Intersection Between Archaeology, Nationalism, and Political Agendas:
A Case Study of India

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the interplay between nationalism and archaeology in India, focusing on how colonial concepts of nationalist archaeology have persisted and influenced contemporary practices. Although nationalist archaeology has been extensively studied in Europe, its implications in South Asia remain underexplored. This study helps to fill in the gap by investigating how nationalist archaeology in India has evolved from colonial origins and explores its impact on political agendas and strategic culture. The research reveals how the Indus civilisation has been utilised to assert Hindu indigeneity and the subsequent effects on minorities, as exemplified by the Babri Masjid dispute. The findings highlight the dangerous implications of such nationalist narratives for social cohesion and minority rights. The study concludes by advocating for a meta-nationalist archaeological approach that celebrates India's rich and diverse heritage, fostering a shared identity over divisive nationalist interpretations.

Keywords: Nationalist Archaeology, Colonialism, India, Indus Civilisation, Strategic Culture, Minority Rights, Meta-Nationalist Theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, myth has profoundly influenced human understanding, leading to a subordination of empirical knowledge to mythical paradigms. However, as time elapsed mythology was unable to encompass new thoughts. As a result, in the 15th century, theoretical thinking emerged, establishing a new way to examine nature and society through the concepts of history, philosophy, and archaeology.

Aristotle approached history as a series of political and military events, framing it within a chronological sense.[1] This perspective on historical knowledge was further refined within the realm of philosophy. However, these traditional disciplines did not include certain empirical events that were beyond immediate experiences. Consequently, a scientific dimension was added to descriptive historical accounts, exploring the natural world of curiosities. While historical and philosophical knowledge in the genealogical sense remained important in understanding society, archaeology brought together the distance in time between events for which there was no record and the more recent past, which was preserved and recorded.

In order to grant it credibility the development of archaeology started being observed in conjunction with different aspects of societal build up, one of them being nation building. Jean-Paul Demoule hypothesised that archaeology has a double

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[1] Martin, Craig. *Subverting Aristotle: Religion, History, and Philosophy in Early Modern Science.* JHU Press, 2014.

function.[2] A scientific one, which is to produce and disseminate knowledge about the past, and an ideological one which explores how national identity is shaped by providing critical insights into past human societies and understanding their structure beliefs and practices. Archaeologist Randall McGuire remarked that archaeology is "the secret writing of nationalism" as its research can influence political and social contexts.[3] Kohl and Fawcett continued this idea by proposing that the discipline has an overt semblance of objectivity attached to it which suggests that its underlying political and ideological claims need not be questioned.[4] Therefore, there exists an almost unavoidable or natural relationship between archaeology and nationalism.

This generated a pattern of blatant manipulation of archaeological data, particularly evident and appreciated for nation building purposes. Nations turned to archaeology to help them construct their historical legitimacy, nurturing a national and even imperial identity. The discipline was used to reinforce an intellectual climate where the real world was seen as a complex web of competing ideologies, all considered equally and inherently false. As a result, archaeological knowledge was put through a wide range of uses, misuses and abuses so that leaders and thinkers of nationalist movements could sustain their essentialist vision of the nation and its so-called cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic homogeneity.

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[2] Demoule, Jean-Paul. *But Where Have the Indo-Europeans Gone? The Myth of the Origin of the West.* Témoigner. Between History and Memory 122 (2016): 171-72.

[3] Sayers, Daniel O. "Archaeology as Political Action. By Randall H. McGuire. 2008. University of California Press, Berkeley, California. xv + 294 pp. $30.00 (paper). ISBN-13 9780520254916." *American Antiquity* 75, no. 1 (2010): 203–4. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002731600049878.

[4] Kohl, Philip L., and Clare Fawcett, eds. *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

South Asia stands as a cradle of early metallurgy, monumental architecture, and the dissemination of languages, traditions, and agricultural [practices. Consequently it offers a rich and diverse landscape for archaeological exploration. As the site of four major world religions and one of the four ancient world civilisations, South Asia's rich archaeological and historical record mirrors the complex interplay of nationalism and historical interpretation.

Archaeological studies in South Asia have long adhered to a traditional synthetic approach, often focusing on a chronological narrative of development. This approach has largely overlooked contemporary theoretical concerns related to nation-building, failing to acknowledge how the region's diversity and complexity challenge the field's claims of neutrality and objectivity. While discussions on the relationship between archaeology and nation-building have gained traction since 1991, there remains a significant gap in addressing how archaeology has been used to further nationalist agendas in South Asia. Given the region's extensive geographical scope and its rich archaeological and historical heritage, there is a pressing need to explore the evolution of nationalistic archaeology in South Asia—a need that this paper seeks to address.

This research paper examines how archaeology is weaponised in India to support sub-nationalist agendas, with a focus on the development of nationalist archaeology during the British Raj and its persistence in shaping cultural contexts after partition. Through archival research of key figures such as Mortimer Wheeler, Robert Cunningham, and Lawrence Waddell, along with the works of Indian archaeologists like Shashi Tiwari and B.B. Lal, this study will demonstrate how colonial approaches have been repurposed to

promote nationalist ideologies. Cox's Critical Theory will be employed to analyse the impact of these practices on strategic culture, providing a framework for understanding their ongoing influence.

The paper will focus on the Indus Civilisation and the "Out of India" theory, which advocates for a Vedic Sarasvati Civilisation and seeks to "Aryanise" the Indus Valley. This perspective, linked to Hindu fundamentalism, has permeated India's strategic culture, posing dangers to minorities by asserting indigenous ancestry and primordial statehood. The Ayodhya dispute will serve as a case study, illustrating how archaeology has been used to erase Islamic heritage symbolically and physically, framing Muslims as invaders. The research will conclude by exploring how a meta-nationalist approach to archaeology could contribute to peace and prosperity in India and the wider region.

2. COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS AND THE EVOLUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN SOUTH ASIA

The awareness of and interest in South Asia's past did not arise with European colonial rule, but emerged from the intersection of many knowledge traditions, motivations, and perspectives. It can be traced to Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq of Delhi, who understood the value of the past in legitimising authority[5] and the Begum of Bhopal who spearheaded field activities at the Buddhist site of Sanchi.[6]

While, South Asian leaders have been on a constant journey to explore their heritage, the development of archaeology in South Asia is frequently associated with

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[5] Chakrabarti, D. K. 1988a. History of Indian Archaeology from the Beginning to 1947. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

[6] Majumdar, N. G. 1934. Explorations in Sind. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No 48. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.

the activities of European explorers. In particular the British Raj who spearheaded the emergence of structured and a systemised archaeological research in the region.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), established in 1871 as a specialised governmental department under Alexander Cunningham, gained significant prominence with the ground-breaking discovery of the Indus Civilization.[7] Under the direction of Viceroy Lord Curzon and Director General of Archaeology John Marshall, the pivotal excavation of Indus in 1921-1922 revealed it as one of the earliest urban societies in the world contemporaneous with the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia.[8]

The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilisation sparked significant scholarly interest and catalysed a more intentional approach to South Asian archaeology, which was predominantly driven by the British colonial administration. (Fig 1) Nevertheless, in a manner consistent with colonial practices, archaeology was seen as a tool to be used in tandem with dominant colonial ideologies in order to bolster colonial control over regional historical narratives. Consequently, as part of their perceived "civilising mission", the British undertook the identification, documentation, and preservation of archaeological remains, to re-shape the understanding of undivided India in order to claim ownership of her past so that they can better govern the land and its people.[9]This utilisation of archaeology in this manner underscores intimate connection between politics and archaeology during the colonial period.

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[7] Etter, Anne-Julie. "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* 24/25 (2020). https://doi.org/DOI: 10.4000/samaj.6926. https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/pdf/6926.

[8] Ibid9

[9] Cohn, S Bernard. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.
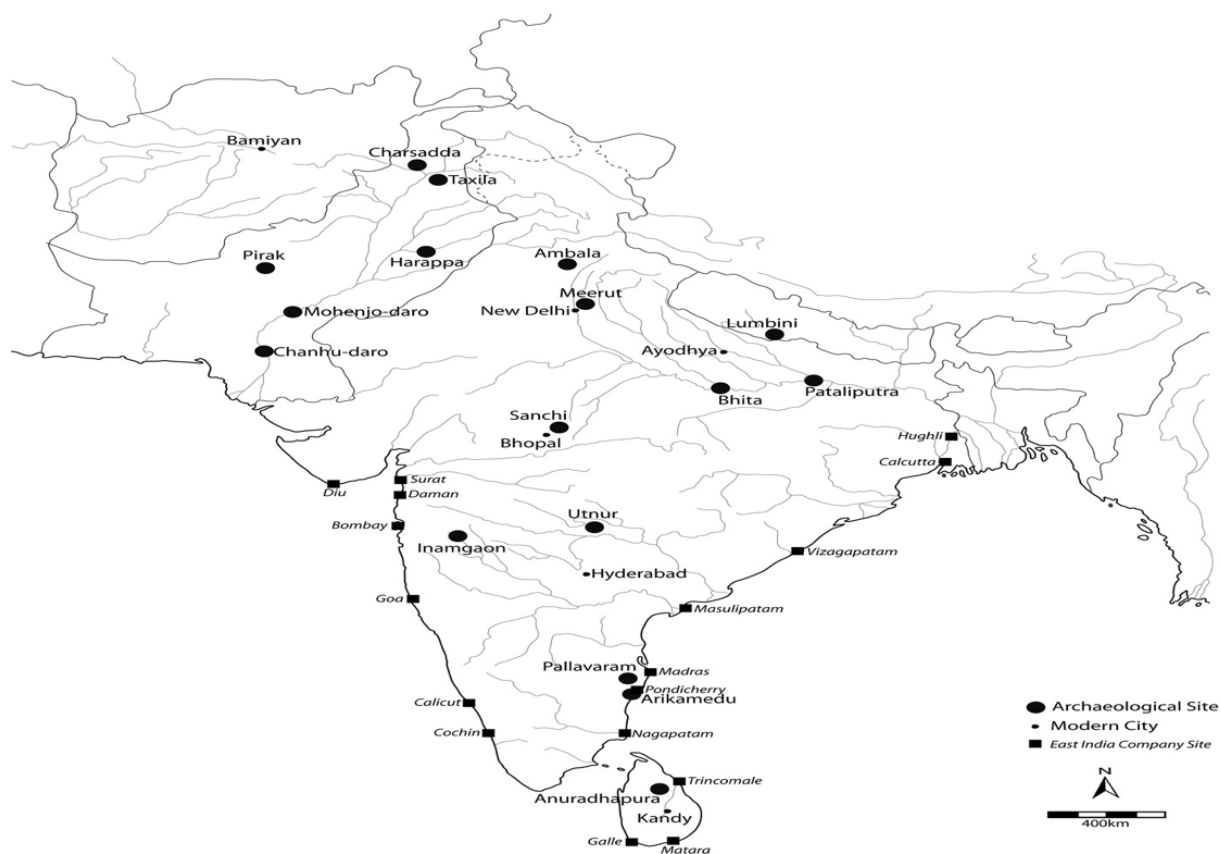
Fig 1, Map of Indus Valley Civilisation sites in British India

In the early 20th century, the dominant intellectual framework in European archaeology, which was later exported to the colonies and persisted, was the "culture-historical" approach. This method focused on identifying the ethnic and racial identities of prehistoric remains and tracing the migration of ancestral races from their original homelands into neighbouring regions. It was characterised by viewing the past as composed of distinct, archaeologically definable, and stable entities.[10] In this way, archaeology functioned as a significant instrument to fulfil the Westphalian quest of nation-states. Many cultural-historical interpretations supported nationalist agendas in

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[10] Kotsakis, Kostas. *Archaeology under Fire: The Past Is Ours Images of Greek Macedonia.* 1 ed.: Routledge, 1998.

