

RESEARCH PAPER

# Social and Political Factors in Post-Colonial Indian Archaeology: The Case of Sanghol, Punjab

Neha Gupta\*

In this paper, I present the case of Sanghol, Punjab, in Indian archaeology to highlight the influence of social and political factors on the interpretation of archaeological data and the preservation of cultural heritage. Using a geographic approach, I show how geopolitical tensions and the desire for internal political stability influenced archaeological practices in post-colonial India. In the aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, local archaeological investigations in Sanghol, located 200 kilometres from the sensitive Pakistan-India frontline, piqued the interest of the Archaeological Survey of India, the national department for archaeology and heritage management. The Survey subsequently carried out collaborative field studies in Sanghol between 1986 and 1990, reflecting the changing relationship between the local community and the national government at a time of intense political uncertainty. I argue that there is greater competition and collaboration between knowledge producers in Indian archaeology than has been accepted. This, in turn, impacts our understanding of the practice of national archaeology.

## Introduction

This article will introduce geographic approaches as a way to draw out the social and political dimensions of archaeology. In the post-colonial Indian context, national archaeology has been practiced in the shadow of political instability and social unrest. I argue that local conditions in Independent India impacted where and when Indian archaeologists carried out fieldwork and the interpretation of archaeological data. Using the case of archaeological investigations in Sanghol, a community in the north Indian state of Punjab, I examine how the desire for political stability impacted archaeological practices, and how, because of its close relationship with Indian history, archaeology is a politically sensitive field of study. This situation, in turn, heavily influences archaeological fieldwork in India.

Archaeology in Punjab, and in Sanghol more specifically, has been a recent focal point for scholars. This interest is reflected in Himanshu Ray's (2010), *Sanghol: The Archaeology of Punjab*, an eleven-chapters edited volume centered on archaeological studies in Sanghol. B.M. Pande (2010), a former director of the Archaeological Survey of India (henceforth the Survey), remarked that Sanghol is "one of the most important sites not only in the Punjab but in the subcontinent".

Ironically, neither Ray nor other contributors to the volume discuss the social and political conditions in which Sanghol was excavated, a particularly surprising

situation given the intense scholarly and public scrutiny Indian archaeologists have come under in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996; Coningham and Lewler 2000; Ratnagar 1994; 2004). This oversight obscures our understanding of the practice of post-colonial Indian archaeology.

Moreover, Pande's remarks are unexpected and curious: the Survey, which is the national department for archaeology and heritage management, excavated Sanghol with the Punjab department between 1986 and 1990, yet, the Survey's report for this field study has not yet been published (CAGI 2013)<sup>1</sup>. The Punjab department has no plans to publish an independent report (K. S. Siddhu, personal communication, 2010); neither the state department nor the Survey has carried out further field investigations in Sanghol<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, Pande's assessment stands in contrast to the Survey's limited investigations in Sanghol in the 1950s and throughout the 1970s. At that time, the Survey archaeologist Yajna Datta Sharma (henceforth Y. D. Sharma) advised officers to excavate no more than "a small shaft to ascertain the sequence" at Sanghol (NAI 1962)<sup>3</sup>, remarking that an excavation would only confirm the accepted cultural sequence in Punjab. This begs the question: what changed in 1986 that Sanghol came to be critically important for Indian archaeology and the Survey? How and why did interests in Sanghol change and how did social factors influence the interpretation of archaeology at this site? And finally, how does the division of an archaeological collection amongst multiple collaborators impact our overall understanding of the past?

In this article, I introduce geographic and spatial approaches as a way to gain insight on social and political

\* Department of Geography, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada  
[nguptag@gmail.com](mailto:nguptag@gmail.com)

dimensions of Indian archaeology. I demonstrate that political crisis and national interests influenced understandings of Sanghol in post-colonial Indian archaeology, reflecting an interweaving of space and power. This does not mean that Sanghol was significant only regionally and lacked national importance. Rather, Sanghol's very recent status amongst the 'most important sites' in Indian archaeology may be seen as a reflection of the impact of social and political factors on the interpretation of archaeology and of the changing interests of Indian archaeologists. Discontinuities in research at Sanghol show that it was not archaeologically important within the established historical framework in which innovations developed elsewhere were brought into India by Aryans. The Survey's collaborative investigations in Sanghol signal the changing relationship between the local community and the national government during a period of intense social and political instability. This situation has implications for our understanding of national archaeology.

Following Indian independence in 1947, some Indian archaeologists influenced by Hindu nationalism increasingly questioned the Aryan invasion and the foreign origins of caste. This view renewed scholarly interest in the relationship between the *Rg Veda* and later Sanskrit texts, the *Puranas*<sup>4</sup>. Because many scholars believed in the Vedic origins of Indian civilization, and because they thought that Aryans had introduced caste, up until the early 1990s, relations between Aryans and non-Aryans were of great interest to scholars and policy makers (Jha 1991). These views often overshadowed concerns of India's ethnic and linguistic minorities, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Gupta, N 2013a). It was precisely amid political uncertainties in the wake of intense competition for an autonomous state of Khalistan for Punjabi-speakers, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 that Sanghol gained its place in Indian archaeology.

It was in this context that Indian archaeologists reinterpreted Sanghol in terms of social stratification, where Harappans (and their descendants), a dynamic and creative social group, brought social order and technologies to local, non- or pre-Harappan communities. These methods served the social and political aims of the national government at a time when it faced growing social unrest and severe internal political instability that threatened Indian unity. Through an analysis of popular and scholarly publications as well as archival records, I show how after independence from the British Crown in 1947, the practice of Indian archaeology was influenced by both an ideology of 'fundamental unity' throughout India and by Hindu nationalism. Increasingly difficult relations between a pro-Hindi-speaking national government and India's ethnic and linguistic minorities such as Punjabi-speakers marked growing disagreement over archaeological interpretation and the preservation of cultural heritage. For scholars and policy makers, concerns over Indian unity and security were heightened by sensitive geopolitical relations with India's immediate neighbours. These tensions impacted the collection and interpretation of archaeological data.

