

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE LITERARY TRADITION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Introduction

The problem of correlation between the archaeological and the literary data may best be visualised on three levels. On the first level the correlation is absolute. On the second level it is only in general terms and cannot be worked out in detail. On the third level the issue is uncertain and has not always been clearly defined.

The first and second situations occur only in the context of historical archaeology. The beginning of history in the Gangetic valley is synonymous with the appearance of the Northern Black Polished Ware in its archaeological record in about 600 or 700 BC. It is only when one goes beyond this chronological limit and tries to integrate the vast body of archaeological data since the beginning of food-production in the subcontinent in the 7th-6th millennia BC with what is known from the Vedic literature, itself substantially earlier than the beginning of history in the Gangetic valley, that one enters the area of total uncertainty and gropes for a theoretical approach to make the Indian proto-historic archaeological data understandable in terms of this rich literary tradition. Within its purview should also fall such texts as the two epics and the genealogical portions of the Purāṇas. The present article seeks to assess the problem in the context of historical archaeology and then identify the basic area of uncertainty in the earlier protohistoric period.

The Context of Historical Archaeology

One of the major areas where the correlation between the archaeological and the literary data may be considered wholly satisfactory is the identification of ancient sites mentioned in literature. This aspect of ancient Indian historical geography received attention as early as the middle of the 18th century. The geographical bearing of important ancient sites, as given both in Indian literary tradition and the Classical writings on India, formed the core of this type of study. This approach matured in Alexander Cunningham's The Ancient Geography of India, first published in 1871 (Cunningham 1963). He depended for this, in addition to the sources used by the earlier scholars and his own extensive field-investigations, on the newly published records of travels of two Chinese pilgrims in India: Fa-Hian (5th century AD) and Hiuen-Tsang (7th century AD). Hiuen-Tsang's records were the more important of the two, because he was more specific about the directions and distances between the places he visited.

The identifications proposed by Cunningham were not all undisputed, but wherever there was a dispute or uncertainty, that was because of the discrepancy and incomplete record in the Chinese account itself. It is in these areas of uncertainty that there has been an increasing amount of satisfactory correlation between the literary tradition and recent archaeological researches.

According to the Buddhist literary tradition, Ghoṣita, a rich merchant, built for the Buddha a monastery at Kauśāmbī. The Allahabad University excavations at the site revealed a Buddhist monastery complex spanning several centuries (c. 5th century BC -- c. 6th century AD) along with a terracotta sealing found among its ruins. This sealing carried an inscription to the effect that it belonged to the organisation of monks in the monastery founded by Ghoṣita. The discovery thus clinched an old controversy regarding the identification of Kauśāmbī and substantiated the truth of the Buddhist tradition of a monastery being founded for the Buddha at this place (Sharma 1980).

The Archaeological Survey of India excavations at Kapilavastu (Srivastava 1979), the capital of the Śākya community to which the Buddha belonged and of which his father was the king, provide another instance of this type. Because of some uncertainties in the account of Hiuen-Tsang and other relevant sources the location of the ancient city of Kapilavastu could not be satisfactorily determined for a long time. The excavations at Piphrawa in Basti district, Uttar Pradesh, solved two important issues in this connection. First, on the basis of the excavated monastic seals whose inscriptions showed them to belong to the great monastery at Kapilavastu, the identification of this ancient city with the modern site of Piphrawa was established beyond doubt. Secondly, two uninscribed soapstone relic caskets were found below a stūpa and dated to the 5th-4th centuries BC. An inscribed relic casket was reported from a higher level in the same stūpa in 1897-98 and its inscription proclaimed it to contain the corporeal relics of the Buddha and possibly his kinsmen. The inscription, however, was in characters of the 2nd-1st centuries BC and thus could not be ascribed to the time of the death of the Buddha in c. 483 BC. The discovery of the two relic caskets containing charred remains below the same stūpa in a context that may easily stretch back to the 5th century BC lends credence to an important Buddhist tradition that after the death of the Buddha the Śākyas erected at Kapilavastu a stūpa over their share of his mortal remains.

Buddhist India has also come alive in the authentication of the Sujātā legend at the site of Bakraur, which is about 1 km northeast of the famous Bodhi temple at Bodhi Gaya. The Archaeological Survey of India excavations here (Srivastava 1977) brought to light three constructional phases of a stūpa, the last phase of which could be dated to the 9th century AD. An inscribed legend found on a number of terracotta plaques, showing the Buddha in a meditative posture, clearly suggests that the last phase of the stūpa was constructed by the Pāla king Devapāla (AD 815-855) to commemorate the place where Sujātā lived.