Europe. The most notorious example was National Socialism's attempt to locate the ancestral Indo-Germanic homeland. The approach manifested differently in the colonies; archaeology became intricately linked to power, it helped back national and political interests of the imperial centre with science.[11]

To fully understand the impact of colonialism on archaeology, it is crucial to recognise how the discipline transcended its scientific objectives to become strategically integrated into the reinforcement of colonial power structures. The ASI interpreted the Indus Valley Civilisation through a diffusionist framework. Diffusionism suggests that major cultural advancements in human history originated in a few key centres and subsequently spread or diffused to other societies, rather than being independently developed in multiple locations. Wheeler, despite recognising the distinct differences between Mesopotamian and Indus cultures, maintained that the urban characteristics of the Indus Civilisation were the result of cultural diffusion from the West.[12]

Consequently, despite observable differences in pottery styles, script, and types of metal artifacts, excavations revealed a gradual progression from pre-urban to urban stages.[13] However, imperial archaeology focused primarily on the Indus Valley Civilisation's historical connections with the Western world, often overlooking its internal development.

The dominant view held suggested that urbanisation in South Asia was significantly influenced by Western sources, suggesting that the elements of urban civilisation were originated in the west and subsequently, adapted and localised within

[11] Díaz-Andreu, Margarita, Sam Lucy, Staša Babic, and D Edwards. "The Archaeology of Identity. Approaches to Gender, Age, Ethnicity, Status and Religion." Routledge, 2005.

[12] Wheeler, Mortimer. *The Indus Civilization.* Vol. 1: CUP Archive, 1968.

[13] Mackay, Ernest. "Chanhu-Daro Excavations: 1935-36." *American oriental series* 20 (1967).

South Asia. Following independence, both Pakistan and India developed their own archaeological agendas; however, colonial ideas and principles of excavation persisted as methodological legacies.

In India, archaeology played a pivotal role in catalysing national awakening, aligning closely with political movements, particularly Hindutva. This alignment significantly shaped the creation of a new historical narrative that sought to establish Hindus as the indigenous people of the land. According to Sinclair, archaeology becomes crucial for new nation states with emerging identities as its inherent ambiguity, enhances the potential for manipulation and abuse. This inevitably helps define a people that are distinct and occupying (or claiming) territories as historically theirs.

After partition, the Indus civilisation was the perfect string for recasting identity in India. However, while the ruins provided new opportunities for Indian intellectuals to explore and assert their claims about India's prehistory, they also introduced complexities. The territorial allocation of the Indus valley and its cities to the new state of Pakistan was as Wheeler put it "a robbery for the new state of India, after all Indus gave India her name."[14] Consequently, it became difficult for new evidence to be offered for building fresh insights and made it more challenging for intellectuals to present a clear and unified narrative of their national history.

Nevertheless, much like their colonial predecessors, Indian intellectuals began to construct narratives by interpreting artifacts as self-evident truths to shape a commemorative vision. This archaeological framing of the Indus Valley ruins helped fulfil the nationalist goals of the emerging nation. The approach mirrored colonial archaeological methods and objectives by relying on a positivist perspective that treated

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[14] R. E. M. Wheeler, "Editorial," *Ancient India* 5 (1949): 1–11.

material remains as objective and indisputable evidence, ignoring the fact that archaeological knowledge is shaped by historical processes rather than being a natural phenomenon.[15]

Arnold and Hassman contend that when archaeology is used to further political agendas, it can deeply influence the discipline, shaping its trajectory for years. This was apparent during the colonial period, when archaeology was often used to support political and imperialist aims. Post-independence, the intertwining of archaeology with political motives reflected a persistent colonial legacy in historiography. The forgotten ruins of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were thus reinterpreted as symbols of a civilisation that fulfilled the modern nation-states quest to confer upon itself an immemorial past.

3. THE INDUS VALLEY AND THE RISE OF NATIONALIST ARCHAEOLOGY IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

The 1924 announcement of the Indus Valley discovery sparked widespread interest across the geopolitical entity of India, with the discourse extending to become a significant topic of discussion among the country's intelligentsia. The discovery introduced the 'Racial Theory of Indian Civilisation.[16] This theory integrated three philology, ethnology, and ancient history which in the context of India included the Aryan, Dravidian questions (This section will disregard the Dravidian question due to the world limit), and the racial constitution of the subcontinent's people that lies in between.

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[15] Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India.* Columbia University Press, 2004.

[16] Bayly, Susan. *The New Cambridge History of India.* Caste,Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age. Vol. IV, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

It aimed to demonstrate that India had a profound, unified identity capable of transcending its visible diversities of caste, language, and region. For high-caste nationalist leaders, such as Nehru this was a convenient way to assert a shared racial bond amongst all Indians, presenting them as a single, unified people rather than a collection of distinct groups.[17]

Nehru in a letter to his daughter Indira in April 1931 wrote that "only three weeks ago I went to see the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus valley in Sindh…I saw a great city coming out of the earth, built they say 5000 years ago. For these 5000 years India has lived her life. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are perhaps the only instances so far. It may be more likely, however, that many of them still lie under the surface of the soil, waiting to be dug up. And as we dig them up and find old relics and inscriptions the past history of our country we will gradually open its pages to us, and we shall read in these pages of stone and brick and mortar what our ancestors did in the old, old times."[18] This example demonstrates that like Nehru, many leaders were persuaded that the Indian nation had a timeless antiquity. For Nehru an ancient Indian civilisation helped to make a corresponding argument that Indians were civilised even prior to British colonialism.[19]

However, this theory also resonated deeply with the religious and patriotic sentiments of Hindus, who sought scientific validation for the authenticity of ancient

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[17] Jaffrelot, Christophe. "The Idea of the Hindu Race in the Writings of Hindu Nationalist Ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s: A Concept Between Two Cultures." *Religion, Caste and Politics in India* 2011: 123-143.

[18] Nehru, J. *Letters from a Father to His Daughter.* Puffin Books, 2004. https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=_aakAAAACAAJ.

