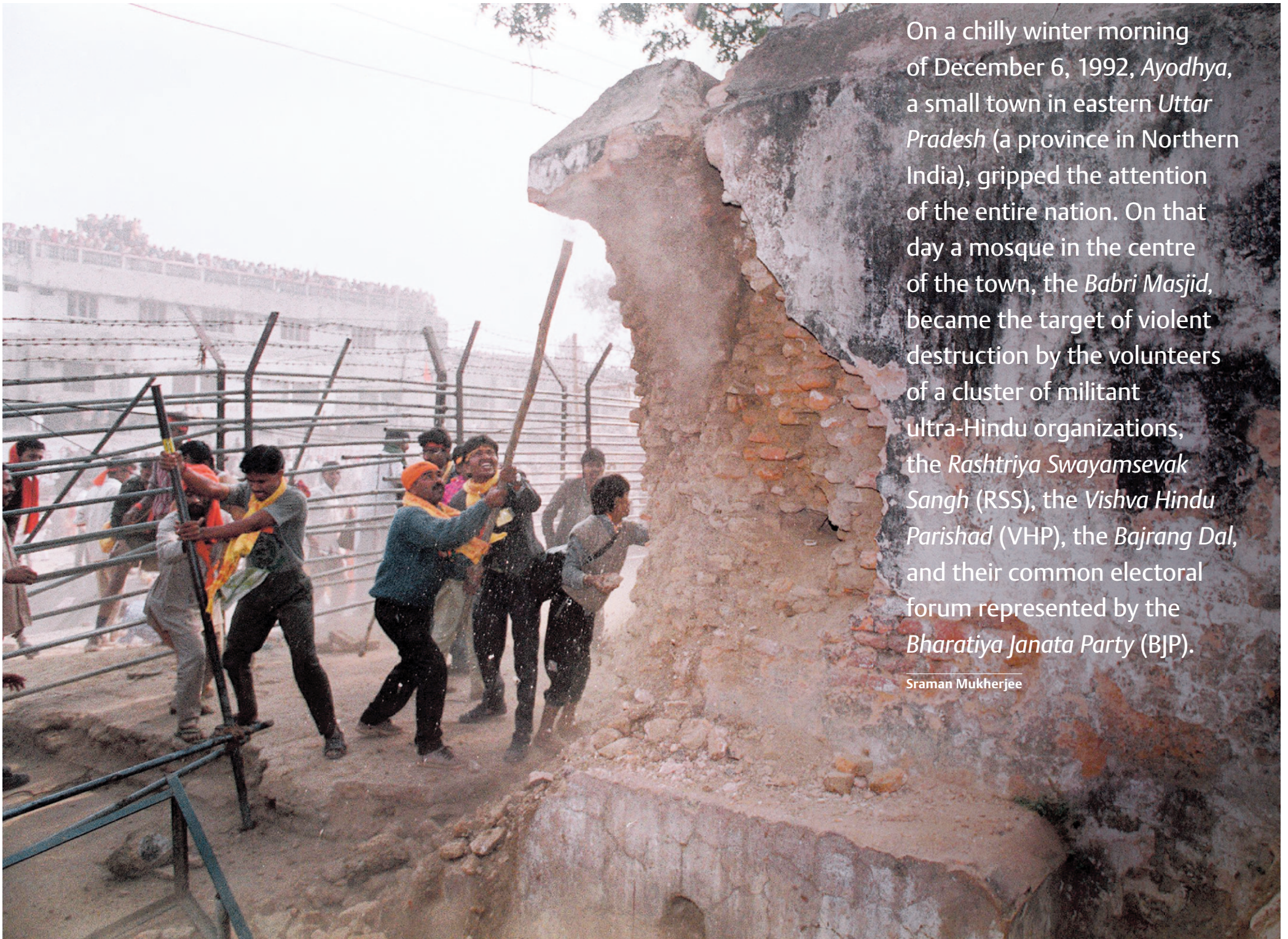


Of methods and aims



On a chilly winter morning of December 6, 1992, Ayodhya, a small town in eastern Uttar Pradesh (a province in Northern India), gripped the attention of the entire nation. On that day a mosque in the centre of the town, the *Babri Masjid*, became the target of violent destruction by the volunteers of a cluster of militant ultra-Hindu organizations, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP), the *Bajrang Dal*, and their common electoral forum represented by the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP).