Specifically, as a result of armed conflict and intensifying hostilities between the newly created Dominions of

Pakistan and of India in 1947, Indian archaeologists could no longer reach or study many archaeological sites and collections. Sites such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa, the Indus Valley sites excavated in the 1920s, and Taxila, an archaeological site relevant to understanding ancient India came under Pakistan's jurisdiction. At the same time, Indian archaeologists lost access to collections stored at local museums in East and West Pakistan<sup>5</sup> and subsequent opportunities to study archaeological material (Lahiri 2012). Challenging foreign relations between India and Pakistan have impacted the practice of post-colonial archaeology in this geopolitically strategic region (Lawler 2008), yet we have only a limited understanding of the influence of these tensions on the *interpretation* of archaeology.

In this post-colonial context, some Indian archaeologists promoted internal development as a factor of societal change, challenging conventional views of the Indian past in which creative and dynamic groups brought innovations into India. Yet whereas these perspectives offered ammunition against colonial interpretations of the Indian past, an internal view of cultural development reinforced Vedic origins of Indian civilization, thus maintaining a caste-based prehistory, which presumed cultural continuity between contemporary people and prehistoric groups. At Sanghol, Indian archaeologists influenced by Hindu nationalism sought to recover 'indigenous' practices and 'Vedic roots'. This view of prehistory excludes all non-Hindus from Indian society and social dynamics, which, in turn, is a source of tension for India's ethnic and linguistic minorities (Gupta, N 2013a; 2013b).

The data for this study come from archaeological publications in scholarly and popular journals, as well as archival documents housed at the National Archives of India (henceforth NAI) in New Delhi and at the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Archaeology and Museums, Punjab in Chandigarh. The choice of depositories is significant. Since archives are themselves a product of the society in which they were created, they are influenced by their social, political, cultural and historical circumstances (Cox and Wallace 2002). Collections in depositories differ in content matter, as well as in historical coverage.

Specifically, the historical coverage at NAI encompasses colonial and post-1947 documents, and the latter collections represent a distinctly national perspective on archaeology and heritage management in India. Previous work in the history of Indian archaeology has emphasized a colonizer-colonized dynamic in which Indian views are juxtaposed to European ones (Singh 2004; Ray 2008), underestimating the influence of 'princely' or Native States, territories that were differentiated from Crown-administered ones (Sengupta and Gangopadhyaya 2009). Yet while these approaches are fruitful for colonial settings, they fall short in the post-colonial context (Gullapalli 2008), where relations between the national government and state governments take centre-stage (Guha, R 2007). To better understand perspectives of post-colonial archaeologists in Punjab and the influence of local and national dynamics on the interpretation of archaeology, this study examined annual field reports and popular publications

produced by the staff in the Punjab department during the Sanghol excavations from 1985 to 1990, alongside documents available in national archives.

Broadly conceptualized, the archaeological community in post-colonial India consists of three knowledge producers, namely, the national department (Survey), universities and research institutions, and state departments. Archaeologists employed at the Survey and at state departments of archaeology are considered civil servants and all state departments have full-time staff. In state departments, archaeologists are often recruited locally and from within the state in which they are resident. These constraints are likely eased at the Survey, which employs archaeologists for its offices in New Delhi, and 'regional offices' across India<sup>6</sup>.

Along with archival collections, newspapers such as *The Tribune*, an English-language daily published in Chandigarh, and *The Times of India*, an English-language daily distributed throughout India, offer insight on public reception of the latest archaeological recoveries. Survey archaeologists and those in state departments alike make use of this medium to disseminate the interpretation of archaeology. To that end, the present study examines newspaper articles relevant to archaeology in Punjab. A brief overview of archaeology in Independent India is followed by a discussion of national archaeology and political crisis in the Indian Republic, and the changing fortunes of Sanghol in Indian archaeology.

### Characterizing Archaeology in Independent India

Most scholars agree that the first two decades following Indian independence from the British Crown in 1947 are characterized by rapid economic development, which saw large-scale government-sponsored projects, such as mining, construction of large dams, power plants, roads, and airports. Many of these activities resulted in the destruction of cultural heritage and in the displacement of people.

The 1950s ushered a new era in the practice of Indian archaeology. The 'national narrative' had a north-India-centric, caste-based view of prehistory that justified economic, social, cultural and political marginalization of aboriginal peoples as it is reflected in works such as Bendapudi Subbarao (1958), discussed in a later section. New universities and organizations opened and old ones, such as the Archaeological Survey, were reoriented. These developments coincided with rapid economic change. Cultural protection laws created before the independence were expanded with *The Antiquities Export Control Act* in 1947, which in turn was repealed and revised by *The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act* in 1972. Interestingly, protection for movable material culture remained separate from that for monuments and archaeological sites, as expressed in *The Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Declaration of National Importance) Act* in 1951, which was amended in 1956, 1958 and 2010. Amid rapid social, economic and political change, these protective measures encouraged the accumulation of archaeological material and the preservation of cultural heritage.

