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Guest Editorial: Public Archaeology in India

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Any editorial on public archaeology in India cannot escape one of the most contentious issues of current times that compels us to probe deep into the mesh of social power relations, namely the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, a 500-year-old structure that was razed to the ground on 6 December 1992. The date of 7 November 2019 may go down in the history of the nation as a watershed moment. The Supreme Court of India delivered their verdict on the long-running Ayodhya legal case, which has been hailed as ‘sealing’ the long-drawn-out conflict of the disputed land of the demolished Babri Masjid. In the title suit the claims of the Hindus — that the mosque had been built on a demolished Hindu temple — were recognized; those of the Muslims were not, and their inability to establish their claims to the 2.77-acre land (where the Babri Masjid once stood) was stated as a key reason. The claim is conjured from allusions to the disputed site being the Hindu god Rama’s birthplace, which were found scattered in Hindu and Sikh texts and colonial gazetteers. Absolute reliance had been sought in excavation findings of the Archaeological Survey of India that mention ‘non-Islamic structures’ below the destroyed mosque in their 2003 report, which were heavily mediated by judicial interventions, as Rachel Verghese has shown so succinctly in this volume. The Supreme Court ruling ultimately proclaimed the *faith* of the majoritarian community as the basis for authorizing the construction of a Hindu temple at the site (e.g. Mohanty, 2019; Rajagopal, 2019). A Hindu temple is therefore due to be constructed on ruins that never existed.

The judgment is beset with contradictions. On the one hand it rebukes the demolition of the 500-year-old Babri Masjid in 1992 as ‘an egregious violation of law’, and admits that this mosque, where *namaz* was offered regularly at least from 1857, was desecrated on 22/23 December 1949 when an idol of Rama was installed under the central dome, creating a de facto Hindu temple. On the other hand, the Court refrains from recognizing the fundamental right of the minority Muslim community to defend its freedom of religion, which is sanctified by the Indian Constitution. When the Constitution came into existence, *namaz* was being offered at the site. If a place where *namaz* is offered is considered as a *masjid*, then the minority community has a fundamental right to defend its freedom of religion. In its act of refraining to recognize this right, the Court fails to protect the Constitution. By affirming their belief that there was once a temple prior to the building of the

mosque, it has tried to settle an ownership issue traced to a 500-year-old past, or more. The judgment is paradoxical to the core. If the minority right to defend their religion is denied by the Court, how can it be used as a justification to direct the government to give the Muslim community five acres of land to build a mosque elsewhere in Ayodhya?

The remarks of Romila Thapar, an eminent historian, are significant here — she thinks this episode is one of the most powerful instances of the incidence of faith overriding ‘historical evidence’ (Thapar, 2019). This has set a precedent of fabricating many such *janmasthan*s or places of birth of divine/semi-divine figures, ‘wherever appropriate property can be found or a required dispute manufactured’. This surely makes a powerful case for the politicization of the past that many of us grapple with in our shared concerns of public archaeology and heritage, particularly in South Asia, torn asunder by ethnic, religious, and caste conflicts in recent years. I pause here to interrogate a few issues. First, was the verdict unexpected? Second — and this forms part of a larger question — were/are there in-built limitations of the secularism that many still preach and believe in, in India? Both queries are inter-related and therefore I address the second question first.

