

Post-Processualism.

INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY IN RETROSPECT

VOLUME IV

ARCHAEOLOGY AND
HISTORIOGRAPHY

History, Theory and Method

Edited by

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MANOHAR

2002

Looking for Post-Processual Theory in South Asian Archaeology

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The aim of the present paper is to expand our discussion of theoretical perspectives in South Asian archaeology beyond the examination of processualist theory that was carried out in Fuller and Boivin (this volume). This paper will focus specifically on the impact and indigenous development of what will be termed, for want of a better expression, post-processualism, in the context of South Asian archaeology. As in the previous paper, our discussion will incorporate theoretical perspectives from a variety of rather separate sub-disciplinary areas within the archaeology of India and Pakistan (see introduction in Fuller and Boivin, this volume). Furthermore, it will maintain the same loose usage of the terms 'South Asia' and 'India' to refer to that geographical area of prehistoric and historic cultural interaction that is now recognized as incorporating a number of sovereign states.

Post-processualism, as can be discerned from the term itself, is a movement within archaeology that largely defines itself in opposition to processualism. While processual archaeology generally perceived the past as something that could be objectively studied given sufficient understanding of formation processes, post-processualism questioned the foundations of such an assumption. This skepticism opened the way for a variety of new concerns within archaeology, such as the study of the social production of the past, the representation of the past (in museums and schools for example), and the uses to which the past is put in the present-day (e.g. Bond and Gilliam 1994; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Shanks and Tilley 1992; Stone and Molyneaux 1994). It also led to a new conception of material culture, as something actively involved in the production and reproduction of social structures, as well as their possible subversion, which could thus not always be interpreted as a direct reflection of past societies (Hodder 1982, 1991; Shanks and Tilley 1987, 1992). While post-processualism does not represent a uniform front within archaeology, consisting rather of a diversity of interests that are not always complementary (Hodder 1992: 86; Thomas 1995: 347), most would agree that it does constitute a significant shift within archaeology with respect to the way that the discipline is perceived and the ways in which the past is interpreted.

What is more difficult than marking the 'boundaries' of the post-processual approach is estimating its impact in the various diverse 'archaeologies' that exist beyond the European context in which the term post-processual was initially coined. The danger of assuming a one-way trajectory of post-processual ideas, from the West (and Europe in particular) outwards to the rest of the world is certainly present. This danger is highlighted within the South Asian context by the fact that ideas carrying what might be called a definite post-processual tone are found in writings by Indian archaeologists that *pre-date*

the advent of a definite post-processual phase in the West. That such ideas often go uncited, certainly by Western scholars, but even by fellow South Asians, only exacerbates the problem, and reinforces the impression that archaeological theory involves a unidirectional flow from the West to the rest. The illustration of several examples that clearly refute such a simplistic conception are given below with the aim of redressing this bias.

It must nevertheless be admitted that, due perhaps to an inhospitable academic climate, such post-processual inklings within South Asian archaeology did not generally take off until relatively recently. Even now, South Asian archaeology is dominated by other theoretical frameworks, such as the processual one explicated in Fuller and Boivin (this volume), as well as a firmly-rooted culture-history paradigm. Nevertheless, however marginal at this time, approaches that can be classed as post-processual are certainly to be found in Indian archaeology. While some of them are quite clearly influenced by the post-processual movement, others are to be found in which post-processual theory is more implicit than explicit. Furthermore, some of the studies that will be examined in this section do not fall clearly within the realm of archaeology, but rather concern the way in which the study of the South Asian past has been, or might be, influenced in a way that could be roughly defined as post-processual, by innovative work in other fields, such as history and anthropology. Thus, 'looking for post-processual theory' in South Asian archaeology has involved a certain amount of interpretative license in identifying just what precisely constitutes a post-processual approach. The problems associated with this methodology are discussed in the conclusion.

SIGNS OF DISCONTENT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A UNIQUE PARADIGM

Signs of discontent amongst scholars of Indian archaeology with dominant frameworks for studying and interpreting the past can be found littered sporadically throughout the literature of this field. Such unease is not felt only as a response to processual models, but just as often to cultural historical paradigms. What is of interest in the present analysis, however, is that some of the reforms suggested could be categorized as post-processual. To present all such critiques as having been inspired by post-processualism, however, would be to do great injustice to the creative dynamic of South Asian archaeology, which has certainly engendered some of its critical thinking in isolation from the Western mainstream.

