altar, notably by B. B. Lal in publications dated 1984 and 2003. At Sukortada (Gujarat), excavated at the same period, the presence of horse bones enabled A. K. Sharma to link this Harappan site with Aryans (Chadha 2011:72). Excavations began at Dholavira in the early 1990s under the supervision of Ravindra Singh Bisht, who ended

his career as Joint Director General of the ASI. This site, one of those designated by the BJP to become archaeological icons, has been interpreted “as a Vedic town (whatever that may mean), even though the *RgVeda* has nothing to do with the Rann or the Kutch mainland” (Ratnagar 2007:371).

- 33 These works, along with others of a similar vein, nurtured the creation of a “new archaeo-ethnic category—the Vedic Harappans” (Chadha 2011:59). At the same time, the Aryan invasion/migration hypothesis, problematic to Hindutva ideology in that it implies that Aryans were foreigners to the subcontinent, was rejected. During the 1990s, several publications came out to dismiss the idea that Aryans migrated from the West, claiming instead that they were indigenous to India.²⁷ A project meant to Aryanize the Indus civilization also emerged at the end of the 1980s. The Deen Dayal Research Institute and Voice of India, both “active arms of the Sangh Parivar,” organized a symposium at New Delhi in 1993 to take it “firmly into the public sphere of the Indian polity” (Chadha 2011:71). A key element of this Aryanization process was the invention of the Indus-Sarasvati Civilization, *Sindhu Sarasvati Sabhyata* in Sanskrit. The river Sarasvati is mentioned in the *Rig Veda* and other Vedic texts as a powerful river, which later dried up. By the late twentieth century, it came to be depicted by Hindutva ideologues as the center of Harappan culture through its identification with the Ghaggar-Hakra, a monsoon-fed river which flows through India and Pakistan.
- 34 This attribution drew on colonial Indology as well as postcolonial geology and archaeology (Chadha 2011). Recent geological work had pointed to the importance of the Ghaggar-Hakra and correlated it to the Sarasvati. In parallel, several decades of archaeological investigation had extended Harappan civilization’s geographical sphere, shifted it away from the Indus Valley and established the importance of the Ghaggar-Hakra area, while establishing links between Harappans and Vedic Aryans. Geological and archaeological data enabled the promoters of Indus-Sarasvati Civilization to give it the trappings of an objective scientific fact, which facilitated its dissemination: “Soon, even archaeologists who were not part of the Hindutva ideological formation were convinced by these rhetorical moves and began calling the Harappan civilisation the Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation” (Chadha 2001:72). This “new cultural artefact” (Markovits 2006:75–6) conveniently packed all Hindutva arguments into one concept. Transferring the homeland of the foundational civilization from the Indus Valley to the area around the Sarasvati / Ghaggar-Hakra was a means to install it within Indian borders—which had been a constant concern since Partition—and also to integrate Indus remains within the orbit of Vedic Hinduism and make Aryans autochthonous.
- 35 BJP’s electoral success meant that Hindutva perspectives on Indian history and identity could now be translated into ambitious state-sponsored projects. A case in point was the Sarasvati Heritage Project (SHP), launched by the ASI in 2002 when the BJP-led NDA was in power. It propelled a multidisciplinary study of the river (archaeology, history, pedology, hydrology, geomorphology, paleobotany, etc.), combined with a plan to transform archaeological sites into tourist attractions. Some of these sites had already been excavated, like Dholavira, Kalibangan, Rakhigarhi, and Banawali; others were excavated for the first time on a large scale, such as Dhera and Bhirrana. The project was headed by the Joint Director of the ASI, while its Advisory Committee was chaired by the BJP Minister of Tourism and Culture, Jagmohan. Senior archaeologists of the ASI—some of whom had been instrumental in the elaboration of the Vedic Harappans—played a key role in the setting up of the SHP, and part of the Advisory Committee’s