[19] Possehl, G.L. *Indus Age: The Beginnings.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=AUkLAQAAMAAJ.

epics and traditions that suggested a link between India's history and Hindu religion.[20] This entanglement was grounded in nationalist archaeology which connected Indus civilisation to Vedic culture and substantiated it with a perceived scientific objectivity.[21]

To grasp this connection, it is essential to explore the diffusionist and anti-diffusionist debate that remains a central issue in South Asian archaeology and has had a significant implication on Hindu nationalism in India.[22]

Linguistic evidence strongly indicated that a broad language family, known as the Indo-Aryan, spanned a vast geographical area from Western Europe to South Asia during the first or second millennium BCE.[23] The term "Aryan" derived from Sanskrit, originally referred to a group of people who considered themselves noble and this term was used in early Vedic hymns to distinguish the Aryans from another group called the Dasyu; a term that later came to refer to as slaves.

As soon as the Indus civilisation was discovered scholars begun to identify when and why it ended. From the mid-20th century onwards, many linguists, historians, and archaeologists proposed that the Dasyu also referred to as pre-Aryans by John Marshal, inhabited the cities of the Indus Valley and were later conquered by the warlike Aryans from Central Asia, who went on to establish the "Indo-Gangetic Civilisation".[24]

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[20] Waddell, Austine Laurence. *The Indo-Sumerian Seals Deciphered.* Disovering Sumerians of Indus Valley as Phonicians,Barats,Goths & Famous Vedic Aryans 3100-2300 B.C. London: Luzac & Co, 1925.

[21] Chakrabarti, D. K. "The Colonial Legacy in the Archaeology of South Asia." In *Handbook of Post-Colonial Archaeology*, edited by Jane Lydon and Uzma Z. Rizvi, 73–80. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010.

[22] Thapar, Romila. "India: Historical Beginnings and the Concept of the Aryan." New Delhi: National Book Trust (2006).

[23] Renfrew, Colin. *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins.* CUP Archive, 1990.

[24] Thapar, Romila. "India: Historical Beginnings and the Concept of the Aryan." New Delhi: National Book Trust (2006).

According to them the material found in the Indus Valley excavations suggested that the inhabitants were "unarmed" and "peace loving" more likely to be victims of the more sophisticated warrior Aryans.[25]

Mortimer Wheeler was the first to suggest this theory through the examinations of skeletal remains (fig 2) and metal objects which had cultural affinities to the Central Asian and Iranian plateau.[26] Additionally, John Marshal In his first official account of the archaeological excavation through the ASI between the years 1922 and 1927 suggested that thousands of years before the Vedic Aryans arrived, regions like Punjab and Sindh were already home to a highly advanced and unified civilisation. This showed that ancestral Indians would not have been Vedic Aryan. This shifted the understanding of ancient Indian history, placing the Vedic Aryans in a more recent context and highlighting the cultural and historical complexity of the Indian subcontinent.[27]

The Aryan migration theory is a diffusionist perspective. Hindu nationalists reject his theory viewing it as a colonial construct used to undermine the indigenous history and identity of India. They argue that this theory was a part of a colonial strategy to portray Aryans as outsiders and alienate the South Asian past from its original inhabitants.[28]In contrast, several Indian scholars argued for continuity and align with the

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[25] Beohar, N. C. "The Two Ancient Civilisations." In *Harappan Civilisation and Vedic Culture*, edited by Shrikant Tiwari, 59–61. New Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 2010
[26] Wheeler, Mortimer. *The Indus Civilization.* Vol. 1: CUP Archive, 1968.
[27] Ramaswamy, S. "Remains of the Race: Archaeology, Nationalism, and the Yearning for Civilisation in the Indus Valley." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 38, no. 2 (2001): 105–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460103800201.
[28] Sharma, B. D. "Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation: In Search of the Truth." In *Harappan Civilisation and Vedic Culture*, edited by Shrikant Tiwari, 1–9. New Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 2010.

anti-diffusionist perspective which suggests that the Harappan culture was created by Rig Vedic people[29].

Fig 2:Skeletons in Mohenjo-Daro[30]

The Rig Veda text which illustrates early Indian history, culture, and religion substantiated this theory. It proposed that the Vedic Aryans, who created the Rig Veda, were the earliest and most advanced civilisation in the Indian subcontinent, advocating that there was no chronological gap between Harappa and the Vedic texts.[31] This claim is also known as the out of India theory which considers Harappans as linguistically Indo Aryan implying that the Indo-European languages originated in India and then

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[29] Lal, B. B. "The Indo-Aryan Hypothesis vis-a-vis Indian Archaeology." *Journal of Central Asia* 1, no. 1 (1978): 21–41.

[30] Coningham, Robin, and Ruth Young. *The Archaeology of South Asia: From the Indus to Asoka, c.6500 BCE–200 CE.* of *Cambridge World Archaeology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

[31] Lal, Basi Braj. *The Earliest Civilisation of South Asia: Rise,Maturity and Decline.* Michigan: Aryan Books International, 1997;Iyengar, Srinivasa. *History of the Tamils from the Earliest Time to 600 A.D.* Madras: C.Coomaraswmoy Naidu & Sons, 1929.

spread world over making the Vedic period much older than what is accepted and postulates the Aryanisation of the Indus civilisation.[32]

This however had certain political implications. By the 1930s, the theory that the Rig Veda was contemporary with, if not earlier than, the Indus civilisation gained significant traction in India. This narrative was popularised by R.P. Chanda, who introduced the concept of Aryan integration into the argument.[33]Chanda suggested that the Aryans were not invaders, like the Dorians in Greece, but were more akin to the Achaeans, who established themselves as a powerful minority that eventually assimilated with the local population, giving rise to a Hindu civilisation.[34]

The archaeological discoveries at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa bolstered the notion that India was home to an ancient civilisation comparable in antiquity to others around the world, seen as a product of indigenous ingenuity. For instance, the presence of fire altars, ox bones, and shell jewellery at Indus Valley sites in Gujarat and Rajasthan were interpreted as evidence of practices and traditions linked to Brahminism and Vedic religion.[35]Additionally, undeciphered scripts found on steatite seals were suggested to bear Aryan, Hindu, and Sanskrit influences.[36] Some scholars even posited that the original home of this civilisation was not the Indus Valley but the region along the Saraswati River (fig 3), thereby renaming it the Saraswati-Sindhu civilisation. This rebranding effectively integrated the Indus remains into the Vedic Aryan narrative,

