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**Who Owns the Indian Past?  
The Case of the Indus Civilization**

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# Who Owns the Indian Past? The Case of the Indus Civilization

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The question 'who owns the past' is not a rhetorical question. On the one hand, it is tied to the issue of identities, which have played a major role in archaeological research since its very inception, and on the other, it is bound up with the various features of cultural resource management including the thorny relationship between mainstream archaeology and the rights of indigenous people in countries like the USA, Australia and Canada.

There is a vast amount of literature on both themes. The first one, i.e. the question of identity, is linked to the establishment of national identity as well as various other collective identities like gender, ethnicity and religion. The issue of identity may assume many forms and generate many debates. In the context of Israel and the Palestinian territory, it has been argued,<sup>1</sup> for instance, that there are four types of 'desired pasts' there: (1) the Israeli desired past which is sought by the Israeli state and the Jewish organizations of the United States; (2) the conservative Christian past which is championed by the Christian fundamentalist organizations, the American School of Oriental Research and the Biblical Archaeological Society; (3) the Palestinian desired past, favoured by the Palestinian rights organizations and Palestinian archaeologists and intellectuals; and finally, (4) the diplomatic desired past, as represented by the appointed officials of the US State department.

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\*This is a revised version of a lecture presented at India International Centre on 21 July 2009.

<sup>1</sup>Sandra Scham, 'Diplomacy and Desired Pasts', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 9(2), 2009, pp. 163-99.



Issues such as these have always been parts of archaeological research tradition, but in the modern world where the public awareness of such issues is much sharper, archaeological literature has to be concerned with the process and nature of various identity formations.

The second theme is equally visible, although currently at its sharpest only in the United States and Australia. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a federal law requiring agencies and institutions in receipt of federal funding to return native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to their respective peoples, was passed in 1990. Similarly, the recognition of the traditional land-rights of the Australian indigenous people has also led to the recognition of their control over the cultural objects, sacred places and human remains found in their land.<sup>2</sup>

The study of the past cannot be said to have ever been free of its socio-politics. Since 1986, when the World Archaeological Congress held its first session in Southampton, the study of this socio-politics has been a part of the mainstream study of the subject. There can never be a one-to-one answer to an archaeological problem, however science-based or logical it may be. In each case, the data are located in a field of uncertainty, however small, and that is filled up by the researcher's own socio-political predilection.

The focus of my present lecture is to examine how the different aspects of the Indus civilizational studies have been conditioned by the socio-politics of our attitudes to the Indian past.

I shall begin by taking up the problem of the date of the beginning of this civilization. Many Indian books still refer to the date propounded first in 1946 by Mortimer Wheeler, i.e. 2500 BC. That was based on Wheeler's own subjective estimate of the date of the earliest contact between the Indus civilization and Mesopotamia. Assuming that this contact was not significantly earlier than the reign of the Mesopotamian king Sargon and accepting 2325 BC as Sargon's date, he arrived at the round figure of 2500 BC, allowing 175-odd years for this civilization to form a relationship with Mesopotamia. The earliest date of the Mesopotamian civilization, typified by the Early Dynastic Period is 2700/2800 BC. Thus, according to Wheeler's scheme, the Indus civilization was later than the Mesopotamian civilization, which was

<sup>2</sup> Cf. N. Ferries, 'Between Colonial and Indigenous Archaeologies: Legal and extra-legal ownership of the archaeological past in North America', *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*, 27(2), 2003, pp. 154-90; D. Ritchie, 'Principles and Practice of Site Protection Laws in Australia'. In, Charmichael, D., Hubert, J., Reeves, B., and Schanche, A., eds. *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*. London: 1994, Routledge, pp. 227-44.

natural in the light of his belief that the idea of civilization came to the Indus from the former. In 1931 John Marshall thought that the date of Indus-Mesopotamia contact was earlier than the period of Sargon and he arrived, through various subjective calculations, at the date of c.3250 BC for the beginning of the civilization on the Indus. Marshall, who spent his life laying the foundations of Indian archaeology, did not believe that India owed her Bronze Age civilization to any foreign source and thus he had no interest in making it look late in comparison with Mesopotamia and Egypt. By the time Wheeler wrote, India had ceased to be the jewel in the British crown and he had no particular reason to feel enchanted by Indian antiquity.