Sujātā was a village woman who brought food to the Buddha while he was doing penance on the bank of the Phalgu river at Bodh Gaya, the place where he attained enlightenment.

The significance of discoveries such as these is limited to the authentication of individual sites and legends. Beyond this, as far as the historical archaeological remains are concerned, there is only a general correspondence with the literary data, and in many instances the correspondence is no more than marginal. There is an impressive number of texts containing allusions to ancient Indian cities and their planning. One of the conclusions emerging out of this evidence is that there are many literary references to the different general features of cities such as moats, ramparts, gateways, shops, markets, cross-roads, gardens, tanks, public buildings etc. All these features have been identified in the excavated remains of these cities (for the details, see Ghosh 1973). At the same time, these literary references are in the nature of casual allusions. The detailed morphology of an ancient Indian city cannot be reconstructed on the basis of the literary data. The Arthasāstra of Kauṭilya certainly has two chapters on the laying-out of forts and the laying out of cities, but one is left with a feeling that Kauṭilya was dwelling more on the ideals than on any specific reality. The same is true of the architectural text of the Mānasāra which, despite its theoretical concern (e.g. cities of eight different classes, the prescribed measurements of the smallest and the largest cities etc.) is unlikely to have conformed to concrete situations. On the other hand, archaeological research has also been severely restricted in this direction. For instance, the city of Rājagriha has been described as being closely associated with the Buddha. It was also the first capital of Magadha. About a century of archaeological research at this site notwithstanding, hardly anything is known archaeologically of Rājagriha during the time of the Buddha.

In many areas of study the general correspondence of the type discussed above dwindles in significance. The history of the use of metals in ancient India is one such area of study. The literary data suggest that there was a close familiarity with the basic metals like copper, iron, tin, lead, silver, zinc and gold because there are many casual literary allusions to them. The terms used for these metals can be known and one may also have a general idea of their antiquity in the country. There are, however, no noteworthy literary data on the details of the metallurgy of these metals. The literary data also do not give an idea of how and where these metals were mined. This is in sharp contrast to the textual details one has for mining and metallurgy in the Greek and Roman world (Healy 1978). There is a general limitation of the Indian literary data in all technical matters.

The Protohistoric Situation

It might be pertinent to define at the outset the basic area of uncertainty in this situation. The Vedic literature by itself provides an image of the history of India before the 7th-6th centuries BC. It

begins with the coming of the Indo-European language-speakers and their initial settlement (early Vedic, or the Rgvedic) between the Kabul river valley and the upper part of the Gangetic basin. It ends with the transformation of the cattle-dependent Rgvedic economy into the elaborate and developed agricultural communities of the later Vedas, the Sāma, Yajur and Atharva Vedas and their associated texts of the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads. In this period the centre of power shifted to the Gangetic heartland in the east. There was no need to change this image even after the discovery of the Indus civilisation in 1921-22. It was categorised as pre-and-non-Vedic and provided a sharply focussed and convenient instance of the pre-Aryan cultures of India with which the early Vedic Aryans interacted and laid down the foundations of the later Hinduism, an amalgam of both Aryan and pre-and-non-Aryan elements. Even the supposition that the Rgvedic Aryans destroyed the Indus civilisation did not weaken the basic literary model of Indian history before the Buddha.

It has been possible since then to offer a purely archaeological picture of India between the beginning of food-production and that of early history. Purely for the sake of convenience this may be understood with reference to two geographical blocks. The first of these lies to the west of the Delhi-Aravalli-Cambay line and covers the distribution area of the Indus civilisation. There is a long and continuous sequence of food-producing cultures (wheat-barley based) in this region, beginning as early as c. 7000 BC in Baluchistan, and culminating in the mature Indus civilisation which later was transformed into fragmented, non-urban and non-literate 'Late Harappan' cultures in the second millennium BC. The second block consists of India outside the Harappan distribution area, which would comprise in the main the Gangetic valley and the major portion of the Peninsula. The discovery of domesticated rice in the 7th-6th millennium BC context at Koldihawa in the Belan valley in the eastern fringe of the Vindhyan plateau (Sharma 1980, 112) is one of the indications that food-production began early in the Penninsular block too, although the details are still uncertain. There were, in this region, food-producing cultures contemporary with the mature Indus civilisation, but the evidence is to some extent diffused. This region comes into the limelight primarily in the first half of the second millennium BC, by which time all its agricultural regions were under effective cultivation. The crop and settlement patterns, house-types etc. of these agricultural communities continued unchanged until the onset of the modern industrial period. Iron was widely used from c. 1000 BC, its beginning going back to about 1300 BC.

