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Archaeology at the Heart of a Political Confrontation

The Case of Ayodhya¹

by Shereen Ratnagar²

Despite its recourse to scientific (laboratory) investigations, archaeology is a social science, researching the cultures of past societies through their material culture residues. No social science proceeds in an ideological vacuum, and historians or geographers who claim not to be theoretical may simply be unaware of the conceptual or ideological underpinnings of the paradigms they use. Being “apolitical,” in turn, often amounts to an acceptance of the status quo. Thus archaeological methods and paradigms are bound to be ideologically inscribed in some way. Moreover, the past is too important for societies to leave the matter to their academics. The earliest known “history,” the Sumerian King List (ca. 2000 B.C.), for instance, was in all likelihood composed at the behest of a ruling dynasty that had usurped power and lacked a Sumerian pedigree. In the postcolonial context, it is often in the process of delineating the past that societies construct their identities. Therefore it is not surprising that archaeological interpretation is prone not only to controversy but also to politicization.

Archaeology has become central to the current conflict over sacred space in the North Indian town of Ayodhya, located on a northern tributary of the Ganga River. There, it has been claimed, a general of Babur (the founder of Mughal rule in India in the sixteenth century) destroyed a temple of the deity Rama in order to build

a mosque. While political parties that claim to speak for Hindus are demanding the “return” of this site, others deny the existence of historical or archaeological evidence of the destruction of an earlier temple at the site. Since 1950 there have been civil suits filed by Hindus and Muslims claiming entitlement to the site. In 1987 the Supreme Court of India decided that these suits would be grouped together and heard by a special bench of the High Court of Allahabad, sitting in Lucknow. On orders from that court, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been excavating at the site since the beginning of 2003.

I shall outline the political background and show how archaeologists were drawn into this adversarial situation. Then, taking the position that this is no innocent debate about the details of this or that artefact or stratigraphic sequence, I shall attempt to initiate a discussion of why this happened—touching briefly on some of the conceptual baggage of the discipline, on the use of archaeology in a somewhat similar situation 50 years ago, and on what we can expect it to deliver.

The Background

It was in the nineteenth century that the dispute over the site began. If we are to believe the records of the colonial administration, there was a tradition that the mosque at Ayodhya stood on the site of a temple commemorating the birth of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana* who came to be deified as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The British records were based on oral information, and there is no documentation in medieval sources for any such destruction (although sources from that period do speak of the destruction of dozens of other temples by Islamic invaders and rulers [Eaton 2000–2001]). The British had annexed the wealthy state of Awadh (of which Ayodhya was the capital until 1740) in 1856. Long before that, however, they had (in 1819) taken control of the civic and revenue affairs of the town of Ayodhya even while Awadh was recognized as a sovereign state. Several matters, including this annexation and the disaffection of Indian soldiers, precipitated an uprising which spread across northern and central India in 1857 and 1858. During this rebellion, the British were besieged for five traumatic months in Lucknow, then the capital of Awadh. This siege united Muslims and Hindus, as did the uprising in general, with all rebels recognizing Bahadur Shah as their ruler—with the result that a British official noted that this was one occasion when “we could not play off the Mohammedans against the Hindus” (Bipan Chandra, Tripathi, and De 1972:45). Surprised by the uprising and thoroughly shaken by the massacres, especially because in Awadh “1857” was much more than just a soldiers’ mutiny, British officials turned against the Muslims. After regaining control over Awadh, they ransacked the palaces of its nawab, spoke of Muslims as ferocious fanatics, and curtailed their recruitment into the administrative services (Metcalf 1965:298–301).

1. Ajay Dandekar, Rusheed Wadia, Salima Tyabji, and Kannan Srinivasan took part in a lively discussion of the first draft. Anirudh Deshpande helped with archival enquiries. My dear friend Gouri Lad discussed matters at long distance. I thank H. Dastur and Roshan Dadabhoy for permitting me a peek into the Munshi papers at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai. This article is dedicated to the memory of M. Muraleedharan.

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respected historian Irfan Habib, “go against the presence of a temple” and are overlooked in the report (2003:20). In many ways this confirms what Ratnagar has identified as one of the weaknesses of the discipline, its focus on an imagined Indianness. The report was a shot in the arm for the Hindu right. Ignoring critical voices or characterizing them as products of Babri-mosque historians, anti-national leftists, and desperate secularists who cannot face the “historical truth,” militants such as Praveen Togadia of the VHP have appealed to Muslims to give up their claim to the disputed site, thereby proving that they want to live like brothers with the Hindus, or risk provoking further confrontation that might well lead to “civil war.”