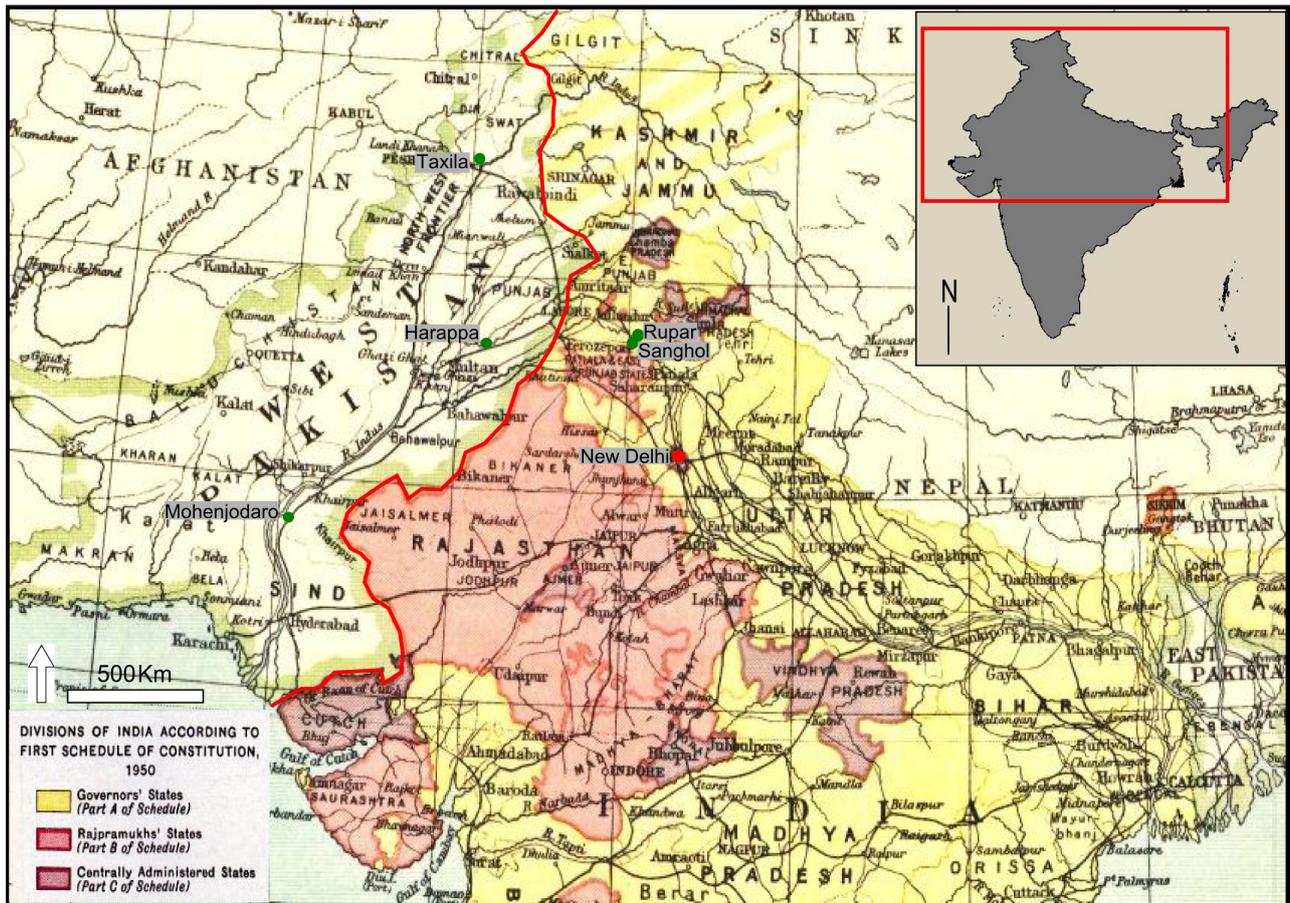
Leading Indian archaeologists such as Hansmukh D. Sankalia thought of Indian history and prehistory in an historical continuum (Sankalia, Subbarao and Deo 1953: 345), and conceptualized the aims of archaeology in terms of the *Puranas* and *Vedas* (Sankalia, Subbarao and Deo 1953: 343). For Sankalia (1969: 29), the aims of Indian archaeology were to: "reveal the country's long prehistoric past", be a "handmaid of, and corrective to, a past with a long tradition of unwritten literature", and to "show how far the pre- and protohistoric cultures can be related to the preliterate who continue to survive in many parts of India". This view maintained pre-1947 interests in the identity of Aryans.

Pressing geopolitical concerns influenced the study of ancient India. Following in the wake of Independence, Indian archaeologists were cut off from monuments and archaeological sites which they had excavated along (and west of) the Indus River (**Fig. 1**). N. P. Chakravarti who had taken over from Mortimer Wheeler<sup>7</sup> as Director General of the Archaeological Survey remarked that the Native States "had no separate historical or cultural traditions" (Chakravarti 1949a: 1). Rather, he argued that archaeological material recovered there was "an integral part of the larger ancient culture of India" (*ibid.*). This meant that the Republic's newly acquired territories, including those in Punjab, were part of the ancient Hindu civilization. These views are best understood within the context of escalating social and political tensions with West Pakistan.

As a result of armed conflict and intensifying hostilities between the newly-created Dominions of Pakistan, and of India, Indian archaeologists could no longer reach or study Mohenjodaro and Harappa, the Indus sites excavated in the 1920s, and Taxila, an archaeological site dated to ancient India, that John Marshall<sup>8</sup> and later, Wheeler had excavated (Wheeler 1946: 1). Indian archaeologists had also lost access to artefacts stored in museums of East and West Pakistan<sup>9</sup>.

Scholars have competing views on archaeology in Independent India. Some scholars remark that Wheeler's "momentum" propelled the collection of archaeological data by universities and government departments of archaeology throughout the 1950s (Paddayya 1995: 131). Others suggest that the loss to Pakistan of Indian heritage resulted in a "great vacuum", which, in turn, encouraged Indian archaeologists to carry out "intense archaeological pursuits" (Thakran 2000: 47). Still others suggest that archaeological field studies "shifted the locus of the Harappan civilization away from the Indus Valley" to the Ganges in the east, and to Saurashtra towards the Gulf of Cambay (Chadha 2011: 66). Yet this does not explain Chakravarti's remarks that Native States had no separate historical and cultural traditions, nor do these views suggest why Indian archaeologists carried out field studies in the territories closest to the newly created West Pakistan border (Ghosh 1952).

