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**Occasional Paper No. 159**

**ARCHAEOLOGY AS EVIDENCE:  
LOOKING BACK FROM THE  
AYODHYA DEBATE**

**TAPATI GUHA-THAKURTA**

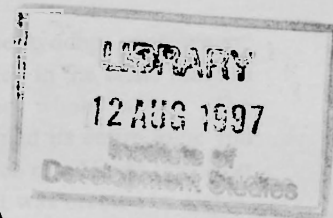
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**Tapati Guha-Thakurta**

Archaeology in India hit the headlines with the Ayodhya controversy: no other discipline stands as centrally implicated in the crisis that has racked this temple town, and with it, the whole nation. The Ramjanmabhoomi movement, as we know, gained its entire logic and momentum from the claims to the prior existence of a Hindu temple at the precise site of the 16th century mosque that was erected by Babar. Myth and legend, faith and belief acquired the armour of historicity in ways that could present a series of conjectures as undisputed facts. So, the 'certainty' of present-day Ayodhya as the historical birthplace of Lord Rama passes into the 'certainty' of the presence of an 10th/11th century Vaishnava temple commemorating the birthplace site, both these in turn building up to the 'hard fact' of the demolition of this temple in the 16th century to make way for the Babri Masjid. Such invocation of 'facts' made it imperative for a camp of left/liberal/secular historians to attack these certainties, to riddle them with doubts and counter-facts. What this has involved is a righteous recuperation of the fields of history and archaeology from their political misuse. Over the past decade, the onus of proving or disproving the remains of a destroyed temple beneath the now-demolished mosque has devolved more and more on the discipline of archaeology - on the elaboration of its excavation methods and analytical techniques.

The point of this essay is not to test the relative 'truth' of these claims and counter-claims around the disputed site - nor to delve into the complex chain of 'evidences' and 'deductions' that have been harnessed in support of these claims.<sup>1</sup> My interest lies primarily in the terms and rhetoric of the debate, and the wider questions it raises about the status of evidence and the nature of knowledge in archaeology. It

becomes necessary here to deliberately disengage form from content - to silhouette the discourse of scientificity, specialisation, and uniqueness of procedure that have been integral to the positioning of the discipline in this controversy; to plot the way professional domains are bounded and policed.

Across both camps, the battle is being waged on the high grounds of 'history' and 'science'. Yet, to confront the arduous marshalling of historical and archaeological evidence on both sides is also to face up to the inherent limitations of the scholarly project. Painstaking 'secular' reasoning has been hitting its head against its own wall, even as the anti-communal persuasions of scholars and activists at Ayodhya could do little to stay the actions of the violent *karsevaks* in their determination to substitute the masjid for a mandir. Conversely, one could argue that the 'Hindu' histories conjured up by the Ramjanmabhoomi protagonists have aroused as much scepticism as conviction, for they smack clearly of manipulations of fact and belief. On either side, the recourse to the languages of history and archaeology has only exposed a problem whose dimensions lie clearly outside their frame. To put it starkly - one can say that the proof for or against the destroyed temple beneath the mosque remains quite irrelevant to the crisis as it has grown around Ayodhya. Still, there is no doing away with the need for 'proof' in a national site that is so "ineluctably engulfed by history". However ineffectual the academic debate, Ayodhya can no longer figure outside history as what Pierre Nora would term a "lieux de memoire": it has slipped once and for all outside a people's "collective memory" into the nation's "historical" and "pedagogical memory".<sup>2</sup>

Taking the case of the Ayodhya dispute, this essay is concerned more broadly with the way histories have been produced and mobilised around old monuments and sites. How, for instance, has archaeology been constituting and shifting its grounds on the subject? How have its histories rested vis-a-vis other meanings and beliefs, other residual associations that lingered around the same sites? And, what are the limits that invariably confounded the staging of 'scientific' or 'objective' knowledges? The lessons from Ayodhya, I would argue, are less about

the abuse of history and archaeology, more about unresolved contradictions that have trapped the disciplines in their own shells.

While a product of its own times, the Ayodhya controversy resonates with a sense of such internal limits and tensions that attended the founding of the new scholarly fields in colonial India. In the latter section of the essay, I treat the current archaeological debate as a moment that is steeped in earlier histories. I use it as a way of marking disciplinary positions and approaches, constructions and claims whose genealogies can be traced back to the first archaeological surveys, writings and programmes of the late 19th century. From today's Ayodhya I switch back to vignettes of archaeological practices and perceptions of the late 19th century - to a period that marked both the maturing of the colonial project and the first indigenous participation and intervention in its programmes. It is a moment which presents us with archaeology's first grand visions of India's lost history and antiquity. It is also rife with the first internal debates and tensions within the discipline, some of the earliest competing bids to authoritative knowledges, and some of the most pointed tussles over 'facts' and 'proofs'. But before we track archaeology in India back to some of these inceptionary concerns, let us look more closely at the forms of its defence and deployment at Ayodhya.

#### *A threatened site, a threatened science*

When on 6th December, 1992, a militant group of Ramjanmabhoomi supporters razed the Babri Masjid, what they destroyed was much more than an old mosque. The mosque, in any case, had been fairly insignificant as a religious or historical structure; but its rubble became the symbol of the utmost violence, the deepest transgressions of religion and history. The day became inscribed as one of the blackest days in national history. Each blow on the stone structure came as an assault on the nation's secular self and on its cherished ideal of a collective history. The frenzied act violated not just Muslim sentiments, but also a century-long tradition of historical and archaeological conservation.

The attack has been widely derided as a betrayal of the very principles of modernity and progressiveness, as a retreat to medieval barbarism and intolerance.<sup>3</sup>

Of the many dangers that the act epitomised, not least have been the perceived threats to the 'modern' academic professions of the historian and archaeologist - to the integrity of their investigative methods and the objectivity of their knowledges. Where archaeology is concerned, the debate on the Ramjanmabhoomi/Babri Masjid has brought on, as seldom before, a defence of the 'scientificity', 'specialisation' and 'uniqueness' of the disciplinary field. It is this issue - its possessions and dispossessions - which I wish to foreground within the body of the debate.

From the start, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) had set this angle to the controversy. Long before the demolition of the masjid, its demand for a Ramjanmabhoomi mandir had rested on the mobilisation of a "mass of literary, historical, archaeological and judicial evidence", which it compiled and formally presented to the Government of India in December 1990.<sup>4</sup> Hence, it has been argued, arose the urgent need to refute and controvert what was falsely presented as "uncontroverted" proof: a task taken up in right earnest by the Centre for Historical Studies of Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1989.<sup>5</sup> The fight had to be conducted on the grounds and the lines laid down by the opponents. As one of the historians have explained,

Those who feel that a historian's critique of the VHP claims is illegitimate and misplaced, fail to understand the nature of the present political debate on the issue. The VHP rhetoric uses both the language of history and the language of myth; it seeks to authenticate its account by presenting it as 'history'.<sup>6</sup>

Let us briefly sample some of the ways the VHP has strategically combined myth and history - matters of faith and evidence - to argue what is termed its "pro-Mandir thesis". The very form of the presentation of its demands, as a historically testifiable thesis, made 'proof' a central element in the debate. For the VHP, for instance, the

historicity of the figure of Lord Rama or the proof of his birth at the present-day Ayodhya are hardly relevant questions, by "international standards prevalent in this kind of issue" - for, it explains, no-one demands evidence around the sacredness of sites like the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, and no-one questions the Christians' right to the holy site.<sup>7</sup> So, the relevant task was not to demonstrate that Ayodhya was the sacred Ramjanmabhoomi, but to prove the following - (i) the long history of the sacredness of the site and a persistent tradition of worship there by Ram devotees (ii) the existence of an earlier Vaishnava temple at the very spot of the Babri Masjid (iii) the demolition of the temple in 1528 by Babar's general, Mir Baqi, and the assimilation of some of its parts within the mosque that was constructed in its place.

The specific archaeological and art-historical evidence is only one segment of a large body of "documentary evidence" which was presented under three heads, "Hindu testimony", "Muslim testimony" and "European accounts". The first compiles a vast list of Sanskrit literary works, epic and scriptural texts, moving from the general evidence of an ancient tradition of Ram worship to the specific and direct testimony of the *Ayodhya-Mahatmya* (a part of the Vaishnava-khanda of the *Skanda Purana*) that "profusely eulogises the Janmabhoomi shrine and gives it location".<sup>8</sup> The "Muslim" and "European" testimonies quote a large line-up of writers from Abul Fazl in the 16th century, through 19th century travellers, surveyors and gazetteers, to two recent Dutch and Belgian scholars - all to certify primarily the last moot point about the demolition. Revenue records and the first settlement reports of the area are further used to reconstruct the "Janmasthan" in the village of Kot Ramchandra as a territorial and administrative entity.<sup>9</sup> It is against this array of sources that archaeological knowledge takes its vantage position to produce the most concrete, "on the spot" evidence of the material remnants of the temple beneath the mosque.