The modern situation is no less intriguing. After the first crop of radiocarbon dates from the Indus sites, D. P. Agrawal, who, as the Secretary of the Radiocarbon Committee of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, had a hand in obtaining some of them, argued that these dates, could not suggest anything earlier than 2400 BC as the date of the beginning of the mature Indus civilization. He believed that this tallied with Wheeler's opinion that the Indus-Mesopotamia contact did not date before Sargon, forgetting that radiocarbon dates are not historical dates. Agrawal represents some Indian archaeologists of the 1960s and 1970s, who considered it unsafe to go beyond the hitherto accepted framework of Indian archaeology. The premise was that any argument in favour of an earlier Indian past would not be 'scientific' and would, more damagingly be termed 'nationalistic'.

The radiocarbon dates kept on coming, and definitive evidence of pre-Sargonic Indus-Mesopotamia contact also emerged. The largest series of the relevant radiocarbon dates emerged from the American excavations at Harappa, and the American interpretation of these dates was that the mature Indus civilization began around 2600 BC. The American scholars, while interpreting their series of dates, did not even mention the historical profile of Indus-Mesopotamia contact, which was used by earlier scholars. The point is that an archaeologist from the Netherlands, the late E. C. L. During-Caspers, and I demonstrated, independently of each other, that the famous Royal Graves of Ur, which are securely dated about 2600 BC, contained two types of carnelian beads of indisputably Indus manufacture. There could not be a shadow of doubt that there was a trading relationship between the Indus and Mesopotamia by 2600 BC. Assuming that the Indus civilization must have taken some time before organizing trade with an area as far as Mesopotamia or modern Iraq, I pushed its

inception hundred years earlier, and put it at 2700 BC. This date makes the beginnings of the Indus and Mesopotamian civilizations contemporary.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the Indian scholars, including Upinder Singh's much-publicised textbook of ancient and early mediaeval India, prefer to cite the American date of 2600 BC. The reason is two-fold: first, unfamiliarity with the primary data and the consequent inability to assess various scholarly opinions critically, and second, a marked reluctance to accept an early date for anything Indian in the fear that their names would be associated with the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), or worse, with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). My familiarity with the various shades of political opinion among Indian archaeologists convinces me that none of our political parties and organizations has a coherent and professional attitude to the Indian past, archaeological or otherwise. Interestingly, a centre for the study of the Indus civilization, funded by an American organization called Global Heritage Fund, is coming up in Gujarat, reputedly with the full support of the BJP-ruled Gujarat government. The concerned Indians have apparently no idea of how such internationally funded heritage organizations can be used to manipulate the sense of the past in the Third World. Or, even if they are aware of this dimension, they are not simply bothered, as long as they can hope to derive some advantage out of it.<sup>4</sup>

As I began with the date of the beginning of the Indus civilization, let me elaborate a bit more about the Indus chronology. How long did it continue? The answer is: 'up to about 1300 BC'. This date is suggested both by the radiocarbon dates and the finds of Indus seals in the Kassite levels of the Mesopotamian site of Nippur. The point is that instead of a thousand-year old chronology, we have now got a 1400-year-old chronology, and this longer chronology, as we shall see later, has some important implications.

Did this civilization, whose full-fledged form dates from c. 2700 BC have a prelude or earlier formative stages, and if so, has this evidence been found in the sub-continent? Two sites in Haryana—Kunal and Bhirrana, both near Fatehabad—have shown two such stages, one 'early Harappan', the trace of which has been found at many sites, and second, 'pre-early Harappan' or what scholars call 'the level of the Hakra Ware'. There is no radiocarbon date from Kunal but there are several from Bhirrana, some dating

<sup>3</sup> There is a detailed discussion on Harappan chronology with a historiographical survey of the various estimates and their basis in D. Chakrabarti, *The Archaeology of the Ancient Indian Cities*, Delhi: 1995, Oxford University Press.