members were close to the Hindutva movement (Chadha 2011:73–4). The main objective was to “produce credible data of *indigeneity* in order to scientifically demonstrate that the Rig Vedic Aryans were the authors of the Harappan civilization” (Chadha 2011:74). The difference with earlier investigations lied in the fact that the wish—and will—to correlate Vedic literary remains, Harappan material remains and the Sarasvati/Ghaggar-Hakra now unfolded within a vast and comprehensive project, benefiting from the support of government and the allocation of specific funds. As Chadha argued, the very political and ideological orientation of the SHP also explained why it was short-lived. After the NDA’s defeat in 2004, the United Progressive Alliance government put an end to the project, whose funding was cut. The ambition, nevertheless, remained intact and got revived when the BJP returned to power. Soon after its victory in 2014, the topic resurfaced, encouraging the ASI to explore and excavate sites around the Ghaggar-Hakra river (Vishnoi 2014).

- 36 Initiatives were also launched at state levels, as illustrated by the Haryana Sarasvati Heritage Development Board (HSHDB). It was constituted by the Government of Haryana in 2015, with Manohar Lal Khattar as chairman. This BJP politician, former RSS *pracharak*, became Haryana Chief Minister in 2014. The aims are to rejuvenate the river and ensure a regular flow of fresh water into it, as well as develop research on it, restore heritage sites that are located on its banks and promote cultural heritage relating to the river. The theory of the Indus Sarasvati Civilization explicitly forms the background of the program: “World oldest literature called Rigveda and other Vedic literature were created on the bank of this River, which placed India in the position of ‘Vishvaguru’. It reflects the continuity of great Indian value system and glorious past of Sarasvati Sindhu civilization to the present age” (HSHDB 2020). In 2019, the HSHDB approved of 11 projects for the revival and development of the river.
- 37 Mainstream scholarship has long rejected the Hindutva historical narrative, but the gap between the two keeps widening as new data further undermine the latter. This was the case of two articles published in 2019, respectively in *Cell* and *Science*. One details the first analysis of the sequenced genome of an Indus Valley Civilization individual, based on the DNA from a woman’s skeleton found at Rakhigarhi (Shinde *et al.* 2019). As stated in the title, the individual in question “lacks ancestry from steppe pastoralists or Iranian farmers,” and rather fits as a mixture of people related to ancient Iranians and Southeast Asian hunter-gatherers. The second article, signed by more than 90 co-authors, deals with “The Formation of Human Populations in South and Central Asia” (Narasimhan *et al.* 2019). Based on genetic analysis of more than 500 people who lived over the past 8,000 years, mostly from Central Asia and northernmost South Asia, it concludes that the modern South Asian population results from the mixing of diverse groups, such as South Asian hunter-gatherers, Iranian farmers and Steppe pastoralists. Genetic data presented in both papers confirmed well-established but still debated facts: the Indus Valley Civilization people was completely different from the Vedic people; Indo-Aryans followed Harappans chronologically as a consequence of Steppe migration; Indo-European languages spread from Eurasian steppes; Steppe ancestry erupted into India during the first half of the second millennium BCE (2000–1500 BCE).
- 38 Yet, a somewhat different picture was reported in Indian media—newspapers headlines, television and Twitter feeds (Shahane 2019). The way these studies were accounted for was rather confused. It seemed that media misrepresented the

conclusions to suit Hindutva political narrative and its nativist assertions (Daniyal 2019). Indian co-authors of the articles contributed to the confusion. A press conference took place in New Delhi on September 6, 2019, the day after the online publication of the article in *Cell*, which coincided with the publication of the other article. Vasant Shinde, archaeologist and Vice-Chancellor of Pune's Deccan College, one of the main contributors of the *Cell* article and co-author of the one in *Science*, presented the Rakhigarhi findings. Niraj Rai, head of the Ancient DNA Lab at the Birbal Sahni Institute for Paleosciences Lucknow, who co-authored both articles, was also present. In this conference and later interviews, both scientists presented conclusions that contradicted the results of the studies, even advancing the Out of India theory. Shinde insisted on the indigenous nature of the ancient population of India. He explained that new genetic data dismissed the Aryan migration/invasion theory and that the Harappans were the Vedic people and spoke Sanskrit. Rai was more careful when it came to equate the Indus Valley Civilization with the Vedic culture (Daniyal 2019). These controversial comments were criticized by some other contributors to the studies, who distanced themselves from the views expressed by their Indian colleagues. The BJP and its allies reject new genetic data as threatening to their ideological construction: as a result, "Indian researchers in government-supported institutions muddy the waters of debate" (Shahane 2019) or, to put it differently, "scientists and writers are allowing themselves to be intimidated by the current political ecosystem" (Rajendran 2019).

