

## **Cultural continuity, identity and archaeological practice in the Indian context**

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### ***Author's preface***

*I worked with Bruce Trigger as a graduate student in Anthropology at McGill University, where, with a fellow student, I took Professor Trigger's graduate seminar in Advanced Archaeological Theory. It was during our discussions on the development of archaeology that I first heard that despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we continue to hold on to our beliefs about the world and the nature of things. The gravity of the statement was deeply felt during meetings with Professor Trigger for my doctoral research on Indian archaeology. Written over a year after his death, the unique research and teaching environment at the McGill department fostered this chapter.*

In her article entitled “Orientalism, ideology, and identity” (2005), Nicole Boivin, an archaeologist at Oxford University, makes explicit the presumption of cultural continuity in India that has been implicit in previous research (Fairservis 1971, Kenoyer 1989). In the article, she argues, “given that archaeological evidence is often drawn upon to support politically-motivated arguments concerning the origins of various forms of identity in South Asia, including caste, it is hardly a topic that responsible archaeologists can afford to simply ignore” (p. 227).

This argument, however, is inconsistent with Boivin’s explanation that “the *limited theoretical attention* that has been given to caste and other dimensions of social identity in South Asia can be linked to *an overall lack of interest* within South Asian archaeology in exploring the social and political dimensions of archaeological interpretation....” (Boivin 2005: 226, emphasis added). Boivin’s call to better understand the discipline’s role through archaeological investigations of caste is problematic. Influential works on identity in post-Cold War societies have examined the role of politics and archaeology (Meskell 2002, Smith 2000, Diaz-Andreu and Champion 1996, Lahiri 2000 for a colonial context). Others have raised caution on the study of a specific people (Trigger 1995), and examined limitations on the reconstruction of prehistoric ethnicity (Chrisomalis and Trigger 2004). Yet others have warned of the dangers of conflating culture-historical approaches and nationalism (Childe 1933). These issues raise important questions on the aims of archaeology as a discipline. This presents an opportunity to address key issues in Indian archaeology.

What do we mean by South Asian archaeology? Fuller and Boivin (2002: 160) note the “formulation of regions and periods of archaeological study within South Asia has had as much

to do with recent historical and political factors as with occurrences and relationships in the deep past....The boundaries that have been drawn are modern, and are interfering in the effective study of the South Asian past.” Their chronological and spatial characterization disengages archaeological study from the social context in which the discipline is practised.

There is general acceptance that South Asian archaeology is characterized by field studies in India (Fairservis 1971, Allchin 1995b, Chakrabarti 2003), Pakistan (Possehl 1990, Kenoyer 1991), Bangladesh (Smith 2000), Sri Lanka (Coningham and Young 1999), Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives (Petraglia and Allchin 2007), and Afghanistan (Wright 2010). Alternatively, Morrison (2002b) has chosen for South Asia an ecological characterization that sees during the Holocene<sup>1</sup> diverse resources and niches, parallel to those in Southeast Asia. Disproportionate research emphasis in post-1947<sup>2</sup> India – see reviews in Fuller and Boivin (2002), and Boivin and Fuller (2002) –over neighbouring countries belies these characterizations.

Contemporary issues in Indian archaeology are examined in this conceptual framework. The first issue is a presumed cultural continuity between contemporary and prehistoric societies. The second is prevailing explanation of the archaeological record in India through a correlation between material culture with language and/or with biological traits. The closely related issues are explored through an examination of studies on the evolution of biological and social complexity in the Indian context.

For more than a century, the identity of Indo-Europeans has been a focal point for prehistoric research in much of Europe, and in Asia. At the heart of the reconstruction is the belief that the linguistic signal corresponds with an archaeological and a genetic one

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<sup>1</sup> Diachronically the Holocene is an interglacial period from 10 000 years ago to the present.

<sup>2</sup> British colonial administration in India ended on 15 August, 1947, with the formation of the Dominion of East and West Pakistan, and of Independent India. Sri Lanka gained administrative independence on 4 February, 1948. Bangladesh gained from West Pakistan administrative independence on 16 December, 1971.

(Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1984, Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1988, Renfrew 1987, Diamond and Bellwood 2003). The Indo-European linguistic signal suggests a branching phylogeny that forms a pattern of parent-and-offspring languages. The same branching pattern is believed to correspond to the origins and spread of agriculture (Gray and Atkinson 2003).