The point we wish to make here is that the existing literary model and its chronological postulates (c. 1200 or c. 1500 BC for the Rgveda; c. 1000-600 BC for the rest) are wholly inadequate to cope with the above-mentioned archaeological complexity. This is not merely because the archaeological data in this case are too complex to be related to the literary minutiae, but also because the literary corpus itself suffers from certain major limitations, a fact not usually emphasized by the enthusiasts for literature-archaeology correlations in the context

of Indian protohistory.

Chronology is a singularly weak point of ancient Indian literature.

History is the one weak spot in Indian literature. It is in fact, non-existent. The total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic, that the whole course of Sanskrit literature is darkened by the shadow of this defect, suffering as it does from an entire absence of exact chronology (Macdonnell 1972, 10).

The above comments by Macdonnell may seem drastic but are true. The dates suggested for the different parts of the Vedic literature are not absolute or even approximate dates in any way. They are based on a chain of inferences, particularly on the inference of the possible date of the Aryan migration to India. This in its turn is dependent on factors like the linguistic similarity between the Rgveda and the old Iranian texts of Avesta and the obvious mentions of some Vedic gods in some Hittite and Kassite documents etc.

Secondly, the interpretation of many Vedic terms may not be as precise as one thinks them to be. The earliest commentator on the Rgveda belonged to the 14th century AD, and although comparative philological researches have undoubtedly been significant in this context, the uncertainties still remain. Even the interpretation of the Rgvedic economy may seem to some extent to be vitiated by subjective inferences. There are clear references to plough agriculture, agricultural fields and implements, and the use of cereals in the Rgveda, but the general emphasis in the historical literature is on the pastoral character of its economy simply because this pastoral image suits the early Aryans better. In the Vedic studies, as in various branches of textual scholarship on ancient India, it is difficult to determine where the evidence ends and imagination takes over.

Thirdly, these texts contain images which may belong to totally different, and perhaps widely separated, periods. For instance, a sizeable portion of the epic Rāmāyana was composed in the early historical period (cf. Macdonnell 1972, 113). From this point of view it is perhaps logical to suggest that the Rāmāyana can be related to the Northern Black Polished Ware period and that the earlier epic, the Mahābhārata, thus belongs to the earlier Painted Grey Ware period. Still, the picture one gets of the central Indian plateaus and hills in the Rāmāyana can only belong to a shadowy, protohistoric past when even agriculture was not properly known in this region. The archaeological evidence of agriculture in this region goes back safely to c. 2000 BC. A passage in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa implies that agriculture was carried to the banks of the Sadānīrā (the Gandak river in Bihar) by the Aryans moving eastward. The neolithic level of the site of Chirand on the bank of this river has yielded a variety of crops including wheat and rice. This level has been dated to c. 2500 BC. So, if the Śatapatha

Brāhmaṇa tradition of the introduction of agriculture in this region is correct, that has to be put around this early date. The Satapatha Brāhmaṇa itself has been dated to around 800/700 BC. The point which emerges is that the texts carry a motley of traditions harking back to different points of time of which we do not have any comprehension.

Attempts to correlate archaeology with literary tradition in the context of Indian protohistory have not led to happy results. Until the late 1960s there was a serious quest to identify the Aryans in the newly discovered protohistoric assemblages; a good number of which were, at one time or another, pressed as claimants of Aryan status (for a review, see Chakrabarti 1968). Since then there has been a certain amount of emphasis on the later Vedic identity of the Painted Grey Ware culture which is earlier than the Northern Black Polished Ware horizon in the Indo-Gangetic divide and the upper Gangetic valley. In that case the archaeological identity of the early Vedic Aryans and the logical connection between that and the Painted Grey Ware would be important issues, but this theory is silent about them. There is also no concern in this theory with the chronologically disparate elements in the later Vedic texts. Another theory tries to link the movements of the Yādavas, a Purāṇic lineage group which originally belonged to the Kathiawar peninsula of Gujarat, to the supposed spread of the Black-and-Red Ware from this region. In the context of this theory it may be enough to point out that this ceramic style, found in different parts of India, has no cultural homogeneity (for these and other hypotheses, see Thapar 1978). In any case, piecemeal identifications of these types do not lead to any archaeological or historical insight.