Indian archaeologists were cognizant that the "route along which the Aryans and in later centuries, others came to India and the places of early Aryan settlements are now outside the borders of India" (Chakravarti 1949b: 13). Because scholars believed these routes passed



**Figure 1:** Map representing geopolitical and administrative units in northern India in 1950. New Delhi, the nation’s capital is represented in red, and the approximate locations of Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Taxila, Rupa and Sanghol are in green. The international boundary, in red, between India and Pakistan is approximate. Adapted from ‘Divisions of India according with the first schedule of the Constitution (1950)’, 1953.

through Punjab, archaeological field studies in northern India were most significant in confirming movements and thus in drawing together the protohistoric Indus Valley civilization with the historical period (Ghosh 1954 [1993]: 16). This view is reflected in Y. D. Sharma’s excavations at the site of Rupa<sup>10</sup>, published in the *Times of India* in 1954 with the title, ‘Rupa sheds light on the “Dark Age”’ (Fig. 2). The latter referred to a chronological gap between the Indus Valley civilization and the Iron Age. These views reflected national interests of Indian archaeologists and their efforts in producing a “connected history of the Indian past” (Lal 1949: 39).

Similarly, in his *Personality of India: pre- and proto-historic foundation of India and Pakistan*, Bendapudi Subbarao (1958: xi) synthesized accumulated archaeological data to explain “differential development” or how an urban civilization co-existed with “Stone Age” communities. *Personality of India* stands out because of the geographical extent of its study. Unlike other Indian archaeologists at the time, Subbarao was most interested in a pre-1947 India-wide view, rather than examining cultural development in one particular locale.

Within this geographical framework, Subbarao drew out the spread of cultural innovations from India’s northwest to southern India and focused on “regional” variation in material culture (1958: xi). He explained variation as a

result of geographic factors. Progress of Indian culture, Subbarao argued, depended on ecological factors, including aridity, and cultural ones, such as isolation and attraction. Moreover, Subbarao believed that territoriality and political activities began with “large scale agriculture” and that the Neolithic was a “progressive emancipation” from the influence of the natural environment (Subbarao 1958: 8). “Pre-agricultural economy” then, held little interest for Subbarao, because in the absence of advanced technology, the Stone Age displayed “uniformity” and had no known social and political complexity (1958: 23). This view of the past constrained the aims and potential of Indian archaeology.

Subbarao believed, as some Indian historians had, that migratory groups who entered India were soon absorbed into the Indian way of life such that only very few could be isolated and identified archaeologically. Aryans, the culturally and morally advanced group (1958: 18) had established settlements in northern India, and had pushed aside aboriginals and less developed groups, a situation that formed the “physical framework” for Indian regionalism (1958: 24). He thus characterized ancient Indian history as the slow replacement of small-scale cultivators, hunters and fishers by large-scale agriculturalists. Indian aboriginals, otherwise-static fossil cultures remained outside Indian history and society (1958: 24). Subbarao

SUNDAY THE TIMES OF INDIA

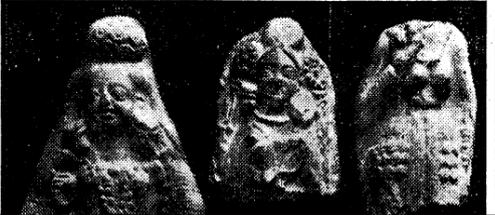
# Rupar Sheds Light On The "Dark Age"

**Excavation Finds**

**By Dr. Y. D. Sharma**

TILL some three decades ago text-books on Indian history began more or less with the invasion of Alexander the Great and

ed coins were in plentiful circulation. This period, from 600 to 200 B.C., witnessed the rule of the Mauryas at its upper end. A fine stone disc, carved with



**Figure 2:** Image from Sharma, Y D's article in *The Times of India* on his archaeological recovery at Ropar in 1954. Courtesy of Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi, India.

believed that some aboriginals had "retained traditions of movements and displacement" and, thus, the hills and forests where aboriginals lived, were not their historical territories (1958: 144). Subbarao's views are reflected in an accompanying illustration in which "Tribal India" stands as a homogenous unit, apart and distinct from his eight ecological and political regions (Fig. 3).

Indian scholars and policy makers often accepted this view of Indian prehistory because it naturalized social inequality and justified rapid economic development in newly acquired territories. This culture-historical approach, which emphasizes change as a result of external factors and denigrates aboriginal peoples as static and unchanging, is akin to methods that British scholars employed to justify colonialism during the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century (Trigger 2006: 261). It is not surprising, then, that to some observers Indian archaeology seemed to have continued, up until the 1990s, "without significant modification" in the established "culture-history program" (Johansen 2003:194).

### Political Crisis and Challenges to National Archaeology

Throughout much of the 1960s and the 1970s, India was rocked by rapid political change and social unrest. Following Nehru's death in 1964, Indian troops battled with counterparts in West Pakistan. This social and political uncertainty was heightened when Indira Gandhi, who took over as leader of the Indian National Congress (henceforth, Congress), faced growing dissatisfaction amongst India's ethnic and linguistic minorities, including in Punjab. As a result of these escalating tensions, and fearing a collapse of the national government, on June 26, 1975, the President of India, in consultation with the prime minister, declared a state of emergency<sup>11</sup> (Guha, R 2007: 1194). Citing internal disturbance, local authorities arrested leading opposition politicians, along with students, professors, journalists, and lawyers in major urban centers and imprisoned them indefinitely (Guha, R 2007: 1196). Within a week of the declaration, Gandhi had banned opposition political parties.

After almost nineteen months of one-party governance, Gandhi ended the emergency and called for the release of opposition politicians. The Janata Party, created and

elected in 1977, formed India's first non-Congress national government. The roughly twenty-four months that Morarji Desai served as prime minister mark the lengthiest period, up until 1998, when the position was held by a member of a political organization other than the Congress. These developments underscored growing social awareness amongst India's middle class. It was in this social milieu that Indian archaeology took a surprising turn.