The 'evidence', here, has centered around both a scrutiny of the standing structure (what is above ground and visible to all) and a discovery of hidden under-surface traces (what is unseen and can only

be known by the professional excavator). The case built itself around what was seen as the obvious architectural incongruity of a series of black Kasauti stone pillars, carved with figural and ornamental motifs, supporting vital parts of the mosque. Using the dating and deductive methods of "the science of Art Style", the stone, structure and carvings of these pillars were all traced to a regional Hindu temple of roughly the 10th or 11th century, of the "late Pratihara or Gahadval style". The case then moved underground to reveal, among other finds, rows of burnt-brick pillar bases (of the same directional alignment as the pillars above), different floor bases (where the top-most mosque floor level could be stratigraphically distinguished from earlier pre-mosque layers), and a variety of Islamic Glazed Ware sherds, dated between the 13th and 15th centuries. Using here the science of Archaeological stratigraphy, the pillar bases and floor levels were seen as conclusive proof of the prior existence of a building on the same site, belonging to Islamic Glazed Ware period (i.e. a period distinctly pre-dating the 16th century mosque).<sup>10</sup>

Later, in 1992, during land-levelling operations at the site, and in the course of the demolition of the masjid, a team of scholars laid claims to some fresh striking archaeological discoveries, particularly to a hoard of sandstone sculptures and architectural fragments found deposited in a pit beneath the floor levels. Consisting of remnants of a temple *shikhara-amalaka*, carved pillar capitals and door jambs, and a panel with images of Vishnu *avatars*, this hoard was directly identified with a demolished Hindu temple complex at the site.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, the archaeological evidence from Ayodhya was projected by the VHP along two main lines: (i) pottery remains of the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBP) period that pushed back the antiquity of the site as far back as 700 B.C. (ii) the standing stone pillars, the excavated pillar bases and floor levels, and the hidden deposit of stone sculptures, all of which became 'conclusive proof' of the existence of a prior temple, its demolition, and selective incorporation within the Babri Masjid.

While these archaeological finds became the main target of attack of the anti-Ramjanmabhoomi camp, we find that, even among the Mandir protagonists the scope and status of this archaeological knowledge have



been open to question. On the one hand, their case has drawn heavily on the project, Archaeology of the Ramayana sites, conducted by B.B. Lal, then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey, from 1975 to 1980.<sup>12</sup> It was under this project that Ayodhya was designated as a prime site and fourteen trenches laid at different places, including some immediately around the Babri Masjid, to carry out extensive excavations. Yet, even as the mythical past of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata was sought to be archaeologically validated by a renowned professional like B.B.Lal, another colleague in the field, B.P.Sinha, a field archaeologist, admitted "the inadequacy of archaeology as the only or even a dominant source for the reconstruction of ancient history". Etching out the clear lack of archaeological evidence on Ayodhya from the "Epic" or even "Gupta" periods, stress was laid on the much greater potential of epigraphic, numismatic and literary sources.<sup>13</sup> If the past yielded little by way of architectural remains or foolproof material traces, it could nonetheless be richly conjured through a collation of other narratives and representations in Indian art and literature.

We see throughout this laboriously argued pro-Mandir thesis a free movement back and forth between what was classified as hard material evidence and persuasive conjectures. Thus, for instance, the evidences from the excavated pillar and floor remnants slide in with the argument that a site as centrally and prominently positioned within the town as the current Masjid site could never have been left free of a temple by the Hindu kings of Ayodhya.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, detailed listing from records of a history of religious conflict and Hindu efforts to retrieve this Janmabhoomi site converges with the ultimate stand on reasons of faith. So, we are reminded, if "for hundreds of years, if not thousands, the Hindus have *believed* this site to be the birthplace of their *divine* Lord Rama", we "cannot whisk away such long-held pious belief of millions with... tons of weighty polemics" or contrary propositions.<sup>15</sup> The argument slips from the invocations of 'hard facts' to a recourse to 'common-sense' to an ultimate stand on 'belief'.

It is precisely this style of argument - this unwarranted mix of the divine and the historical, the believed and the proven - which has made

much of this pro-Mandir thesis quickly contestable. While the confusion of 'history' with 'belief' has been easy to target, it has also been possible to dismiss much of its 'facts' as 'fictive', with the archaeological 'finds', in particular, coming in for a point by point refutation. I will be restricting myself, here, primarily to the reactions from within the disciplinary forum of archaeology. For these have been the most pointed in the assertion and protection of an exclusive scholarly expertise, and in the allegations about the 'motivated' and 'unscientific' nature of the VHP's arguments about the site.

Let us broadly identify some of the main grounds on which the parallel campaign set out to sift historicity from belief. One fundamental act of delegitimisation lies in its labelling of the fact-finding expeditions at Ayodhya as instant history and archaeology:

What is at issue is the attempt to give historicity to what began as a belief. Whereas anyone has a right to his or her beliefs, the same cannot be held for a claim to historicity. Such a claim has to be examined in terms of the evidence, and it has to be discussed by professionals...Historicity...cannot be established in a hurry and, furthermore, has always to be viewed in the context of possible doubt. Archaeology is not a magic wand which in a matter of moments conjures up the required evidence. Such 'instant' archaeology may be useful as a political gambit, but creates a sense of unease among professional archaeologists.<sup>16</sup>

This statement of the historian, Romila Thapar (a leading figure of the left/secular campaign) pinpoints the moot issues of the counter-posture. It marks out clearly 'history' from 'belief', 'objective' from 'motivated' scholarship, the properly-brewed methods from their 'instant' varieties. It marks out also the exclusivity of the professional domain, its singular responsibilities of authenticating the past, the long gestation of its working methods. Let us add to this the more outraged response of the archaeologist, Shereen Ratnagar, seeking to protect the uniqueness and autonomy of the discipline of archaeology against non-specialist

intruders. The procedures of archaeology, its units of study or the entities with which it works, are unique to it, she writes.<sup>17</sup> The problem arises from a general public ignorance and academic philistinism about its specialised procedures, and from a faulty conflation of its spheres with those of history or anthropology, causing the kind of violence to the discipline as occurred at Ayodhya.

The professional disgrace that Indian archaeology led itself into concerning Ayodhya is not only because of a diabolical conspiracy. There has been a general unconcern with method and even with the scope of the subject. This has left the field open for the mofussil 'neta' to misappropriate available information, with all attendant vulgarity.<sup>18</sup>

Taken together, these responses provide a full-blown sense of violated knowledge and an endangered science.

It has been important, from this standpoint, to contest, first and foremost, the kind of procedures employed at Ayodhya in search of evidence for a pre-existing temple and to challenge their very status as archaeology. The allegations have operated at different levels. To begin with, they have posed an inconsistency between B.B. Lal's first published reports from his Ayodhya excavations (available in *Indian Archaeology - A Review*, 1976-77) and the later public declarations of various new archaeological discoveries in 1992 as "direct proof" of the Mandir thesis.<sup>19</sup> A 'professional' report of an eminent scholar is separated out from the later flagrantly 'unprofessional' projections, that came none the less in the guise of archaeology from a "Historians' Forum". The reactions have ranged from occasional efforts to retrieve B.B.Lal's scholarly credentials from such public misappropriations<sup>20</sup> to open accusations of the involvement of archaeologists like him in conspiracy and vandalism.<sup>21</sup> Particularly, in the context of the new discoveries stumbled upon by an archaeological team at Ayodha during the events of 1992, the profession confronted with acute consternation this phenomenon of 'demolition' or 'voodoo archaeology' - where the levelling of land by the government and the mosque by a frenzied mob

magically threw up incontrovertible evidence for scholars.<sup>22</sup> The problem is seen to lie in the way professional archaeologists (those who clearly know better) have attempted to convince a gullible public (those who know no better) that this is 'true' archaeology. The response has been to both seal off the disciplinary domain from deviants and outsiders, and to create a new 'corrected' domain of public knowledge.