Reconstruction of Indo-European phylogeny is closely aligned with efforts to imagine prehistoric social ideology (Dumézil 1988 [1948], Renfrew 1987, Mallory 1989). Indo-European ideological reconstructions rest on two key assumptions. The first is what the anthropologist Kevin Tuite (2003: 207) calls the characterization of Sanskrit as an unchanged ancestral language or a “living fossil” that had not changed “from the speech of the ancestral community.” The second is the assumption that early Sanskrit texts are a static archive of traditions. The two beliefs are exemplified in Georges Dumézil’s functional tripartite division of an ideal society that features discrete, complimentary religious, military and agricultural peoples (Dumézil 1983 [1971a], 1986 [1971b]). External processes alone explain social change in this reconstructed society. Indo-European society, thus, is like an isolated biological and social system that exists in an ecosystem but neither depends on, nor impacts the ecosystem (Mikkelsen n.d).

In the same vein, recent research efforts on early societies have emphasized caste as an intrinsic institution (Kenoyer 1991, Boivin 2005, 2007). These efforts in Indian archaeology presume cultural continuity between contemporary and prehistoric societies. Social structures include group identity or membership, forms of residence, territorial organization and leadership patterns (Morantz 1983). While post-positivist literary critiques (Whitehead 1992, Chatterjee 1993, Cohn 1996, Trautmann 1997, Dirks 2001) have examined the construction of knowledge and the configuration of social institutions in colonial India, contemporary Indian archaeology

assumes a perfect correspondence between prehistoric culture, including material culture, and social structure.

In *The Stone-Tipped Arrow* (1966), Bridget Allchin argues there exists a “general structure of Indian society,” outside of which, “a certain number of them [hunters, pastoralists, hereditary specialists in pot-making, basket-making, metal-working, carrying goods from place to place, moneylending or begging] are undoubtedly survivals from earlier periods – communities which have retained their identity and cohesion in spite of the changing society around them” (p. 73). The statement implies that community is a bounded, exclusionary and essentialist social entity. Change is brought through external migratory events and technology. Allchin notes, “considerable numbers of people appear to have left or been driven from more advanced areas and to have taken refuge in remote regions where they have been forced to adapt their ways of life, and have sometimes become incorporated into more primitive groups which they found there” (p. 74-5). How then are these communities identified?

Allchin posits that “social, religious and material features that are in complete contrast to Hindu practice” are “undoubtedly direct survivals from more or less remote periods in the past” (p. 75). The assessment of cultural continuity in contemporary Indian society effectively excludes all non-Hindus from “the general structure of society,” and from social dynamics. Allchin holds static Hindu practices to delineate traditions of “Others.” The statement presumes a homogeneous, widely spread tradition within a bounded entity.

In his article entitled “Alternative Histories, Alternative Nations: Nationalism and Modern Historiography in Bengal” (1995), Partha Chatterjee has presented as a “modern” nationalist construct “Indian” or “Hindu” (p. 249). He argues that the inclusion of anti-Brahmanical religious thought, such as Buddhism and Jainism, within Hinduism is based on their

historical origins in a territorially bounded India. That, in turn, makes possible the origin of all indigenous culture in India an ancient Hindu civilization (p. 251). The nationalist construct predated the identification of the Indus Valley civilization in early twentieth century colonial India.

Indian archaeology often holds caste as an organizing principle<sup>3</sup> (Kenoyer 1989, Possehl 1990, Boivin 2005). Caste is defined as endogamous, hereditary, and hierarchically organised (Marriott 1955, Majumder 1998). Differentiated by particular traits, discrete castes live in isolation to ensure ritual purity from other castes. In their ethnoarchaeological article entitled “Ceramics, Caste, and Kin: Spatial Relations in Rajasthan, India,” Carol Kramer and John E. Douglas (1992) examine the production and distribution of ceramics in the cities of Jodhpur and Udaipur. They argue that the pattern of ceramic distribution reflects caste and kin relations and that these relationships have an archaeological signal. They assume a significant degree of cultural homogeneity within a given caste, and expect greater variation between castes. Homogeneity in this closed social system is both caused by, and results in an endogamous pattern of partner choice. While endogamous relations remain a possibility, the absence of records detailing marriages in the Indian context presents difficulties in the reconstruction of partner choice in both historic and prehistoric scenarios.