In this case, the validity of ‘faith’ is juxtaposed with ‘historical evidence’. Rightly so, when no evidence of ruins of a Hindu temple actually exist below the demolished mosque. Even the much-orchestrated excavations of the Archaeological Survey referred only to the presence of ‘non-Islamic structures’. Yet, in the larger perspective, how is historical truth constituted? This propels me to confront developments of the last hundred years or more, and the ways in which the Indian nation state was configured. The Babri Masjid controversy has been one of the most burning issues since India’s independence, invoking violent emotions. The polarization of public sentiment, manoeuvred and manipulated to reap political gains, has erupted in communal riots, although the region of Ayodhya has witnessed fewer disruptions. It has been argued that the ‘social sources and political motives’ shaping the movement have drawn on the political culture of Hindu nationalism for the past hundred years or more (Nandy, et al., 2005). This nationalism later acquired its brand name, Hindutva, ‘absolutized history’, in a way that negated the entwined relations of myths, legends, and epics. Myths were invoked when ‘history failed them’ (Nandy, et al., 2005: 65). Their commitment to an idea of history coincided with that of the Indian Left. The secular liberals, socialists, and the proponents of the Hindu nationalism shared a common belief in a sanitized, ‘scienticized’ history that did not secede completely from modernity unleashed by the west. So the Hindus, argue the authors, who would become pall-bearers of the Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu state) were not emerging to be Hindus in the traditional sense. These Hindus who now form a major chunk of metropolitan India share a peculiar hybrid form of western education and values and filtered versions of classical thought. In the context of the Ramjanambhumi¹ movement they tried to return to myths to justify their claims, when betrayed by history. Here they were fiercely resisted by an emboldened secular Left who fought them with the instrument of ‘hard’ history. This, perhaps, is the paradox of Indian secularism, which upholds the harmony of social life, yet has long been impatient for cultural plurality. The gaping holes in the ideology of the secular blocs have been dangerously and

systematically worked on by the Sangh Parivar² in India, by foregrounding questions of cultural and religious identity.

This is the backdrop against which political parties honed their skills in capturing electoral blocs. The doors of the sacred shrine at Ayodhya were unlocked by the central government in late 1986, five years before the actual demolition. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the chief protagonist of the temple, was sufficiently emboldened to intensify its campaign for the liberation of the *janmasthan* (the birthplace). Three years later the foundation-laying ceremony of the proposed temple was performed near the disputed site. The countdown to the fated day began on 25 September 1990 when the Bharatiya Janata Party President Lal Krishna Advani set out on his *Rath Yatra* (journey on a chariot) to whip up public opinion in favour of a Hindu temple. An environment of communal tension was created in the country. Yet in Ayodhya and its vicinity there prevailed a minority opinion among the Hindus and Muslims who believed that, left to them, the matter could have been settled amicably. The residents of Ayodhya had seen only two riots — in 1912 and 1934 — in the eighty years preceding the riots in 1992, which followed the demolition. Conversations with them (Nandy, et al., 2005) reflected the shared traditions and pieties of community life that continued to linger even in the 1990s, in spite of the bitterness of the Ramjanambhumi movement. The ensuing years following the demolition and the ultimate verdict involved the prolongation of the dispute until the ordering of the excavations by the Allahabad High Court in 2003 as an apparent solution. A weak compromise by the same Court was attempted in 2010 when it gave the ruling that directed division of the disputed land into three parts, a third of which was given to the Sunni Waqf Board, and the other two assigned to the Hindu incumbents. Stayed by a subsequent order of the Supreme Court, the matter dragged on through tumultuous political changes in India, with the Bharatiya Janata Party assuming power with a thumping majority in 2014 and holding sway in 2019. It was only a matter of time before a plan of action on the temple would be proposed: the temple featured in their political manifesto of 2019 before the general elections. The Supreme Court delivered their verdict at an opportune moment. The Congress party, which forms a major plank of an otherwise weak opposition in the Parliament, has welcomed the decision that many see as ‘sealing’ a three-decades-old conflict.

It waits to be seen how the future unfolds now, when very recently a review petition has been presented by some of the Muslim plaintiffs, rejecting the offer of the five-acre plot for a mosque somewhere in Ayodhya. Interestingly, Praveen Togadia, former head of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, questions whether the temple will be built in the near future, as the Supreme Court is likely to put a stay on its own order once the review petition is filed.

The challenges and anxieties confronting a professional archaeologist in India and also in neighbouring nation states have assumed alarming new proportions. The Ayodhya case is only a pointer in that direction. A greater, sustaining dialogue is more than necessary between professional archaeologists and their publics in the former’s emphasis on multi-vocality, stressing that ‘interpreting the past is not merely a scientific act, but also cultural and social one’ (Matsuda & Okamura, 2011). Cohort groups operating beyond the academic ambit have a larger role to play. Indeed, the ‘public’ of public archaeology needs to be further interrogated. It

would perhaps be appropriate to point out here that Habermas's definition of a public sphere — which has been a central idea in the formulation of the 'public' — has been critiqued in social theory (Eley, 1994) for its limited understanding. Set against the findings of recent social history, gender, processes of state formation, and popular politics, Habermas's original thesis with its emphasis on the bourgeoisie demands a reworking.

