

## The theater called Archeology: The interplay of identity and religion in the understanding of the past



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### Abstract

*The question of 'identity' affects archaeological studies in diverse ways; the identity of the archaeologist, multiple ones at that, dictates, in most cases, his/her interpretations. Interpretation, of any kind, in any area of study, and in our daily lives, for that matter, results from our perceptions of the world we live in. Religion, as an identity-marker, has been at the forefront of academic debates. Archaeological studies are no exception. The study of religion in archaeology has posed many vexing questions: how to define the beliefs of people of past societies, how these people viewed their universe, what were their religious practices, what are the artifacts that point to the practice of rituals, if any, in the material cultural residue being excavated and investigated, and above all, can there truly be an archaeology of religion that will do justice to both the discipline as well as something as abstract, but so important in human lives, as religion? The current work tries to address these issues, through a brief study of the archaeology of Hinduism.*

**Keywords:** identity, nationalism, religion, archaeological interpretation

### Introduction

The study of the past, for any society or country of the world, has always carried great meaning, and, in that regard, archaeology, as an investigative tool for the study of our past, assumes immense significance. As a standard definition, the overarching aim of archaeology is to expand and improve our knowledge of the human past left in material culture residues (Huffman 2004: 66). We will do well to remember that any study geared towards the understanding of human society, past or present, is inevitably premised upon, to a great degree, our own sets of beliefs, perceptions and prejudices, and preconceived notions. This argument finds resonance in the work of Carr (1961), who, in his seminal work, *What is History*, had remarked "...our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question, what view we take of the society we live" (Carr 1961: 5; see also, Shenan 1989).

Our worldview shapes our notion of 'identity' – identity of the self as well as identity of the society. This, in turn, affects archaeological studies in diverse ways. The identity of the archaeologist – which are multiple, ranging from professional, cultural, religious, national and so on – dictates, in most cases, his/her interpretations, coupled with the problem of ascribing an identity to the material remains uncovered and such like. In the current study, we are concerned with religion as an identity-marker. The study of religion in archaeology has posed many vexing questions to the archaeologist—how to define the beliefs of people of past societies, how these people

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viewed their universe, what were their religious practices, what are the artifacts that point to the practice of rituals, if any, in the material cultural residue being excavated and investigated, and above all, can there truly be an archaeology of religion that will do justice to both the discipline as well as something as vague, but so important in human lives, as religion? More often than not, it is seen that archaeological objects that cannot be explained functionally are categorized as ‘religious’ or ‘ritual’. This tendency arises from our perception that religion itself, to a large extent, belongs to the realm of the unexplained. Hence, it is a matter of convenience for excavators to club together all such ‘problematic’ artifacts under the overall category of ‘religious’ objects. Through a case study on the archaeology of ‘Hinduism’, this article will attempt to problematize the archaeology of religion, a discipline which has come to be taken for granted.

### **Archaeology of Identities**

Before delving into the problematic study of religion as an identity-marker and its archaeology, it is essential to discuss how the very concept of ‘identity’ is perceived as well as how its archaeology has evolved. The word ‘identity’, as informed by Rowlands (2007), comes from the Latin root *idem*, the same, evoking a principle of endurance and continuity, usually in essentialist terms. This sense of ‘continuity’ acts as a bonding force among those who accept and identify with it. The past, a common one at that, goes a long way in bringing people together – into communities, regions, or nations. The identity of being a member of a ‘nation’ or ‘nationalism’, as the concept is more popularly known, is that feeling of loyalty towards one country, one’s nation. Hence, the fostering of nationhood becomes all the more easier if the people feel a common interest and loyalty towards a particular idea (of a nation based along geographical or communal or some such other factors). History helps in bringing about this feeling of ‘common’-ness towards a perceived past, and archaeology, the physical residues of that past, helps to reinforce it. In this way, archaeologists become ‘trustees’ of national cultural property and, hence, are in a position to influence public opinion.