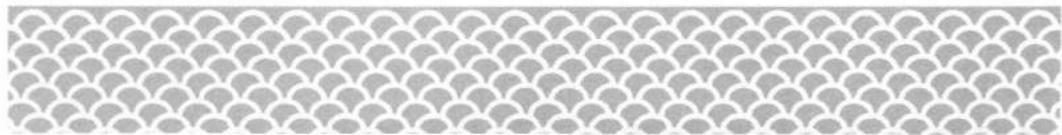
<sup>4</sup> The details of the proposed Indus Centre can be easily located in the web-pages of 'Global Heritage Fund'.



from the fourth, fifth and sixth millennium BC. To be honest, there are some uncertainties regarding their context, but I shall not hesitate to put the beginning of the Hakra Ware level at this site at least in the first half of the fourth millennium BC, possibly closer to 4000 than 3500 BC. Now, if we look at the whole dated profile, we shall realize that the archaeological cultural tradition represented by the Indus civilization covers really a long and continuous span—a span of about 2500 years (tentatively, 3800 BC as the date of the Hakra level at Bhirrana, and c.1300 BC as the date of the end of the Harappan tradition), if not more.

If the chronological column of the Indus civilization is, according to my argument, at least 2500-year-long, one of the most obvious inferences is that it was more deeply rooted in the sub-continental soil than we had hitherto been prepared to admit. Second, the very fact that this tradition lasted so long, covering virtually the whole area between Jammu and Gujarat and between Baluchistan and the outer front of the Siwaliks in Panjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), implies that it interacted with the areas around it. From Gujarat, for instance, the Malwa plain of central India is open, and the western U.P. is inextricably connected with the vast sweep of the Ganga plain. To argue that the Indus civilization had no special archaeological bearing on the archaeology of the subcontinent outside its distribution area has no meaning in the geographical sense. Similarly, to speak of a 'Ganga civilization', completely separate from the Indus civilization, does not have much meaning either. In western U.P., between the Yamuna and the Siwaliks, the two traditions are known to have interacted. The occurrence of the Gangetic valley 'copper hoards' in the otherwise Harappan assemblage of Sinauli near Baghpat is a major evidence of this interaction, and so is the interlocking of the Harappan and Painted Grey Ware levels at Alamgirpur near Meerat. I suspect that the painted pottery that one finds in Bulandshahr and Aligarh at some of the Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) sites is a part of the Harappan tradition, although it is not yet possible to be positive on this issue. One of the outstanding discoveries of the Harappan material in the Ganga plain is the find of what Dr. Rakesh Tewari of Uttar Pradesh State Archaeological Organization calls a piece of indisputably Harappan perforated vessel in an apparently mixed assemblage in the recent excavations at Ramnagar opposite Varanasi.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For the archaeological details, D. Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology*, Delhi: 2006, Oxford University Press. I owe my information on the interlocking of Harappan and Painted Grey Ware levels at Alamgirpur to Dr. R. N. Singh of Benares Hindu University, and I owe my information on the find of a Harappan perforated ware vessel at Ramnagar to Dr. Rakesh Tewari, Director of U. P. State Archaeology.



There is an attempt in the archaeological literature to disassociate, as far as possible, the Indus civilization from modern India. J. M. Kenoyer's name for it in his *The Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Karachi, Oxford University Press) is the 'Indus valley civilization', which clearly carries the implication that it is primarily a product of the Indus valley, all of which is in Pakistan. I find this erroneous term being freely used even in the Indian archaeology journals. I do not know if the Indians who use this term are even aware of its implication. The term 'Indus-Sarasvati civilization' is also wrong because it takes away the significance of the occurrence of the Indus sites in Gujarat and western U.P. The only logical terms are the Indus civilization or the Harappan civilization. The first excavated site of the civilization is Harappa.

Another related feature is the emphasis on what is called 'middle Asian interaction sphere' to explain the growth and appearance of the Indus civilization. A convenient example of this emphasis is G. Possehl's *The Indus Civilization, a Contemporary Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland: 2002, Alta Mira Press). The different kinds of interaction between the different components of the interaction zone between the Indus and the Oxus are well-known, but the present archaeological data do not suggest that the growth of the Indus civilization was due to this interaction. Among other things, this does not take into consideration the implication of the overwhelming number of Indus sites far to the east of the Indus. There is no doubt that the cultural sequence that has been unearthed at Kunal and Bhirrana, or for that matter, at Padri and Dholavira, is way beyond the Indus-Oxus orbit.