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THE MOSQUE WAS SAID TO HAVE BEEN BUILT in 1528 by *Mir Baqui*, a courtier of the Mughal emperor *Babur*. The structure, however, attracted a more recent notoriety, particularly in postcolonial India, as one that was allegedly built on the site of a destroyed *mandir* (temple) commemorating the birthplace of the epical Hindu deity *Rama*. Without going into the details of the contentious history of interreligious tensions around the site it will suffice to point out that since 1989-90, activists and volunteers of the militant ultra Hindu lobby have repeatedly congregated around the site with the agenda of 'liberating' the 'true' birth place of *Rama* (*Ramjanmabhumi*). For them this 'liberation' was possible only through redressing a historic injustice inflicted on the nation's Hindu community by the Muslims centuries ago, by demolishing the sixteenth century mosque and making way for building a new *Ram Mandir*, the foundation of which had been ceremonially laid in an adjacent site in 1989.

Since 1992, the rubble of the destroyed mosque has become the site of multiple readings. In the context of contemporary South Asia it highlighted, more virulently than ever before, the power of historic structures and the associated questions of heritage and patrimony in congealing or fracturing public spheres. At the same time, what the events of December 1992 brought to the foreground was the potential authenticating status, and also the question of professional integrity among practitioners of disciplines of history and archaeology. Both sides, the pro-*Mandir* ultra Hindu lobbyists and the opposing camp of left/liberal/secular historians and archaeologists took recourse to archaeology in proving or disproving their cases about the authenticity of Ayodhya as *Ramjanmabhumi* and the evidence of a prior vandalized Hindu temple at the site of the mosque. Central to all these debates was the status of archaeology as a science, and its potential for unearthing 'true' histories. As archaeologists and historians sought to retrieve the scientific method and scope of the discipline from 'gross vulgarization' by political leaders, what came to fore was the range of extra-disciplinary meanings and intents that could, and did, accrue around an academic field.¹

This article is not about the political and symbolic potential of the *Babri Masjid* as a monument. I use this moment of violent rupture in the public positioning of archaeology in contemporary South Asia as an entry point to reflect back on the claims of the discipline as a science around issues of its indigenization and translation in colonial India. The material focus of this study lies in a select body of Bengali writings published during early twentieth century. These writings in regional vernaculars sought to popularize the idea of heritage and the disciplinary field of archaeology and scientific history among non-specialist readers. Such translations involved remarkable transmutations of the parameters of methods and aims of archaeology as a discipline of Western/European 'origins'. Exploring how a range of linguistic, religious and territorial identities came to be played around such texts, this study will look for a prior history of ways and forms in which disciplinary practices of archaeology came to be overlaid with a range of extra-disciplinary concerns.

Pratna-vidya: the new science of archaeology

In South Asia, as in other regions that came under European political and cultural colonization between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the discipline of archaeology had a distinctly Western, more specifically colonial origin. In much of the non-Western world, archaeology and museums evolved as part of a grid of modern disciplinary and institutional practices, including cartography, surveys and census, which sought to colonize and order newly acquired territories. Western scholar-administrators in South Asia argued for a long time that the colony was singularly bereft of indigenous scientific textual records about its own past. Archaeology here became an integral component of the British 'civilizing mission' of enlightening the 'natives' by endowing them with an authentic history. Reliance on material remains emerged as the sole avenue of 'knowing' history. Architectural and sculptural remains, along with stone and copper plate inscriptions were privileged as a higher order of evidence, over indigenous textual records, in recovering India's pasts.

The violent destruction of *Babri Masjid*. © AFP Photo/ Douglas E. Curran.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these very questions shaped the imagination of the Indian nation as an immemorially ancient community and informed the issue of Indian authorship over India's past. As the colonial enterprise was grafted on the nation-building process, the material remains were rediscovered as replete with history and artistic heritage of the nation. In the process, several claims of the colonial archaeological discourse were contested. These contestations ranged from specialized art historical debates around questions of autonomy, origins and influence to heated public disputes on professional integrity or authorial intentions of the 'Western' versus the 'Indian' scholars.² By the early twentieth century, along with English, regional vernacular tracts on scientific history and archaeology emerged as a space where the Indian scholars could pit an entire range of authorial claims about India's past.