This fact is clearly highlighted by an examination of the publications of S.C. Malik, who has written extensively on theory in Indian archaeology (1968, 1973, 1975, 1979). Most of Malik's writings reflect the trends of processualism, in seeing society as a system and archaeological work as part of broader social science (Malik 1968, 1975, 1979). However, he also clearly expressed the social construction of knowledge in the present, and as a result highlighted that no vision of the past could ever be final and objective (especially in Malik 1973, 1975, 129-32). Though he urged the use of a deductive approach, hypothesis-testing, it was more with the aim of making reasoning clear, rather than as a

means of achieving objectivity and certainty, as strict positivism would have it. He also argued that the division of anthropology and history, an opposition encouraged by processual archaeology in America, was a false dichotomy (Malik 1975: 55). However, while he addressed changing ideologies in his brief synthesis of Indian history (*ibid.*: 67-110), Malik failed to apply these to archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, Malik was an important critic of the traditional empiricist approach to South Asian archaeology, and an early voice to speak out against academic dogmas.

Others have critiqued the dominant theoretical paradigms from a distinctively Indian perspective. R.N. Mehta (1995), for example, has noted the problems inherent in applying, wholesale, archaeological models developed for other regions to the Indian context. He has argued that:

... the interpretation of the relics of a region, when examined in the light of the tradition of that region, reveals a picture of what happened in the past from a different aspect than the one developed on the basis of the ideas and experience of other regions and cultures. This then often leads to conflicting interpretations of different groups and further to an interpretative struggle with many socio-political ramifications. (*ibid.*: 2)

Mehta's employment of concepts from Indian philosophy in discussing the study of the South Asian past imply a desire to develop a research framework that is not restricted to theoretical paradigms imported from Western archaeology. Bednarik (1993) has also argued that the use of Eurocentric paradigms have negatively affected the discovery and interpretation of Palaeolithic art in India. Varma (1996: 3) has similarly criticized the reconstruction of the Indian past based on European evidence, and has called, like Bednarik, for what might be described as a more contextual approach, which would see archaeologists developing indigenous models for cultural development in South Asia. Morrison, in her detailed critique of theoretical approaches to state formation in South Asia, has echoed such sentiments with respect to traditional interpretive approaches to the South Asian state (Morrison 1994). She argues that 'we must begin to appreciate the archaeological record of complex societies in Asia on its own terms and not use this record simply to illustrate archaeological perspectives developed elsewhere' (*ibid.*: 183). Wright (1991) makes a similar critique based on her analysis of pottery production during the Harappan period (which is discussed in more detail in a later section).

What these criticisms have in common is that they demand an approach to the study of ancient India that will lead to formulations that recognise the idiosyncracies of India's past and the uniqueness of its developmental trajectory. An analysis of the literature reveals that this call has been answered in a number of recent publications, which represent the development of some fairly novel directions in Indian archaeology. Specifically, many of these studies deal with issues of symbolism and ideology that until recently have either been largely ignored or dealt with in a fairly unsophisticated fashion in South Asian archaeology. These concerns, as well as, quite often, the novel conception of material culture that they invoke, have often been broadly influenced by post-processual developments within archaeology.

The Harappan civilization has been the focus of a number of interesting recent attempts

to reconstruct ancient ideology (Atre 1989; Fairservis 1989; Kenoyer 1989, 1995; Miller 1985a; Ratnagar 1991), although not all of these adopt a post-processual outlook. Kenoyer's (1995) analysis of ideology as reflected in various items of Harappan material culture, for example, might be more accurately characterized as cognitive-processual in flavour. The cognitive processual school (see Renfrew 1994) seems to have derived inspiration from the post-processual interest in ideology and symbols, but has retained a decidedly processual outlook on material culture, which in such studies often continues to be perceived as a passive reflection of social relationships. In contrast, analyses like Miller's (1985a) perceive material culture as a potentially active force in the production, reproduction and even subversion of social structures (a viewpoint that we will elaborate upon in a later section). These perspectives have led to quite different interpretations of the Harappan material record, with Miller perceiving a lack of social differentiation and Kenoyer speculating upon the existence of ritual segregation along the lines of a caste system (see in particular Kenoyer 1989). Nevertheless, these variations in theoretical approach and interpretation should not be permitted to efface the common denominator shared by these and the other studies mentioned, which is their clear emphasis on the uniquely 'Indian' developmental trajectory of the Harappan Civilization. As Kenoyer (1995) notes, they offer a sharp contrast to most models of state formation that have been put forth in Indian archaeology.