In their seminal work on the notion of ‘identity’ and its overbearing presence in the academic diaspora, Brubaker and Cooper despair how the social sciences and humanities have surrendered to the word “identity” (2000: 1). This rings true for the discipline of archaeology too. No archaeological study is considered complete unless all artifacts collected in the process of discovery is labeled with an ‘identity-marker’. The archaeology of ‘identity’ is an umbrella term under whose ambit may be categorized the archaeology of religion, although this is also dealt with under what is popularly known as ‘cognitive’ archaeology, the latter being a study concerned only with the thoughts and belief systems of past human societies. As a guiding definition of what archaeology of identities stands for, Insoll’s (2007: 14) views can be considered significant here: “The archaeology of identities is essentially concerned with the complex process of attempting to recover an insight into the generation of self at a variety of levels: as an individual, within a community and in public and private contexts.” Thus, we see that identities operate at different levels of our existence, but it is all-pervading and an inescapable truth by way of which we perceive the world around us and vice versa.

More often than not one finds that the question of ‘identity’ when dealt with by archaeologists becomes a quest for the search of the historicity of ‘ethnic’ or

‘national’ or ‘religious’ identities. Often, the lines of distinction between the three categories *i.e.* ‘ethnic’, ‘national’ and ‘religious’, are blurred and they become synonymous with each other. Early interest in identifying archaeological cultures with ethnic affiliations arose from 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘romantic nationalism in Europe’ (see, Shenan 1989: 7) which aimed at establishing the long and continuous history of the then emerging nation-states and people, as important political entities in the global context. Unfortunately, these attempts served the needs of the time by creating the kind of past that was desirable and not one which was based on rigorously worked-out empirical data. There are many examples from history of archaeology being used in the state’s service. An oft-cited one is that of Germany and its manipulation of a ‘Nordic’ or ‘Indo-Aryan’ past, a past ‘verified’ by the works of Gustaf Kossina and his followers. As Casella and Fowler (2005: 1) have rightly observed, “[a]rtifacts and architectural features alike have been conceptualized as “signatures” or “representations” of specific cultures”.

The critical role played by the presence of a ‘historical consciousness’ (Thapar 2000: 123) of the people who are being studied is often neglected when such a framework of views is in place. Thapar (*ibid*: 123-4) successfully shows how, under different sets of circumstances, this historical consciousness can tend to be used differently. She distinguishes between two distinct forms of history—‘embedded’ and ‘externalized’. The first denotes a situation where historical consciousness “has to be prised out” while the latter “tends to bring embedded consciousness into the open...and to be more aware of its deliberate use of the past...such a deliberate use suggests a changed historical situation.” This distinction can be clearly seen in the case of India where, under changed conditions of polity and economy during the period of colonial rule and in the immediate post-colonial atmosphere, historical consciousness became ‘externalized’.

Externalization of historical consciousness can be made permanent through the use of ‘labels’. ‘Labels’ are those tools, made available to us at the behest of our own convenience, that enable ‘identification’ or the planting of identities on something or someone as and when we deem fit as well as necessary. Religion, or the question of personal faith, being as sensitive as it is, adds weightage to these labels, when the two are combined. Relevant to the current work is the seemingly all-encompassing label ‘Hindu’ and its associated ‘-ism’. Labeling of identities can be based on a variety of social phenomena like, speaking strictly in the Indian context, caste<sup>i</sup>, class, economic background, and, perhaps the most sensitive and contentious of them all, religion. Thapar (1996) has traced the evolution of the identities of the labels, ‘Hindu’<sup>ii</sup> and ‘Muslim’<sup>iii</sup> (the latter as the proverbial ‘other’ in Indian society). The evolution of terms like ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ as two distinct monolithic religious communities, most scholars like to believe, has its origins in nineteenth century colonial interpretations of Indian history, where the two communities were not only described as monolithic but bore a different connotation than what we know them today.

Thapar (*Ibid*) also finds that the British colonialists, who held political sway in India for almost two centuries, had an influential role to play in the crystallization of these ‘labels’ in the Indian social consciousness. In her opinion, it was James Mill who is to be squarely held responsible for the segregation of the ‘Hindu’ civilization from the ‘Muslim’, thus giving rise to the periodization of Indian history as that of the

Hindu, Muslim and British periods. It can be argued, thus, that social perceptions and historical understanding of a particular community are essential factors in the evolution of these so-called labels along religious lines. Although her theory cannot be accepted in its entirety, in the light of elaborate research on the origins of the two terms, 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', one has to concede that their most prolific use was indeed during the period of colonial rule.