### *Returning Ayodhya to 'archaeology'*

The most crucial plank of the archaeological critique has been a questioning of excavation and investigative methods, and a careful screening of what constitutes 'facts' and 'evidence' in archaeology. It required, thus, the intervention of an orthodox field archaeologist, D. Mandal, to painstakingly reexamine the available data from the mandir/masjid complex, and test the validity of each of the claimed discoveries. The ultimate concern was with distinguishing 'finds' from 'evidence', with establishing that very little of the 'finds' can be classified as 'evidence', with disclaiming the possibility of anything like "final proof" or "incontrovertible evidence" in archaeology.<sup>23</sup> The exercise has involved a recourse to the primary analytical tools used by the first team of excavators at Ayodhya - the first trench notebooks, drawings and photographs. So, "an excellent photograph taken during excavation (almost certainly by B.B.Lal) of the trench near the south wall of the Babri Masjid" set out the key working point for Mandal's renewed scrutiny of each of the reported 'discoveries', old and new - like the brick pillar-bases, the hoard of Hindu stone sculptures, or the structural remains of an early wall at a 'pre-Islamic level'.<sup>24</sup>

With each of these, the criticisms have tended to converge around a singular issue: that of 'stratigraphic context', the constitutive core of the present-day science of archaeology. For example, an in-depth analysis of the data about the pillar-bases, it is alleged,

immediately reveals the complete ignorance of the stratigraphic context of the concerned finds. This despite the fact that these

finds, cited in the argument for the existence of a temple, were uncovered in systematic excavation. But for the casual information that there are two floors, one above the other and separated by a thick layer of debris, nothing has been communicated about the relationship of the floors with the 'pillar bases', the various bases with one another, or the 'glazed pottery with the floors and 'pillar bases'. Conspicuous by its absence in the argument was the key stratigraphy of the particular trench,...the various levels of construction of the 'pillar bases', the different layers sealing them and so on.<sup>25</sup>

The task is to return every material remnant to its embedded location within the excavated soil strata: for in this stratigraphic reconstruction lies the clue to the relative chronology and inter-relationship of different artefacts.<sup>26</sup> It is through such stratigraphic analysis that the 'easy' conclusions derived about the 'pillar bases' were overturned with the following counter-deductions - (i) that the various remnants claimed to be vestiges of the pillar bases were not contemporaneous, but belonged to at least five sequential structural phases (ii) that the so-called pillar bases were most probably remnant portions of walls from these different phases (iii) even if these were assumed to be pillar bases, constructed as they were of brick-bats laid haphazardly, they seemed incapable of bearing the load of the large stone pillars above. So, it is argued, there was nothing about these structural features or artefactual finds to suggest even in a circumstantial manner that they were a part of any single structure, leave alone a pillared temple on the spot raised in the 11th century.<sup>27</sup>

The invocation of stratigraphy becomes all the more pointed with regard to the discovered hoard of stone sculptures. Faulty digging, here, in the course of a land-levelling operation had led inevitably to a confusion of soil layers, a mix-up of artefactual sequences and a complete loss of the stratigraphic context of the objects - thus denuding them of any value as 'evidence'. These stone sculptures were thus branded as 'contaminated' (with modern post-depositional debris) and lacking in any evidential or archaeological significance.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps their

artistic and iconographic features could be productively analysed and dated, but not their archaeological context vis-a-vis the mosque. For, 'archaeological value' is seen to be grounded centrally in the fidelity to stratigraphy and proper excavation procedure. "Archaeological finds" we are reminded,

acquire the status of evidence only when situated in their context. In archaeological science, 'context' is the concerned stratigraphy, the sequence of soil deposits and the cultural material found in various deposits...The question of an unstratified artefact being used as evidence obviously does not arise.<sup>29</sup>

It is possible to draw out from this rigorous stand on stratigraphy a set of larger claims and postures that today stand integral to the discipline. For instance, in contrast to much of the 19th century premises of archaeological research in India, access to knowledge, it is emphasised, no longer centres around the experience of direct observation or first-hand presence at an excavation site. Hence emerges the central importance of systematic trench notebooks, detailed photographic records of the trench and its finds, and a laborious noting of all artefactual and stratigraphic information - to enable all other scholars to reexamine the data with the same facilities as the on-the-spot excavator.<sup>30</sup> This norm, it is alleged, has been repeatedly flouted by archaeologists at Ayodhya. Another emphatic point is made around present-day archaeology's primary concern with excavated, underground material rather than with over-ground standing structures. The priority is set by a system of dating and identifying surface objects on the basis of material excavated in that locus, and never the reverse. All "surface material", it is stressed, "is required to be consistent with excavated finds if it has to qualify as evidence...; systematically excavated material alone is conclusive".<sup>31</sup> This thus invalidated the elaborate conclusions drawn around the black stone pillars in the mosque. And it relegated to secondary status much of the iconographic analysis of the material from the suspect 'hoard' through comparison

with other examples of temple architecture and sculpture.<sup>32</sup>

Like all these attendant positions, the highlight on stratigraphy serves then to reiterate the uniqueness and autonomy of the disciplinary field. Each point of contention with the pro-Mandir thesis becomes also a stand about the advancement of the science, its great progression from its 19th century concerns, the rarity of its procedures, and the separateness of its spheres from those of ancient history or art history.<sup>33</sup> There is an attempt, all along, to return the objects uncovered in Ayodhya to this self-enclosed space of 'archaeology' - to remove them from all the 'extra-archaeological' wrangles of the Ramjanabhoomi movement. And, just as each excavated material remnant is arduously relocated in its stratigraphic context, the discipline itself retreats into its own in-grown and exclusive sphere.<sup>34</sup>

#### *The limits of the 'science'*

But where, we might well ask, does this leave us vis-a-vis the immediacy of the Ayodhya dispute. We can keep piling on more and more 'evidences' and 'refutations'; and, on each of the counter-postures, keep hearing out the responses and fresh proofs offered by the Janmabhoomi protagonists. Each criticism and allegation, it seems, is matched by a set of reverse-charges by the Vishva Hindu Parishad.<sup>35</sup> Still, we are left in the end with a problem that eludes any archaeological resolution. What is seen as 'extra-archaeological' - matters of faith and belief, imagination and conjecture - seem to invariably intrude on the domain of archaeology, to defeat the intricacies of its arguments. There seems no way 'historicity' can be completely and safely sifted out of 'belief' - no way that the realm of 'proof' and 'evidence' be kept separate from a wider circuit of claims and projections around Ayodhya, and their modes of authentication. We see in this debate a constant blurring of boundaries between 'science' and 'myth', 'fact' and 'conjecture', despite the persistent attempts by historians and archaeologists at resoldering this cardinal line of divide.

While the Ayodhya debate confronts us with a pointed display of archaeological reasoning and expertise, it also brings home a deeper.

fundamental tension that resides within the attitude to such historical monuments and relics. The tension stems from an unresolved schism between the archaeological valuation of monuments and their various alternative configurations - whether in popular, collective memory or (as we see in the VHP endeavour) in the nation's manufactured mass memory. The problem around such disputed sites clearly involves a whole sphere of beliefs, imaginings and residual meanings that lie beyond the bounds of 'scientific' knowledge.

Yet, it would be unreal to designate this sphere as a pure, pristine domain of popular memory that exists totally outside history and its pedagogic accoutrements. The mobilisation of popular belief and support for the Ramjanmabhoomi temple has proved quite the reverse. It has shown the ways and the extent to which popular myths and legends are shot through with the modes of reasoning and forms of dissemination of modern-day histories. In a proliferation of new popular "Hindu histories of Ayodhya", what were myths and metaphors stand metamorphosed as true history. These accounts of the past of Ayodhya share with the historical discipline the core claim to the real and comprehensive truth; at the same time, they remain essentially ahistorical in the way the verities of 'fact' are bolstered by the certainties of 'belief' - in the way legends are reproduced through the 'scientific' aperture of dates, statistics and geographical details.<sup>36</sup>

Academic historians have increasingly recognised the need to take seriously the many mythological histories of Ramjanmabhoomi to understand how myth, history and communal politics "inter-relate in complex ways".<sup>37</sup> Across both camps, the notion of 'popular belief' has remained a crucial nodal point of the dispute, the 'popular' figuring both as a means of legitimation of positions and as a prime target of address. The academic arguments - the scramble, for instance, for archaeological evidence and counter-evidence - have only been the extra reinforcements for a debate which had always rooted itself in a popular and public forum. Once again, it is the BJP/VHP/RSS combine which led the way in foregrounding this popular forum: since the 1980s, its case was first and most forcefully made in a series of popular Hindi histories and pamphlets and in newspaper articles in its mouthpiece, the



Organiser.<sup>38</sup> The counter-bid for a broad public audience of the left/secularist lobby has been undeniably weaker. It is a weakness embedded in its ingrained refusal to properly acknowledge or engage with this formidable popular front of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. By treating the popular phenomenon only as "political manipulation" of the people by a "fascist Hindu right", or by describing the demolition of the masjid only as an act of "vandalism" by a "lumpen-proletariat", the opposition is left either bemoaning the "incomplete secularisation" of the Indian culture or blaming the Indian state for not being "aggressively secular".<sup>39</sup> Alternately, it is left trying to retrieve an illusory, uncontaminated domain of popular memory, where Hindus and Muslims coexist in symbiotic shared histories.<sup>40</sup>

This other domain of myth and memory however, can no longer be distinctly figured as a space 'on the outside'. Rather, it exists as a nether zone within the invoked fields of history and archaeology - disrupting the proprieties of their methods and procedures, challenging their evidentiary logic, refusing to keep apart 'proven fact' from 'imagined truths'. The professional practitioners of the disciplines have gone all out to disqualify such knowledges as neither proper 'history' nor 'archaeology'. But selectively assuming their colours, these illegitimate intruders hover at the boundaries of the disciplines, confronting them with their own in-built limits.