Whereas national narratives of the Indian past had explained change as a result of the migration of creative and dynamic groups into northern India, some Indian archaeologists now modified this account with an emphasis on local development and social class as is reflected in Y. D. Sharma's later works. Sometime in the early 1970s, Y. D. Sharma (1981: 17) re-examined the material culture he had collected at Ropar<sup>12</sup>, an archaeological site not far from Sanghol, and he noted there were six periods of occupation, rather than the five he had identified in his initial investigations at the site (Sharma Y D 1955). But what was this additional period of occupation? Why was it significant?

Y. D. Sharma remarked that the earliest culture at Ropar was distinctly "pre-Harappan" (1981: 17) and he distinguished material culture in this occupation level from the Harappan culture previously recovered. He called the "new and unfamiliar pottery", Bara, after a site roughly six kilometres from Ropar. This archaeological culture, Y. D. Sharma explained, seemed to be "related rather directly to a pre-Harappan tradition without the intermediate Harappan culture" (1981: 19). He meant that Barans were related to pre-Harappans, who were the original settlers in Punjab, and the Barans "used their own pottery, but [had] appropriated certain other sophisticated elements from the Harappans" (1981: 19).

Elsewhere, Y. D. Sharma argued that the origins of the Barans might be found in "cognate Baluchi village cultures", which had moved to the Indus plains as "rural food-producing communities" (Sharma and Sharma 1982: 72). Barans had "sub-elite status" as farmers and workers, which Y. D. Sharma thought was reflected in intra-settlement patterns. He claimed, for example, that at Ropar, Barans lived in a "separate *Mohalla*" (neighbourhoods) from elite Harappans (1982: 74).

It is no surprise then that in subsequent investigations at Sanghol, Y. D. Sharma and G. B. Sharma (no relation)



examined Bara culture in Punjab in relation to the apparent Harappan culture of northern India. Bara pottery, they explained was “part of a distinct culture and not as a later day genealogical devolution of the mature Harappan” (1982: 72). The researchers further remarked on an “overlap” at Sanghol between Bara and the Painted Grey Ware culture, which linked archaeological cultures in Punjab with those at Hastinapura<sup>13</sup>, a site in northern India that B. B. Lal had investigated (1954). These views reflected cultural-historical interpretations; yet, they also challenged conventional thinking on a homogenous Indian past.

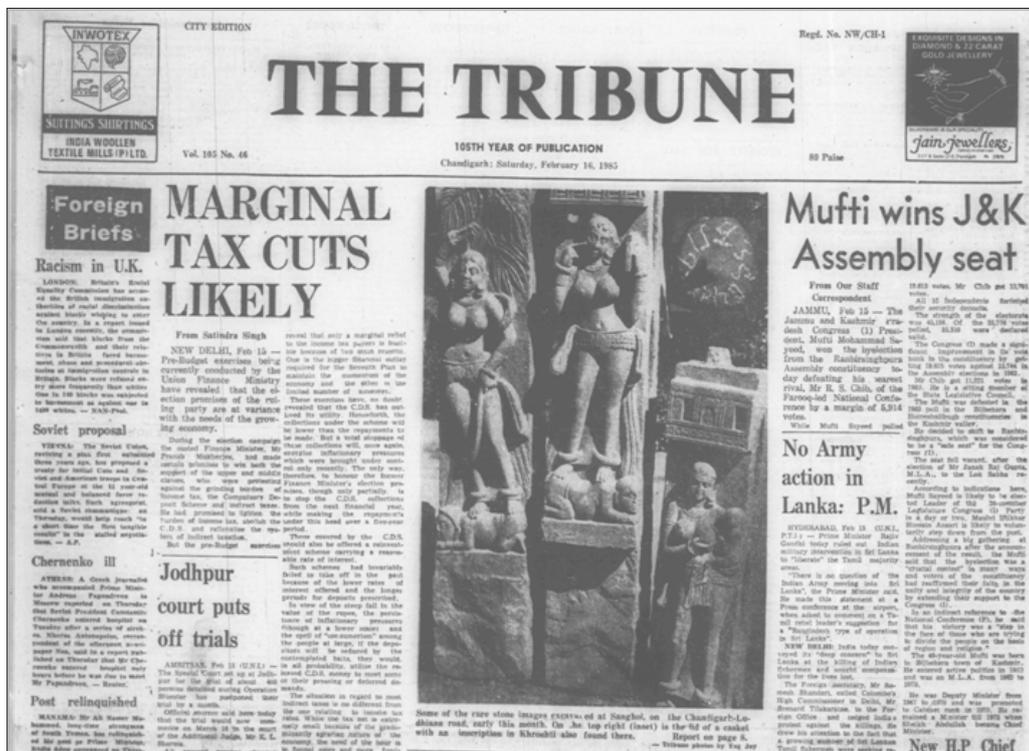
In their examination of a potter’s establishment at Sanghol, for example, Sharma and Sharma observed a deep deposit of 1.8 m in an open-fire pottery kiln (1982: 81), which they believed was used over a long period. Sharma and Sharma estimated that the kiln represented 200 years of use, or “four to five generations of potters”<sup>14</sup> (*ibid.*). They remarked on local development and cultural continuity in Punjab. Baran settlements, Sharma and Sharma concluded, were likely non-urban and were sites for “food production and industrial goods” (1982: 74). This view reflected a subtle, but significant modification of the national narrative in which cultural development was recast as a dynamic between urban and non-urban communities.