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer (1995, 2005) has posited a Harappan legacy<sup>4</sup> in contemporary South Asia. He argues that ritual purity has its archaeological signal in the “segregation of living areas, private water sources, drainage and waste disposal and distinct set of ceramics, specifically

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<sup>3</sup> See also Coningham and Young (1999) for a study in Sri Lanka.

<sup>4</sup> Harappa is an Indus Valley site. R.F. Starr (1941) first employed the term ‘Harappan’ in his examination of the pottery recovered from excavations at the site. Starr believed, as many Indian archaeologists had, that culture remained unchanged for long periods of time. Scholars who study urbanization and ancient Indian history believe that the Indus Valley was the first urbanization, and that the second was in the Ganges Valley (Chakrabarti, 1973).

those connected with cooking, food preparation and food serving” (Kenoyer 1989: 188). These, he contends, evidence hierarchical stratification in Indus and later societies. For Kenoyer, cultural continuity in later societies shows the Indus Valley civilization did not end. The mechanism for this continuity suggests a reorganization of Indus studies. Kenoyer (1991, 1995) argues that the development of the “Localization Era in the Indus Valley Tradition,” of which Harappa is a part, is parallel to developments in northern India, specifically in the Ganga-Yamuna region (1991: Table 1; 2005: Table 1.1 **see figure at end**). Kenoyer posits that “through careful study of different aspects of material culture, it is possible to isolate specific continuities from the Indus Valley Tradition and input from non-Indus communities” (1995: 214-15). Furthermore, he suggests that the “vast area of the Indus valley itself continued to be inhabited and that most of the sites from this period were established along the newly stabilised rivers and lie buried under cities that have been occupied continuously since that time, i.e. Sehwan Sharif, Multan, Kamliya, Harappa, Pak Patan, Depalpur, Lahore, etc.” (p. 215). Within this context, Kenoyer calls for archaeological studies “at sites that are more directly linked to the Vedic period in order to build a transitional chronology from the Harappan period through the Late Harappan and on into the Early Historic period” (2005: 46).

Similarly, Gregory L. Possehl (1990) sees in the street-drainage system at Mohenjo-daro the operation of ancient “public” or “civic” institutions. He argues that “maintaining the system so that it was not clogged and a public menace must have been a significant, and probably distasteful, job. Perhaps more important was the constant task of maintaining a proper drainage slope to the entire system as the ‘tell’ of the city grew and changed its contours across ‘neighborhood’ boundaries” (p. 272). Social differentiation, he further argues, is apparent in the “patterns of use” at Mohenjo-daro’s Great Bath and Warehouse. These structures were “not open

to the bulk of the city's population" (ibid.). Possehl's contention that a civic institution likely maintained drains at Mohenjo-daro contradicts results from his ethnoarchaeological work in Gujarat. There, Possehl (1995) notes that the "elaborate drainage systems documented at Mohenjo-daro are facilities that could easily have been built by men with no real knowledge of formal engineering. Moreover, they would not have required any form of instrumentation to level them, even over relatively long runs of several hundred metres" (p. 202). The conclusions are surprising and cast doubt on Possehl's contention for centralized Indus social institutions.

In their reconstruction of the Indo-Gangetic cultural tradition, Jim G. Shaffer and Diana A. Lichtenstein (1995) have argued that cattle were a form of cultural wealth in the Indus Valley civilization. The shift from the Indus Valley to the forested Ganges Valley presented less ecological potential for pastoralists, whereas the "integration of millet, sorghum and rice with wheat and barley" in addition to abundant water resources resulted in the "ascendancy" of agriculture over pastoralism (pp. 146-47). Shaffer and Lichtenstein assume kin-related or hereditary occupational specialization. They define a paleoethnic group as a "stylistically distinct archaeological assemblage sharing key traits and relationships with other past, contemporary, and future groups" (p. 142). While they note that paleoethnic groups must not be equated with historic or contemporary ethnic groups, Shaffer and Lichtenstein do not discuss in their study the criteria for requisite "key traits" and relationships. They imply a closed system of inheritance, with little or no internal dynamic.

Scholars face a challenge in reconstructing inheritance in biological and social systems. Human biology is assumed to have direct correspondence with language and culture, and is interchangeable. Castes are identified by hereditary or traditional occupations. The epistemological union presents constraints on explanations for social change. Change in



occupations, and thus, in gene frequencies are explained primarily as a result of external events such as migrations, invasions, new technologies and environmental catastrophes. By implication, non-indigenous domination replaces indigenous social institutions, or the latter are assimilated into non-indigenous social institutions (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1988, 1994, Renfrew 1992). Social institutions, and genes, are intrinsic in time and space.