- 39 The *Science* paper also sheds light on the origin of Dravidian languages. One scenario which is put forward is that proto-Dravidian was spread by peoples of the Indus Valley Civilization. Another possibility is mentioned: proto-Dravidian derived from peninsular South Asia. In parallel, new developments occurred on the Tamil Nadu archaeological stage with the documentation of a site a few kilometers away from Madurai, Keezhadi. The first phase of excavations, undertaken by the ASI, started in 2015. The site soon proved to be of major importance, since it presented features characteristic of an urban civilization (brick structures, continuous constructed walls, drainage network structure, furnaces, tanks) and its artifacts were ascribed to the Sangam period. If Sangam literature points to urban civilization in Tamil Nadu, there was no archaeological evidence for it so far. In that respect, as Amarnath Ramakrishna, the ASI superintendent archaeologist at the site, explained in 2017, Keezhadi could shed considerable light on Tamil culture and history (Saradha 2017).
- 40 In spite of these promising results—or precisely because of them—difficulties emerged. The Central government withheld approval for the third season of excavations. This decision was severely criticized by Tamil Nadu's polity and approval was granted. But before the third phase started, the ASI issued an order transferring Ramakrishna to Assam and, later on, gave up the excavations. The Government of Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology took over in 2018. A report, entitled *Keeladi: An Urban Settlement of Sangam Age on the Banks of the River Vaigai*, was published in 2019.²⁸ Carbon sample analysis pushed back the chronology of the Sangam era, with artifacts dated to 580 BCE. Findings also hinted at a potential continuity in script with Indus Valley Civilization remains. The expression "graffiti marks" is used by scholars to refer to a kind of script which survived between the disappearance of the Indus script and the emergence of Brahmi script. More than 1,000 graffiti sherds were recovered from Keezhadi. Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherds were recovered as well, and the date of this ancient Tamil script was pushed back to the sixth century BCE. These results

represented a strong challenge and affront to both the ASI and Central Government. Whereas the papers published in *Cell* and *Science* brought further evidence that Hindutva theories on Indian ancient history were erroneous, Keezhadi findings presented yet “another thorn in the BJP’s views that the Vedic people were unique” (Muralidharan 2019).

- 41 To fully understand what happened at Keezhadi, one should bear in mind Tamil nationalists’ ancient claims that the Indus Valley Civilization was Dravidian. This narrative stands in sharp divergence with the one promoted by Hindutva circles and this is reinforced by the opposition between the Tamil Nadu state and the central government. This episode also helps us to understand the choice of Adichanallur for becoming an iconic site. It is somehow a way of making up for the ASI’s volte-face in Keezhadi through the promotion of Tamil history and archaeology in Tamil Nadu. To BJP’s eyes, nevertheless, Adichanallur is a much less dangerous site than Keezhadi and its remains hinting to a sophisticated urban civilization with a potential connection to Harappan civilization. As for Rakhigarhi, it can seem ironic that Modi government chose to shift to the fore the very site which has genetically invalidated the existence of links between Harappans and Vedic people. Considered the other way round, this decision stands as an embodiment of BJP’s capacity to muzzle archaeological and scientific knowledge with the aim of maintaining, at all costs, its ideological framework.