Pratna-vidya (the science of archaeology), a Bengali article written by Akshay Kumar Maitreya, serves here as an illustration of both internalization and indigenization of the methods of a modern western discipline by a Bengali scholar.³ The central concern of *Pratna-vidya* is to demarcate the specialized terrain of the emerging discipline of archaeology by elaborating on its methods and aims. Writing in 1912, Maitreya's citation was the renowned archaeologist and Egyptologist, Professor W. M. Flinders Petrie's work *Methods and Aims in Archaeology*.⁴ Published at the turn of the twentieth century, the book sought to lay out the technical/disciplinary expertise in the field of archaeological research. For Maitreya, however, the prime attraction of this work lay in its rather strict exposition of the question of ethics in archaeology and in Petrie's strong espousal of the values and integrity of character that he sought to instill among archaeologists. For Petrie proficiency in archaeology required a combination of disciplinary expertise in different branches of liberal arts, natural and social sciences. However, faced with a growing creed of relic hunting speculators in Egypt, for him, the integrity of the archaeologists ultimately lay in an almost fanatical devotion to the cause of science, their work being something more than a professional career, their commitment to research as being their '... honour and the end of their being.'⁵

The field of archaeology in colonial India

Read alongside Petrie's 'master-text', Maitreya's article appears as a historically and culturally contextualized review and translation of the methods and aims of archaeological research; the context being that of early twentieth century colonial Bengal. Following Petrie, Maitreya marks out the main sources of archaeological investigation as epigraphy, numismatics, sculptural and architectural remains. The areas of expertise that Maitreya prescribed for mastering this craft were epigraphic and linguistic skills, knowledge of history and numismatics, experience of field-work and scientific treatment of evidence. What ultimately distinguishes the eligible researchers in archaeology, for both Petrie and Maitreya, is integrity of character, devotion to truth (*satyanishtha*) and a complete unbiased, objective, scientific treatment of the excavated evidence. It is these demands of truth, objectivity and devotion to the cause of scientific history that provides important insights into Maitreya's altered self-positioning in the field of archaeological research.

The question of eligibility-ineligibility (*'adhikar-anadhikar charcha'*) in archaeological research brings to the fore the location of Akshay Kumar Maitreya in an increasingly professionalized field, where 'amateur' gentlemen scholars could still claim for themselves the same status as their professional peers, on the grounds of their internalization of the scientific methods of the discipline. In this sense, Maitreya provides an interesting, but by no means exceptional, case study in colonial India. Trained as a legal professional, Maitreya's chief claim to fame lay as an author of numerous historical and archaeological articles, essays and monographs in Bengali and English. With his mastery over ancient languages and the modern science of epigraphy, Maitreya emerged as a towering figure among contemporary Bengali archaeologists. For Maitreya archaeology was never a domain of professional service. His self-positioning was among the ranks of those devoted researchers '... who live to work...' as against those '... who work to live...'.⁶ Archaeology was Maitreya's passion as well as his time-tested disciplinary tool for the recovery of his ancient Bengali ancestry. Fervour for recovering the lost glory of ancient Bengal combined, in Maitreya, with a self-projected loyalty to truth and objective, unbiased and scientific analysis of excavated remains. Maitreya's self-positioning as a leading Bengali archaeologist of his time was based as much on the rigorous fidelity to the methods and intentions of the modern discipline of archaeology, as on his carving out of a critical space of Bengali authorship over Bengal's, more specifically *Varendra's*, past. Maitreya's bilingual locations (English and Bengali) and his location within *Varendra* Research Society and Museum in *Rajshahi* (a provincial town in northern Bengal, now in Bangladesh) provided the space for articulating these authorial claims.

Established in 1910 by Maitreya along with other local archaeologists and historians and landed patrons, the *Varendra* Research Society emerged as a crucial antiquarian body for the practice of scientific history. Antiquarian societies in colonial India provided a platform where the 'specialist' professionals, from within the official preview of the Archaeological Survey and the Museums, would cohabit with the 'amateur' gentlemen intellectuals – civil servants, lawyers, landlords, teachers in universities, colleges and schools – to engage in the recovery of lost histories from material evidence. The quest for the 'ancient' land of *Varendra* and its physical reconstruction within the space of the *Varendra* Research Society's Museum in the district town of *Rajshahi*, was symptomatic of the modern quest for ancient territories, particularly the sites of ancient capitals. The idea of *Varendra* (covering districts of northern and eastern Bengal, now parts of Bangladesh and eastern India) as an ancient land of Buddhist and Hindu/Brahmin civilization lost to medieval Islamic iconoclasm was one that Maitreya and the other Bengali gentlemen scholars of the *Varendra* Research Society inherited from early colonial archaeologists, like Alexander Cunningham, in the late nineteenth century.⁷ The particular context of this historical quest was provided by the repeated colonial administrative and territorial reconfigurations of Bengal in the early twentieth century; first the reconfiguration of Eastern Bengal and Assam and Western Bengal, Bihar and Orissa as two separate administrative units in 1905, and then the reunification of the Bengali speaking districts of Eastern and Western Bengal in 1911 and the separation of Bihar and Orissa from Bengal as a separate provincial unit in 1912.