### **Archaeology of Religion**

The study of religion in archaeology has posed many vexing questions to the archaeologist: how to define the beliefs of people of past societies; how these people viewed their universe; what were their religious practices; what are the artifacts that point to the practice of rituals, if any, in the material cultural residue being investigated; and above all, can there truly be an archaeology of religion that will do justice to both the discipline as well as something as vague, but so important in human lives, as religion? More often than not, it is seen that archaeological objects that cannot be explained functionally are categorized as 'religious' or 'ritual' (here, the latter only referring to the religious rituals). This tendency arises from our perception that religion itself, to a large extent, belongs to the realm of the unexplained. The outstanding example, in recent history, of archaeology of religion at work, is the case of the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. Other well-known examples, from the Indian context, are those of the Somanath temple and the Ram Setu and so on.

Although forming a major 'identity-marker', and hence, comprising a major area of study in the archaeology of identities, the archaeology of religion originally started out as, and still continues to be a foremost theme in what has been described as 'cognitive archaeology'. The latter covers, as Bahn and Renfrew (2008: 391) have surmised "...the study of past ways of thought from material remains..." Closely related, also, to the study of symbols, this sub-discipline in archaeological studies tries to decipher human thoughts and personal belief systems from a bygone era.

At the outset, the concept/term most used in, and unmistakably identified with, the study of religion, *viz.* 'ritual' needs to be explained, and differentiated from 'religion'. Any customary observance or practice can be described as 'ritual' behavior – that is to say a ritual does not necessarily have to be religious in nature. Consider the acts of eating dinner or bathing and such other daily activities – all of them fall under the purview of what is understood as 'ritual'. Ritual can be both 'sacred' as well as 'secular' (See, Bahn and Renfrew 2005), as in a religious ritual or a weekly gathering of the local residents of a particular neighborhood in town, respectively.

Archaeological records can have varied classifications. Typically, they are grouped according to their functions *viz.* pottery, tools, weapons, personal ornaments, faunal remains, and so on (See, Neustupný 1993). To this grouping may be added the class of 'ritual' objects, religious as well as secular. Why do archaeologists fall into this trap of misrepresenting words or confusing terminologies? In agreement with Fogelin's view (2007: 56), the reason behind such a practice could be "a widespread archaeological understanding that ritual is a form of human action that leaves material traces, whereas religion is a more abstract symbolic system consisting of beliefs, myths and doctrines." Therefore, in the hope of retracing and recovering some of that material residue, on the basis of which a picture of the past can be presented,

archaeologists tend largely to focus on ritual objects and ritual space, which they might also consider ‘religious’.

Religion, undoubtedly, can pose contentious issues, and it has indeed done so, without fail, wherever an opportunity has presented itself. In the case of Hinduism, the controversies are all the more pronounced because unlike other ‘world religions’, it cannot lay claim to a set of divinely revealed scriptures. There is no One God in Hinduism. In fact, the very term Hinduism is a debated one. It is no wonder that the search for the material remains of early Hinduism, at the stage of its inception, is difficult to pursue. The case of Israel also poses similar questions and issues as those pertaining to the archaeology of Hinduism, the only difference being that the matter is more pronounced, hogging more limelight, so to say, in light of the charged atmosphere prevailing in the region as well as the age old contentions of two different faiths/sets of beliefs. This is not to suggest that these are the only two religions which have attracted controversies, but I wish to highlight the contested nature of the issues, and their harmful fallouts which seem to have affected other ‘world’ religions in a much less pronounced manner.

At the core of the issue that is being looked at, is the problem of ‘interpretation’ undertaken by archaeologists. Interpretation, of any kind, in any area of study, and in our daily lives, for that matter, results from our perceptions of the world we live in—our family, society, our religious affiliations, political inclinations, academic bent of mind, and so on. And, in the present context, it is this ‘world’ that has been kept in mind while using the word ‘theater’ in the title of the paper – the plethora of experiences resulting from natural as well artificial stimuli thrown at us is comparable to the unfolding of a drama, and our lives, as the stage on which it is played out. Archaeological interpretation becomes a critical act in the understanding of this play. How we see ourselves in relation to other people and how we perceive those other people. This also influences the way we see archaeological artifacts as ‘identifiers’ or ‘identity markers’ for a group or groups of people. Religion marks a very important identity for a person.