Michael Bamshad et al. (2001) have reconstructed using genetic evidence, the origins of caste in India. The researchers suggest that contemporary Indian elites are products of an admixture during prehistoric times between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. Noting that “evidence of diffusion of material culture from Western Eurasia into India has been limited,” they argue that immigrants are responsible for establishing social institutions (p. 995). With an aim to complement the lack of archaeological material, Bamshad et al. have analyzed their contemporaries’<sup>5</sup> mitochondrial DNA, or mtDNA and Y-chromosome; in their analysis, they identified differences in the frequency of non-indigenous haplotypes<sup>6</sup>.

While Bamshad et al. note that contemporary Indians exhibit “underlying genomic unity,” they correlate genetic distances with caste rank, such that upper castes are “significantly more similar to Europeans than are lower castes” (p. 999). This pattern is observed in Y-chromosome analysis whereas, mtDNA analysis suggests greater similarity between lower castes and Asians, and less similarity with Europeans. Bamshad et al. contend the two patterns evidence “asymmetric” diffusion, an event some time in prehistory, which introduced non-indigenous innovations and social institutions. The researchers discern greater non-indigenous admixture amongst males than amongst females. They explain that the uneven distribution is a result of the

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<sup>5</sup> The survey includes adult males in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India. Attributes included caste affiliations, surnames, and birthplace of parents. After consent, researchers collected 8 ml of blood, or five scalp hairs (Bamshad et al. 2001: 1002).

<sup>6</sup> Identical combinations of mutations on any single location in gene alleles (Endicott et al. 2007: 230).

dominance of non-indigenous males, and the upward social mobility of indigenous females (cf. Endicott et al. 2007). A rigid, externally imposed social hierarchy with unidirectional rank change is implicit in the Bamshad et al. study. This, in turn, implies a perfect correspondence between human biology and social structure.

In 1909, Edgar Thurston, Superintendent for the Madras Government Museum, assisted by K. Rangachari, published a seven-volume series entitled, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. The publication served as a report on ethnographic and anthropometric investigations on contemporaries in the Madras presidency. The survey aimed to collect and document in detail “aborigines,” and their characteristics deemed under threat from “civilisation.”<sup>7</sup> Thurston notes (pp. xxxiii-xxxiv):

“In this part of the world, as in others, antiquarian remains show the existence of peoples who used successively implements of unwrought stone, of wrought stone, and of metal fashioned in the most primitive manner. These tribes have also left cairns and stone circles indicating burial places. It has been usual to set these down as earlier than Dravidian. But the hill Coorumbar of the Palmanair plateau, who are only a detached portion of the oldest known Tamulian population, erect dolmens to this day. The sepulchral urns of Tinnevelly may be earlier than Dravidian, or they may be Dravidian...”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In his introduction, Thurston (1901: vol.1, xiv) notes the timeliness of the survey, “as in the Pacific, and other regions, so in India, civilisation is bringing about a radical change in indigenous manners and customs, and mode of life.”

<sup>8</sup> The Palmanair or Palmaner plateau is located in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, India. Tinnevelly or Tirunelveli is a city and district in Tamil Nadu, India.

Thurston's work suggests the character of classification in the early twentieth century. Local non-elites are classified in a unilinear schema based on a correspondence between material culture and language. On the basis of anthropometric measurements<sup>9</sup> on his contemporaries, Thurston further delineates social hierarchy as pre-Tamulian and Tamulian. The pre-Tamulian Dravidian-speaking is "older or less civilised" than the Tamulian (p. xxxiv). Thurston suggests a perfect correspondence between individual cultural "traits" and skeletal morphology. The criterion implies a correlation between human biology and cultural achievements.

A more fundamental implication is that local prehistory is characterized by stagnation, and the absence of cultural creativity (Trigger 1980, 1989). In this creative chasm, social elites, often products of external influence, are believed to bring dynamism. This is the conceptual space in which Indus Valley cities, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, were identified in the 1920s. The ancient settlements were celebrated as evidence of Indian engineering and innovation. Social elites enthusiastically claimed the ancient society as *their* (pre)-history, to the exclusion of their "less civilised," and static contemporaries (Chatterjee 1993, Ramaswamy 2001). Elites envision their past as *always* having been dynamic and creative. The past, then, is believed to resemble a present in which local elites are culturally, and spatially, separate and discrete from non-elites.