The purpose of the present article in the protohistoric context has been merely to underline the basic area of uncertainty. The total situation has been aptly summarised by M.C. Joshi:

It is clear...that Indian tradition, Vedic or Purāṇic, is not likely to help much in the interpretation of archaeological data. The theories propounded by reputed archeologists are laboured ones and based on pre-conceived notions. Most scholars have twisted the traditional accounts or invented their own legends to suit their interpretations because it is utterly difficult to apply the tradition as a whole to the field of pure archaeology involving one or more material cultures.... [The] majority of Indian traditions are unhistorical and coloured and therefore none of their archaeological interpretations would prove to be free from subjectivity.... Tradition and archaeology should not be mixed together in any form at least as far as Indian protohistory is concerned. (Joshi 1978, 102)

Summary

The present article has emphasised three points in the context of historical archaeology in India. There can be firm archaeological authentications of sites and legends mentioned in literature. Beyond this, the correspondence between historical archaeology and the literary data in India is only on a general level. In some cases, where the significance of the literary references is marginal (as, for example, in the history of ancient Indian mining and metallurgy), even this level of correlation cannot be maintained. In the protohistorical context the uncertainty of correlation between a vast and complex body of archaeological data and the Vedic literature, the epics and the Purāṇas has been defined essentially as that of correlation between the two models of cultural development suggested by these two types of data for India before the Buddha.

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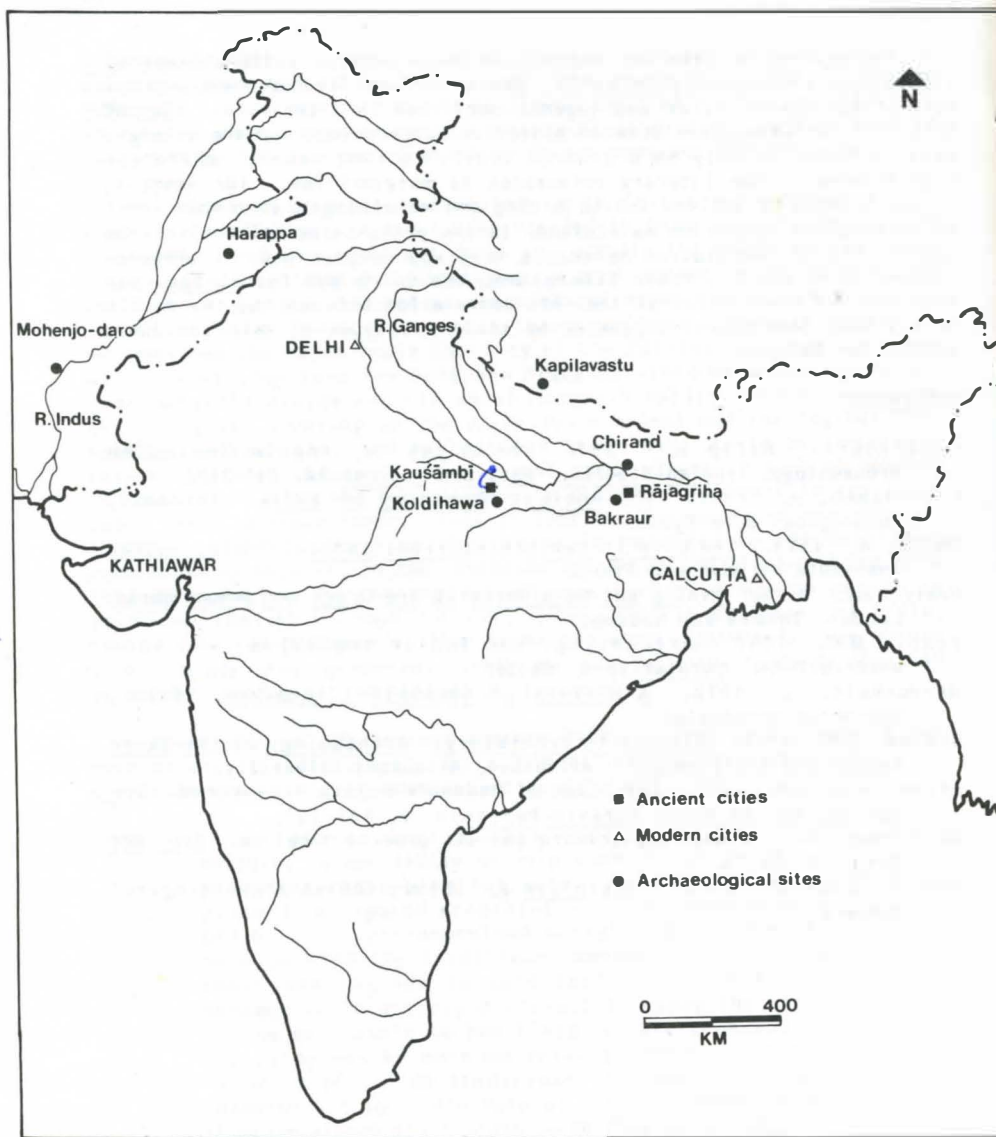


Figure 1: Ancient India, showing sites mentioned in the text.