Conclusion

- 42 From the standpoint of Hindutva fundamentalists, archaeology is a highly valuable tool: it enables them to strengthen their ideological construction, which is largely embedded in literature and mythology, by endowing it with material, territorial, and empirical reality as well as scientificity. Such a legitimization is key to the dissemination and growing ascendancy of their definition of the Indian nation, identity, and history. As shown in this article, Hindutva organizations and leaders have become experts at the art of manipulating archaeological data with the aim of advancing their political agenda. Distortion and creation of evidence are resorted to as routine practices, along with the promotion of archaeological activity in accordance with Hindutva views and the setting aside and curbing of any kind of data or work which could threaten them.
- 43 Archaeology accompanied the rise and eventual success of Hindu politics. The claim may even be advanced that it somehow contributed to this rise through the Ramjanmabhumi movement, which constituted a major step in the appropriation of archaeological discourse by Hindutva organizations. More generally, the period stretching from the late 1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century is a turning point in the linking up of archaeology and Hindutva, with the development of a foundational case, the Ayodhya dispute, in all its phases—pre-demolition, demolition, and lawsuit—and the setting up of theoretical constructions such as the assumption of Aryans being indigenous and its refinement into the Indus Sarasvati Civilization. BJP’s defeat in 2004 meant that some projects were ended or paused, but solid foundations had been laid in the preceding years and relationships between archaeology and BJP could easily be amplified in the aftermath of the 2014 general election.

- 44 Hindu majoritarianism has gained pervasive prevalence in the political and public sphere and its version of Indian history permeates, to an increasing degree, education and research institutions, such as universities and museums. The ASI has certainly been instrumental in the successful intrusion of Hindutva organizations into the archaeological field. In many instances, the ASI as an institution as well as its employees had no choice but to satisfy BJP's requests. Nonetheless, this raises the question of why a good number of scholars and archaeologists have been involved in the creation of suitable evidence of a Hindu past, either actively or through omission. This is a delicate topic. A much deeper analysis, attentive to each case's specificities, would be necessary to disentangle a complex series of parameters pertaining to individual preferences and professional constraints. What can be said, at this stage, is that a panel of options, not necessarily exclusive from one another, are at play, such as sympathy with or adherence to Hindutva ideology, opportunism, and self-censorship on account of institutional affiliation or intimidation measures, or for fear of retaliation.
- 45 Archaeology in India has long been closely tied to politics, as illustrated by the use and promotion of archaeological research by British colonial power and the development of a nation-serving archaeology after Independence. Such a political mobilization has from the start been favored by the existence of an institution like the ASI, controlling archaeological activity on a large scale and having strong connections with government. Indian archaeology also displays an enduring tendency to use texts as a guiding principle for research, with a concern for establishing modern Indians' ancestry—including by linking material culture with ethnicity. Hindutva supporters could draw on these institutional and scientific characteristics, which they have amplified and perverted to match their own goals. This background contributes to explaining why they managed to appropriate archaeology quickly and efficiently and turn it to serve their politics of exclusion.
- 46 Given how strategically important archaeology is in the making of nation(s) in India, one can wonder with Sumathi Ramaswamy (2001:144) why the discipline, from a social and institutional point of view, still holds a marginal and precarious place in the country.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Archaeological Survey of India. 2020. "History." Retrieved October 5, 2020 (<https://asi.nic.in/about-us/history/>).
- Arnold, Bettina. 1990. "The Past as Propaganda: Totalitarian Archaeology in Nazi Germany." *Antiquity* 64(244):464–78.
- Arnold, Bettina. 2006. "'Arierdämmerung': Race and Archaeology in Nazi Germany." *World Archaeology* 38(1):8–31.