A search for sites of capitals in this ancient land took scholars like Akshay Kumar Maitreya and his fellow historians in the Society, like Rama Prasad Chanda, to the ruins of the city of *Gaur* (in northern Bengal, now in India). However, the search for the material remains of a pre-Islamic capital of an ancient Bengali kingdom among the ruins of *Gaur* proved elusive. The only monuments that the twentieth century

Hindu Bengali archaeologists encountered in *Gaur* could be dated back to the Mohammedan past. To account for this absence, the Bengali archaeologists re-invoked an established trajectory of the destruction of India's ancient pre-Islamic civilization by the iconoclastic raids of the Muslims. To this was added a narrative of modern vandalism of archaeological relics by early colonial officials and native landlords.⁸ The only path to the recovery of an ancient pre-Mohammedan history of *Gaur* lay in investigating the absent traces of the ancient pre-Islamic Bengali civilization in the monumental remains of Islamic antiquity in which the city of *Gaur* abounded – '... *jaha ache, tahar modhyei jaha nai tahar onushandhan korite hoibe...*' (roughly translated as 'the search for the lost and elusive in the extant presence').⁹ Lost traces of a pre-Islamic Bengali civilization of *Varendra* were traced among the Mohammedan monuments of *Gaur*. From this collection of sculptures and epigraphs from *Gaur* and the neighbouring Buddhist site of *Paharpur*, these Bengali scholars now set about to compile an authentic chronological history of the pre-Islamic Bengal, specifically of the *Pala* and *Sena* kingdoms between the eighth and twelfth centuries A.D.

Sculptural art and self-fashioning in colonial Bengal

The positioning of Buddhist and Brahminical sculptures as the prime source for selective configuration of an ancient pre-Islamic Bengali civilization gives a different edge to Akshay Kumar Maitreya's exposition on marking out the eligible participants from non-specialist intruders in the emerging field of archaeological research. The positioning of the modern Bengali archaeologist as the sole eligible decoder of this ancient pre-Islamic Bengali civilization from the sculptural art of the region had its roots in an ongoing debate in the early decades of the twentieth century, between the Bengali archaeologists and a school of artists and aesthetes, about the interpretation of ancient Indian sculptures. Towards the end of *Pratnavidya*, Maitreya emerges as a virulent critic of the new school of aesthetic reappraisal of ancient Indian sculptures, represented by Abanindranath Tagore, with strong support in the Orientalist camp of E.B. Havell and A.K. Coomaraswamy. While the aesthetes critiqued the archaeologists for their dry historicist approach devoid of spiritual empathy and artistic appreciation, the latter in turn saw the aesthetic approach as seriously lacking in the rigors of scientific method and historical analysis. Without going into the details of this debate, it will suffice to point out that within the nationalist project of reclaiming art as the signifier of the emergent Indian nation, the field continued to be deeply fractured.¹⁰

The historian saw his own role as salvaging both the art and the history of the nation, of *Swadesh* and *Swajati*, which, for Maitreya, remained a flexible category. It could extend to encompass the whole of India, the nation and her people and at the same time could speak of a distinctly regional identity of Bengal and the Bengalis. This became a shared concern of other prominent fellow Bengali historians and archaeologists of his time. The idea of an Eastern school of early medieval sculptures as encoding the key to the lost civilization of the Bengalis found its powerful invocation around the same years in Rakhaldas Banerjee's monograph *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*.¹¹ For both Maitreya and Banerjee, the sculptures of the *Pala* and *Sena* empires stood as the clearest marker of a separate regional glory that he wished to recover for Bengal. With all its scholarly rigour, the book endured as a tome of specialized empiricist research out of the reach of non-specialist literate audience.

To shift from this scholarly monograph in English to a spate of contemporary Bengali articles on the same theme by Akshay Kumar Maitreya is to encounter a different intensity of passion and emotion, and also polemics in the iconographic analysis of this newly conceived school of Eastern Indian sculpture. The switch from English to vernacular served a purpose that was more than one of mere popular dissemination of Western disciplinary methods in the field. Writing in Bengali also signalled a deliberate self-distancing from the close scrutiny of the colonial masters and the rigours of their *scientific* counter-evidence. Vernacular emerged in these writings as a powerful medium where the Bengali archaeologist, without compromising the rigours of his scientific training, could effectively inject large doses of the regional glory of pre-Muslim Bengal into the sculpted figures.