After the discovery of Mehrgarh in the Bolan Pass area of Baluchistan, the general tendency in the archaeological literature is to treat the Indus civilization in a straight arrow-line of development beginning with the growth of wheat-barley agriculture in Baluchistan. Again, Possehl's book, which we have cited above, offers a ready example. The problem is that this notion downgrades, possibly wilfully, the role which the non-wheat-barley agricultural tradition to the east possibly played in the genesis of this civilization. Both rice and millets occur at several early Harappan and mature Harappan sites of Haryana and Panjab, including Harappa. These two crops are not known to have been domesticated in Baluchistan. In the central Ganga plain and its Vindhya fringe the antiquity of rice cultivation goes back to the seventh millennium BC. The rice that one finds in the early Harappan Haryana (Balu and Kunal) could have been only of eastern derivation. To relate the growth of the Indus civilization only to the



growth of wheat-barley agricultural tradition in Baluchistan is to imply that the growth of this civilization is oriented to the west. This assumption ignores the multilineal character of its formation over a singularly large and diverse territory. Related to this trend is the current attempt by an American archaeo-botanist to deny the presence of rice cultivation at Lohuradeva in the central Ganga plain.<sup>6</sup>

A major archaeological fact disputing the notion of an exclusively western orientation of the Indus civilization is the growth of early agriculture and metallurgy along the Aravallis in Rajasthan. In my book, *The Archaeology of Ancient Indian Cities* in 1995 I pointed out the probable role of the Aravalli metallurgical development in the genesis of the mature Harappan civilization, but regrettably, the whole issue has been ignored even by scholars who specialise on Rajasthan. For instance, in V.N. Misra's recent summation of the prehistoric and archaeological data from Rajasthan in his *Rajasthan: Prehistoric and Early Historic Foundations* (Delhi: 2007, Aryan Books), there is no mention of this issue. On the other hand, the claim of the Aravalli system as an early and independent centre of agricultural origin is getting increasingly strong. First, we may consider the case of Bagor in Bhilwara. The fact that cattle, sheep and goat of Period I at Bagor were domesticated and the fact that the earliest chronological point of this period falls in the sixth millennium BC suggest the possibility of Bagor I having an agricultural component. In the next period Bagor yielded copper implements, of which the arrowhead is identical with the arrowhead type of the subsequently excavated site of Ganeshwar, located further up the Aravallis. In its first phase Ganeshwar was exclusively marked by microliths but possessed a number of copper tools in the next phase itself. It has not been generally realized that Bagor and Ganeshwar in two different sections of the Aravallis have the same archaeological sequence. It is likely that Ganeshwar I and Bagor I belonged to the same period, i.e. the sixth millennium BC and Ganeshwar also had an agricultural dimension like the latter site. The sixth millennium BC date for the so-called Mesolithic level in the Aravallis has also been highlighted by the mid-sixth millennium BC date for a 60 cm thick Mesolithic

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding Lohuradeva rice, the following is the comment of Dorian Fuller in 'archaeobotanist blog', section: Indian archaeobotany watch: Lohuradewa 2008: 'I now doubt even more, that the rice was domesticated. It is not even clear that it was cultivated, and is plausibly (perhaps safest interpreted as) wild gathered'. Among other things, rice occurs at the site in the 7-6 millennia BC context as plastering material in mud plaster. Those who have seen the practice in modern Indian villages will know that this practice itself implies a long and close familiarity with rice agriculture. Is there any context where wild rice occurs extensively in mud plaster?



deposit on the eastern face of Gilund-2 (Bhilwara district where Bagor also is situated). The issue needs further research, but what is intriguing is that the beginning of the chalcolithic occupation at Balathal in the same region has now been found to be about 3700 BC (calibrated). This implies a considerably earlier beginning of agriculture in the region, and as there is no reason to infer that this beginning was due to an infiltration from another area, one has to accept that this suggests an independent beginning of agriculture and metallurgy in the Aravalli zone<sup>7</sup>.

The attempts to disassociate the Indus tradition from the later Indian heritage have also taken other forms. Those familiar with John Marshall's discussion on the Indus sculpture in *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization* (1931) will recall that the entire framework of that discussion was in terms of the 'Indianness' of the relevant specimens, and he worked out this 'Indianness' by pointing out the stylistic and conceptual similarities between the Indus sculptural objects and some examples of later Indian sculptures. It is this postulated link which is being currently questioned.