We can see archaeology as a clear victim of such a process. The response of the endangered profession, as we have seen, has been to jealously guard its exclusive, scientific terrain. Archaeology, as Shereen Ratnagar points out, is not merely a branch of history, and not just to be listed alongside epigraphy or numismatics as a 'source' for 'ancient India'. It is, and has to be acknowledged as, "a discipline on its own track".<sup>41</sup> Yet, the impact of the long-drawn Ayodhya controversy has been to constantly 'detrack' the discipline from its elaborately-laid out scientific tracks. Repeatedly, we find archaeology dragged out of its sealed and self-enclosed scholarly sphere into a larger public stage, where it is made to defend and play out its expertise. The specialist is made to perform for a lay and an inevitably inappropriate audience. In the process, we see the corpus of scientific knowledge battling to assert

itself vis-a-vis a welter of counter-meanings and associations rallied around sacred sites. The science of excavation and stratigraphy stands face to face with the no less powerful phenomena of engineered memories or, what Ashis Nandy terms, "principled forgetfulness" that permeate the same site.<sup>42</sup>

Archaeology, even when it has been most flamboyantly used in defence of the Ramjanmabhoomi claims, weighs lightly on the main body of the Hindutva discourse<sup>43</sup> and on the kind of popular "Hindu histories of Ayodhya" it has nurtured.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the setting-up of the pro-Mandir thesis itself provides a stark example of the way archaeology defeats itself through its own terms. Let us take, on one hand, a strictly archaeological perspective on this issue. From archaeology's point of view, even the incontrovertible proof of a destroyed Vaishnava temple beneath the Babri Masjid - even the certainty of Babar's demolition of the temple to erect the mosque - cannot by any means justify the present-day razing of a 16th century mosque to substitute it with a temple. For that would negate one of archaeology's fundamental constitutive principles - that of historical conservation - enshrined in a series of acts and statutes in colonial and independent India. It would go against the grain of all its intricate knowledge of several other such temple remains beneath mosques or Buddhist remains beneath Hindu edifices throughout India. And it would render illegitimate, by the same logic, large numbers of the country's historical monuments that lie in the treasured custody of the Archaeological Survey. On the other hand, if we were to take a political or religious perspective on the disputed site, what we meet headlong are a set of convictions and claims that have little to do with excavated finds or their arduous analysis. The issue becomes one of a perceived 'correction' and 'reversal' by Hindus of a historical injustice, of a physical wresting of a long-lost 'possession': an imaginary historical Rama temple that is the birthright of an equally imaginary community of Hindus. And all 'histories' of Ayodhya are woven around this one narrative of past dispossessions and present rectitude. So, the whole history of the temple town of Ayodhya from ancient times comes to centre around a single grand monument at the holy site of the

Janmasthan and the singular relentless struggle of the Hindus to reclaim (or, to use their terminology, 'liberate') this site from its Muslim appropriators. Everything old here, from the river Saryu to the mute stone artefacts, is made to stand witness to this singular tale of the town's "raktaranjit itihās".<sup>45</sup> These narratives keep proliferating, while archaeologists are left debating whether any of the 'finds' in the Ayodhya trenches can qualify as 'incontrovertible evidence' - whether the excavated 'pillar bases' or 'hoard of stone sculptures' can at all be linked to a prior temple on the site. Returning each excavated find to its stratigraphic context has failed, clearly, to dislodge these other histories or to keep at bay their explosive consequences.

*From the present to the past: tracing earlier histories*

These confrontations and failings of archaeology come to us as part of a long earlier history. Though never outlined with such sharpness before, archaeology, ever since its inception in colonial India, has had to contend with similar tensions and oppositions, both within and outside its boundaries. It would be obvious to anyone narrating the history of archaeology in India that the scope and content of the subject has radically changed, that the science of field excavation or stratigraphy have substantially advanced since the 19th century.<sup>46</sup> To move from Ayodhya to other sites of archaeological activity and debate in the late 19th century means going back to a time when the field of knowledge was far less specialised and autonomous, far less centred on under-surface remnants, and far less tied to the comparative methodologies and techniques of the natural sciences. Archaeology featured then as a part of a broad, composite field of antiquarian studies, with its particular focus on the country's vast stock of 'monumental remains' and architectural 'antiquities'. Its concerns were then primarily with standing structures and ruins; its spheres closely overlapped with those of art and architectural history; and it had to work closely in tandem with epigraphy and numismatics to uncover a chronology of ancient India.

But there were similar questions being raised within the discipline,

even then - about what constituted 'scientific' method and procedure, about what made for 'evidence' in the ascription of dates, styles and influences to structures, or about who had the ultimate authority to adjudicate on these matters. Archaeology's self-positioning in the Ayodhya controversy resonates with the history of these earlier stakes and claims. In more ways than one, the present debate keeps returning us to the ways the Western discipline first negotiated its field in India, disengaging itself from the traditional 'native' view of monuments, and trying to create a new modernised domain of public knowledge.

Right from the outset, the European practitioners of the discipline had to settle the prime question of who owned the country's ancient monuments. It could never be the local rulers or people who had lived for years with these ruins, quite oblivious of their 'true' value, allowing these to disintegrate, freely ravaging and pillaging its stones for building purposes. Nor could it be the different religious groups and sects battling to establish their claims and monopoly over old sacred sites - for these only led to further infringements, demolitions and additions on the bodies of the old monuments, or threatened to produce domains of counter-authority around these sites.<sup>47</sup> The issue of ownership and custody could only be clinched by a new community of scholars and administrators who alone commanded a proper historicised and archaeological knowledge on these edifices. It required a careful dissociation from this other 'traditional' sphere of claims, beliefs and practices for the modern discipline to stage its arrival, establish the authority of its knowledges, and assert its sole custody over the relics.

But the success of the colonial project also involved a constant process of reengagement with an indigenous public - and it is this process that would invariably trouble its certainties and composure or split its internal unities. It involved, for instance, a transformation and disciplining of popular perceptions, the creation of a 'proper' public for its archaeological sites and museums: a project that would always remain unfulfilled. Since the late 19th century, the colonial archaeological establishment also relied heavily on the participation of Indian scholars and on the forging of an indigenous professional circle who would be fully committed to the development and expansion of the

science. While this latter agenda was eminently successful, it opened up, however, various grounds of tension. For if Indian scholarly participation was widely desired since the 1870s, the forms and terms of that participation were often open to contest. And the content of the new modernised Indian knowledges often produced resistant or dissenting positions within the scholarly field. The case of Rajendralal Mitra in Bengal in the 1870s - his close involvement with government archaeological programmes, on the one hand, and his debates with his European peer, James Fergusson, on the other hand, on the history of Indian architecture - offers a pointed example. It presents us with one of the earliest spectres of competing bids to authoritative knowledge within the subject - of the construction of alternative national histories that staked the same claims to 'proof' and 'evidence'.<sup>48</sup> In Bengal, in the late 19th century, this moment of indigenous intervention becomes an instructive point from which to survey the mapping-out and the bounding-in of the new discipline. This double agenda of archaeology in colonial India - of both pointedly dissociating itself from 'native knowledges', and of selectively transforming these to mobilise them in its own cause - exposed the kind of tensions and contradictions that continue to batter the discipline today. The problem, then, as in the current Ayodhya dispute, lay primarily with the constitution of an effective public forum of operation of the knowledges and expertise that archaeology engendered. It involved, then, as now, a continuous screening of the scholarly community. A distinct demarcation of the discipline had to revolve around a rigid sense of all that it superseded and all that lay outside its 'scientific' field.

There are other distinct resonances of past postures that surround the uses of archaeology at Ayodhya - these relate to the kinds of histories and meanings that are invoked around archaeological relics. If the present controversy harks back to earlier histories of the internal self-constitution of the discipline, it also echoes with themes and approaches that have always obsessed the archaeologist in India. We can extract from the elaborate archaeological arguments around the Ramjanmabhoomi site at least two concerns that have long been fundamental to the disciplinary episteme.