Throughout a series of articles published especially in *Sagarika* (1912) and *Bangabhaskarja Nidarshan* (1922) the *Pala* and the *Sena* empires appear as the last great moments of indigenous regional political autonomy and artistic excellence before the onslaught of Muslim invasions. The works marked the passage of the sculptures of Bengal to the sculptures of

the ancient Bengalis. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee's formulation on the construction of a Hindu nationalist subjectivity through history-writing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Guha-Thakurta persuasively argues that the '... term *Bengali* here became implicitly synonymous with Hindu Bengali, as it came to define the new nationalist persona of the Bengali historian and his agenda for recovering what he considered the truly autonomous history of the region/nation of a time before the beginnings of the country's first subjection to foreign [read Muslim] yoke.'¹² Sculptures were stamped with the authorship of an ancient, eminently civilized nation to which the modern Bengali could trace his ancestry. In the claimed stylistic spread of this sculptural field from *Varendra* in northern Bengal, to the neighbouring territories of *Magadha* (in present Bihar) and *Kalinga* (in present Orissa) and to far flung lands of mainland and island Southeast Asia, Maitreya located the political, territorial, and cultural colonies of ancient Bengalis. Writing in Bengal's truncated colonized present, more importantly within his self-projected limits of the modern scientific disciplines archaeology and history, vernacular in Maitreya's work emerges as a space of transmutation designed to turn disciplinary aims and methods, questions of science, into a field of nationalist and regional assertions.

To read overlays of extra-disciplinary meanings and intentions around archaeology through a parallel reading of anti-Islamic vandalism at Ayodhya in the 1990s, and early twentieth century Bengali texts on archaeology, is not to dismiss the altered historical, political and cultural contexts in which these two unfolded. 'Pre-Islamic' and 'Hindu' had different connotations at these different points. The difference is also apparent in the public spheres of colonial India and Bengal of early twentieth century and of contemporary South Asia in which archaeology as a field of scientific practice is called upon to authenticate selective pasts. Nor does this study argue for a regional specificity of archaeology in the public domain in South Asia. The plea is merely one for recognizing these apparent extra-disciplinary intentions and meanings as constitutive elements of the disciplinary field, rather than as momentary lapses from standardized scientific parameters.

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Notes

- 1 While the literature on this field is substantial, for a recent critical appraisal of the Ayodhya debate and the attendant contentions around the public positioning of archaeology in contemporary South Asia, see: Tapati Guha-Thakurta. 2004. 'Archaeology and the monument: on two contentious sites of faith and history', in *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, pp.269-303.
- 2 The literature on the connections between cultural politics of colonialism, nationalism, heritage and the disciplinary and institutional fields of archaeology and museums is vast. In the context of colonial and postcolonial India a recent critical study of the field is Guha-Thakurta's book *Monuments, Objects, Histories*.
- 3 A.K. Maitreya. 1912. '*Pratnavidya*', *Sahitya*, 23:9 (1319 b.), pp.691- 698.
- 4 W.M. Flinders Petrie. 1904. *Methods and aims in archaeology*. London, New York: Macmillan.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.2.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 See A.K. Maitreya. 'The Stones of *Varendra*', *Modern Review*, June 1912, pp.618-622; August 1912, pp.183-186; September 1912, pp.244-249 and A.K. Maitreya. 1949. *The ancient monuments of Varendra (North Bengal)*, edited with an introduction and appendices by Kshitis Chandra Sarkar, *Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society (Mongograph No. 7)*.
- 8 A.K. Maitreya. 1902. 'To the Ruins of *Gaur*', *Modern Review*, pp.425-428; A.K. Maitreya, 'Gour Under the Hindus', *Modern Review*, 1902, pp. 518-521.
- 9 A.K. Maitreya, '*Gaur-Tattva*' in *Gaurer Katha*, reprint, Calcutta: Sahityalok, Baishakh 1390b. (1983), p. 5.
- 10 For a critical engagement with the nuances of this debate see Guha-Thakurta. 2004. 'Wresting the nation's prerogative: art history and nationalism in Bengal', in *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, pp.140-171.
- 11 R. Banerjee. 1933. *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*. New Delhi: ASI.
- 12 Guha-Thakurta. 2004. *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, p.333, endnote #49; P. Chatterjee. 1994. 'The nation and its pasts' and 'Histories and the nation', in *Nation and its Fragments*. New Delhi: OUP.