The famous 'priest-king' head and torso from Mohenjodaro has been compared first with some specimens from Bactria and then with various other sundry representations from West Asia (cf. Ardeleanu-Jansen). This exercise has been singularly unedifying. Even if one assumes that the priest-king figure was a part of a seated image, the whole concept and representation of this image is completely different from the examples which have been cited from Bactria and other central and west Asiatic places. That the figure suggested the concept of a *Yogi* wrapped in meditation with his eyes fixed on the top of his nose was pointed out in detail by R. P. Chanda soon after its discovery at Mohenjodaro. The problem with the study of Indus sculptural tradition is that very few specimens have so far been found, and that too primarily from two sites, Mohenjodaro and Harappa. One gets only occasional flickers of the fact that the spread of the Indus tradition was possibly more deep-rooted and widespread than we admit, in such discoveries as that of a stone monitor lizard or *Godhika* at Dholavira and the incised outline of the Mohenjodaro 'dancing girl' on a potsherd at Bhirrana. That the iconographic tradition of this civilization was diverse is clear from the representations of sundry human figures on its seals. This tradition is also overwhelmingly 'Indian' in the sense that they can be explained in terms of the later and mostly current ritual beliefs.

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<sup>7</sup>The data are cited in detail in D. Chakrabarti, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology*.



This leads us to the question of the Indus religion. Many scholars, both foreign and Indian, are very reluctant to find any trace of modern Hindu rituals and beliefs in the finds which have been interpreted as evidence of Indus religion. Two facts, however, cannot be wished away—regrettably from the point of view of this group of people. One is the indubitable presence of Siva in the form of linga-like stones found both at Mohenjodaro and Harappa, a distinctively phallic stone column at Dholavira, a seated ithyphallic stone figure from the same site, the famous ‘Siva-Pasupati’ figure on a seal, and the terracotta representation of a Siva-linga set in ‘Yoni-patta’ at Kalibangan. The second such evidence is the widespread presence of sacrificial pits at Lothal, Kalibangan, Banawali, Rakhigarhi and possibly a few other sites. These pits possibly have variations of their own. Their shapes and contents may also vary from site to site. However, their generic similarity with the ‘havan kundas’ which many devout people still dig up every day, light fire in, and pour offerings on, is undeniable.

Again, one has only to look up the section on religion in *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization* to find the foot-prints of later-day Hinduism in the ruins of the Indus civilization. I shall not argue that Hinduism in its modern forms flourished there. All that I would say that the roots of some major Hindu religious beliefs and rituals can be traced back to that period. As far as the early scholars were concerned, that was obvious. Even to people like me, that is the most simple and straightforward explanation of the category of artifacts which have been found at the Indus sites and can be associated with religion and ritual beliefs. Doubts have been expressed in the modern context because there are scholars who will not like to see the continuation of Hinduism in any form from this early period.

In a small but important volume entitled *The Sarasvati Flows On: The Continuity of Indian Culture* (Delhi : Aryan Books, 2002), the seniormost archaeologist of the country, B. B. Lal, has offered an outline of the various traits of Indian behaviour which have continued from the protohistoric times to the present. Even outside this book some major examples can be given. For instance, one has only to look up the list of the plant-remains found at the Indus sites to realize that the agricultural pattern of the sub-continent has been reflected in that list. The general idea is that the Indus people were not familiar with irrigation and depended on the over-bank floods of the Indus to sow their crops. There was certainly some dependence on the river floods of the rivers during that period, but a far more probable hypothesis in the light of modern but pre-

industrial agricultural practices in Sindh is that canal irrigation was used. The practice of both double-cropping and irrigation was there, and I have been trying to argue this since 1988 (*Theoretical Issues in Indian Archaeology*, Delhi: 1988, Munshiram Manoharlal) but without any effect on the mind-set of Indus-specialists. Regarding Harappan technology, especially regarding Harappan metal technology, it has been convincingly argued by Nayanjot Lahiri that the preference for pure copper products in the range of Harappan metal objects may be explained by the general preference for ritually pure copper materials in modern India.<sup>8</sup> The point is that it is no reflection on the technological status of Harappan metallurgy that many of its specimens were unalloyed.

In the general field of Indus technological studies, a noteworthy development in recent years is to analyse the technical skills involved in various crafts by employing village craftsmen to replicate them. The knowledge imparted by the traditional craftsmen is couched in terms of modern science, and by the time the process results in publications, the village craftsmen are forgotten and in their place we find modern 'western' scientists trying to lay down laws on the Indus crafts. This tendency has become dominant after the American excavations at Harappa under Kenoyer. Such studies are no doubt useful but provide an excellent example of how the traditional crafts of the subcontinent can be appropriated by 'western science'.