[32] Markovits, Claude. "Appropriation du passé et nationalisme hindou dans l'Inde contemporaine." *Sociétés et Représentations* 22 (2006): 65–80.
[33] Leopold, J. "The Aryan Theory of Race." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 7, no. 2 (1970): 271–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946467000700204.
[34] Chanda, Ramprasad. *Survival of the Prehistoric Civilisation of the Indus Valley.* Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1929.
[35] Tiwari, Shashi. "Harappan Civilization and Vedic Culture."2010.
[36] Das, Abinas Chandra. "Dravidian Origins and the Beginnings of Indian Civilisation." *The Modern Review* 37 (1925): 355–56.

helping to mitigate the loss of the Indus Valley to Pakistan following partition.[37]Chandra further argued that the continuity between the Indus civilisation and subsequent cultures in India represented a harmonious integration of non-Aryan and Aryan elements, with Aryans evolving from invaders into peaceful settlers.[38]
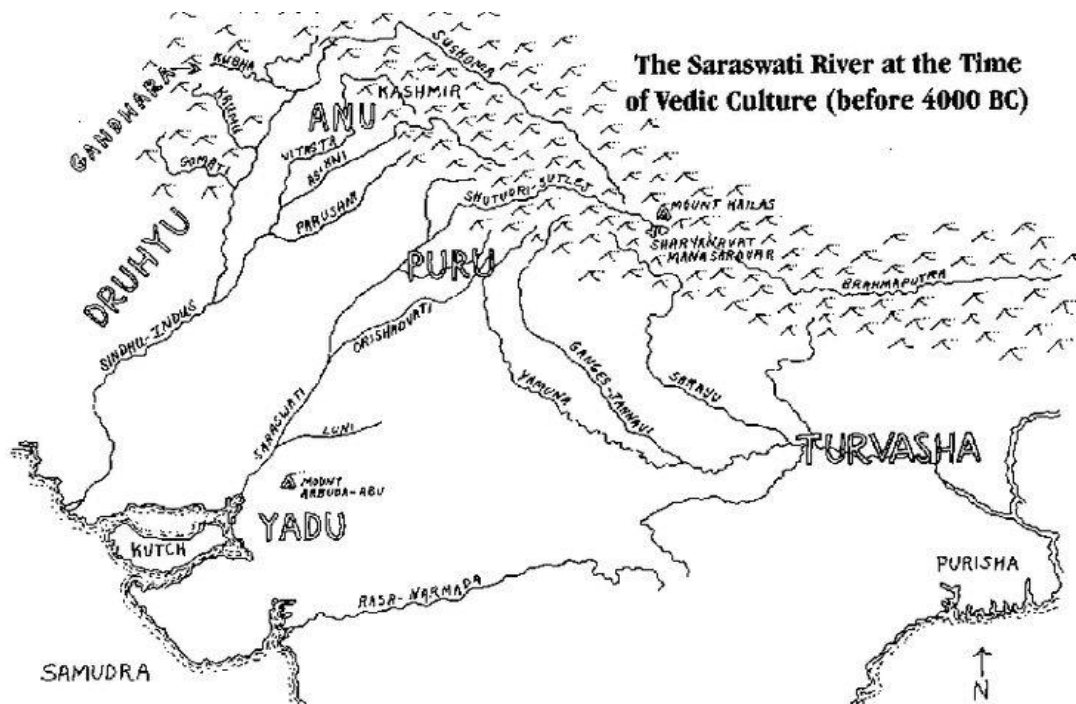

Fig 3: imagined map of the Saraswati river at the time of Vedic Culture

However, there is a distinction between speaking of ancient times and claiming definitive knowledge of them.[39] Many challenges have arisen in attempting to assign a specific date to the Rig Veda or in asserting that its events are historical rather than

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[37] Rajaram, N. S. *Aryan Invasion of India: The Myth and the Truth*. Delhi, 1993.

[38] ibid

[39] Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. "Monuments and Lost Histories: The Archaeological Imagination in Colonial India." In *Proof and Persuasion: Essays on Authority, Objectivity, and Evidence*, edited by Suzanne Marchand and Elizabeth Lunbeck, 168. Belgium, 1997.

ritualistic, symbolic, or poetic. A past anchored to an unidentifiable relic or location on a map is not necessarily primary in either a chronological or theological sense.[40]

Nonetheless, the appropriation of the Indus Valley's legacy has continued to strengthen and is difficult to ignore, particularly due to the influence of the growing Hindu nationalist project in India. By emphasising the indigenous roots of the Vedic culture Hindu nationalist promote a narrative of cultural and civilisational continuity in India. This narrative is used to assert that Hinduism as prime and original to the Indian subcontinent. The movement has skilfully employed scholarly knowledge and postmodern arguments about the colonial construction of India's past, alongside ongoing debates in professional archaeology, to marginalise and exclude the contribution of other cultures and religious as foreign and secondary.

4.THE EFFECT OF NATIONALIST ARCHAEOLOGY IN INDIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

The "Out of India" theory profoundly shapes India's strategic culture by embedding historical narratives into the fabric of national identity and security policy. Strategic culture integrates cultural considerations, collective historical memory, and their impact on a state's security policies and international relations, representing a specific worldview that underpins strategic decisions. In India, refuting the Western Orientalist narrative, particularly the Aryan invasion theory, is central to the development of a unique strategic culture. Scholars like Paranjpe and V.D. Savarkar reinterpret pre-modern Indian history through a civilisational and nationalistic lens, positioning figures

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[40] Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. *Culture through Time: Anthropological Approaches.* Stanford University Press, 1990.

such as Kautilya, Sukracharya, Ashoka and the religious doctrines such as the Rig Veda as pillars of India's strategic heritage. [41]

This reimagined narrative reinforces the idea of India as a civilisational state, where strategic culture is deeply rooted in historical narratives and symbols. Archaeology plays a critical role in this process by providing tangible evidence of a nation's past achievements, conflicts, and cultural heritage. This evidence is crucial in shaping such culture, as it helps construct and reinforce a national identity aligned with specific historical interpretations and political objectives. The Vedic chant "Vishva Dharma ki Jay"[42] are not merely historical references; they actively legitimise contemporary political power and territorial claims, thus aligning strategic goals with Hindutva ideology.[43]

