

Digging for a Hindu Nation



*The search for the Hindu nation is closely linked to the development of archaeology and its manipulative use. **Rachel A. Varghese** traces some past projects, misconceptions and mis-truths which aid ideas of the Hindu right-wing in India.*

On 6 March, this year *Reuters* [reported](#) the existence of a committee that was appointed in 2017 by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to rewrite the history of the nation. The committee was headed by K.N. Dikshit, former Joint Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, who told *Reuters*: “I have been asked to present a report that will help the government rewrite certain aspects of ancient history.” The aim of the committee, the report goes on to say, is to use archaeological and DNA evidence to establish the Hindus as the descendants of the original inhabitants of the territory and to make a case for factual proof for the existence of the Hindu myths.

The above instance underlines not just the explicit manipulation of history and archaeology in recent years by the Hindu Right in India but also the intimate association that archaeology has had in the creation of a particular imagination of the nation based on religious identity in India, before and after independence. The process cannot be understood through the binaries of ideological use and abuse of archaeology. The specific location that archaeology has had as a discipline in colonial and post-colonial India, the perception of archaeology as a supplementing and authenticating tool for text/myth-based history, and the bureaucratic and state mechanisms that function in giving authority to institutionally produced archaeological knowledge are factors that have to be considered in this regard.

The case of Somnatha

A highly illustrative and much cited example is the case of Somnatha in Gujarat. Somnatha is the site of a Hindu temple which went through many phases of destruction and reconstruction and renovation in the pre-independence period. It was part of the princely state of [Junagarh, whose ruler wished to accede to Pakistan](#) at the time of independence. He was forced to flee to Pakistan [following a movement against him](#) led by the Indian National Congress and the territory was annexed to India. Senior INC leader, K.M. Munshi pushed forward the agenda to ‘reconstruct’ the temple in its ‘original’ form. He held the Hindu nationalist view that the raid on the temple by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1024 was a wrong done on the people (read Hindus) of India by the Muslims. Soon after independence, [an advisory committee](#) was formed in 1949 which included the then Director General of the ASI to decide on the matter of ‘reconstruction of the temple’. The centuries old ruins of the earlier temple on the site were removed and a new one was constructed in its place. The removal of the ruins went against the principles that govern protection of such monuments, one of the primary functions of the ASI. There was resistance from some quarters of the archaeology department to the removal of the ruins. Nevertheless the excavations were carried out by the institute and the ruins were replaced by a new structure.



The Somanatha Temple, a photograph taken in 1869 by D.H. Skyes, from Archeological Survey of India.

Oriental and India Office Collection, British Museum. Image credit: D.H. Skyes/[creative commons](#)

The case of Somanatha draws to attention a few important aspects related to the practice of archaeology in India. The first is a theme or approach “[that have always obsessed the archaeologist in India](#)”, that of authenticity and origin whereby, unearthing a precise moment of origin grants authenticity to a structure. There was a disposition within colonial and nationalist history projects to define ancient as loosely Hindu and medieval as Islamic. The perception of authenticity as origin would mean that the true history of a monument or place can only be revealed by stripping away its medieval (read Islamic) layers to expose the original (read Hindu) history; an attitude resonating well with Munshi’s nationalist obsession.

Past material and present identities

A second important aspect is the tendency in Indian archaeological studies to draw direct correlation between past material evidence and present identities. Scholars have discussed how the archaeology of Indus Valley sites have fed into identity assertions of various kinds over the years, with the pre-historic population being dubbed varyingly as Indian, Aryan, Dravidian, Hindu or Tamil. This includes the nationalist obsession of attributing ‘Indian-ness’ to the Indus sites, prompting large scale excavations for new sites in the western states of India following independence, the Tamil assertions of the Dravidians being direct descendants of the Indus population and the attempts to link the Vedic Aryans to the Indus Valley civilization. The latter case, as archaeologist Shereen Ratnagar [notes](#), is the result of a compulsion, often shared willingly by archaeologists of professional standing, to argue that the *Aryans* are indigenous to India. This should be understood in the atmosphere of majoritarian and exclusionary politics of the *Hindutva*, whereby Aryan equated to Hindu becomes the original inhabitants of India. This leads to Muslims and the other minority groups being automatically cast as aliens.

Somnatha, importantly, also brings into discussion the role that the ASI performs, or is expected to perform, as an organ of state bureaucracy in creating a nationalist imagination for the nascent nation state. Established in 1861, the ASI, one of the largest institutions of its kind, served the primary task of colonial surveys of collating and recording information about the colonised. In the post-independence period, the institution assumed a regulatory function in archaeological knowledge production and in the management and protection of material remains across the country. Owing to this historical role, the ASI is expected to give authoritative opinions on past ‘truth’. This is best evidenced in the role that the institution played in the [Ayodhya case](#). The ASI was asked to give a definitive answer to a legally formulated question of whether or not a temple existed at the site of the Babri Masjid, which was demolished to build the mosque. If one examines the excavation report that the ASI submitted to the court in the Ayodhya case, one finds that the institution also shares with the judiciary positivist notions of archaeology as a science which can make claims to such ‘truths’, whereby being dismissive of alternative interpretations.

Confusing mythology and history

The role of archaeology in Ayodhya case is closely related to another preoccupation in Indian archaeology from the early days that sought to attest textual sources through archaeological evidences. The projects to locate the places mentioned in the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana and the [Saraswati Heritage Project](#) that aims to identify the archaeological sites on the banks of the mythical river Saraswati, mentioned in the Rigveda, are the post-independent period examples for this preoccupation. In a more recent instance, the ASI is reported to have allowed [excavations](#) at Barnava in Baghpat district of Uttar Pradesh at a site which is popularly held to be the ‘Lakshagriha’ (literally house of lac) mentioned in the Mahabharata. Excavations at Ayodhya by B.B.Lal as part of the *Archaeology of the Ramayana Sites Project* and his assertions on the existence of a temple below the Babri Masjid has had a direct influence on the right wing assertions in the early 1990s, that led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992. The [court-ordered excavations](#) by the ASI at Ayodhya also have to be seen in the context of such established traditions of archaeological practice in India.

Archaeology, world over, has had an important role in endowing nationalist imaginations with materiality and authenticity. In the case of India, this is a role that has been strengthened to through the bureaucratic authority of the ASI. Owing to these factors, the discipline assumes a persuasive function in the creation of national and nationalist subject, [“endowing it” as Sumathi Ramaswamy notes](#), “with an essence which endures over the centuries by establishing a nominal link between pre-historic ‘ancestors’ and their descendants today, the citizens of the modern nation.” This potential of the discipline systematically comes into play in political contexts that demand authenticating new historical narratives, as in [the recent case of Taj Mahal](#), and in active rewriting of history as is happening in India in the contemporary times.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About The Author



Rachel A. Varghese has recently submitted her doctoral thesis at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU. She holds a masters degree and MPhil in History from the CHS, JNU and an Erasmus Mundus Masters in Archaeology from IPT&UTAD, Portugal and UNIFE, Ferrara. Her research interests include Public Archaeology, Politics of Archaeology and the history and archaeology of Indian Ocean trade. She can be contacted at rachelvarghese84@gmail.com