### Indian Archaeology in an Anxious Punjab: Investigations at Sanghol

Growing political instability and social unrest in Punjab throughout the 1980s influenced Indian archaeology. Already under President’s Rule<sup>15</sup>, tensions reached boiling

when armed members of the community calling for Khalistan, an autonomous state on the border with Pakistan (amongst other demands), took refuge on the grounds of the Golden Temple. The historic *gurdwara* located in Amritsar, is considered the “seat of spiritual authority” for Sikhs (Guha, R 2007: 1356). Leading politicians in New Delhi grew frustrated with their inability to resolve these pressing social and political concerns through dialogue. As a result, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi authorized the storming of the *gurdwara* and its grounds. The military operation that saw Indian troops enter and take control of the Golden Temple did not bring peace to Punjab. Some scholars believe that Indira Gandhi’s assassination on October 31st, 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards was a direct result of her support for the mission and the loss of human life in Amritsar (Bryjak 1985: 32). In its wake, New Delhi, the nation’s capital was gripped by civil unrest and widespread riots<sup>16</sup>. It was amid this heightened political uncertainty that Survey archaeologists carried out archaeological investigations in Sanghol.

In early 1985, the Punjab Department of Cultural Affairs, Archaeology and Museums announced its recovery of 69 pillars, 13 coping stones and 35 crossbars in Sanghol (Directorate 1985: 3). In its initial report submitted to the Survey, department officers<sup>17</sup> described the finds as “epoch making” and the “biggest discovery of the century in the field of Indian archaeology” (Fig. 4). In this context, the Punjab department invited Survey archaeologists to conduct field investigations at Sanghol, raising the question of how did Survey archaeologists collaborate with their counterparts in the Punjab department amid the visceral



**Figure 4:** Image showing the front page of *The Tribune* from February 16, 1985, to announce the Punjab Department’s recovery of sculptures. The original caption reads ‘Some of the rare stone images excavated at Sanghol, on the Chandigarh-Ludhiana road, early this month. On the top right (inset) is the lid of a casket with an inscription in Khroshti also found there. Tribune photos by Yog Joy’. Courtesy of Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi, India.

social unrest and political uncertainties? How did these relations influence the interpretation of archaeological data at Sanghol?

More than two decades since these excavations at Sanghol, scholarly and public publications, and unpublished excavation summaries, shed light on the methods archaeologists employed at Sanghol. Close examination of available sources suggest the interests of the researchers, their understanding of theoretical developments in archaeology, as well as their worldviews. Specifically, some Indian archaeologists continued to explain change as a result of external events such as migration and invasion, whereas others sought to examine identity and social stratification in the archaeological record. Some archaeologists employed the latest analytical techniques, such as soils and botanical analysis. These scholars tended to be closely associated with national institutions.

Furthermore, each research team had different aims, and they employed different methods. Although the field investigations were collaborative, the Survey and Punjab Department worked on different parts of the archaeological site and they seem to have shared only movable artefacts<sup>18</sup>. The division of the archaeological collection and its written records – including photographs and maps – between research teams has implications for our understanding of the site and the archaeological collection as a whole.

In their initial excavation summary, Punjab department archaeologists stressed the significance of the sculptures, and remarked that they “seem to have been buried intentionally” (1985: 2). Previously, S. S. Talwar and R. S. Bisht (1978: 28) focused on exposing the *stupa*, a Buddhist monument at the site. In their investigations, the Punjab archaeologists aimed to understand the relationship between the *stupa* and recovered sculptures. Specifically, they remarked that purposeful interment of the sculptures had saved these artefacts from “attacking hordes” (Directorate 1985: 2). Scholars such as Margabandhu (2010: 106) and Gill (2010: 148) reiterate this account, although clear archaeological evidence for such an event at Sanghol is presently lacking.

The Survey and the Punjab Department’s records further suggest similarities and differences in their objectives. The Punjab team was primarily interested in the Buddhist occupation at Sanghol, and its interest is reflected in the team’s horizontal excavations to recover town planning and structures (Directorate 1986: 1). Moreover, Survey archaeologists such as Margabandhu and Gaur were likely aware of Sharma and Sharma’s (1982) work on the ‘overlap’ between Painted Grey Ware and antecedent cultures. The Survey’s efforts were directed to recovering intra-site settlement patterns through dwellings and town planning. Margabandhu and Gaur remarked that the settlement had “well-differentiated social stratification” (1987: 75) and they further classified structures as fortifications, citadel, township and religious ones (*ibid.*). The researchers argued that “trade and increased productivity” (1987: 76) had created more capital, yet Margabandhu and Gaur did not directly address the distribution of wealth and power

and how this situation changed over time. This oversight implied that social classes were fixed and unchanging, a situation that mirrors conceptualizations of caste in Indian archaeology (Gupta, N 2013b).

In his examination of “plant economy” at Sanghol, K. S. Saraswat (1997) analyzed archaeobotanical remains collected during the Survey’s excavations. He analyzed 12 soil samples collected from Bara levels and concluded that “Mature Harappan cultural dynamics” was a “prime mover of agricultural intensification” (1997: 98). By this, Saraswat meant that agricultural intensification in local communities was made possible as a result of the creativity of Mature Harappans. In the samples, he identified 30 different plants, most of which he attributed to these “settlers” (Saraswat 1997: 110).

But what was the relationship between Barans and Harappans? Saraswat remarked that Barans were “lineal descendants of highly advanced Early and Mature Harappans” (1997: 106). This view of the past differed from Sharma and Sharma’s (1982: 72) contention that Bara was a distinct archaeological culture in Punjab. Elsewhere, Saraswat and Pokharia (1997: 150) identified “fire-alters”, arguing that ritual behaviour at Sanghol had Vedic roots, which implied that the ancestral Harappans, and later, the Barans, carried out Vedic rituals. Although they do not say so explicitly, Saraswat and Pokharia believe in Vedic origins for Indian civilization, and they think in terms of cultural continuity. This method aims to recover historical peoples and territories.