Radhakamal Mukerjee (1942) argues that in rural society "men live in close physical proximity with one another; social distance which exists in rural society is abridged by neighbourly spirit and sympathy and community service...." (p. 156). The rural dweller lives simply, and in harmony with people and the environment. In contrast, urban society is where "culture becomes no longer an organized, integrated pattern of living adequate for the needs of

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<sup>9</sup> Attributes included the length and breadth of the head, stature, nasal height, nasal breadth, skin colour and caste. A broad nose, or nasal index greater than 90, short stature, and dark skin indicated the antiquity of a population (Thurston 1909: vol. 1, lv).

individuals, but rather an agglomeration of individuals, associations, and institutions characterized by the constant conflict between individual achievements and moral values and social objectives” (p. 156). The urban dweller then is characterized as one who “constantly strives to change his ecologic space, drift to jobs, occupations, and areas that represent higher levels of economic attainment; he strives to change his social space, attain higher social status and prestige; and he also aims at the realization of maximum goals of life although he actually secures few of them, and the few he achieves often become incompatible with the well-being and progress of society” (pp. 156-157). Where the rural dweller lives in balance and harmony, the urban dweller is dynamic and changing, moving toward bigger and better at society’s expense. The costly endeavour signifies creativity and success.

Archaeologists and scholars in closely related disciplines such as anthropology and sociology have examined hierarchical ordering through investigations of forms of residence, village layout, and land tenure. In the Indian context, all castes are related, and hierarchically ordered under *Brahmins*, who are at the top (Marriott 1955, Gough 1960). Caste spatial organization in villages is believed to reflect ancient Indian society. Sinha (1990: 12) has argued that villages are spatially organized to reflect hierarchical social order. She contends village neighbourhoods are symbols of ritual purity, similar to those carried by residents, such that the village “is a replica of the cosmos” (p. 18). Observing many dimensions in spatial order, Sinha concludes that territorial segregation is not always evident in villages (ibid.). Thus, her study suggests that hierarchical ordering indicates social inequality. Yet, there remains considerable scope for research on the dynamics of social change (Leach 1960, Attwood 1992).

The past is reconstructed on the basis of particular social “traits” or traditions believed to be essentialist, and static. In *Living Traditions*, Bridget Allchin (1995a) argues that contemporary

traditions such as craft specialization, house forms, and regional relationships in the Indian context have survived from prehistoric times (pp. 2-3).

In her article entitled “Subsistence and Associated Settlement Patterns in Central India: an ethnoarchaeological analysis,” Nandini Rao (1995) examines settlement patterns amongst Gonds in the Kuntala Reserved Forest, Andhra Pradesh. Rao notes that the identification of archaeological sites prompted further investigations and that the investigations were confined due to “political instability” (p. 143). Rao hypothesized that resources, in particular the availability of water, determined contemporary and prehistoric settlement patterns, such that permanent camps would be located in close proximity to perennial water sources, and transient ones away from perennial water sources. Through her participant observations in villages, Rao notes that the Gonds practice their “traditional” occupations, hunting, fishing and foraging. The majority of their time, however, is spent on agriculture (p. 145). She attributes this surprising phenomenon to recent “pressures exerted on forest-based groups to take up plough cultivation and to the expansion of non-forest-based communities into forested areas” (p. 147). Rao explains that although Gonds live in permanent settlements, their traditional activities involve mobility and, thus, seasonal variations must impact their pattern of settlement.

Mark Kenoyer (1992) remarks in his ethnoarchaeological study entitled “Socio-ritual Artifacts of Upper Paleolithic Hunter-Gatherers in South Asia” that “the fact that most of the communities [of contemporary hunter-gatherers] available for study today have had contact with settled communities is most definitely a disturbance factor” (p.237). The problem of “settler effect”, however, “can be treated in much the same way as water movement of bioturbation is treated in stratigraphic analysis” (ibid.). He contends that prehistoric adaptations are simple in comparison to the complexity seen amongst agriculturalists. Similarly, in his investigation of

activity patterns around a stone platform in Madhya Pradesh, Kenoyer argues that the feature, dated to 11, 000 years ago, functioned as a communal area. He posits that the hypothesis is testable through archaeological and ethnoarchaeological investigations of continuous use of similar materials. Within this context he notes contemporary hunter-gatherers have “a high variability of shrines and structures,” and that this patterning differs from his archaeological identification (p. 247). He concludes, nonetheless, that there is a “correlation between the raw material and medium used to express the symbol and also a similarity in the environmental context of late Upper Paleolithic and modern hunter-gatherers” (ibid.). For Kenoyer, the latter indicates a “significant thread of continuity in socio-ritual symbolism” (ibid.).