The active role of material culture in creating and sustaining inequalities of power has been explored in a number of studies of the archaeology of the historical period in South Asia. What many of these studies have in common is the recognition that 'the most dramatic and visible aspects of the material record of complex societies are purposely created and manipulated by individuals and institutions to make public "statements" or 'claims' about their power and authority' (Morrison and Lycett 1994). Not only these, but other sources of data, such as texts, artefacts and landscapes, are similarly conceptualized, with the implication that 'they are problematic rather than self-evident sources of information' (Morrison and Lycett 1997). We thus find numerous new approaches to the material culture of the Historical period in South Asia which look beyond the traditional focus on stylistic norms, to an examination of the potential social uses of material culture. The study of settlement organization and its link to ideology seems in particular to have evoked a great deal of interest amongst scholars analysing historical South Asia. Erdosy (1986), Fritz (1986), Fritz and Michell (1991), Gunawardana (1989), Michell (1992), and Sinopoli and Morrison (1995), for example, (in these and other publications) have all examined the role of the city in sustaining various power structures during the historical period. Many of these studies have examined the appropriation of cosmic and divine symbols by rulers as key means of naturalizing the right to rule. Other studies (Bandaranayake 1989; Shaw 1999, *in press*) focus on religious monuments and sacred landscapes, but take these investigations in novel directions which recognize the social and political embeddedness of sacred architecture. Studies like Shaw's (*ibid.*) represent a far cry from the decontextualised, text-based studies of 'Indian architecture' that have long dominated Indological studies. They, along with the other

studies listed here, demonstrate the exciting potential of archaeology in the analysis of historical South Asia. In an equally important way, these studies contribute new insights into the functioning of complex societies in general, which will certainly help in the revision of explanatory models that, until now, have taken little account of the South Asian evidence (Morrison 1994; Possehl 1990; Wright 1991).

The increased concern with the issue of caste amongst archaeologists studying South Asia (e.g. Cunningham and Young 1999; Fairservis 1995; Kenoyer 1989; see also Malik 1968 for an earlier expression of this concern) might likewise be seen as an attempt to move away from general models, and to begin to grapple with the South Asian past on its own terms. However, as Kenoyer (1989) has pointed out, ethnoarchaeological studies that examine the material culture correlates of caste will be a necessary precursor to the successful examination of social structure in South Asia. The tendency to equate any signs in the archaeological record of social inequality or difference, or craft production by specialised groups, with caste, involves obvious dangers that tend to be glossed over or ignored in many studies that interpret caste from archaeological remains. Sinopoli has addressed this issue, and warns that 'archaeological evidence can potentially prove useful in examining the origins of the South Asian caste system, but at present, we should be very cautious in projecting caste into the past on the basis of productive organization alone' (Sinopoli 1991: 185). Furthermore it is worth cautioning that the analysis of the history of the caste system in South Asia is a complicated affair that has often involved controversial assumptions linked to a questionable Aryan invasion hypothesis (Chakrabarti 1968, 1997; Shaffer 1984). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the critique within anthropology of the tendency to privilege caste as the central determinant of social relations in South Asia (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Daniel 1984; Inden 1990) is something which archaeologists interested in caste would do well to examine.

Overall it is clear that archaeologists studying the Indian past have also contributed to the critique of processualism that has been pursued in other regions of the world, albeit often for different reasons and with different aims in mind. Alternate interpretive models have been experimented with in the South Asian context and the interest they have engendered is likely to lead to increased debate concerning the role of material culture in society, as well as the frameworks used in the interpretation of the archaeological record. However, it is also clear that this critique is conditioned by the unique circumstances of the development of archaeology within South Asia. As we shall now see this unique trajectory, and the social forces that have shaped its path are themselves an increasing focus of attention within the discipline.