At this point, it may be apt to point out how the study of the Indus civilization itself is being appropriated by 'western science'. In June 2008, the American magazine *Science* published a lengthy article in several sections on the Indus civilization. The sections numbered six and carried the following headings: (1) Unmasking the Indus: boring no more, a trade-savvy Indus emerges; (2) Unmasking the Indus: Buddhist stupa or Indus temple?, (3) Unmasking the Indus: Indus collapse; the end or the beginning of an Asian culture? (4) Understanding the Indus: trench warfare; modern borders split the Indus; (5) Understanding the Indus: trying to make way for the old; (6) Unmasking the Indus: Pakistani archaeology faces issues old and new.

As excavators two Indian names—V. Shinde and R. S. Bisht, both well-known associates of the American scholars G. Possehl and J. M. Kenoyer—and three Pakistani names—Qasid Mallah, Farzand Massih and G.M. Veesar—have been cited; otherwise the essay cites as 'scholars' only Americans. The title of the sections is, to us,

<sup>8</sup> N. Lahiri, 'Indian Metal and Metal-related Artefacts as Cultural Signifiers: An ethnographic perspective', *World Archaeology* 27(1)1995, pp. 116-32.



academically meaningless. That the Indus civilization was, as the writer put it, 'trade-savvy' has been known since its discovery and in 1931 its internal and external trade were comprehensively discussed. That there is a possibility of finding an Indus religious place below the ruins of the Buddhist stupa in the northeastern corner of the western mound of Mohenjodaro was pointed out as early as 1931. The issue of the Indus decline has also been discussed for ages. That Indian and Pakistani archaeologists do not work together is well known, but to put the record straight, there is no 'trench warfare' between them. Research is a continuous process, and one is not sure why 2008 should mark a point when old ideas regarding the Indus are giving way to the new. Archaeologists anywhere face both old and new issues, and one does not understand the reason of particular emphasis with reference to Pakistani archaeologists. The article states that Mehrgarh was the precursor of the Indus civilization and that the Indus cities at 2600 BC were six hundred years later than those of Mesopotamia, simply forgetting to mention the fact that some early Harappan settlements dating from before 3000 BC were fortified, planned and could be considered cities, especially in view of the fact that the Indus writing had made its appearance by then. Equally interestingly, he approvingly cites the Italian archaeologist G. Verardi's idea that the Buddhist stupa at the northeastern corner of the western mound at Harappa was not a stupa but only a series of platforms on the model of the Sumerian ziggurat, an idea which fits perfectly with Wheller's idea that there was a strong Mesopotamian impetus to the growth of the Indus civilization. Incidentally, this stupa structure was investigated by two of India's foremost early archaeologists, R. D. Banerjee and D. R. Bhandarkar, and I have no reason to believe that they did not recognize a Buddhist stupa when they saw one.

Most amazingly, considering that the articles figured in *Science*, the author, A. Lawler, allowed himself some comments on the domestic politics of India:

The rise of Hindu nationalism in today's India has thrust this scholarly debate into the political spotlight. Hindu nationalists' push to see the roots of their religion in the 5000-year-old Indus civilization creates another barrier between Indian archaeologists and their mostly Muslim counterparts in Pakistan.... The Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) which ruled India from 1998 to 2004 declared the Indus to be progenitor of Hindu civilization, a controversial claim in a country with a large Muslim population. While in power, BJP pumped additional funding into Indus-related digs, and its influence over archaeological matters remains strong.

I agree with the last part of the author's comment. The BJP's influence over Indian archaeological matters must be strong because otherwise how is an American-funded Indus Centre with J. M. Kenoyer on board being set up in Gujarat with the support of its BJP government? Regarding the author's statement that the BJP 'declared the Indus to be progenitor of Hindu civilization' all that one can point out is that it is not usual for any political party in India to declare anything as the progenitor of any aspect of the Indian civilization, nor are they known to make such statements. Lawler's political comments go deeper. Citing Bisht's 'opinion' - that the Indus people were 'one and the same with the Aryans' he writes that this 'theory finds little support among foreign scholars'. This attempt to put Indian scholarship vis-à-vis foreign scholarship has long been an important ingredient of western scholarship on ancient India.