- Avikunthak, Ashish. 2019. "Secret, Hurried and Anonymous When Convenient: Revisiting ASI's Ayodhya Dig Report." *The Wire*, November 22. Retrieved October 16, 2020 (<https://thewire.in/the-sciences/secret-hurried-and-anonymous-when-convenient-revisiting-asis-ayodhya-dig-report>).
- Basak, Bishnupriya. 2018. "Guest Editorial: Public Archaeology in India." *Public Archaeology* 17(2-3):69-73.
- Bernbeck, Reinhard, and Susan Pollock. 1996. "Ayodhya, Archaeology, and Identity." *Current Anthropology* 37(S1):S138-S142.
- Chadha, Ashish. 2011. "Conjuring a River, Imagining Civilisation: Sarasvati, Archaeology and Science in India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45(1):55-83.
- Chakrabarti, Dilip Kumar. 1988. *A History of Indian Archaeology from the Beginning to 1947*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Chakrabarti, Dilip Kumar. 2003. *Archaeology in the Third World: A History of Indian Archaeology Since 1947*. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld.
- Cohn, Bernard. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Danino, Michel, and Sujata Nahar. 1996. *The Invasion that Never Was*. Delhi: Mother's Institute of Research.
- Daniyal, Shoaib. 2019. "Two New Genetic Studies Upheld Indo-Aryan Migration. So Why Did Indian Media Report the Opposite?" *Scroll.in*, September 12. Retrieved October 31, 2020 (<https://scroll.in/article/936872/two-new-genetic-studies-upheld-aryan-migration-theory-so-why-did-indian-media-report-the-opposite>).
- Demoule, Jean-Paul. 2020. *Aux origines, l'archéologie: une science au cœur des grands débats de notre temps*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Deo, Shantaram Balchandra, and Suryanath Kamath, eds. 1993. *The Aryan Problem*. Pune: Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Samiti.
- Diaz-Andreu, Margarita, and Timothy Champion, eds. 1996. *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe*. London: UCL Press.
- Diaz-Andreu, Margarita. 2007. *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frabley, David. 1994. *The Myth of the Aryan Invasion of India*. New Delhi: Voice of India.
- Guha, Sudeshna. 2015. *Artefacts of History: Archaeology, Historiography and Indian Pasts*. Los Angeles; London; New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2004. "Archaeology and the Monument: On Two Contentious Sites of Faith and History." Pp. 268-303 in *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Hamilakis, Yannis. 2007. *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hamilakis, Yannis, and Philip Duke, eds. 2007. *Archaeology and Capitalism: From Ethics to Politics*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Haryana Sarasvati Heritage Development Board. 2020. "About HSHDB." Retrieved October 25, 2020 (<http://www.hshdb.in/>).

- Kohl, Philip, and Clare Fawcett, eds. 1995. *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lahiri, Nayanjot. 1998. "Coming to Grips with the Indian Past: John Marshall's Early Years as Lord Curzon's Director-General of Archaeology in India, Part I." *South Asian Studies* 14(1):1–23.
- Lahiri, Nayanjot. 2017a. *Monuments Matter: India's Archaeological Heritage Since Independence*. Mumbai: Marg Foundation.
- Lahiri, Nayanjot. 2017b. "Archaeology Should Be Taken Out of the Corridors of The Government. Historian Nayanjot Lahiri on the ASI and Preserving Indian Heritage." Interview with Surabhi Kanga. *The Caravan*, August 14. Retrieved September 20, 2020 (<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/historian-nayanjot-lahiri-asi-preserving-indian-heritage>).
- Mandal, Dhaneshwar. 1993. *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Demolition: A Critique of the "New" and "Fresh" Discoveries*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Mandal, Dhaneshwar, and Shereen Ratnagar. 2007. *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Excavation*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Mantena, Rama. 2012. *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780-1880*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Markovits, Claude. 2006. "Appropriation du passé et nationalisme hindou dans l'Inde contemporaine." *Sociétés et Représentations* 22:65–80.
- McGuire, Randall H. 2008. *Archaeology as Political Action*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Meskel, Lynn, ed. 1998. *Archaeology under Fire: Nationalism, Politics, and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*. London: Routledge.
- Meskel, Lynn, and Robert W. Preucel. 2007. "Politics." Pp. 315–34 in *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, edited by L. Meskel and R. W. Preucel. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Muralidharan, Kavitha. 2019. "In 'Rebuttal' to ASI, Tamil Nadu Dig Claims Proof Sangam Era Older Than Thought." *The Wire*, September 20. Retrieved November 2, 2020 (<https://thewire.in/the-sciences/keezhadi-excavation-tamil-nadu-sangam-era-asi-tamil-brahmi>).
- Narasimhan, Vagheesh M., et al. 2019. "The Formation of Human Populations in South and Central Asia." *Science*, September 6. 365(6457):eaat7487. Retrieved on December 3, 2020 (<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/365/6457/eaat7487>).
- Rajaram, Navaratna Srinivasa. 1993. *Aryan Invasion of India: The Myth and the Truth*. New Delhi: Voice of India.
- Rajendran, C. P. 2019. "Scientists Part of Studies Supporting Aryan Migration Endorse Party Line Instead." *The Wire*, September 13. Retrieved October 31, 2020 (<https://thewire.in/the-sciences/rakhigarhi-indus-valley-civilisation-aryan-steppe-migration-vasant-shinde>).
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi. 2001. "Remains of the Race: Archaeology, Nationalism, and the Yearning for Civilisation in the Indus Valley." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38(2):105–45.
- Ratnagar, Shereen. 2004. "Archaeology at the Heart of a Political Confrontation: The Case of Ayodhya." *Current Anthropology* 45(2):239–59.
- Ratnagar, Shereen. 2007. "The Aryan Homeland Debate in India." Pp. 349–78 in *Archaeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts*, edited by P. L. Kohl, M. Kozelsky, and N. Ben-Yehuda. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.

