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# Future of an Ancient Past

KUMKUM ROY

It has been customary amongst middle-aged, and older, historians to bemoan the end of the golden age of the discipline, particularly within the sub-field of ancient history. Young scholars, we lament, lack the intellectual curiosity of their illustrious predecessors. Their academic productions, if any, are not innovative, or are marked by the conspicuous absence of that elusive entity, methodological rigour. They are typically unadventurous in their choice of research themes, confining their explorations to perfunctory forays into the unknown. Upinder Singh and Nayanjot Lahiri, the editors and the moving spirits behind the anthology under review, challenge these perceptions with a quiet confidence in a new generation of young scholars.

Consider, at the outset, the chronological span encompassed by the contributors to the slim volume. Mudit Trivedi's exploration of the Delhi Ridge (more specifically, a part of the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University) takes us to the depths of primordial, geological time. He patiently and persuasively argues that this provides us with the framework for understanding processes of rock formation, which, in turn, constitute, literally, the bedrock of stones that provided the resources for early tool-makers. At the other end of the spectrum is Sanjukta Datta's reconstruction of the biographies of individuals and institutions who shaped the understanding of the past in eastern India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The spatial range that the contributors traverse is equally impressive. Some, such as Shibani Bose, Shivani Agarwal, and, to some extent Shonaleeka Kaul, retain a focus on the Ganga valley, often implicitly and explicitly visualised as the epicentre of historical processes in early India (a perspective that has been critiqued in recent decades). Others venture well beyond this putative heartland. Uthara Suvrathan, for instance, focuses

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ancient India: New Research** edited by Upinder Singh and Nayanjot Lahiri (*New Delhi: Oxford University Press*), 2009; pp xiv + 206, Rs 695.

on Vidarbha, Meera Visvanathan draws on the evidence from ancient Tamilakam, Susan Verma Mishra turns her attention to Gujarat, while Devika Rangachari revisits textual traditions from Kashmir. What is perhaps even more refreshing is that the history of the Ganga valley is not privileged by either the authors or the other contributors; instead it figures as one possible area of investigation amongst others.

Several contributors attempt more or less successfully to grapple with a range of ideas. Suvrathan, for instance, introduces a stimulating discussion on the way landscapes are visualised. However – and this is true of some of the other essays as well – her paper then reverts to present-day boundaries of districts and states, mapping the data within these frameworks. To state the obvious, present-day political boundaries have evolved through complex histories that have little or nothing to do with the distribution of megaliths that form the core of Suvrathan's discussion. This is evident from the maps she provides. Attempting to fit the data within a framework derived from the annual reviews published by the Archaeological Survey of India loses some of the potential complexity of the material.

What I also found troubling in some of the contributions was the tendency to take archaeological reports at face value, instead of critically evaluating the findings and/or attempting to contextualise them. A small example from two of the most interesting contributions, those of Suvrathan and Visvanathan illustrates. Both refer to an archaeological experiment in megalith construction undertaken at the site of Bhagimohari. One suggests

that this involved about 150 person days, and the other, about 230 days. Suvrathan then goes on to concur with the archaeologists that mobilisation of labour on this scale would have been possible only for a sedentary population, and not for mobile pastoralists. It takes only a simple calculation to figure out that 150 person days can be provided by about 20 people working for seven or eight days, surely possible for mobile as much as for sedentary populations. I was also intrigued by a reference to slag being found in a megalithic burial. Since it is unusual to find slag in this fashion, I wished the authors had asked if and why this would be done.

### Informative

Some of the articles are remarkably informative. Datta, for example, provides carefully etched vignettes of scholars who worked to construct a Bengali identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She refers to potential tensions between native and colonial agendas, touches on communalist tendencies, and yet tends to gloss over scenarios of probable or real conflict. So, while the partition of 1905 figures in her work, attitudes towards Curzon as an advocate of proactive archaeology, if any, are not opened up. Also, whether what emerged as a result of the scholarly activity she documents can be described as “popular consciousness” is debatable.

Bose, likewise, provides a painstakingly detailed summary of existing information about archaeologists and antiquarians in eastern India as well as about institutions that attempted to create a sense of regional heritage. While this is, in itself, invaluable, one wishes that she pushed her data somewhat further. What, for instance, would have been the seasonal requirements of labour for the crops that she documents? What would the implications have been in terms of storage? Are there ways in which we can move beyond the preoccupation with origins and diffusion?

While most of the scholars seem wary, if not dismissive of textual traditions, Visvanathan, Kaul and Rangachari grapple rather fruitfully with all their complexity. Kaul, for instance, raises issues about the