### **Archaeology of ‘Hinduism’: A Case Study**

“Why is “Hinduism” so difficult to define?” asks Indologist Heinrich von Stietencron (1991: 11). The complexity of this debate is heightened by the fact that most studies on ‘Hinduism’ view it as one whole religion, neglecting the fact that it is actually a conglomerate term for hundreds of differing faiths and sects who have come together across centuries of evolution and existence to identify themselves under this broad ‘label’.

There is an overwhelming urge among Indian archaeologists to associate the Vedas, which are considered to be the root of the religion of the ‘Hindus’, to the pristine position of a truth which is as old as human beings themselves. Writing more than half a century ago, Finegan (1952: 121) had made a significant statement, perhaps not himself fully aware of the connections that could be drawn from it; “The words Hinduism and Hindu as well as India are derived ultimately from the Sanskrit *sindhu* meaning river, a term which was applied preeminently to the Indus river.” Going over these words, one can now, insightfully, make out from where this urge to trace the Hindu origins of the Indus Valley culture, or the origins of Hinduism in the

latter, took root. It is the very association of the two words, 'Indus' and its derivative, though corrupted, form *viz.* 'Hindu' that provokes this interest<sup>iv</sup>.

In popular perception there is a tendency, which more often than not assumes the form of a norm, to use the terms 'Hinduism' and 'Vedism' interchangeably (see Smith 2005). This is because, unlike other 'world religions', *viz.* Christianity, Islam, and others, which are guided by their sacred scriptures specifically meant to serve that purpose, Hinduism cannot claim to have risen from any sacred texts. One also needs to recognize the truth that what is referred to as Hinduism has adherents among people belonging to different traditions, sects, classes, and so on, amalgamated together to form this abstract entity.

No less than the celebrated discovery of the 'Indus Valley' civilization has gone a long way in fostering a false sense of pride in the antiquity of 'Hinduism'. This is because several attempts have been made to establish 'continuity', and sometimes even 'origin' of the Vedic religious practices from the belief system prevailing in the society of the Indus Valley people. The desire to be the 'ancient-most' nation in the world (See, Lal 2009) was closely linked to the urge to establish Hinduism as the oldest religion in the world, as India is also known as 'Hindustan' or the land of the 'Hindus'. The nationalist school of historians that had its origins in the colonial era in India played a crucial hand in the polarization of Indian communities by taking up the theme of the importance of religion to Indian society (see Thapar 2000). The reason why nationalism has been brought into the ambit of this discussion on archaeology of Hinduism is because, in India, nationalism, more often than not, boils down to religious nationalism, and, more specifically, a brand of nationalism championing the cause of the majority of the population, which happens to be 'Hindu'<sup>v</sup>.



Figure 1. Proto- Siva seal from Mohenjo-Daro (Finegan 1952: Fig. 49).

It will be helpful to furnish a couple of example of the parallels drawn between present-day 'Hinduism' and the Harappan belief system in order to further illustrate the zeal with which the roots of 'Indian culture' have been sought to be pushed back as far back in time as possible. One of the most controversial archaeological artifacts discovered from Harappa is a seal (Figure 1) representing a seated horned figure surrounded by animals, popularized as a prototype of *Śiva-Paśupati*, or '*Śiva*, Lord of Beasts', a later day Vedic deity, who still commands fierce

following among the Hindus of the world (see Marshall 1931 [Reprint 2004]; Finegan 1952; Chakrabarti 2001).

Largely, the seal mentioned above has been accepted as a proto-Śiva deity by archaeologists. But, there have been other equally fantastic suppositions. In this regard, the conclusion reached by Chatterjee (2005: 299) deserves mention. She tries

to make sense of the inscription on top of the seal, drawing the inference that the seal portrays the Vedic god Agni, in his pristine form. Elsewhere Chatterjee (Ibid: 300-301) raises the pertinent question (pertinent in the context of her own work) as to why there is no mention of the word 'Agni' in any of the Harappan seals (the reason being different terms were used at different times in different cultures), if we assume that decipherment of the Indus script is a foregone conclusion!