Influenced by Hindu nationalism, some Indian archaeologists have argued that the ancient Hindu civilization flourished along the now dried-Saraswati River (Gupta, S P 1995). They claim that the Indus-Saraswati civilization, or *Sindhu Saraswati Sabhyata*, developed in the territories between the Indus River and Saraswati palaeochannel. Some Indian scholars who study geology and geomorphology, and believe in Vedic origins of Hindu civilization, are interested in recovering the Saraswati paleochannel (Valdiya 2002). As some scholars believe that agriculture was a local development, and that the ancient Hindus were farmers, they consider Vedic Aryans indigenous to India (Lal 2008: 107).

There are competing views on the Vedic origins for the Indus-Saraswati civilization. Some scholars remark that by renaming a “known phenomenon”, Indian archaeologists have established a “foundational myth” (Guha, S 2005: 404). They suggest that a “dismissal of historical consciousness” is apparent in the “absence of a coherent professional disavowal” of the “pseudo-Hindu culture in the third millennium B.C.” (Guha, S 2005: 422). Other scholars have argued that “colonial Indology” that promotes an “Aryan-non-Aryan dichotomy” in Indian society is unacceptable to Indians because of its notion of invasion (Chakrabarti 2000: 667). They propose instead a “grassroots archaeological investigation” to “forge a broad-based Indian identity” (Chakrabarti 2000: 670). Still others suggest that the Survey’s Saraswati Heritage Project was the first state-sponsored program that aimed to “produce credible data of indigeneity” of the “Rig Veda Aryans” (Chadha 2011: 74). While informative, these views do not explain why Indian scholars explain change as a result of

(internal) migration, or why they believed that Hindu culture did not change over time. These views serve social and political aims.

It is unlikely a coincidence that these views are promoted at the exact moment India's ethnic and linguistic minorities increasingly demand equality and fairness in Indian society. Their demands are perceived as threats to Indian unity. Moreover, a caste-based view of prehistory presumes cultural continuity between contemporary and prehistoric groups and effectively excludes all non-Hindus from society and social dynamics. In maintaining a simplistic view of the Indian past, relations between caste society and aboriginals take priority over the interests of ethnic and linguistic minorities.

### Conclusions

This article examined the influence of political crisis on the practice of Indian archaeology in post-colonial India. Approaches to the history and practice of archaeology in India have tended to focus on a colonizer-colonized dynamic in which the relationship between Europeans and Indians is of central interest. While fruitful, these approaches are unsatisfactory for an understanding of Indian archaeology in the post-colonial context, where relations between the national government and state governments take centre-stage. To better understand perspectives of post-colonial archaeologists in Punjab and the influence of local and national dynamics on the interpretation of archaeology, this study examined the case of Sanghol in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Sanghol's unique place in Indian archaeology draws from its proximity to a tenuous international border with Pakistan, and from its reinterpretation during a time of severe political crisis and social unrest in the Indian Republic.

From this perspective view, we gain a nuanced understanding of a subtle but significant re-orientation in Indian archaeology that challenged conventional views of the Indian past. Indian archaeologists often explained change as a result of external events in which creative and dynamic groups brought innovations into India. Influenced by growing social awareness, some Indian archaeologists increasingly attributed change to local development and social factors. This does not mean that Indian archaeologists rejected migration as a factor in change or discarded culture-historical approaches.

Following independence in 1947, the national government invested in land redistribution for mining and the construction of large dams, irrigation canals and power plants. Amid these rapid economic and social changes, the government undertook measures to protect cultural heritage, encouraging the accumulation of archaeological material. Some Indian archaeologists assumed cultural continuity between contemporary and prehistoric groups when it came to the interpretation of archaeological data. They thought in terms of recovering cultural achievements of their ancestors. Moreover, scholars thought of aboriginal peoples as static and unchanging, and synonymous with prehistoric cultures that had gone extinct. Some scholars believed that more advanced peoples had pushed aside

aboriginal and less developed peoples. These ethnocentric views highlighted the progress of Hindus, and denigrated aboriginal people as simple. Thus, by assuming a simplistic past, some Indian scholars encouraged migration as an explanation for change. These approaches were accepted because they naturalized social inequality and justified rapid development in territories occupied by ethnic and linguistic minorities. These methods were similar to those employed by British scholars to justify colonialism and gave observers the impression that Indian archaeology had continued without significant modification until the 1990s.

