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Archaeology in India

Indian archaeological remains can be traced back to the Early Stone Age—as far, that is to say, as those of any country in the world. But in spite of the work that has in comparatively recent times been done upon them their interpretation remains, for the most part, almost as great a mystery as ever. And this applies not only to remains belonging to the far distant prehistoric past, but also to most of the temples of historical times, many of them buildings of great magnificence and many still used for worship. Only here and there has a little bit of the curtain been raised, revealing glimpses of intense interest with all sorts of fascinating possibilities beyond. . . .

In comparatively recent years archaeologists have been startled by the discovery, through excavations in the Indus Valley, of a great civilisation the very existence of which no one had previously suspected. And it now seems probable that this civilisation was by no means confined to the valley in which it was first discovered, so that the familiar term 'Indus Valley Civilisation' is likely to prove a misleading name for it. As this civilisation flourished at about the period of transition from the Stone to the Metal Age it gives us a glimpse of life at a time long after that of Palaeolithic Man, whose remains are so particularly abundant round about Madras, but probably long before that of the pottery sarcophagus and urn burials found within the city of Madras, as well as in the Coimbatore District and elsewhere, though at present best known from Rea's excavations at Adichanallur and Perumbair. For urn burials seem still to have been customary in the days of early Tamil literature. How much earlier than that they came into use it is as yet impossible

to say. Nor do we seem to have any better knowledge regarding the various types of megalithic and cave burials, of which treasure-hunters and cultivators are all too rapidly reducing the greatly diminished number that still remain with their contents intact.

The excavation of Taxila, commenced by General Cunningham in 1863, and continued on modern lines and with much greater thoroughness and understanding than was then possible by Sir John Marshall from about 1912 onwards, has unearthed a sequence of three lost cities of great early renown, of which the first seems already to have flourished in far off mythological times, having been conquered, according to the *Mahabharata*, by King Janamejaya of snake sacrifice fame. In historical times it would be this city that offered hospitality to Alexander the Great, and in which Asoka ruled for a time as his father's viceroy. On the decline of the Maurian Empire, however, it was captured by Greeks from Bactria, who shifted their capital to the second city early in the second century B.C. This second city remained the capital, passing under the sway first of the Sakas or Scythians and later of the Parthians, till it was sacked by the Kushans (probably shortly before 64 A.D.) who then founded the third city, which in its turn was laid waste during the fifth century A.D., presumably by the White Huns who conquered the Kushans and ultimately also the Guptas. Taxila thus carries us far on into historical times, and illustrates the many changes and vicissitudes that beset the capital of a frontier state in those early days. . . .

To sum up—Of prehistoric remains we have descriptions but no understanding; and though there seems to be hope that current work will now very soon result in some degree of understanding of the cultural status of Palaeolithic Man in India, the various types of pre-historic Iron Age burials remain as unintelligible as ever, while the daily press bears constant witness to the rate at which these monuments are being rifled. At Mohenjodaro, Harappa and elsewhere the remains of a forgotten civilisation have recently been brought to light; but this civilisation is still very imperfectly understood and excavation by agencies from within the country have practically

ceased. For the period of great Buddhist monuments more work has been done than for any other, but a detailed scientific and comparative study of the evolution of these monuments in the country as a whole is greatly needed, and further exploration and excavation still remains to be done. . . .

We would also invite the attention of Government to the severe financial limitations under which the Archaeological Survey is at present working. In the introduction to an authoritative review of its work during 1933–34 we read 'The era of all-round retrenchment and general economising which the Government of India were forced to inaugurate since the financial stress of the year 1931, continued to be felt very seriously in the Archaeological Department. Few branches, indeed, of the many-sided activities of the Government have suffered more from reductions in grants than the Archaeological Survey. During the year 1933–34 hardly any excavation was possible, and the amounts allotted for conservation work were, on the whole, about one-fifth of what they had been before 1931.' How, we would ask, can the country hope to have properly preserved or studied the priceless monuments that survive as indications of the glories of its past history when its Central Government treats in such fashion the department it has created for this purpose? And what effect is such treatment likely to have as an example to the various Indian States on which rest the responsibility for many other such monuments, some of them of exceptional beauty and importance?

Lastly we would call attention to one specially disastrous effect that is bound to result from the stoppage of the excavation work by the Survey, namely, the disappearance of the means of training further excavators. The Survey has in the past had in its service a band of unsurpassed excavators mostly European and mostly already retired. How can they be replaced except again from abroad when such excavation as is carried out is done not by the Survey but by foreign investigators? Yet without excavation research is bound to languish. And without vigorous research the Survey cannot hope to retain the vitality essential to its efficiency.