India has been able to integrate archaeology into its strategic culture with state institutions such as the ASI who has played a crucial role in materialising nationalist imaginations. Shnirelman (1989) highlights that archaeologists sometimes compromise evidentiary standards to serve state interests.[44] The ASI is a well-funded and expansive organisation, that has increased its exploration and research efforts since 1947.[45]The survey's interpretations are heavily influenced by the social, economic, and political factors surrounding the Hindu nationalist agenda. For instance, with the loss of archaeological sites of the Indus such as Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Taxila to

[41] Paranjpe, Shrikant. *India's Strategic Culture: The Making of National Security Policy*. 2nd ed. Routledge India, 2020. 180 pp. £36.99. ISBN: 9780367257590

[42] Bernbeck, Reinhard and Pollock, Susan. "Ayodhya, Archaeology, and Identity." *The University of Chicago Press Journal* 37, no. 1 (1996): 138-42. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2744239.

[43] Fair, Christine. "Hindutva and Violence: V. D. Savarkar and the Politics of History." *International Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2023): 2185-86. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad206. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad206.

[44] Shnirelman, Victor. "Nationalism and Archaeology." *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* (2013

[45] Chakrabarty, Dilip K. *India: An Archaeological History: Palaeolithic Beginnings to Early Historic Foundations.* Oxford University Press, 2009.

Pakistan, the ASI strategically extended its geographical reach of Harappan culture eastward and southward to substantiate its historical claims of a Vedic civilisation. By the 1990s, they had identified 1,400 Harappan sites are in modern day India.[46]

In 2020, under Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governance, several measures were implemented to promote heritage conservation and deliberately lend material credibility to Hindu mythology and history.[47] Five archaeological sites in BJP-dominated states were excavated, two of which were Harappan.[48] Additionally, archaeological evidence was reportedly discovered in Assam, suggesting that Sivasagar was one of the capitals of the Ahom kingdom, which emerged in the 13th century. The Ahom rulers, believed to have been Hinduised, successfully resisted Mughal invasions. Integrating Assam into this narrative is seen as a way to symbolise the incorporation of the north-eastern state into India, while aligning its history with the broader vision of India's past that Hindu nationalists aim to promote.

Additionally, artefacts and structures are readily cited as evidence of historical presence or ownership, thereby justifying modern territorial claims and strategic culture. A 2013 performance audit revealed that the ASI's management had lost 90 non-Hindu monuments of culturally significance. This highlights the influential role of archaeological

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[46] Etter, Anne-Julie. "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* 24/25 (2020). https://doi.org/DOI: 10.4000/samaj.6926. https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/pdf/6926.

[47] Sitharaman, Nirmala. "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.

[48] ibid

evidence in India, demonstrating its capacity to shape national identity, military strategy, and state policy. [49]

5.THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE AYODHYA DISPUTE

The most prominent example of weaponising archaeology in modern India is the deliberate exclusion of Islamic components of Indian history, a practice that has become particularly evident in the Babri Masjid- Ramjanmabhumi dispute in Ayodhya. Ayodhya holds significant importance in Hindutva ideology as the purported birthplace of the mythical king Rama, who is believed to be an incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu.

In 1528, the Mughal Emperor Babur constructed the Babri Masjid, a mosque that became the focal point of intense communal violence and legal battles between Muslim and Hindu groups for 32 years.[50] Hindus claimed that the mosque was built on the site of a temple that marked Rama's birthplace. This contention concluded in 2019 when the Supreme Court of India awarded the ownership of the land to a Hindu trust, leading to the consecration of a temple in January 2024.[51]

Archaeology has been instrumental in the Ayodhya conflict, not merely as a means of uncovering historical truths but as a tool to substantiate Hindu pre-historical claims. In this context, archaeology has been distorted to serve ideological ends, manipulating evidence to lend credibility to preconceived notions. This distortion illustrates how faith, imagination, and belief can be cloaked in the guise of scientific

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[49] Varghese, Rachel. "Digging for a Hindu Nation." *The London School of Economics and Political Science Blog*, May 1, 2018. Retrieved on December 3, 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/05/10/digging-for-the-hindu-nation/.

[50] Bernbeck, Reinhard and Pollock, Susan. "Ayodhya, Archaeology, and Identity." *The University of Chicago Press Journal* 37, no. 1 (1996): 138-42. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2744239.

[51] Babri Mosque to Ram Temple: A Timeline from 1528 to 2024." *Al Jazeera*. January 22, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/22/babri-mosque-to-ram-temple-a-timeline-from-1528-to-2024.

legitimacy, driven by political agendas and the interpretations of 'specialists.[52]The challenges posed by post-processual relativism in archaeology are evident here; this approach offers no clear guidelines on when to promote the construction of national pride or when to criticise it as overly chauvinistic. As Tsetskhladze argues, the political implications of such archaeological work are profound, as the reconstruction of history has the potential to significantly influence government policies, with far-reaching effects on society.[53]

In the context of the BJP electoral successes in the 1990s, archaeology has increasingly been utilised to authenticate Hindutva politics.[54] ASI has been a big proponent of this, In 1990 BB Lal, the Director-General of the ASI conducted excavations at Ayodhya, to find sculptures and other objects interpreted as evidence of Buddhist stupas.[55] Lal later during land levelling operations in 1992 claimed to also have discovered a column temple beneath the mosque(fig 4), allegedly confirming it as Rama's birthplace, stating "I am not saying so. But my spade is".[56] This marked a significant moment in what Chadha describes as Hindutva's "epistemological appropriation of archaeology's discursive legitimacy to pursue its divisive politics."[57]

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[52] Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India.* Columbia University Press, 2004.

[53] Kohl, Philip L., and Gocha R. Tsetskhladze. "Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology in the Caucasus." In *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*, edited by Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, 149–74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[54] Mandal, Dhaneshwar, and Shereen Ratnagar. *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Excavation*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2007.