Yet through the 1960s, India's middle class grew increasingly anxious in the face of growing social unrest and political uncertainty. Some scholars increasingly challenged traditional views of the Indian past and questioned the foreign origins of innovations. Some Indian archaeologists examined the influence of social and political factors in the development of complex societies, challenging traditional understandings of the archaeological record. These archaeologists emphasized local development and social class as factors in Indian archaeology. These views reflect significant theoretical developments in Indian archaeology prior to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. It is clear that with the growing social awareness of the Indian middle class, the practice of archaeology in India, far from being static and unchanging, has undergone significant re-orientation in recent decades. Yet because some Indian archaeologists believed in the cultural and biological superiority of ancient Hindus, and because they thought of themselves as descendants of these early farmers, they sometimes neglected examination of internal dynamics as explanations for change. Their commitment to Vedic origins also meant that archaeologists interpreted the archaeological record in terms of an archive of Hindu cultural achievements. India's ethnic and linguistic minorities increasingly challenge these views of the Indian past. These developments, in turn, influence the interpretation of archaeological data and the preservation of cultural heritage in the Indian Republic.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> CAGI is short for Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the organization that compiles information on national institutions and assesses their performance in terms of stated aims. Report no 18 of 2013 covers the Survey and its parent department, the Ministry of Culture. The audit took place between April 2012 and February 2013. The report names the Sanghol investigations, amongst others, whose final reports the Survey has yet to publish.
- <sup>2</sup> Himanshu Ray has remarked that the Punjab department gave its permission to excavate at Sanghol, but the Survey had been “dilly-dallying the matter [permission to excavate] since long” (Mann 2010). She made the comments in 2010 during an interview for *The Tribune*. It is possible that the Survey is discouraging new fieldwork at this site until its report on the 1986 investigations is published.
- <sup>3</sup> I will refer to archive material at the National Archives of India, New Delhi, India as NAI. The documents are files from the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Education and Culture. In the cited document, Survey officers discuss how to protect the “ancient site called Sanghol” and describe previous archaeological studies in this community. The record shows discontinuity in investigations. The document sheds light on the preservation of cultural heritage, and on the relationship between local communities and national institutions.
- <sup>4</sup> Scholars generally accept that the *Puranas* (old narratives) are younger than the *Rg Veda*, the oldest Sanskrit text. The relationship between the two is uncertain. Some scholars think of the *Rg Veda* as an ancestor of the later Sanskrit texts (Thapar 1984). Indian archaeologist K. Paddayya (1995: 113, 138) has argued that the *Puranas* are “sacred literature” descended from the *Rg Veda* and that these texts offer methods to explain the archaeological record. Dilip Chakrabarti (1982: 339) points out that written sources on ancient India are “severely limited in quantity and suffer from the additional handicaps of ambiguity, chronological uncertainty and limited geographical applicability”. For context, see Jan Gonda (1975: 28), where he remarks that “[a]ttempts at determining the date of Vedic hymns with the help of puranic passages, whether or not dealing with Vedic persons, or at finding support of a relative chronology in the few passages which might refer to historical can, because of the unreliability of legendary traditions, hardly be expected to lead to acceptable results. Conclusions about contemporaneity or difference are hazardous”.
- <sup>5</sup> The Dominion of Pakistan consisted of West Pakistan, adjacent to the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir, East Punjab, Rajasthan, and Cutch, and of East Pakistan, which was adjacent to the Indian states of Bihar, Bengal, Assam, and Tripura. East Pakistan declared independence (from West Pakistan) in 1971 to form Bangladesh. Documents (NAI 1950) show that the Government of India’s attempts to acquire artefacts from museums in West Pakistan were contentious. For more on impact on monuments, and archaeological collections, especially in the case of artefacts from Indus sites (Mohenjodaro and Chanhu-daro), see (Lahiri 2012: 308–310).
- <sup>6</sup> Precise figures on the number of Indian archaeologists are not available, and I am not aware of these statistics being collected. Chadha (2010: 228) remarks the Survey employs “several thousand workers”, although it is unclear how many of these are archaeologists.
- <sup>7</sup> R. E. M. Wheeler was the last European Director General of the Archaeological Survey (1944–1948). He was knighted in 1952 for his contributions to archaeology. He influenced the practice of Indian archaeology by familiarizing archaeologists with methods that had been developed in Britain before the Second World War (Clark 1979). For more on Wheeler in India, see also Ray (2008).
- <sup>8</sup> John H. Marshall was Director General of Archaeology from 1902 to 1928. He led excavations at Mohenjodaro in the 1920s. For more on Marshall, see Lahiri (1997; 2006).
- <sup>9</sup> In his assessment of Indian archaeology, British archaeologist, Leonard Woolley had recommended the closure of all local museums, and the relocation of collections to a national museum in New Delhi and to other museums (1939: 30–32). Since such a museum did not yet exist in New Delhi, it is possible that collections were distributed to larger museums, although local depositories seemed to have remained open at Taxila, Mohenjodaro and Harappa. This is supported by documents relating to the Government of India’s post-independence efforts to acquire from Pakistan, artefacts on display at their museums (NAI 1950). See also (Lahiri 2012) on these challenges.
- <sup>10</sup> Since 2012, Survey archaeologist V. N. Prabarkar has been carrying out archaeological field studies here, renewing interest in Y.D. Sharma’s work in the 1950s.
- <sup>11</sup> Indian historian, R. Guha (2007: 302) notes that the Constitution had a clause for ‘national emergency’, during which detention without trial was permissible. This echoed colonial practices, which had seen many Indian nationalists imprisoned without trial. See especially chapter 22 on the declaration of emergency in 1975.
- <sup>12</sup> It is unclear whether Y. D. Sharma revisited Ropar after 1952, previously called Rugar. Sharma remarks that he re-examined archaeological material he had collected there.
- <sup>13</sup> B.B. Lal excavated Hastinapura, a place referred to in the *Mahabharata*, and he associated it with the ‘Painted Grey Ware’ archaeological culture. Lal dated this culture to the Iron Age (1954: 12A). Lal’s archaeological work has come under scholarly scrutiny in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid because of his correlation between archaeology and written sources. For perspective, see Habib (1997) and Bhan (1997).

- <sup>14</sup> Sharma and Sharma (1982: 81) report carbon-14 dates for Sanghol: (PRL-511) 1900 ± 220BC, and for the kiln (PRL-513) 1690 ± 160BC.
- <sup>15</sup> President's Rule refers to Article 356 of the Indian Constitution. In this case, it meant that the democratically elected state government was dismissed in favour for a Governor appointed by the national government in New Delhi. The Governor would oversee day-to-day administration in Punjab.
- <sup>16</sup> In January 2014, Arvind Kejriwal, the newly elected Chief Minister of Delhi, submitted a proposal to set up a Special Investigation Team to investigate the riots in New Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination, suggesting there is more to know on this sensitive issue. In 2013, a court in Delhi reopened a case against Jagdish Tytler, a Member of Parliament for his alleged involvement in the 1984 riots in north Delhi.
- <sup>17</sup> Officers who participated in the field investigations are: G. B. Sharma, K.K. Rishi, Kuldip Singh Siddhu, Gurdev Singh, Pradeep Loyal, Rajinder Bathh and Hira Singh.
- <sup>18</sup> The artefact ledger shows breaks in accession numbers, suggesting a division of movable material culture. Gurdev Singh remarked that his department and the Survey worked on different parts of the site and that they divided the recovered material.

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