One core-theme, here, is the narrative of authenticity and origin - whereby the authenticity of a structure rests on the recovery of a presumed primary moment of origin. With all the advancement of excavation and investigation techniques, archaeology remains committed to pushing back the histories of each monument and site to more and more distant moments of antiquity. The deployment of archaeological evidence by the Ramjanmabhoomi movement provides a stark instance of the way a site came to be historicised only through a conjectural originary history of temple-construction and worship. By this logic, the standing edifice of the 16th century mosque at the site existed only as a sign of negation of an absent 'original' structure. And each relic recovered from the site - from the pillars within the mosque to the pillar bases, floor remnants or hoard of stone sculptures uncovered beneath - assumed meaning only through their place within this lost primary unit of a Vaishnava temple. The opposition has attempted to crack these constructions by vesting 'originality' squarely on the structure of the mosque, by disproving the possibility of a preceeding temple at precisely the same spot, and by diverting attention to the more general traces of the 'material culture' of the town of Ayodhya which could be dated back to the 6th century B.C. Over the years, the objects of archaeology graduated from 'monuments' to 'material cultures', from over-ground edifices to underground remnants of everyday life; but what persisted through the shift is the quest for the antiquity of a site, the unravelling of its oldest histories.

In the late 19th century, the search for origins played itself out in the way a vast landscape of architectural ruins was mapped, documented and classified.<sup>49</sup> As each building found its slot in an intricate grid of dynastic and religious classifications, the first architectural denominations of 'Buddhist', 'Hindu', 'Jain' or 'Muhammadan' (denominations which remained foundational to the subject) rested centrally on the expert's acumen of identifying the 'pure' and 'primary' structure beneath all subsequent accretions, alterations or decay. This sifting and recovery of the 'original' - the ultimate target of archaeological intervention - established, in turn, a distinct hierarchy of knowledges concerning these monuments. Thus in all archaeological

monographs of the time (for example, in each of Alexander Cunningham's first detailed studies of the Buddhist sites of Bhilsa [Sanchi], Bharhut and Bodh-Gaya), we find a constant privileging of 'ancient' sources over the 'medieval' and 'modern' histories of these monuments.<sup>50</sup> While 'ancient' references (whether gleaned from legends and literature, inscriptions or coins, or travel accounts of Chinese pilgrims) served as a key mode of authentication, the 'medieval' and 'modern' phases would register primarily as a story of depredation and decline. The spectre of 'medieval ravage' inevitably dovetailed with a more current scenario of 'native apathy and neglect': with a widespread local destruction of relics and pilferage of stones by the local populace. Together, the two provided the critical backdrop against which modern archaeological scholarship advertised its achievements and successes, returning to these monuments their 'true' authenticated histories. It was by positing the 'ancient' over the 'medieval' histories, the 'modern' over the 'traditional' approaches, that archaeology fulfilled its search for origins and effected its restorative project.

Central to this project was a second core-concern of the archaeologist: his fascination with the histories hidden in these monuments, with the stories stone could tell. They were stories to which only the expert field archaeologist, epigraphist or architectural historian could claim access. But they stood waiting to be told to a larger public to awaken them to the 'real' historical value of these monuments. Over the mid 19th century, India's vast reserve of architectural antiquities assumed utmost primacy as 'sources' for the country's hidden history. Systematically surveyed, documented and classified, these came to be regarded by British scholars as the most valuable and authentic indices of the past, in the absence of written histories or textual records. For James Fergusson, the pioneer surveyor and historian of Indian architecture, buildings and their remains figured as the most reliable witnesses of history (far more reliable than the shifting evidences of languages or literatures, legends or customs).<sup>51</sup> And the decoding of architectural evidence (the evidence purely of style, structure or design) remained his main working method, providing him with his singular clues to the past. Fergusson's

contemporary and the founder of the parallel field of archaeology in India, Alexander Cunningham expanded the concerns from the category of 'architecture' to a larger category of 'archaeological remains', where architectural testimony was matched and corroborated by the evidence from coins and inscriptions. In distinction from Fergusson's architectural scholarship, Cunningham evolved a genre of work that has been termed "text-aided archaeology"; yet, his approach too placed as great a priority on material remains over and above all ancient textual sources as sites of history.<sup>52</sup> Archaeology in late 19th century India came to revolve centrally around this theme of the testimony of stone - around the solidity and infallibility of this testimony, and the many finely-honed methods of extracting it. The theme spills over, simultaneously, into the new indigenous endeavours in 'scientific' history and archaeology in Bengal. Premised on a spreading passion for collecting local material remains, a new scientific history in turn of the century Bengal thrived around this novel commitment to the "evidence of stone".<sup>53</sup>

The Ayodhya debate stirs up once again this central vexed theme. Invoking stone as the mute but most reliable witness of history, it opens up a complex chain of past claims and contestations. It is possible to trace two main trajectories, here, in the way meanings and values are affixed to stone remains. In one, we remain within the more rigid and avowedly 'scientific' confines of proof, restricted to the range of what is closely verifiable or arguable from the precise material remains. Following on the lines laid out by the 19th century science, the present-day discipline used all its new technical acumen and know-how to hone in on the sheer materiality of the remains. A main consternation, as we have seen, was with the loose concoction of 'facts' and 'evidence' by the pro-Mandir camp of historians and archaeologists - with their style of free and exaggerated conjectures about a Rama temple from what was considered clearly debatable material evidence. The counter-stance has been to constantly underscore the limits of archaeological knowledge. To demolish the Ramjanmabhoomi thesis, the opposition set out to stratigraphically disaggregate the conjectured whole into a set of disembodied traces and fragments, returning each



excavated bit to its location within the soil.<sup>54</sup> An imagined monument is thus dispersed and dissolved into geology.

The second trajectory operates in striking contrast to this first approach, and often in open violation of its norms. We see, here, stone structures acquiring a voice, body and persona of their own, as they emerge as oracles of the past - as they are made to stand as silent witnesses of a history of which they alone bear the traces. The Ramjanmabhoomi discourse revels in such invocations of "mute witnesses" and the histories they testify to. Here, invariably, the histories resist the constraints of hard evidence as they conjure vast epochs, debacles and passages of time around scattered traces. They also repeatedly transcend the specificities of an individual site and monument to inhabit a grand national space. So, the tale of the Ramjanmabhoomi becomes archetypal of innumerable other Hindu temples; and the Babri Masjid becomes one among a large list of dargahs, idgahs and masjids, tabled region by region from all over the country, all of which become witnesses to the same tale of the destruction and appropriation of temples.<sup>55</sup> Again and again, in the VHP rhetoric, we see individual local histories being conflated into a collective national saga, and diverse details being compressed into the single trauma of the Muslim ravage of Hindu temples. The term "Hindu" is conveniently conceived here as a homogenised umbrella category, standing in "for all schools of Sanatana Dharma - Buddhism, Jainism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and the rest".<sup>56</sup> Such a configuration serves to strategically erase other conflictual histories - all instances, say, of Shaivite appropriation of Buddhist sites - to perpetuate a single recurring myth of Muslim depredation, and to construct India's entire archaeological history around a single Hindu/Muslim polarity.

Such extreme 'Hindu' constructions certainly carry over refrains of earlier colonial and nationalist readings of monuments. The first phases of archaeological survey and scholarship in the country were focussed primarily on the recovery of India's 'ancient' sites. While Buddhist cave-temples, stupas or rock-edicts offered the earliest examples of architectural antiquity, the operative principle of the 'ancient' became

loosely that of pre-Muslim past. It was a sense in which all the differentiated genres of 'Buddhist', 'Jain' or 'Hindu' styles (with all their sub-differentiations according to period and region) could figure as a composite 'ancient' collective vis-a-vis a later medieval 'Muhammadan' heritage. It was also a sense in which the authentication of the 'true', 'ancient' history of these monuments meant a stripping away of all 'medieval' traces -and their restitution from this later history of damage and destruction. Thus, we find centuries of earlier mutations and transformations of Buddhist or Hindu structures receding before and freezing around the one cathartic blow of 'Muslim ravage'. Archaeological writings of the late 19th and early 20th century would keep resorting to this theme of Muslim destruction as a prime rhetorical device. It became the main trope with which to assert the power of their new restorative exercise and their new claims to the custodianship of monuments. It is this trope which acquires an unprecedented hardness and manipulative edge in the current Hindutva discourse, sliding into a kind of programmatic agenda for the counter-appropriation of Muslim sites that the 19th century discipline could never have condoned.