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In 1992 the Babri mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed by a lethal cocktail of religious tradition, political opportunism, and the failure of the instruments of the state; the incident divided archaeologists in India into three groups. The first two are in polar positions, those who hold that there is archaeological evidence that a temple marking the birthplace of the god Rama was destroyed so that a Mughal mosque could be erected (Lal 2002), and those who hold that there is no such evidence (Mandal 2002 [1993]). The third group is the most numerous but least vocal and contains archaeologists who believe that their profession should have no role in the politics of modern India. That archaeology has such a role is now undeniable, as in March 2003 the Allahabad High Court directed the Archaeological Survey of India to excavate the site and resolve the “temple” issue.

There is a possibility that the mosque did replace an earlier temple, as there are well-known examples of such changes. Delhi’s Q’tab Minar complex, for example, incorporates pillars from a demolished temple. Equally convincing is the mosque at Bambhore in Pakistan, whose foundations include a *lingam*, the phallic embodiment of the god Siva. This phenomenon is not restricted to South Asia; examples include the conversion of Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia from a church to a mosque and Athens’s Parthenon from a temple of Athena to a church. Receiving legitimation and power, those making the changes undoubtedly tapped into the proximity of a sacred location. Thus, for me, the issue of whether the Babri mosque was or was not built on the ruins of an earlier temple is not the central issue of the conflict, whether the court believes it to be so or not.

Many commentators, Ratnagar included, attribute a number of South Asia’s social and political woes to British policy, suggesting that colonial archaeology was political. I am in broad agreement, but it would be erroneous to ignore the role that archaeology played for the independence movement. The discovery of the Harappan civilization in the 1920s demonstrated the presence of a

vast, literate, and urban society millennia before such developments in Europe, and the selection of a third-century-B.C. Asokan pillar capital as the new state’s crest underlines its attempts to gain legitimation from the past (Coningham and Lewer 2000). However, the issue of whether colonial/post-Partition archaeology in India was/is political is, again, not for me the central issue of the conflict.

The central issue is that of restitution; that is, to which group/identity should the site be handed? The answer to this question is complex, the more so because South Asia’s social and religious identities had fluid or, in Ratnagar’s words, “fuzzy” boundaries in the past. Tidy-minded colonial administrators created long-lasting damage because they would accept only single identities. For example, previously mobile castes were formally organized, censuses encouraged single religious entries (Coningham 2001), and Curzon attempted to remove the Hindu incumbent of Bodhgaya because the British viceroy identified it as Buddhist, not Buddhist-Hindu (Lahiri 1999). Such approaches were clearly inappropriate for South Asia, where Buddhist monuments, for example, were patronized not just by Buddhists but by individuals belonging to other faiths and where the religious affiliation of many archaeological monuments is unclear for similar reasons.

“Fuzzy” boundaries still exist in South Asia at Lumbini, the birthplace of the Gautama Buddha. This UNESCO World Heritage Site was identified only in 1899 in ruins surrounding a small Hindu shrine. The sculpture of the resident goddess was soon recognized as a partial sculpture of the Buddha’s mother and the shrine rebuilt around it. Annually, the site is visited by thousands of Hindus and Buddhists of many different sects, but conflict has been avoided by keeping the core monument as a sacred garden marked only by archaeological ruins and a non-denominational shrine, whilst buildings of formal religious affiliation are reserved for the surrounding precinct. The irony is, of course, that Lumbini is located in Nepal, the only official Hindu country in the world, whose king has recently been proclaimed Chakravartin or “universal ruler.”

The Ayodhya incident is not unique, and it is possible to trace a very worrying acceleration of the destruction of sites of archaeological and religious significance in South Asia. The destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992 and the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 are two well-known cases, but equally disturbing was the suicide bombing of the Temple of the Buddha’s Tooth in Sri Lanka, a UNESCO World Heritage site, in 1998 (Coningham and Lewer 1999). If the Archaeological Survey of India and the courts are not to be bound up by decades of claims and counterclaims at every site of cultural and religious importance in India, the only solution is a Lumbini-style plan. Whilst the ASI can only offer archaeological evidence, the courts must provide a solution not just for India but also for South Asia as a whole.