Atre (1987: 177) has added another dimension to the study of the religion of Indus people in her seminal work on the same. Her efforts are geared towards establishing the fact that there is not enough quantitative evidence to prove the existence of a cult of the so-called 'proto-Śiva' deity. In the course of her detailed "...stylistic study of such figures appearing on various seals and sealings..." she points out the complete absence of such seals at Harappa. Even at Mohenjo Daro, where the purported seal was discovered, only two other such seals have ever been found. This discards the idea of a 'ritual' or 'cult' following.

It need not be reiterated here how the Indus script has been like the 'da Vinci Code', yet un-cracked. Hence, any interpretation of the cultural beliefs and practices of the

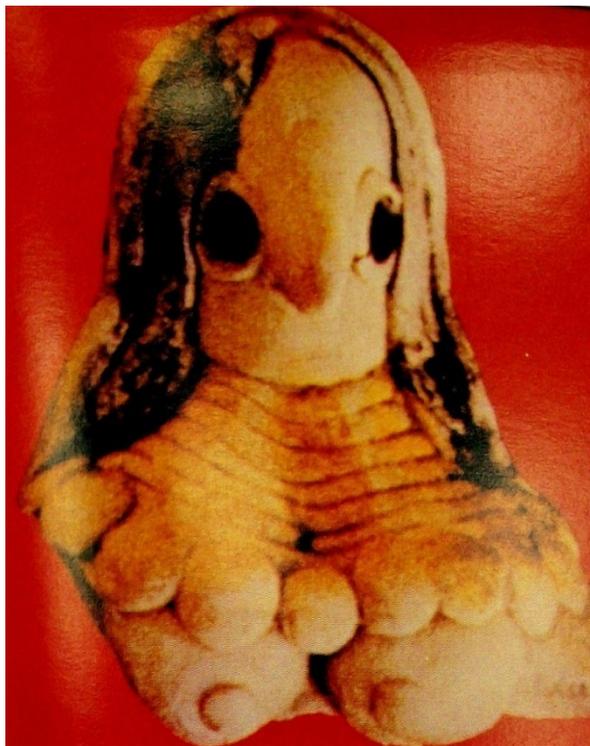


Figure 2, Terracotta Figurine from Nausharo (Lal 2009: PL II)

people belonging to the Indus Valley Civilization, based on this undeciphered script, has to be dismissed as incredible attempts at bringing a sense of familiarity, to the contemporary world, with one of the oldest cultures of the world. The claims made so emphatically by Chakrabarti, and those by the towering figure in whose shadow those claims were molded, viz. John Marshall, have been severely criticized by Shrimali (2001) who labels this whole group of archaeologists as 'cultural chauvinists' whose sole purpose is to establish the Harappan origins of Hinduism. Speaking in the same vein as Shrimali, Guha (2005: 399) has also lamented how the discipline of archaeology is increasingly being exploited for meeting the aspirations of religious nationalism in India. The complacency of Indian archaeologists

is increasing at an alarming rate. There is no scope for the 'alternative'.

An eminent archaeologist, Lal (2009) in a recent publication, has fallen into the same trap as had most of his predecessors, that of drawing parallels between present day 'Hindu' practices with artifacts found from the Indus Valley sites, and even from sites dated earlier than the latter, in a bid to establish the antiquity of Hinduism. One glance at the title of his work, which reads, *How Deep are the Roots of Indian Civilization? Archaeology Answers*, and the reader gets a sense of what is to

come in the following pages of the book. Lal (Ibid: 6) draws the reader's attention to a terracotta figurine from the site of Nausharo (Figure 2), located in present day Pakistan "but forming a part of India before the 1947 – Partition...The hair of the figurine is painted black so as to depict the color...But more noteworthy is the red paint in the medial partition of the hair, which is similar to the *sindūra* (vermilion)...These were found by Jarrige<sup>vi</sup> in levels that have been dated by Carbon-14 method to circa 2800-2600 BCE, i.e. even before what is known as the Harappan civilization (also called the Indus or Indus – Saraswati Civilization). Ponder over the high antiquity of applying *sindūra* to the *mānga*. Isn't that strange? But let me assure you that this is as true as you and I: you the reader and I the writer."

