Of methods and aims

On a chilly winter morning of December 6, 1992, Ayodhya, a small town in eastern Uttar Pradesh (a province in Northern India), gripped the attention of the entire nation. On that day a mosque in the centre of the town, the Babri Masjid, became the target of violent destruction by the volunteers of a cluster of militant ultra-Hindu organizations, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, and their common electoral forum represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these very questions shaped the imagination of the Indian nation as an immemorially ancient community and informed the issue of Indian authorship over India's past. As the colonial enterprise was grafted on the nation-building process, the material remains were rediscovered as replete with history and artistic heritage of the nation. In the process, several claims of the colonial archaeological discourse were contested. These contestations ranged from specialized art historical debates around questions of autonomy, origins and influence to heated public disputes on professional integrity or authorial intentions of the 'Western' versus the 'Indian' scholars.2 By the early twentieth century, along with English, regional vernacular texts on scientific history and archaeology emerged as a space where the Indian scholars could pit an entire range of authorial claims about India's past.

The violent destruction of Babri Masjid. © AFP Photo/ Douglas E. Corrigan.

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Potna-vidya: the new science of archaeology

In South Asia, as in other regions that came under European political and cultural colonization between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the discipline of archaeology had a distinctly Western, more specifically colonial origin. In much of the non-Western world, archaeology and museums evolved as part of a grid of modern disciplinary and institutional practices, including cartography, surveys and census, which sought to colonize and order newly acquired territories. Western scholar-administrators in South Asia argued for a long time that the colony was singularly bereft of indigenous scientific textual records about its own past. Archaeology here became an integral component of the British 'civilizing mission' of enlightening the 'natives' by endowing them with an authentic history. Reliance on material remains emerged as the sole avenue of 'knowing' history. Architectural and sculptural remains, along with stone and copper plate inscriptions were privileged as a higher order of evidence, over indigenous textual records, in recovering India's pasts.

Prehistorical studies in the Western academic world, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, were driven by the search for a 'true' history. For Petrie proficiency in archaeology required a combination of disciplinary expertise in different branches of liberal arts, natural and social sciences. However, faced with a growing creed of relic hunting speculators in Egypt, for him, the integrity of the archaeologists ultimately lay in an almost fanatical devotion to the cause of science, their work being something more than a professional career, their commitment to research as being their ‘…honour and the end of their being.’5

THE MOSQUE WAS SAID TO HAVE BEEN BUILT in 1528 by Mir Baqi, a courtier of the Mughal emperor Babur. The structure, however, attracted a more recent notoriety, particularly in postcolonial India, as one that was allegedly built on the site of a destroyed mandir (temple) commemorating the birthplace of the epical Hindu deity Rama. Without going into the details of the contentious history of interreligious tensions around the site it will suffice to point out that since 1989-90, activists and volunteers of the militant ultra-Hindu lobby have repeatedly congregated around the site with the agenda of ‘liberating’ the ‘true’ birthplace of Rama (Ramjanmabhumi). For them this ‘liberation’ was possible only through redressing a historic injustice inflicted on the nation’s Hindu community by the Muslims centuries ago, by demolishing the sixteenth century mosque and making way for building a new Ram Mandir, the foundation of which had been ceremonially laid in an adjacent site in 1989.

Since 1992, the rubble of the destroyed mosque has become the site of multiple readings. In the context of contemporary South Asia it highlighted, more virulently than ever before, the power of historic structures and the associated questions of heritage and patrimony in congealing or fracturing public spheres. At the same time, what the events of December 1992 brought to the foreground was the potential authenticating status, and also the question of professional integrity among practitioners of disciplines of history and archaeology. Both sides, the pro-Mandir ultra Hindu lobbyists and the opposing camp of left/liberal/secular historians and archaeologists took recourse to archaeology in proving or disproving their cases about the authenticity of Ayodhya as Ramjanmabhumi and the evidence of a prior vandalized Hindu temple at the site of the mosque. Central to all these debates was the status of disciplinary expertise in different branches of liberal arts, natural and social sciences. However, faced with a growing creed of relic hunting speculators in Egypt, for him, the integrity of the archaeologists ultimately lay in an almost fanatical devotion to the cause of science, their work being something more than a professional career, their commitment to research as being their ‘…honour and the end of their being.’5
The field of archaeology in colonial India

In the late nineteenth century, the field of archaeology in colonial India was emerging as a modern and scientific discipline. The work of Akshay Kumar Maitreya, a Bengali archaeologist, played a significant role in shaping this field.