CLAIMS ON THE PAST: COLONIALIST, NATIONALIST AND OTHER READINGS OF THE INDIAN PAST

In arguing against the need for an examination of the social construction of the past, Paddayya (1990: 34) has stated: 'I am unable to think of any New Archaeologist worth the name who has used his or her knowledge of the past for any kind of human exploitation

in the present. There is no need to visualize monsters where they are not there. ...' This statement reflects a view that 'objective' study of the archaeological record negates the possibility of an introduction of biases based on the historical and cultural circumstances of the archaeologist. It thus represents the notion that political prejudices are only ever *consciously* incorporated into readings of the past, and that such prejudices are always *overt and recognizable*. However, the primary argument of the post-processual critique is that socio-politically influenced readings of the past are only rarely conscious, and ultimately, their very subtlety derives from the fact that the historically contingent paradigms responsible for them go largely uncognized. Post-processualism's argument, as Tilley emphasises, is that 'there is no need to drag politics into archaeology. It has been there from the beginning' (Tilley 1989; cf. Trigger 1984). Accordingly, as Molyneux has recognized, 'the analysis of received knowledge is as vexing and critical to the analysis of the past as is the study of the material remains of an excavation site' (Molyneux 1994: 2).

Until recently, the social construction of the past has been discussed only sporadically in the archaeological literature of South Asia. Archaeologists like Malik (1968, 1975), Miller (1985a), Morrison (1994), Shaffer (1984), Sinopoli (1991), and Rao (1994, 1999) touched on ways in which current understanding of the South Asian past had been biased by colonialist or nationalist perspectives, but these avenues were not followed up in any detail. However, the recent publication by D.K. Chakrabarti (1997) of a detailed analysis of the socio-politics of the Indian past has finally opened this area up to serious study, and demonstrated the importance of investigating the social construction of archaeological interpretation. Chakrabarti's work is the first to specifically draw archaeology into the fray of post-colonial studies in India, which are already well underway in other fields (see, for example, Chakrabarty 1992; Chatterjee 1993; Cohn 1990, 1996; Prakash 1992; Singh 1996; Viswanathan 1989). Such studies have highlighted how colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it, and demonstrate how colonial paradigms that privilege certain ways of seeing and knowing have actually been perpetuated in post-colonial contexts (Pels 1997: 168).

It is in keeping with such strategies of deconstruction that Chakrabarti (1997) has conducted a painstaking excavation of European prejudices towards the Indian 'other'—that have often been couched firmly within a scientific ethos—and demonstrated how these have had crucial effects on the way the Indian past is interpreted. He argues that the colonial view of India as ahistorical, static and unoriginal led to a tendency to look for outside origins for 'progressive' changes evidenced in the archaeological record. Cohn has also demonstrated a denial of indigenous origins by British scholars during the colonial period in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary (see especially his discussion on Fergusson's argument for Bactrian and Roman influence at Amaravati (Cohn 1996: 88-96). It would be dangerous to relegate the existence of such biases to a distant colonial past, however, as ossified frameworks for understanding Indian prehistory that were established under colonial influence still persist today. Chakrabarti (1997) argues that

these inherited edifices require reappraisal and deconstruction if archaeologists studying South Asia are to lay claim to any real understanding of the Indian past. In particular, as he and many others have argued (Shaffer 1984; Erdosy 1995), there is a need to separate concepts of race, language, and culture that have so often been conflated in interpretations of material remains in South Asia.

While archaeologists such as Chakrabarti have taken on the issue of colonialism in Indian history and prehistory, others have made equally important inquiries into the interplay between archaeology and nationalism. Such scholars have recognized what Kohl and Fawcett (1995: 3) call 'the almost unavoidable or natural relationship between archaeology and nationalism'. It is certainly true that an archaeology embedded in nationalism can play a positive role in counteracting colonialist devaluations of the history of the colonised and promoting national pride (Lane 1990). Furthermore, Indian archaeology positively benefited from the post-Independence drive to find Harappan sites in India, after the key sites went to Pakistan at partition (Hooja 1988). This search for 'potent symbols of national identity' (Kohl and Fawcett 1995: 10) resulted in substantial changes in archaeologists' understanding of the distribution of the Harappan Civilization, and also led to discovery of important non-Harappan Chalcolithic cultures like Ahar, and an enormous leap in knowledge concerning the Deccan Chalcolithic. However, it is also true that this often close relationship with nationalism lends itself to the abuse of archaeology, sometimes with devastating results. In fact, India provides one of the most notorious examples of such an unhappy marriage in the shape of Ayodhya and the events that occurred at the site in 1993. If nothing else, this unfortunate incident has likely gone far to awaken Indian archaeologists to the need for greater social responsibility and engagement with wider issues beyond the narrow world of scholarship (Rao 1994, 1999).