A South Asian context would further necessitate a re-thinking of the 'public'. Unfortunately, public archaeology itself remains a non-formalized subject in university curricula or teaching syllabi in India, perhaps owing to the professional penchant for 'hard' or 'scientific' evidence, and a discomfiture with anything beyond that. Only a few have highlighted the urgency of understanding 'public perceptions of the past' (e.g. Paddayya, 2018: 305–09) and sustained activities are still lacking. Kerala, a south-western state of India, shows a greater awareness of issues related to the subject that emerged through a survey of the public conducted by professional archaeologists (Selvakumar, 2006). Two events having a cataclysmic effect on the local communities may be briefly mentioned. The first centred on the discovery of a roughly tenth-century sailboat, in a waterlogged condition, in a small village located 35 km from Kochi/Ernakulam. During subsequent excavations, the efforts of the Kerala State ministry to move the boat to a central museum and the organization of an international conference to highlight the significance of the find and attract funds unleashed a huge reaction from the public, who hailed the boat as 'their' heritage, and that it should be preserved on site. However, the survey was only a means of gauging public opinion, and did not extend to any further analysis. In the second instance, the identity of a place and its publics were embroiled in controversy. The site of Pattanam, 20 km north of Kochi, was excavated and identified as the Early Historic port of Muziris, which is emphasized in historical texts as one of the more important sites of Indo-Roman trade of the early Christian era. What ensued was an embittered and prolonged tussle between Pattanam and the neighbouring village of Kodungallur over the identity of the port town, which was tied to the belonging of a people and connectivity to a historical heritage. The issue still remains unresolved. These situations are pregnant with possibilities and engagement opportunities for professional archaeologists. A more proactive engagement may be seen in public outreach and capacity-building programmes undertaken by the Sharma Centre for Heritage education, based in Chennai, which attempts to raise awareness among school students and teachers about issues of archaeological site destruction in general and prehistoric heritage in particular (Pappu & Akhilesh, 2019).

Thus, a special issue such as the current volume could not be more relevant. All four papers here are reflective of the diverse ways in which archaeological knowledge is mediated. Rachel Verghese's paper explores this through the trope of 'archaeology-as-science' that was regulated at each stage by judicial interventions in the Ayodha case. Mudit Trivedi probes the background of the Indian Treasure Trove Act of 1878 and asks how victims of the law — whom he labels as archaeology's 'counter-publics' — have been punished in the name of greater archaeological good, thereby drawing attention to voices stifled in the process of knowledge production. Smriti Hariharan situates this in the entwined relations between different voices and archaeological landscapes contextualized in a rural setting in South India. In the last paper, heritage-making is located in a discursive sphere, deeply enmeshed

in social/cultural memory and identity formation, centring on an archaeological monument located in the Sundarbans, in eastern India.

Each volume has its inherent limitations. The obvious lacuna of this issue persists in non-representation of initiatives from other parts of South Asia, which are fast emerging as zones of flux, with suspended conflicts and tensions in the political and social scenario. It is hoped that *Public Archaeology* will continue to be a forum for such facilitation.

Notes

¹ According to tradition, the temple town of Ayodhya situated in eastern Uttar Pradesh is the birthplace of Lord Rama. Although there are many temples in this town, including some built by Muslims, it is the seat of the now-demolished Babri Masjid that became identified with the Hindu god Ram's birthplace and has been the pivot of the movement for the construction of a temple. The Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has been at the forefront of this movement, backed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and their youth wings, the Bajrang Dal and Durga Vahini. The VHP had launched their agitation for a temple in

the early 1950s. After almost thirty years, in 1986, the movement took a momentous turn with the unlocking of the disputed shrine under the ruling Congress. Since then the movement gathered force under the circumstances of political parties — both the Congress and the Sangh Parivar — seeking any opportunity to gain electoral advantages.

² The Sangh Parivar or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is an umbrella term for the family of ultra-Hindu organizations constituted by the RSS itself, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Bajrang Dal, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

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