The idea that the Indus civilization could bear an echo of the Vedic tradition has taken deeper roots in the recent period after it was understood that the densest distribution of the Indus civilization sites was not along the Indus but along the Hakra which was a part of a river-system parallel to that of the Indus. This river-system has been known to modern scholarship since the late eighteenth century, and the Ghaggar-Hakra was identified with the Vedic Sarasvati by the French historical geographer L. Vivien de Saint-Martin (1802-1896) possibly in 1860 in his book on the study of the Vedic geography. By 1830 the general archaeological potential of its valley was also understood. The idea that the Indus civilization and the Vedic tradition could not have been poles apart was perfectly acceptable to scholars like R. P. Chanda, M. S. Vats, B. N. Datta and possibly most significantly, P.V. Kane. They did not discuss the issue from the point of view of modern politics. I do not know the political opinion of Chanda and Vats, but B. N. Datta was one of the forerunners of the communist movement in India and, hopefully, P.V. Kane, *Bharatratna*, will not be accused of being a 'Hindu nationalist'. According to Datta, 'in religious matters, the present-day Hindus are the descendants of the Indus valley people'. Kane, in fact, wrote that 'the Rigvedic people were earlier than the Indus valley people' and that there was some evidence to believe that the Indus valley people 'were probably Aryans' or different but 'contemporaneous with the Rigveda Aryans'. I have cited these scholars only to show that the problem was not always tinged with political implications as it is now.<sup>9</sup>

People who are very keen to insert a phase of Aryan invasions between the Indus civilization and the later historic India would prefer to view Hinduism as Aryan in

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<sup>9</sup> This literature has been surveyed in D. Chakrabarti, *The Battle for Ancient India*, Delhi: 2008, Aryan Books.



inspiration. This would mean, by implication, that Hinduism is as much native to the Indian soil as the much later immigrant religions like Islam and Christianity. If this belief gives a section of Indian people and what Lawler calls 'foreign scholars', happiness and peace, they are welcome to it. However, this should not be a deterrent on viewing the formative phase of Indian history in the light of the increasingly supportive archaeological data that there is no break in the continuity of Indian archaeological record since prehistory. As I wrote in 2004, 'all the people of the subcontinent are, in one way or another, the inheritors of the Indus civilization'.<sup>10</sup> The Indian past represented by this civilization belongs to them.

I conclude this lecture by pointing out a danger which is increasingly facing Indian archaeology today. If one goes through the archaeological literature on Egypt and Mesopotamia, the areas where Western scholarship has been paramount since the beginning of archaeological research in those areas, one notes that the contribution made by the native Egyptian and Iraqi archaeologists is completely ignored in that literature. The Bronze Age past of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the intervening region is completely appropriated by the Western scholarship. Also, when Western archaeologists write on Pakistani archaeology, they seldom mention the contribution made by the Pakistani archaeologists themselves. There are exceptions but they are very rare. After Independence, the Archaeological Survey of India pursued a policy of relative isolation, which enabled archaeology as a subject to develop in the country and helped Indian archaeologists to find their feet. The policy seems to be changing now, and supercilious articles like the one by Lawler are an indication of the effect of this change. There is a great deal of arrogance and sense of superiority in that segment of the First World archaeology which specializes in the Third World. Unless this segment of the First World archaeology changes its way and attitude, it should be treated with a great deal of caution in the Third World.

As a British author, William Dalrymple, possibly well-known in Delhi, is supposed to have commented in an interview to the Channel 4 of the British television, 'One should protect one's own history and fight for it by tooth and claw, as others will always try to change it.'