- Saradha, V. 2017. "Don't We Need to Know India's History?": Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna Discusses His Transfer from a Key Sangam-Era Site." *The Caravan*, April 17. Retrieved November 2, 2020 (<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/keezhadi-archaeologist-amarnath-ramakrishna-transfer-sangam>).
- Shahane, Girish. 2019. "Why Hindutva Supporters Love to Hate the Discredited Aryan Invasion Theory." *Scroll.in*, September 14. Retrieved October 31, 2020 (<https://scroll.in/article/937043/why-hindutva-supporters-love-to-hate-the-discredited-aryan-invasion-theory>).
- Shinde, Vasant et. al. 2019. "An Ancient Harappan Genome Lacks Ancestry from Steppe Pastoralists or Iranian Farmers." *Cell* 179:729–35.
- Singh, Upinder. 2004. *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Sitharaman, Nirmala. 2020. "Budget Speech," Union Budget (2020-2021) presented in the Lok Sabha, New Delhi, February 1, 2020. Retrieved October 15, 2020 (<https://www.thehindu.com/business/budget/article30711669.ece/binary/BudgetSpeech.pdf>).
- Sorensen, Marie Louise Stig. 1996. "The Fall of a Nation, The Birth of a Subject: The National Use of Archaeology in Nineteenth-Century Denmark." Pp. 24–47 in *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe*, edited by M. Diaz-Andreu, and T. Champion. London: UCL Press.
- Sudhakar, P. 2020. "Adichanallur Site Gets Its Due, Finally." *The Hindu*, February 2. Retrieved October 13, 2020 (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/adichanallur-site-gets-its-due-finally/article30716873.ece>).
- Thapar, Romila. 2000. "Hindutva and History." *Frontline*. Print Edition February 6, 2015. Retrieved October 31, 2020 (<https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/heritage/hindutva-and-history/article6805140.ece>).
- Thapar, Romila. 2010. "The Verdict on Ayodhya: A Historian's Perspective." *The Hindu*, October 2, updated October 26, 2016. Retrieved October 20, 2020 (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/The-verdict-on-Ayodhya-a-historians-perspective/article15523346.ece>).
- Trautmann, Thomas R. 1997. *Aryans and British India*. Berkeley; London; Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Valiant, Seonaid. 2018. *Ornamental Nationalism: Archaeology and Antiquities in Mexico, 1876-1911*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- Varghese, Rachel. 2018. "Digging for a Hindu Nation." South Asia @ LSE Blog. Retrieved October 13, 2020 (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/05/10/digging-for-the-hindu-nation/>).
- Varghese, Rachel. 2019. "'Order'-ing Excavations: Constitution of Archaeology as Legal Evidence in the Ayodhya Case." *Public Archaeology* 17(2-3):89–109.
- Varma, Supriya, and Jaya Menon. 2010. "Was There a Temple Under the Babri Masjid? Reading the Archaeological Evidence." *Economic and Political Weekly* 45(50):61–72.
- Varma, Supriya, and Jaya Menon. 2019. "Ayodhya: Evidence from Excavation Does Not Support ASI's Conclusion About Temple." Interview with Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, *The Wire*, November 21. Retrieved October 15, 2020 (<https://thewire.in/history/ayodhya-dispute-excavation-evidence-temple-asi>).
- Vishnoi, Anubhuti. 2014. "ASI Encouraged by the New BJP Regime Renews Search for the Mythical Sarasvati River." *India Today*, October 9. Retrieved October 25, 2020 (<https://>

