The Archaeology of Sacred Sites and Identity in Colonial and Postcolonial India, 1861-1960: The Case of Eastern India

My research seeks to examine archaeological practice (especially cultural heritage-management) in India and its consequences for identity-formation/change from colonial times till the decade after Independence. As a discipline actively engaged in the construction of the past and professing a "scientific" and "disinterested" methodology, archaeology has come to stand for the hegemony of science and reason, secularism and historicism that European modernity since the 19th century has aggressively sought to universalise. In the area of monument preservation in particular, archaeology has, from the inception of the discipline in the mid-19th century until very recently, been imbued with an unquestioning authority over the nature of monument preservation, overriding the contesting claims of the community to exercising control over something that was usually deeply rooted in its daily life. In India, the history of religious monument preservation is a strong case in point.

In keeping with the principles of public space created by European modernity which segregated religious practice (private sphere) from arts and aesthetics (public sphere), religious monument conservation in colonial India sought to "aestheticise" and "historicise" the structures it was to protect by clearly declaring that only non-living religious structures would be taken up for restoration; the living structures were to be in the charge of groups who used them. Sharp binaries were drawn between the religious, the living, the ugly (traditional Indian and the preserve of local communities) and the ancient, the historical, the aesthetic and the secular (modern European, the sphere of the state and its archaeologists).

My study intends to show that the distinction made between "secular" and "sacral" space often failed to work: Archaeological restoration and preservation in colonial India often came up against strong resistance from local communities employing the claims of faith and belief. But the inability of colonial and later postcolonial, state-sponsored archaeology, which continues to share many of the assumptions of colonial modernity, to fathom the significance of traditional perceptions of religious sites for the community or communities has contributed to some of the fundamental problems of Indian culture and identity today. My study locates these questions in the region of eastern India and tries to examine how the "discovery" and classification of religious sites found their way into the discourse on regional identity and provided legitimisation for the conflicting claims of diverse linguistic groups.

I undertook preliminary archival research in the state archives of Orissa and West Bengal in December 2002, followed by research at the National Archives of India, New Delhi in February 2003. I expect to conduct extensive research in the course of 2003 and 2004 at the British Library (India Office Collection), London, Bihar State Archives (Khuda Baksh Library), Patna, the archives of the Archaeological Survey of India at New Delhi and Calcutta, Orissa State Archives and National Archives of India Records Centre (Eastern Zone), Bhubaneswar and the archives of the Asiatic Society of India, Calcutta. The study is being conducted in the Department of History, SAI.

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