Ayodhya has generated a great deal of interest amongst archaeologists both in India and abroad (see, for e.g. Anonymous 1995; Colley 1995; Hassan 1995; Mandal 1993; Rao 1994, 1999, Lal this volume; Shaw forthcoming). While some archaeologists have adopted a processualist stance, and have turned to the apparent security of 'hard facts' for a solution (e.g. Mandal 1993), others have taken a more nuanced approach, rejecting the possibility of the neutral and unequivocal testing of hypotheses (Shaw, forthcoming). Rao, for example, has discussed how Ayodhya has served as a powerful symbol for the post-colonial recreation of identity in India, and argues that 'historical "fact" is irrelevant and invoking it will not cause the "irrational" anger of either [the Hindus or the Muslims] to subside' (Rao 1994: 161; also Rao 1999). She also points out that this recreation of identity has meant largely the recreation of Hindu identity, which as Ayodhya shows, often involves the negation of Muslim history and belonging in India. Meanwhile, Shaw, argues that the Ayodhya dispute, 'by becoming polarized into a generic Hindu-Muslim problem, has subsumed even further the multitude of histories in its soil' (Shaw forthcoming). In addition, Rao (1999) has discussed the ways in which Ayodhya has been used to create a monolithic, unified Hinduism where previously there has been plurality. Lahiri (1999) and Shaw (1999, forthcoming) have attempted to demonstrate

that India's sacred sites often incorporate a multitude of diverse histories that argue against the right of any one group to appropriate them in the present. The propagation of such an understanding to the wider public might well lead to a less divisive use of the past than was seen at Ayodhya.

While both nationalist and colonialist perspectives are potentially important factors in generating biased and single-faceted views of the past, they are not the only ones. Jain (1995), for example, has argued that the artistic and cultural history of India as recorded by archaeologists and historians is primarily a history of the culture of the urban aristocracy. This biased focus has led to a substantial failure to recognize the cultural achievements of peasants and tribals and their contributions to the development of Indian art and culture (*ibid.* 1995). Caste has similarly been argued as a source of bias in reconstructions of the Indian past. Ilaiah (1996) has pointed out that educational curricula in India omit Dalit-Bahujan history, and present Indian culture as a monolith. These critiques highlight an important problem in the study of the development of Indian culture, which archaeologists have implicitly been called upon to address. Anthropologists and modern historians have already responded to this critique, and as a solution have developed the subaltern project in South Asia (see, for example, Guha 1982, 1984, 1985; Arnold and Hardiman 1994), 'an enterprise designed to locate and listen to the non-elite voices of history, voices that speak against hegemonies both of colonialism and of the indigenous elite' (Gold and Gujar 1997: 83). Whether and how archaeologists attempt to rectify the biases that have entered the study of the South Asian past remains to be seen.

INDIAN PERSPECTIVES ON TIME AND THE PAST

The idea that Western historical scholarship and archaeology are solely responsible for awakening an interest in the past in India and many other regions of the world is a pervasive one. This view is commonly reflected in treatments of the history of archaeology in India that trace its origins to developments under British colonialism alone (Piggot 1950; Kirshnaswami 1953; Malik 1968, 1979; Chakrabarti 1982, 1988; Paddayya 1995), and thus perpetuate the perception of pre-colonial India as ahistorical (Cohn 1996) and dominated by a preoccupation with metaphysics and spirituality (Thapar 1966) that negated a need for historical knowledge. However, one of the realizations that has emerged from the post-processual critique in archaeology is the need to question 'the assumption that archaeologists have a privileged interest in the past's remains' (Layton 1989: 1), as well as the perception that archaeology is not in fact a universal human endeavour (Lane 1996). Thus Malinowski's claim that 'non-Western peoples are not given to reflecting on their past' (Malinowski 1954 cited in Layton 1989: 1) has begun to be deconstructed in the Indian context.

Several recent publications have re-examined Indian perceptions of the past in various ways. Thapar (1991, 1996), for example, has examined early Indian concepts of time, and argued that cosmological, cyclic conceptions of time described in early Indian texts did not debar consideration of other distinctly linear views of time, as is commonly argued.