www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20141020-bjp-government-Sarasvati-asi-river-renews-search-ancient-805476-2014-10-09).

Zutshi, Chitralkha. 2009. "Debating the Past: Academic and Popular Histories in India." *Perspectives on History. The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, December 1. Retrieved September 9, 2020 (<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2009/debating-the-past-academic-and-popular-histories-in-india>).

NOTES

1. Ranging from the end of the eighteenth century till today, they relate to all parts of the world and all kinds of political regimes. Archaeology, for instance, played a role in the building of the nation in nineteenth century-Denmark, in reaction to the crisis induced by significant territorial loss as well as to the sociopolitical evolutions deriving from the abolition of absolute monarchy (Sorensen 1996). Also worthy of mention are the creation of national symbols using indigenous, particularly Aztec, images in Mexico during the authoritarian regime of Porfirio Diaz (Valiant 2018), and the use of archaeology in Nazi Germany (Arnold 1990; 2006).
2. Zutshi, Chitralkha. 2009. "Debating the Past: Academic and Popular Histories in India." *Perspectives on History*, December 1. Retrieved on December 3, 2020 (<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2009/debating-the-past-academic-and-popular-histories-in-india>).
3. In that perspective, it should be read along with others from this special issue, especially Corinne Lefèvre's (<https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6728>) and Audrey Truschke's (<https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6636>) contributions.
4. For an account of the ASI's first decades of existence, see Singh (2004).
5. This explains why the Indus Valley Civilization is also known as the Harappan Civilization and its inhabitants are called the Harappans.
6. For example, Lahiri (1998).
7. Among these tropes, one can mention the idea that the Indian mind is ahistorical, as well as the division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods and its approach in terms of decline and corruption—to which the colonial power supposedly put an end.
8. Rama Mantena (2012) showed that the British kept Indian antiquarians out of the scholarly sphere and intellectual networks during a great part of the nineteenth century. It was only in the latter part of the century that Indian antiquarians and archaeologists came to be fully considered as scholars by colonial administrators.
9. Guha notably mentioned the works of Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti, who has written extensively on the history of South Asian archaeology. See Chakrabarti (2003).
10. Varghese, Rachel. 2018. "Digging for a Hindu Nation." *The London School of Economics and Political Science Blog*, May 10. Retrieved on December 3, 2020 (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/05/10/digging-for-the-hindu-nation/>).
11. He had earlier been involved in the project on the archaeology of *Mahabharata* sites.
12. More than 20 authors contributed to this 574-page-long report.
13. Ashish Avikunthak is also a filmmaker. He is also known as Ashish Chadha, whose work on Sarasvati river has been of great help in the drafting of this article.
14. Avikunthak was doing fieldwork at Dholavira at the end of 2003. There he met with several people who had been working at Ayodhya (officers, draftsmen, photographers, and archaeologists of the ASI). They had signed a High Court order prohibiting them from talking

about their work there. He managed to get more information during the course of his fieldwork, which lasted until 2005.

15. A Court's charge of contempt was directed at Ratnagar and Mandal in 2011 in relation with their 2007 book and unsold copies were withdrawn from circulation (Varghese 2019:93).

16. See Thapar, Romila. 2010. "The Verdict on Ayodhya: A Historian's Perspective." *The Hindu*, October 2, updated October 26, 2016. Retrieved on December 3, 2020 (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/The-verdict-on-Ayodhya-a-historians-perspective/article15523346.ece>).

17. For examples, see Lefèvre's article in the present issue (<https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6728>).