[55] Gupta, S. P. "Government Sitting Tight Over Clinching Archaeological Evidence?" *Organiser* 46, no. 18 (1994): 3.

[56] Malhotra, J., and R. Sehgal. "The Ayodhya Controversy: Digging into the Past to Change the Present." In *The Babri-Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy Runs Riot*, edited by Ali Asghar Engineer, 81–84. Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1992.

[57] Chadha, Ashish. 2011. "Conjuring a River, Imagining Civilisation: Sarasvati, Archaeology and Science in India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45(1):55–83.

The political popularism and fundamentalism in this case was such a disaster that it saw archaeologists turn against each other. Archaeologists such as Dhaneshwar Mandal, Shereen Ratnagar, Supriya Varma,Robert Cunningham and Jaya Menon challenged the evidence used in this context and contested the conclusions drawn from it.[58] They have critically re-examined the stratigraphic data, which is a single published photograph of Lal's excavation trench.[59] Their analyses suggested that, alongside oral history, a temple referred to as the Janam Asthan temple did exist in the area, though it was situated at a different location from the Babri Masjid.(fig 5) Moreover, they indicated that the archaeological findings, such as the column bases, were insufficient to support B.B. Lal's hypothesis, as they could not have sustained the type of structure he had proposed. Additionally, they maintained that the sculptures in question likely originated from an 11th-century temple, further challenging Lal's assertions.[60]

[58] Mandal, Dhaneshwar, and Shereen Ratnagar. 2007. *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Excavation.* New Delhi: Tulika Books; 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); Cunningham, A. *Four Reports Made During the Years 1862-63-64-65.* Vol. 1. Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India, New Delhi, 1871; reprinted 2000.
[59] Mandal, Dhaneshwar, and Shereen Ratnagar. *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Excavation.* New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2007.
[60] Sharma, Y. D., K. M. Srivastava, S. P. Gupta, K. P. Nautiyal, B. R. Grover, D. S. Agrawal, S. Mukherji, and S. Malayya. *Ramajanma Bhumi: Ayodhya, New Archaeological Discoveries.* New Delhi: Historian's Forum, n.d

Figure 4: Pillar bases excavated by B.B. Lal[61]

Figure 5: Cunningham's map which identifies Janam Asthan temple at a different

spot than where Babri Masjid stood.[62]

[61] Excavation Evidence in Ayodhya Does Not Show a Hindu Temple: ASI Officer." *The Wire*. Accessed August 19, 2024. https://science.thewire.in/politics/ayodhya-dispute-excavation-evidence-temple-asi/.
[62] ibid

Ashish Avikunthak described the 2003 excavation as "the most unusual excavation in the history of archaeology," as it diverged greatly from the usual practices and foundational principles of archaeological research.[63] The unprecedented speed and the fact that it was conducted under the direct oversight of the High Court of Allahabad illustrated that the excavation process was heavily controlled to produce a nationalistic interpretation of the past.[64]

The Ayodhya case starkly highlights the problematic aspects of weaponising archaeology for the construction of a national identity. The case been used to legitimise a form of retribution for supposed past injustices. It demonstrates that the Hindu nationalist definition of an Indian does not fit other religions, because they are fundamentally different. Muslims, in particular, are vilified as antagonists of Indian history, depicted as invaders and foreigners to Indian (Hindu) values and culture. This narrative is an attempt to prove that Hindus are indigenous to Indian soil, unlike the perceived outsiders and it nurtures an existential fear and an aggressive stance towards minority groups.

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[63] Avikunthak, Ashish. "Secret, Hurried and Anonymous When Convenient: Revisiting ASI's Ayodhya Dig Report." *The Wire*, November 22, 2019. Accessed October 16, 2020. https://thewire.in/the-sciences/secret-hurried-and-anonymous-when-convenient-revisiting-asis-ayodhya-dig-report.

[64] Varghese, Rachel. "Digging for a Hindu Nation." *The London School of Economics and Political Science Blog*, May 1, 2018. Retrieved on December 3, 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/05/10/digging-for-the-hindu-nation/

6. CHALLENGING THE NATIONALIST NARRATIVE: COX'S CRITICAL THEORY AND META-NATIONALIST ARCHAEOLOGY

Historians and archaeologists often integrate the diverse and complex history of the Indus civilisation into the broader narrative of Indian history. However, this raises an important question: Is the foundation of a nation primordial, indelible, or firm? Cox's Critical Theory suggests that dominant groups shape ideologies and cultural norms and in this regard nationalist archaeology is used to create a hegemonic narrative to promote a particular version of history that aligns with political interests of the dominant group.[65] This is done by highlighting certain archaeological findings and interpretations that serve nationalist agendas and constructs a national identity that legitimises political power and policies.

The status quo in India has attempted to either inextricably associate the Indus Valley with the state or to link it to an entirely separate extraterritorial context. The former distorts historical understanding, while the latter obscures the present reality. The nationalist archelogy used mirrors Cox's idea of problem-solving theory where the status quo is accepted and managed rather than questioned. This can marginalise groups such as Indian Muslims, and it can also, influence international relations and geopolitical dynamics. Indian scholars find discomfort with Pakistan as it is a direct contention to their nationalistic agenda of a Vedic Indus civilisation because the ruins are geographically present in the modern state of Pakistan.

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[65] Moolakkattu, S.John. "Robert W. Cox and Critical Theory of International Relations." *Sage Journals* 46, no. 4 (2011). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/002088171004600404.

In his book The Indus Saga, Aitzaz Ahsan argues that the primordial impulses shaping culture, polity, and society in the Indus region have always been distinct from those of India.[66] Although the century preceding the partition may have created an illusion of unity between the Indus and India, Ahsan contends that the Indus region never truly integrated into India it had always been separate

In his exploration of Pakistan's historical identity, he asserts that every tale, legend, ballad, and ritual, spanning from ancient times to the more recent pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods, reinforces the existence of a state or region encompassing the Indus and its tributaries that was both independent of and distinct from India. While acknowledging some commonalities between the two, Ahsan emphasises that they have always been driven by fundamentally opposing forces. This once again directly challenges the archaeological evidence that shapes India's strategic culture and historical narrative.