In the same vein, Kathleen Morrison (2002a) has argued that the time depth of gathering and hunting as a subsistence strategy warrants its study in contemporary South and Southeast Asian societies. She argues the continuity of foraging indicates “important components of both subsistence and sociocultural identity” (Morrison 2002b: 21) and contends that subsistence strategies must be examined from deep prehistory to the present day. Her aim is to move away from essentialist definitions for foragers. To that end, Morrison (2002c: 105) has examined the exchange and intensification of the spice trade in what she calls “pre-colonial and early colonial” southern India between 1400 and 1700 AD.

Indeed, in her study, Morrison (2002c) argues the “productive demands placed on peasant agriculturalists, gatherers of forest products, and export-oriented swidden cultivators were all structured through networks of local power and authority” (p. 115). Given that her interest is in the “operation of political and social power” (p. 105), it is somewhat surprising, that Morrison explains that the ruler of Calicut did not control the “forested hinterland” and that accountability for transactions, including tribute and taxes rested with local leaders (p. 111).

Morrison further argues that for indigenous producers, the distinction between “luxury” goods such as pepper and cardamom and “utilitarian” goods such as rice and cotton textiles was “largely academic”. Thus, she implies that indigenous producers were immune to the significant changes in demand and tax differentiation by the Portuguese for these goods (p. 115). How did local leaders, or chiefs, navigate differing colonial tax regulations on utilitarian goods and luxury goods? This is particularly interesting, as Morrison suggests that the “basic subsistence needs of specialized foragers and possibly swidden spice cultivators were met through the mobilization of this [wet rice agriculture] surplus” (ibid.). It seems unlikely, then, that foragers and spice cultivators strategically remained practicing foragers and spice cultivators. In this scenario, establishing permanent fields seems a plausible strategy to harvesting forest products alone.

A more fundamental implication of embedding biology in social structure is the naturalisation of social inequality. This is a reductionist view of biological and social systems. The acceptance of social inequality as a continuity from the past, replicating itself in the present, and in the future, is precisely what limits an understanding of social change. The former presents a never-broken chain of causation in which one event has a “domino effect” on another to an inevitable result. This consequence is then construed as universal, or structural to human behaviour, and to societies (Lewontin et al. 1984).

Within this context, a recent publication by Petraglia and Allchin (2007) asks – why South Asia? Eighteen contributions in *The Evolution and History of Human Populations in South Asia* examine key events from deep prehistory in Africa, to agricultural origins in five centres in India. The volume presents an interdisciplinary approach in the chronological reconstruction of prehistory.

Boivin (2007) examines anthropological, historical and archaeological perspectives on the origins of caste in South Asia. She notes that the origins of caste are elusive for all three disciplines. The solution to this problem, she argues, is genetics. She explains, “if the disciplines of the social sciences have demonstrated that ideas about caste and its origins are often shaped by contemporary social, political and economic agendas, then perhaps the answer to questions about caste origins in South Asia is best sought in the more objective data offered by the natural sciences” (p. 350). This is a curious proposition. In her review of contemporary genetic studies in South Asia, Boivin observes no consensus, and no one objective answer to the origins of caste. She rightly notes that each study comes with its assumptions, such that there is a diversity of patterns. Yet, common to each study is an assumed stable biological marker for caste or another socially constructed identity, whether Brahmin or tribal, from Andhra Pradesh, or Greece, Arab or French. That, in turn, makes possible the identification of quintessential Brahmin or French genes, which remain unchanged over long periods of time.

Elsewhere, Boivin (2005) has argued, “ethnoarchaeologists have an important role to play in revealing the material dimensions of caste” (p. 236). She further argues that long-term ethnoarchaeological studies must be undertaken to make caste “accessible” to archaeologists. The research strategy fundamentally premises that caste *has* a material correlate. In the “Archaeo-Ethnology of Hunter-Gatherers or the Tyranny of the Ethnographic Record in Archaeology,” Martin Wobst (1978) argues that a hypothesis will “only predict the human behaviour that ethnographers can and have observed, in the way that ethnographers have summarized it” (p. 303). It is to the benefit of archaeologists in the Indian context to consider Wobst’s caveat.