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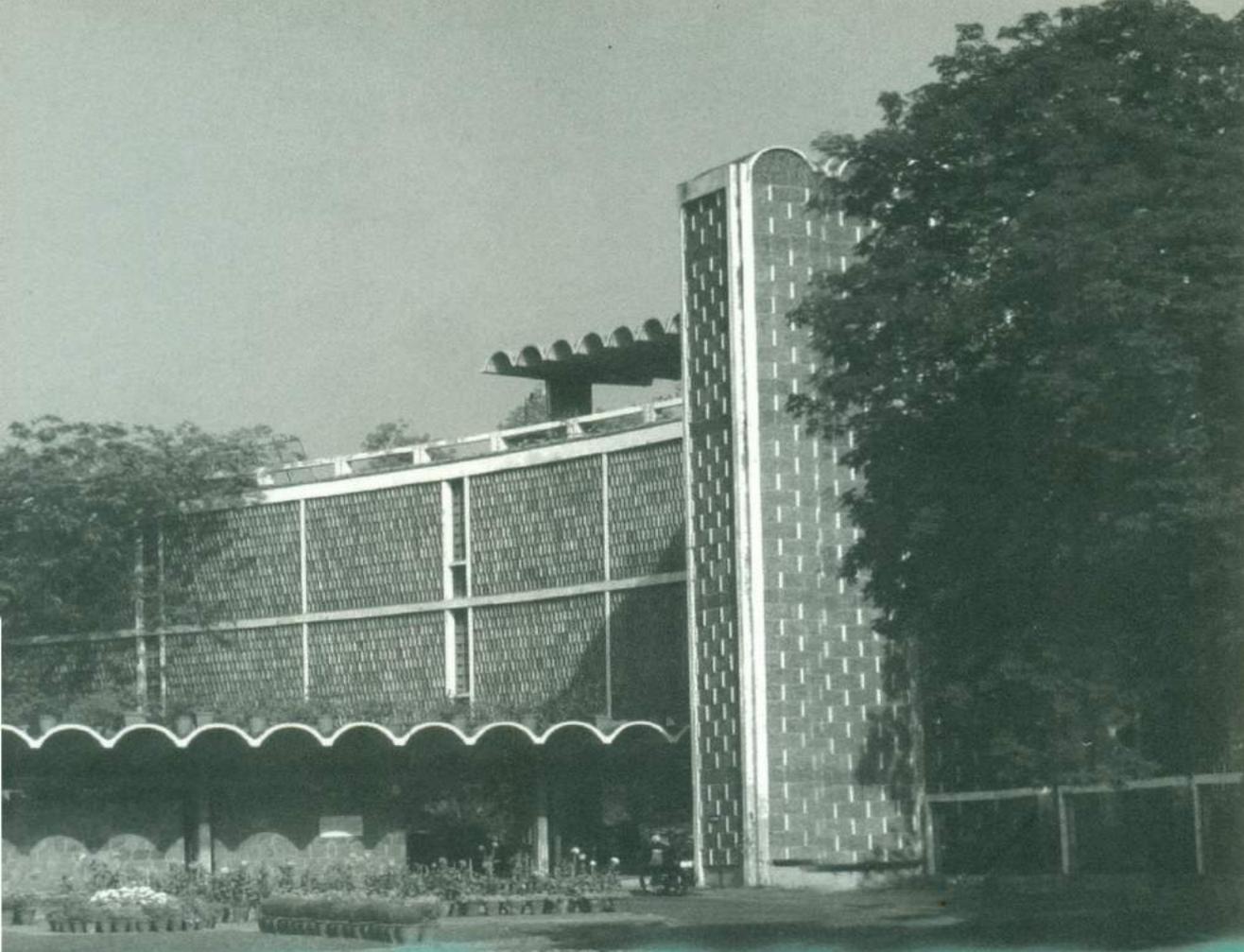
<sup>10</sup> D. Chakrabarti, ed., *Indus Civilization Sites in India: New Discoveries*, Mumbai: 2004, Marg Publications.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Dilip K. Chakrabarti** has taught in various universities for forty-three years (1965–2008), the last eighteen years in Cambridge University where he is currently an emeritus professor in the Department of Archaeology and a Senior Fellow of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research of the same university. He has researched the following major themes of Indian archaeology: the archaeology of ancient Indian cities; history of Indian archaeology from the beginning to the present; the use of iron and copper in ancient India; the external trade of the Indus civilization; archaeological geography of the Ganga plain from the Sagar island to the hills of Uttarakhand, Bangladesh, Chhotanagpur Plateau, Haryana, Indian Panjab, and the Kangra valley; the ancient routes which linked the Ganga plain with the Deccan; the network of ancient routes in the Konkan coast, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra; and the socio-politics of the ancient Indian past. He has been doing field-work every year for the last twenty nine years in various parts of India. He has authored twenty-four books and about two hundred articles, notes and reviews. He has supervised many M.Phil and Ph.D dissertations. His *India: an Archaeological History* (OUP paperback) and *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology* amply underline his easy familiarity with, and sound grip of, the different types of primary material in south Asian archaeology and the depth of his understanding of the same. Currently he is working out the historical geography of Asokan edicts and is preparing a detailed monograph on the regional archaeology of the Indian subcontinent. Queries-by email: [dc129@cam.ac.uk](mailto:dc129@cam.ac.uk)





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