I would suggest, here, that more than the content of these Ramjanmabhoomi claims, it is the style of their invocations which leads back to some fundamental strains and tensions within the discipline. The problem revolves around the type and scope of history that a stone relic could be made to tell. Archaeological narratives, like all historical reconstructions, have always worked with large elements of speculation and conjecture; but in each phase, with each specific subject, the question of what is permissible and scientific - of what constitutes feasible possibility and verifiable fact - have had to be carefully negotiated.<sup>57</sup> The lines of 'truth' in archaeology have had to be constantly demarcated, not just against falsities and distortions, but also against the fictional and imaginary.

Since the 19th century, this exercise, we find, has been open to contest at different levels, among different writers engaging with the field of scientific knowledge on their own terms and using its prerogatives to construct narratives that may or may not have qualified

as strict 'history'. This opened up some of the most creative and productive tensions within the subject. If it exposed its internal limits - the limits of its evidence and deductions - it also brought it face to face with the possibilities of imagination.<sup>58</sup> It was only through a constant tug and pull - through both a drawing of boundaries and their subtle transgression - that the new science of archaeology could enter the terrain of a nation's historical imagination, that its truth-claims could coalesce with the romance and thrill of historical tales.

In Bengal, over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a compulsive drive for the domestication and popularisation of the new field of archaeology foregrounded many of these tensions and contests. The inception of scientific methods (of epigraphy and numismatics, field excavations and stratigraphy) went hand in hand with the production of a rich crop of narratives around stone relics that often resisted the confines and strictures of these methods. It required the involvement of an indigenous intelligentsia, driven by the new demands for a national history, to extract from the new science the tools to test and correct the interpretations the colonial masters attached to their architectural history - to stretch the possibilities of evidence in ways that could compound the glories of ancient India. It required also a parallel space of Bengali writing - particularly a space of literature and fiction - for writers to implicitly challenge the regime of truth and indulge the full romantic possibilities of the histories hidden in stone. Thus, in the 1870s, we find the Bengali antiquarian, Rajendralal Mitra (one of the first Indian participants in the new archaeological project) turning against James Fergusson the same armoury of archaeological 'proof', to establish for India her own autonomous and ancient tradition of building and sculpting in stone. A few decades later, we find another Bengali archaeologist, Rakhaldas Banerjee (now a part of an expanding local scholarly community) diversifying from his academic writing to a new genre of historical fiction in Bengali, to conjure the nation's history around the reconstructed ruins of a Buddhist stupa at Bharhut.<sup>59</sup> To gain credence as national possessions, archaeological relics had to be configured within a more affective zone of memory and belief. For history, as Rabindranath Tagore reminded us at the turn of the century,

could never be ours through knowledge alone, it had to be grasped through the imagination; it could never be meaningful as a mere compilation of facts, it had to invoke a people's collective memory and identity.<sup>60</sup>

The Ayodhya controversy - its uses and abuses of archaeology - returns us to this central dilemma of scientific history. In its heated battle over 'facts' and 'evidence', we confront in new forms the same struggle and unease of the archaeologists in their role as the interlocutors of 'mute stone', or in their status as guardians of the true knowledge these could reveal. There remains, all along, an unbridged gap between proof and persuasion, between reason and belief, in which all scholarly discourses keep stumbling and dissembling. Such a gap resurrects in turn that old dichotomy between the archaeological science and the archaeological imagination. The 'science', as we have seen, is being valiantly rescued from its misappropriators and illegitimate claimants. But the 'imagination' still waits to be released and recouped from the hegemonic grip of the Hindu right. The solution lies less in the reiteration of the science and the staking of its separate boundaries - more in its realignment with a new historical imagination that can recover for Ayodhya the variety and multiplicity of its pasts.

## NOTES

1 In the huge body of literature generated around the Ramjanmabhoomi/Babri Masjid controversy, many of the publications offer a detailed scrutiny of the historical and archaeological evidence, both in favour and in strong refutation of what is called the "pro-Mandir thesis". To isolate the arguments from archaeology, in particular, the case for the Ramjanmabhoomi had one of its earliest full statements in S.P.Gupta's article, "Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy: What History and Archaeology Say", *Organiser*, 29th March 1987. A more extensive and up-to-date manifesto is a lavishly produced booklet, *Ramjanmabhumi: New Archaeological Discoveries* (New Delhi: Historians' Forum, 1993). On the refutation of these claims, since they began to be forcefully asserted, see, especially, Sarvepalli Gopal, ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue* (New Delhi: Viking, 1991), particularly, the Appendix, "The Archaeological Evidence", pp. 223-232; and D.Mandal, *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Demolition*, Tracts For The Times, No.5 (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993).

2 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoires", *Representations*, 26, Spring 1989, pp. 18-20. As Nora writes, "What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. What we call flare-ups of memory are in fact its final consumption in the flames of history." (p.13). Using such metaphors of consumption and destruction, he tracks the virtual disappearance of sites of 'pure' or 'traditional' memory in the face of the modern-day materialisation and multiplication of memory in museums, archives, monuments and history-books - "the indiscriminate production of archives", becomes for Nora, "the acute effect of a new consciousness, the clearest expression of the terrorism of historicised memory" (p.14). Ayodhya would figure in his analysis as one of the clearest sites of this 'terror' of historicised memory.

3 This sense is deeply embedded, for instance, in the essays in *The Anatomy of a Confrontation*, particularly in Sarvepalli Gopal's introduction, pp. 11-21. Here, he sees secularism and toleration as both a legacy of the true tenets of Hinduism and as the essential element of "a modern outlook: "the only possible social cement for a cannot revert to the approaches of *medieval* politics and set about destroying, under any circumstances, existing or erstwhile places of worship"(the emphases are mine). *modern* community and the only way of making certain that no one is treated as a second-class citizen on the ground of religion". And he writes, "India cannot revert to the approaches of medieval politics and set about destroying, under any circumstances, existing or erstwhile places of worship" (the emphases are mine).

4 *Evidence for the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir*, presented to the Government of India on December 23, 1990, by the Vishva Hindu Parishad. A substantial portion of the text (pp.21-104) are annexures reproducing the actual literary, inscriptional and historical

'evidences' in Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu and English. A final section consists of a point-by-point rebuttal of the documents of the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee (AIBMAC), submitted to the Government of India on January 6, 1991.

5 *The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Dispute* (New Delhi: Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1989; updated version of the pamphlet, 1992). It was, however, underlined, later, that the views expressed in this pamphlet were those of the authors alone (namely, Sarvepalli Gopal, Romila Thapar, K.N. Panikkar, and Neeladri Bhattacharya), and not those of either the Centre for Historical Studies or of the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

6 Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi" in *The Anatomy of a Confrontation*, p.138.

7 *Evidence for the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir*, p. 1.

8 *Ibid.*, pp.2-8.

9 *Ibid.*, p.9-16.

10 *Ibid.*, Annexure 28, "Ramjanmabhoomi/Babri Masjid at Ayodhya: An Archaeological and Art Historical Examination", pp.95-98.

11 *Ramjanmabhumi: New Archaeological Discoveries*, .

12 Under what was termed, a "national archaeological project", B.B.Lal worked closely with a team from the Archaeological Survey of India, headed by K.V.Soundarya Rajan, and excavated Ayodhya over two seasons, concentrating specifically on the areas south and west of the Babri Masjid. These excavation findings were first published in the annual reports of the Survey, *Indian Archaeology - A Review*, 1976-77, pp.52-53.

13 B.P.Sinha, "Archaeological Evidences of Ram Janmabhoomi", in *Evidence for the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir*, Annexure 29, pp.99-104.

14 *Evidence for the Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir*, p. 19.

15 B.P.Sinha, "Archaeological Evidences of Ramjanmabhoomi", p.103.

16 Romila Thapar, Editorial Preface, *Ayodhya: Archaeology After Demolition* (henceforth, referred to as *AAAD*), p. xiii.

17 Shereen Ratnagar, Introduction, *AAAD*, p.5.

18 Shereen Ratnagar, "Archaeology: In Search of the Impossible", *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 5-12, 1994, p.2901.

19 D.Mandal, *AAAD*, pp.17-18.

20 Mandal, in an assertion of professional solidarity, expressed his highest regards for B.B.Lal and offered his reexamination of Lal's data "entirely in the spirit of an academic exercise. It is like debating a freshly scraped section with a senior colleague out on a site" (*Ibid.*, pp.27-28).

21 These allegations became most vocal as a coterie of archaeologists - M.N.Deshpande, B.K.Thapar, S.P. Gupta, Makkhan Lal - headed by B.B.Lal, who had clearly condoned the demolition of the masjid, appropriated the organising initiative of the third World Archaeological Congress, held in New Delhi in December, 1994, and openly used the Congress as a forum to advance their 'archaeological evidences' for the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. This added fresh fuel to the sense of a rabid political abuse of the scholarly profession. See, for instance, Gautam Navlakha, "Archaeology: Recovering, Uncovering or Forfeiting the Past?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 19, 1994.