This essay aimed to examine cultural continuity and archaeological practice in Indian archaeology. Contemporary practice in Indian archaeology is marked by presumed cultural continuity. A recent call for the archaeological study of caste has presented an opportunity to discuss key issues in Indian archaeology. An issue is raised on the characterization of South Asian archaeology. The chronological and spatial characterisation indicates the scale at which archaeological study is examined. There is disproportionate emphasis on research efforts in Independent India. It is suggested that archaeological study be examined within the social setting in which it is practised.

Contemporary practice in Indian archaeology assumes a correspondence between material culture and social structure. The issue of cultural continuity, and the prevailing correlation of material culture with language or with biological traits, is explored through studies on the evolution of biological and social complexity in the Indian context. Contrary to Boivin's (2005) assessment, archaeological investigations presume material correlates of multiple dimensions of social identity, in particular caste.

The presumption of cultural continuity in contemporary Indian society effectively excludes all non-Hindus from social dynamics and social history. "Indian" identity is characterized as a modern, nationalist construct. The significance of an ancient Hindu civilization is suggested, and is explored through, recent studies on the Indus Valley civilization. Prevailing archaeological reconstructions in Indian archaeology contend a deep and close relationship between material culture and human biology and that the two are interchangeable. Reconstructions reinforce a view of social elites as being dynamic and creative. This is in contrast with non-elites, who are believed to be simple, and in harmony with their environment. Yet, the statement is inconsistent with ethnoarchaeological studies that suggest variability and

dynamism amongst both elites and non-elites. The conflation of language, caste, culture and biology continues to be seen in works such as Walimbe (2007). In this simplistic society, internal dynamics are absent, and external processes necessarily explain change. The past, then, is believed to resemble a present in which local elites are culturally, biologically and spatially separate and discrete from non-elites. This presents a fractured view of society. That, in turn, impedes our understanding of theoretical developments in archaeology.

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Figure referred to in text as follows: Table 1 from Kenoyer 1991: 333 (top), and Table 1.1 from Kenoyer 2005: 27 (bottom). Note changes in the terminology and significant modifications to the chronology to indicate historical events.

**Table I. South Asia: General Archaeological Labels and Chronology**

Archaeological Label	General dates
Early Historic Period begins around	600 B.C.
<b>Post Indus</b>	
Northern Black Polished Ware	+700 to 300 B.C.
Painted Grey Ware	+1200 to 800 B.C.
<b>Indus Tradition</b>	
Localization Era	1900 to 1300 B.C.
Integration Era	2600 to 1900 B.C.
Regionalization Era	ca. 5000 to 2600 B.C.
Early Food Producing Era	ca. 6500 to 5000 B.C.

*Table 1.1 Chronology of the Indus and Indo-Gangetic Traditions*

<i>Archaeological/historical events</i>	<i>General dates</i>
<i>Indus Tradition</i>	
Early Food Producing Era	c.6500–5000 BC
Regionalization Era	c.5000–2600 BC
Harappa Period 1A/B	3300–2800 BC
Harappa Period 2	2800–2600 BC
Integration Era	2600–1900 BC
Harappa Period 3A	2600–2450 BC
Harappa Period 3B	2450–2200 BC
Harappa Period 3C	2200–1900 BC
Localization Era	1900–1300 (or 1000) BC
Late Harappan – Harappa Period 4	1900–1800 BC
Late Harappan – Harappa Period 5	1800–1700 BC
Post-Indus Painted Grey Ware	+1200–800 BC
Mahabharata Battle	c.836 BC
<i>Indo-Gangetic Tradition: beginning of</i>	
<i>Regionalization Era for Indo-Gangetic Tradition</i>	
Early Historic Period begins around	600 BC
Northern Black Polished Ware	(?700) 500–300 BC
<i>Ramayana Episode (early NBP period)</i>	
Panini (Sanskrit grammarian)	c.500–400 BC
Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama)	563–483 BC (or 440–360 BC)
<i>Mauryan Empire (Integration Era)</i>	
Chandragupta Maurya	?317–298 BC
Bindusara	298–274 BC
Ashoka	274–232 BC

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