18. For a short account of the Hindutva narrative of Indian history, see Thapar (2000).

19. One example is the work entitled *A Discourse on Indo-European Languages and Culture* (2005), edited by Daya Nath Tripathi. It derived from the Seminar on the Homeland of Indo-European Languages and Culture organized in 2002 by the Indian Council for Historical Research and the Centre for the Study of Indian Tradition. Stating that "some contributors to the volume, including archaeologists with claims to academic distinction, appear to have become interested in Aryans only recently," Ratnagar (2007) raised the following question: "did the scholars succumb to the temptations of political patronage and rush to discover the indigenous origins of the Aryans?" (P. 372)

20. To undertake excavations at a site of historical importance, for instance, one must obtain permission from the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology, which is constituted by the Minister of Culture and the ASI.

21. This theory held "that the constitutive event for Indian civilization, the Big Bang through which it came into being, was the clash between invading, fair-skinned, civilized Sanskrit-speaking Aryans and dark-skinned, barbarous aborigines" (Trautmann 1997:194). In addition to Aryans and Dravidians, a third group emerged, based on the identification of Munda languages. Their speakers, the Kolarians, appeared in colonial ethnology as the main rivals of Dravidians as the subcontinent's autochthons.

22. Harappan chronology seemed to push back the limits of Indian history by at least a millennium. There is today a consensus on three phases of Harappan chronology: Early Harappans (3300-2600 BCE), Mature Harappans (2600-1900 BCE), and Late Harappans (1900-1300 BCE).

23. The term "Sangam" applies to ancient academies of poets and scholars active around the city of Madurai. It is used to refer to a corpus of Tamil ancient literature and also to the period in which it is supposed to have been composed or compiled. The chronology is debated, but it has been assumed to span from the second century BCE to the third century BCE.

24. The time period during which Indo-Aryans and Harappans may have overlapped (1700-1300 BCE) is very short (Chadha 2011:59). There are methodological problems as well, since sources are incomplete in both cases. The culture of the Harappans is known through numerous archaeological records, but there are still uncertainties on their language and religious and social life, on account of the difficulties for deciphering their script. As for Indo-Aryans, sources are mainly textual—which explains why the date of their arrival in India, based mainly on philological analysis of the Rig Veda, remains conjectural and relative (Chadha 2011:58-9). This asymmetry in sources has made it easier for Hindutva supporters to pretend to identify equivalences between Harappan archaeology and Vedic literature.

25. The culture of the horse is associated with speakers of Indo-European languages.

26. S. R. Rao published his theory in *The Decipherment of the Indus Script* (1982).

27. A few examples are Deo and Kamath (1993); Rajaram (1993); Frawley (1994); Danino and Nahar (1996).

28. For an English version of the results, <https://cdn.thewire.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/20102444/%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%80%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%BF-English-08.08.19-1776Words.pdf>.

ABSTRACTS

This article deals with the relationship between Hindu nationalism and archaeology in India from the end of the twentieth century onwards. Archaeology has been closely linked to the political sphere since the nineteenth century, in particular through the existence of a state organization such as the Archaeological Survey of India. Organizations belonging to the Hindutva nebula, notably the BJP, started to resort largely to archaeology's legitimizing discourse in the late 1980s and 1990s. They have turned it into a powerful political and ideological tool since then, using it to bolster their politics of exclusion. Archaeological data have enabled them to materialize their theses on identity and nation into actual places and objects and thus give them the appearance of empirical and scientific facts. Distortion and creation of archaeological evidence have become current practices so as to fit and promote the Hindutva agenda, as shown in two cases: the Ayodhya dispute and the controversies on origins, both being part of the Hindutva project to define the Indian nation as Hindu and confer upon modern Indians autochthonous ancestors, in contrast to Muslims.

INDEX

Keywords: Archaeological Survey of India, archaeology, Ayodhya, BJP, Dravidians, Hindutva, Indo-Aryans, Indus Valley Civilization, nationalism

AUTHOR

ANNE-JULIE ETTER

CY Cergy Paris Université