22 This critique repeatedly comes up in D.Mandal's tract - *AAAD*, pp.xi, 2-3, 17, 42, 49-52.

23 *Ibid.*, pp.10, 16-17, 41-42.

24 *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, "Analysis", pp.26-55.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 26-27.

26 Shereen Ratnagar also highlights the spatial and stratigraphic contextualisation of all artefacts as the essence of the 'science' of archaeology and its deductive procedures, and criticises the way this core method "goes unobserved by non-specialists" - Introduction, *AAAD*, pp.5-15, "In Search of the Impossible", p.2902.

27 *AAAD*, pp.39-40.

28 *ibid.*, pp.42-45. This charge of the "modern contamination" of these stone debris builds up to a larger accusation of a later pilfering of data and possible implanatation of certain suspect inscriptions and icons among the mosque debris by "vandal" archaeologists in the confusion following the demolition (pp.50-51).

29 *Ibid.*, p.41.

30 It is in this context that the scrutiny of a properly-taken photograph (of the trench and of each excavated fragment) becomes all important for archaeological research. While 19th century archaeology in India also placed the highest premium on the novel item of the photograph (to produce the most thorough and accurate record of a standing structure), the present-day archaeological photograph is concerned more with the revelation of rarified under-surface details and clues to the specialist - details which are unavailable not only to a lay observer but also to the naked eye of the excavator in the field.

31 *AAAD*, pp. 52-54.

32 However, outside this narrowly-defined circuit of archaeological re-examination, historians and art-historians too had closely analysed the iconography of the twelve carved stone pillars within the mosque to discover in these strong affinities with Buddhist and Jain motifs. Their conclusion was that the pillars in the mosque were clearly of an assorted lot, probably amassed from different sources, and "could on no account be described as *in situ*" - and that the evidence from these pillars could not in any way conclusively prove "the existence of a Hindu temple, and more particularly a Vaishnava

temple dedicated to Rama at the very same site as the present mosque". See, the comment by R. Champakalakshmi in *The Anatomy of a Confrontation*, pp.228-232.

33 This bid to assert the uniqueness, autonomy and scientificity of the archaeological discipline in India (most strongly voiced by Shereen Ratnagar in a piece like "In Search of the Impossible") needs to be located within some vital methodological and conceptual shifts within the subject in India and the West. While I have extracted mainly the diatribes against the 'misuse' of archaeology at Ayodhya, I have not done justice to the full theoretical and methodological complexities of this position in India nor to the important contributions it has made to our knowledge on very ancient 'material cultures' - for instance, on a vast new area of pre-Vedic Harappan sites in northern and western India. On some of these new researches and their radically revised implications for ancient Indian history, see, Shereen Ratnagar, *Encounters: The Westerly Trade of the Harappan Civilisation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981) or Romila Thapar's essays, *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi: Oxford university Press, 1992).

It would also be particularly instructive to situate this new disciplinary stance in India within the phenomenon of what was termed the 'New Archaeology' in U.S.A and Britain, promoted by scholars like Lewis Binford [*An Archaeological Perspective* (New York, 1972) and *In Pursuit of the Past: Decoding the Archaeological Record* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983)]. For it replicates in many ways this 'New Archaeology's attempt to break out of the discipline's earlier subservient status as a 'source for history' and its confinement to the mere collection, ordering and description of data. The current language of scientificity in the Indian profession directly echoes this New Archaeology's obsession at the time with constituting itself as a 'science' in its own right, its employment of the methodology of natural sciences like geology, palaeo-botany or ecology, and its attempts to produce a new "science of the archaeological record". Under this new dispensation, archaeology forged its status as a 'science' by a novel concern with the testing of hypotheses, formulation of general laws of human and societal behaviour, and the generation of theories. These stances of the New Archaeology stand scrutinised in many latter-day critiques, for instance, in Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) or Michael Shanks and Chris Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

34 Among other issues, it was this in-house reification of the discipline in the West - the positivism and scientific rigour of the 'new Archaeology' of the '70s (also termed as mainstream 'processual archaeology') - which has come under attack since the '80s by a new school of 'post-processual' approaches. Challenging the scientific insularities and over-specialisation of 'processual archaeology', the new approaches drew on the wider perspectives of history, social anthropology and textual criticism to foreground issues of social context and ideology in archaeological research. For a fuller flavour of these critiques, see Hodder, *Reading the Past* or Shanks and Tilly, *Re-constructing Archaeology*.



35 What is particularly interesting, here, is the way the VHP returns the charges of political manipulation and tampering of evidence against the other camp, to preserve for itself the high grounds of 'proof' and 'authenticity'. There is an allegation, for instance, about the later deliberate suppression of "Muslim testimony" - of selective omissions from later reprints of various Persian and Hindi books and manuscripts of all passages referring to "the demolition of the temple at Janmasthan". Such processes of concealment were seen to have gained momentum especially since 1949: that momentous year when an idol of child-Rama apparently manifested itself (rather, was installed) inside the Babri Masjid, strengthening Hindu claims over the site. There are also allegations about "motivated" archaeological quibbling about the Buddhist lineage of many of the pillar carvings, while ignoring the most likely and tenable possibility of a 10th/11th century Hindu temple on the site. While some scholars have gone all out to show that the Ramjanmabhoomi claims are all recent concoctions, the VHP argues the reverse. "Until recently", it asserts, "the pre-existence of a Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir at the Babri Masjid site was a matter of established consensus. It was confirmed by a large number of Hindu, Muslim and European sources...and all the iconographical and archaeological findings at the site. By contrast, the alternative hypothesis is a recent invention of armchair theorizers under political compulsions. Formally, it does no more than put into question a number of the sources which confirm the Mandir hypothesis...Materially, it does not come up with any proof: no proof that the Mandir document is telling lies, much less any proof of the events that would make up an alternative hypothesis." (*Evidence for the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir*, pp.19-20).

36 For a rich discussion on this theme, see Gyanendra Pandey, "Modes of History Writing: New Hindu Histories of Ayodhya", *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 18, 1994, pp.1523-1528.

37 Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi", p.132.

38 Some of the best-known and most widely-circulated Hindi histories and pamphlets are: Pratap Narain Mishra, *Kya Kahati Hai Sarayu Dhara ? Sri Ramjanmabhumi ki Kahani* (Lucknow, 1986, 2nd edition, 1990); Radhey Shyam Shukul, *Sri Ramjanmabhumi: Sachitra Pramanik Itihasa* - "An Illustrated Authentic History" (Ayodhya, 1986); Ramgopal Pandey, *Ramjanmabhumi ka Raktaranjit Itihasa* (Ayodhya, n.d.); *Sri Ramjanmabhumi ka Romanchakari Itihasa* (Ayodhya, n.d.); Sri Ramjanmabhumi Mukti Yagya Samiti, "Sri Ramjanmabhumi ke bare me Tathya", *Hum Mandir Wahin Banayenge* (New Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1989); *Sri Ramjanmabhumi ka Sampurna Itihasa* (Ayodhya, 1991). The form and content of such writings are analysed in Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi" and Gyanendra Pandey, "Modes of History Writing".

39 Some of these inadequacies of the secularist stand on Ayodhya have been recently explored by Vivek Dhareshwar, "History and the Politics of Self-Description", unpublished paper, 1996.

40 Outside the stranglehold of Hindutva discourses, and outside the official secular rhetoric, a body of alternative approaches have more effectively attempted to reconstruct the everyday "lived" world of Ayodhya, with its multiple inter-woven traditions and its many "forms of interweaving of pieties and communities". For a recent evocative account of this 'other' world of Ayodhya, see - Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram, Achyut Yagmk, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

41 Shereen Ratnagar, "In Search of the Impossible", p.2901.

42 Ashis Nandy characterises such "principled forgetfulness" as "an antidote to the ravages of modern historical consciousness". He sees it as one of the "crucial psycho-social attributes" which the "lived world of Hinduism" brings into play as a way of "re-reading and cauterising its traumatic experiences". Nandy, Trivedi, Mayaram, Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality*, p.vii.

43 The term, Hindutva, which has gained wide currency in our present political vocabulary, implies a well-worked out theory and programme of Hindu nationalism propagated by the combined front of the RSS/VHP/BJP. The essays in Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today* (New Delhi: Viking, 1993) provide a dissection of the ideology, representations and the invented traditions of Hindutva of the past decade.