Hindu Bengali archaeologists encountered in Gaur could be dated back to the Mohammedan past. To account for this absence of archaeological excavation, Petrie re-visited the ancient sites and remarked on the potential of this area, which sought to recover the lost and elusive in the extant presence. Lost traces of an ancient pre-Islamic civilization of Varendra were traced among the ruins of the ancient city of Gaur. From this collection of sculptures and epigraphs and from the neighboring Buddhist site of Paharpur, these Bengali scholars now set out on the task of discovering the archeological chronology of the pre-Islamic Bengal, specifically of the Polo and Sena kingdoms between the eighth and twelfth centuries A.D.

In the early twentieth century, the search for sites of capitals took place alongside the reconfiguration of the emergent Indian nation, the field continued to be dominated by the Bengali archaeologist, without compromising the disciplinary intentions and meanings as constitutive elements of the disciplinary field, rather than as momentary lapses from specificity of archaeology in the public domain in South Asia. The plea is merely one for recognizing these apparent extra-disciplinary intentions and meanings as constitutive elements of the disciplinary field, rather than as momentary lapses from standardized scientific parameters.

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Notes
1 While the literature on this field is substantial, for a recent critical appraisal of the Ayodhya debate and the attendant contentsions around the public positioning of archaeology in contemporary South Asia, see: Tapati Guha-Thakurta. 2004. 'Archaeology and nationalism: the stylistic spread of this sculptural field from Varendra in Ayodhya in the 1990s, and early twentieth century Bengal texts on archaeology, is not to dismiss the altered historical, political and cultural contexts in which these two unfold. 'Pre-Islamic' and 'Hindu' had different connotations at these different points. The difference is also apparent in the public spheres of colonial India and Bengal of early twentieth century Bengal. For Maitreya the field of archaeology as a whole was able to generate a sense of belonging, and of the emergent Indian nation, the field continued to be deeply fractured.

2 The literature on the connections between cultural politics of colonialism, nationalism, heritage and the disciplinary and institutional fields of archaeology and museums in east Asia. In the context of colonial and postcolonial India a recent critical study of the field is Guha-Thakurta's book Monuments, Objects, Histories.

3 The historian saw his own role as salvaging both the art and the history of the nation, of Swadesh and Swaajit, which, for Maitreya, remained a flexible category. It could extend to encompass the whole of India, the nation and her people, and at the same time could speak of a distinctively Hindu and Bengali Bengal. This became shared concern of other prominent fellow Bengali historians and archaeologists of his time. The idea of an Eastern School of Archaeology, by extending the key to the lost civilization of the Bengali found its powerful invocation around the same years in Rakhaldas Banerjee's monograph The Bengali archaeologist, without compromising the

4 For a critical engagement with the nuances of this debate see: 2004. ‘Archaeology and nationalism: the stylistic spread of this sculptural field from Varendra in Ayodhya in the 1990s, and early twentieth century Bengal texts on archaeology, is not to dismiss the altered historical, political and cultural contexts in which these two unfold. 'Pre-Islamic' and 'Hindu' had different connotations at these different points. The difference is also apparent in the public spheres of colonial India and Bengal of early twentieth century Bengal. For Maitreya the field of archaeology as a whole was able to generate a sense of belonging, and of the emergent Indian nation, the field continued to be deeply fractured.

7 ibid., p. 2.
8 Ibid.
9 See A.K. Maitreya. ‘The Stone of Varendra’, Modern Review, June 1912, pp.618-622, August 1912, pp.138-136, September 1912, pp.244-249 and A.K. Maitreya. 1940. The ancient monuments of Varendra (North Bengal) and the domain in South Asia. The plea is merely one for recognizing these apparent extra-disciplinary intentions and meanings as constitutive elements of the disciplinary field, rather than as momentary lapses from standardized scientific parameters.
10 Sraman Mukherjee. 2012. ‘Pre-Islamic’, Sahitya, 23. 9 (1319 b.), pp 691-698.
11 R. Banerjee. 1933. Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture. New Delhi: AIA.