In the South Asia, it is important to consider a pluralistic universalism in archaeology which emphasises the diversity of human experiences because nation states are not natural entities. They are a form of political organisations which developed in the fairly recent historical period. Archaeology should therefore be aware of these dynamics and strive to maintain an anthropological perspective for example artefacts should be examined with a contextual understanding of the unique socio-political religious and environmental factors that respect the diversity and complexities of today rather than a single linear progression.

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[66] Ahsan, Aitzaz. *The Indus Saga.* From Pataliputra to Partition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Kristiansen's meta-nationalist approach, originally proposed in the European context, offers a valuable framework for South Asia in reshaping archaeological policies.[67] In Europe, this approach advocated for a broader, unified policy that aligned with traditional archaeology, aiming to prevent the resurgence of biased and chauvinistic histories that were prevalent before World War II. Unlike nationalist archaeology, which often emphasises the uniqueness and superiority of a singular heritage, meta-nationalist archaeology seeks to explore and celebrate a shared identity, recognising the interconnectedness of all cultures and the collective contributions of different regions throughout history. Applying this approach in South Asia would involve acknowledging the common humanity of its people and viewing history as a shared experience, rather than a fragmented one. This perspective could foster a more inclusive understanding of the region's past, countering divisive narratives and encouraging a more harmonious approach to cultural heritage. By highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of identities in history, archaeologists can challenge the widespread belief that groups, and identities are unchanging and permanent, both historically and in the present.[68]

7.POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Promote a Meta-Nationalist Approach in Archaeological Practices

- Encourage archaeological institutions and researchers in South Asia to adopt a meta-nationalist approach that recognises the shared and interconnected nature of

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[67] Kristiansen, Kurt. "National Archaeology in the Age of European Integration." *Antiquity* 64 (1990)

[68] Hall, Stuart. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, edited by A. D. King, 41–68. London: Macmillan, 1991.

human history. This approach seeks to counter the exclusionary narratives often promoted by nationalist archaeology, fostering a more inclusive and accurate representation of the past. By critically engaging with the claims of subordinate groups, archaeologists can acknowledge internal conflicts and hierarchies within these groups. This approach challenges the dominance of Western archaeological interpretations and promotes a more nuanced understanding of history that is suited to the South Asian region.

7.2 Establish Ethical Guidelines for Archaeological Research

- Develop and enforce rigorous ethical guidelines to prevent the politicisation of archaeological findings. These guidelines should emphasise the importance of contextualising artefacts within their historical, cultural, and environmental settings, rather than using them to support nationalist agendas. Institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Department of Archaeology and Museums in Pakistan should collaborate to establish standards that transcend modern political boundaries, facilitating a comprehensive and unbiased analysis of artefacts. This would challenge fixed perceptions of identity by revealing the underlying interests that shape them.

7.3 Enhance Multidisciplinary Collaboration

- Promote collaboration among archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists through exchange programmes to ensure that archaeological interpretations are grounded in a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the past. This interdisciplinary approach helps to prevent the oversimplification and misuse

of archaeological data, fostering more robust and accurate historical narratives. This will help to bring a diverse perspective of archaeological data and reduce the influence of nationalist agenda

7.4 Develop a Regional Archaeological Policy Framework

- Advocate for the creation of a regional policy framework for archaeology in South Asia, overseen by regional organisations such as SAARC. This framework should promote a shared understanding of the past and include guidelines for the protection of cultural heritage, the ethical use of archaeological data, and the promotion of pluralistic and inclusive historical narratives.

7.5 Increase Public Awareness and Education

- Implement public education campaigns to raise awareness about the complexities of archaeology and the risks associated with its politicisation. By educating the public on the diverse and interconnected nature of human history, these campaigns can reduce the appeal of nationalist narratives that exploit archaeological findings for political purposes.

7.6 Support Independent Research and Funding

Establish independent research funds and grants to support archaeological projects that are free from government or political influence. This will encourage unbiased and objective research, ensuring that archaeological findings are not manipulated to serve nationalist or political interests.

8.CONCLUSION

As Hobsbawm put it "Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market."[69]The weaponisation of archaeology in South Asia, particularly in India, illustrates the deep entanglement of historical narratives with nationalist agendas. Archaeology, when misused, transforms material cultures into symbols of a collective identity, often granting them an assumed, almost unconscious legitimacy that reinforces the idea of a people's continuous existence in a particular region. Nationalist narratives, supported by culture-historical methodologies, have manipulated archaeological findings, turning stones, bones, and relics into proof of a nation's linear progression from an ancient past to a modern present.

In India, the appropriation of archaeological findings, such as those from the Indus Valley, to support Hindu nationalist narratives, highlights the challenges and consequences of such practices. The discovery of the Indus Valley civilisation in 1924 disrupted the Hindu Aryanist project by challenging the primacy of the Vedas as the foundation of Indian civilisation and introducing the idea of a sophisticated pre-Aryan culture. Despite these revelations, Hindu nationalists, driven by the belief in an inherently Aryan India, have continued to manipulate archaeological evidence, fuelling tensions between communities and scholars, and creating disputes over the legitimacy of various historical interpretations.

The professional archaeological community insists that material remains, such as pottery, do not equate to people or cultures. However, the damage caused by

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[69] Hobsbawm, Eric. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

nationalist misinterpretations has already taken root, especially in post-colonial contexts where non-specialists and nationalists continue to exploit the past for contemporary agendas. The reduction of complex archaeological entities, like the Harappan culture, into simplistic and politically charged narratives exemplifies the vulgarisation of the discipline.

In this highly politicised environment, where academic research is often overshadowed by nationalist motives, there is an urgent need to re-evaluate the role of archaeology in shaping historical narratives. The adoption of a meta-nationalist approach, which emphasises shared identities and the interconnectedness of cultures, could offer a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. This approach would help mitigate the weaponisation of archaeology, promoting a perspective that recognises the common humanity of all people and the collective contributions to history, rather than perpetuating divisive and exclusionary narratives. Such a shift could contribute to a more balanced and constructive strategic culture in South Asia.

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