44 These popular histories, we find, are seldom constrained and inhibited by the limited corpus of verifiable 'facts' that archaeology has laid at their disposal. For instance, while archaeological and art-historical 'evidence' talks only of a 10th/11th century Vaishnava temple of the late Pratihara style, the imagined Ramjanmabhoomi temple in the Hindu histories is freely drawn back in time to the first rediscoverer of the site, Vikramaditya, who himself is variously located between the 2nd century B.C. and the 5th century A.D. And Babar's act of demolition of the temple in 1528 is conjured as only the culmination of an "ancient history" of "foreign aggressions on Ayodhya", where Ravana figures as the first aggressor to be followed by the Greek king Menander and then a Muslim plunderer in Mahmud of Ghazni's army. Gyanendra Pandey, "Modes of History Writing", pp.1523-1524.

45 This is the essence of the histories narrated in Pratap Narain Mishra's, *Kya Kahati Hai Sarayu Dhara ?* or Ram Gopal Pandey's *Ramjanmabhumi ka Raktaranjit Itihasa*.

46 The history of the changing methods, approaches and concerns of archaeology in India is best documented in F.R. Allchin and Dilip K. Chakrabarti, ed., *A Source-book of Indian Archaeology* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1979) and Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *A History of Indian Archaeology upto 1947* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988). The theory and technique of stratigraphy came to be first extensively employed in Indian archaeology by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the 1940s, when it tied up with a new primacy of field archaeology and a new wave of investigations into the pre-history, proto-history and very early history of India, (attempting particularly to contend

with the huge gap in knowledge on the period between the end of the Indus Valley civilisation and the absorption of north-west India into the Achaemenid empire in the 6th century B.C.).

47 In the first years of the Archaeological Survey of India, this problem surfaced openly around Buddhist attempts to reclaim a site like Bodh-Gaya that had for centuries been appropriated by Hindu Shaivites. Here, the British attempts to recuperate the lost and original Buddhist history of such sites clearly set itself apart from what was seen as the unscientific, haphazard restorative activities of a Burmese Buddhist delegation at Bodh Gaya in 1876 which resulted only in "the masking and modernising of the ancient temple". And, in the subsequent years, the colonial government remained equally bent on asserting its 'archaeological' claims on the site against the violent religious contentions that raged over it between the Ceylonese Buddhist delegation led by Angarika Dharmapala and the Hindu *mahants* of Bodh-Gaya. On the early history of the archaeological recovery of Bodh-Gaya, see Rajendralal Mitra, *Buddha Gaya: The Hermitage of Sakya Muni* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1878) and Alexander Cunningham, *Mahabodhi* (London: W.H.Allen & Co., 1891).

48 Rajendralal Mitra repeatedly challenged James Fergusson's theory of the Greek origins of the stone architecture in India and argued instead for an autonomous and ancient history of Indian stone architecture that must have preceeded the first available remains from the Mauryan period. This view and its 'evidences' were elaborated in his two main archaeological monographs, *The Antiquities of Orissa*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1875, 1880) and *Buddha Gaya*. Fergusson's virulent (and now infamous) reaction to these criticisms anticipates many of the current disciplinary stances in the way it questioned the legitimacy and scientificity of Rajendralal's scholarship and accused it of extra-archaeological motivations. See, James Fergusson, *Archaeology in India with especial reference to the Works of Babu Rajendralal Mitra* (London, 1884; Reprint - New Delhi: K.B.Publications, 1970).

49 Between the 1840s and the 1870s, the surveys and writings of James Fergusson pioneered this work of the documentation, illustration and classification of Indian architecture, culminating in his compilation of a comprehensive *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (London: John Murray, 1876). In parallel, from 1861, Alexander Cunningham, in his newly-created office of Archaeological Surveyor to the government, began to map out through his field excavations a detailed topography of the ancient archaeological sites of upper and central India. See, *Archaeological Survey of India, Four Reports made during the years, 1862-63-64-65*, by Alexander Cunningham (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1866; Reprint - Delhi/Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972).

50 Cunningham centrally premised his archaeological investigations around one key ancient source: the travel accounts of the two Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang, who visited India in the 4th and 7th centuries A.D. - a source which had then recently been made available to European scholarship in French translation. In fact,

Cunningham in his explorations sought primarily to retrace the steps of these Chinese pilgrims. And following on his work, these Chinese accounts long served as a main mode of the identification and reconstruction of ancient north Indian sites. Interestingly, the testimony of Hiuen Tsang's accounts of Hindu temples at Ayodhya is invoked even in the Ayodhya debate, in *Evidence for the Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir*, pp. 101-2.

51 Compared to languages or literatures, architecture, he wrote, "never shifts its locality,...it does not change with time; and...we know exactly what the religion, what the art and civilisation of the people were who excavated these structures". All of Indian architecture, he felt, could be read as "a great stone book, in which each tribe and race has written its annals and recorded its faith..." Fergusson, *On the Study of Indian Architecture* (London: South Kensington Museum, 1867; Reprint - Delhi/Varansi: Indological Book House, 1977), pp.10-11.

52 These priorities of Cunningham are laid out as early as 1848 in his directive, "Proposed Archaeological Investigation" - see, *A Source-book of Indian Archaeology*, pp.10-11.

53 The obsession with the "evidence of stone" (what in Bengali was termed "pathure proman") permeated the writings of turn-of-the-century historians and archaeologists like Akshay Kumar Maitreya or Rakhaldas Banerjee. Akshay Maitreya's articles like "Aitihasik Jatkinchit" (*Bharati*, Baishak: 1305/1898) or "Pratnavidya" (*Sahitya*, Poush 1319/1912) and Rakhaldas Banerjee's two-volume *Bangalar Itihas* (Calcutta: Bengal Medical Library, 1914,1917) provide powerful instances of the invocation and deployment of such evidence.

54 The emphasis on hard scientific method disembodies and objectivises the artefactual remains to a point that renders them into racted traces of the past, unhinged not only from any imaginable structure but also from any tangible human histories. In such archaeological terminology and reasoning, such material traces become constitutive of their own, equally abstracted cultures. Thus, for the earliest periods of Indian history, we have 'archaeological cultures' and whole periods defined purely through the diagnostic trait of common 'artefact-types' labelled as Painted Grey Ware (PGW) or Northern Black Polished Ware (NBP). And such cultures, we are told, are exclusive archaeological constructs, and not really equatable with 'cultures' of historians or anthropologists.

55 A striking instance of such constructions and elaborate listing of "Muslim monuments...built with the materials of Hindu temples" is Sita Ram Goel's article "Let the Mute Witnesses Speak"- in a compilation of writings by Arun Shourie, Harsh Narain, Jay Dubashi, Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel, *Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them (A Preliminary Survey)* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1990), pp.62-181.

56 *Ibid.*, p.62.

57 The issues of permissible imagination and conjecture was constantly raised within archaeology in India. Going back to a statement of 1905, archaeology as a "science...risen out of the study of antiquarian odds and ends" was seen to be still principally working with "imagination and hypotheses". "As a science, it is really of recent

development, and even yet, in the minds of some, has hardly attained its rank as a purely inductive science with fixed principles and defined aims." (James Burgess, "Sketch of archaeological research in India during half a century", reprinted in *A Source-book of Indian Archaeology*, p. 29) Four decades later, in 1949, Mortimer Wheeler emphasised the advancement of the 'science' of archaeological fieldwork in independent India that allowed now "the methodological, logical use of *the disciplined imagination* in the evaluation of cause and effect." ("Archaeological Fieldwork in India: Planning Ahead", *A Source-book of Indian Archaeology*, p.44).

58 This theme has been very well explored in a recent Bengali article that delves into a range of writing in Bengali of the early century, fictional and non-fictional, which in very different ways have posed the problems of the limits and possibilities of archaeological knowledge - Arun Nag, "Pratnatatva o Pratikriya", *Academy Patrika*, No. 9, 1996.

59 Rakhaldas Banerjee, *Pashaner Katha* [the story of stone], English sub-title, "A Historical Romance" (Calcutta, 1914; Reprint - Calcutta: Ghosh Dastidar, 1982). For an extended analysis of this work of Rakhaldas, in the detailed context of the trajectory of archaeological thought and practices that I have sketched in this last section, see my article, "Monuments and Lost Histories: The Archaeological Imagination in Colonial India" in E. Lunbeck and S. Marchand, ed., *Proof and Persuasion: Essays on Authority, Objectivity and Evidence* (forthcoming, Princeton: Princeton University Press).

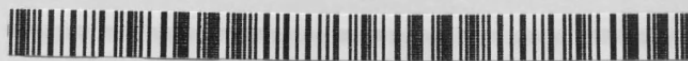
60 Rabindranath Tagore, "Bharat-Itihas-Charcha" in his collected essays on history, *Itihas* (Calcutta, 1915). Quoted in Arun Nag, "Pratnatatva o Pratikriya", pp.66-67.

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