### Conclusion

Religion is a very complex phenomenon as it forms part of what we think, what we believe. And the society of humans is an ever-changing and complex one – what changes, really, is the way we perceive of this world – fundamental changes come about in our thought process. Thus, to deduce that something as intricate as religion can be broken down and explained on the foundation of an equally dubious notion *i.e.* assuming a static nature for the human mind is dangerous and wrong. "Religion", writes Smith (1989: 219), "is an exercise of the creative power of the imagination." In the same vein, at least to some extent, it can be suggested that archaeology also involves the exercise of this imaginative and creative faculties of the human mind. Added to this, as has already been mentioned before, is the association of an 'absolution' to archaeological finds that endows the discipline, rather its practitioners, with certain unrestricted powers.

Much has been said about and done to portray archaeological research in various forms, forms which suit the respective presenter. In a situation like this, one often wonders which would be the correct approach to adopt. And, is there, after all, 'a' correct approach? This question is of paramount importance to the future of archaeology, and more so in the very sensitive matter of religion because, as we have seen, in the foregoing discussion, religion can be a highly controversial issue and so can its archaeology.

The basic problem with both religion and archaeology, and the relationship between the two is that they end up being discourses where "a single society or a single world" Bergquest (2001) is trying to grapple with the problem of confronting 'plural meanings'. Extra care needs to be taken while treading on this road. Politics has a decisive role to play in this as the powers-that-be decide, to a large extent, the fate of archaeological undertakings. There is every reason to be wary of the danger posed by increasing political influence on a country's education and knowledge discourse, the world over, including India.

Religion, when combined with politics, can turn into a potentially explosive combination, a catalyst for disaster. And, this is surely what has been happening in India, for quite some time now. This aspect needs to be looked at too, in light of the discussion in hand. Archaeology, unfortunately, rather the 'caretakers' of the discipline in the country, have had a telling role to play in this phenomenon, as archaeological findings are looked upon with a kind of unquestionable reverence. The tendency among archaeologists to brand an artifact as 'religious/ritual' can be attributed to the basic human predisposition to seek an answer to everything that s/he

sees around him/her. Given the abstractness of religion, it is easy for it to be used as an explanation for the unexplained. That is to say that whenever a scenario presents itself where a certain archaeological context or artifact does not make sense, it is immediately concluded that they must have had some sort of religious connotation attached to them.

Archaeology of religion is both possible as well as unattainable at the same time. It is possible as archaeology offers the opportunity to visualize or form images in our minds, in a way, concretize our ideas about past belief systems by way of providing material clues to them. However, it is equally true that it is too slippery a ground to walk on given the abstract nature of religion itself, as well as the latter's invariable link to polity, economy and other social factors, a link which is, indeed, difficult to break. Archaeological artifacts do not speak for themselves. It is up to the archaeologist to give them voice.

The flexibility of archaeological praxis obviously suffers because archaeologists, as human beings, interpret the past through their own understanding of the present. And even in doing so, we choose only those aspects for comparison that we feel are relevant to a particular study(ies). One feels tempted to follow Ucko's (1994: xiii) formulation of a 'world' archaeological approach as a possible alternative to the issues raise in this paper. With its wholesome approach, in theory, a 'world' archaeological approach tries to understand not only the changes that have taken place in the journey from past to present, but deals extensively with the 'why' of the journey. Questioning long standing claims has been taken up in right earnest, in the light of new breakthroughs in discoveries and analytical models and new interpretations are on the horizon, lending the discipline of archaeology a much needed flexibility coupled with the exercise of reflection.

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i "Caste as *varna*", points out Thapar (1996: 9), "earlier thought to be a definitive identity is now being recognized as being intersected by identities of language, sect and occupation. Each individual therefore, had varied identities, of which some might over-lap, but which interfered with the consolidation of a single, monolithic religious identity, even in societies prior to the coming of Islam."

ii "The notion of a Hindu community evolves from a geographic and ethnic description gradually giving way to religious association. The Hindu community is more difficult to define given the diverse nature of belief and worship making it the amorphous "Other" of the Muslim community...[t]he crystallization of this perception occurs when erstwhile Vaisnavas, Saivas, Lingayats and others, begin to refer to themselves as Hindus" (ibid: 4).

iii As far as defining this category goes, Thapar states (ibid: 4), "[t]he definition of the Muslim community extends to all those who claim adherence to Islam and the adherence is said to be demonstrated by a clearly stated belief and form of worship, which through conversion confers membership in a large body of believers, a membership which also assumes the egalitarian basis of the association...a perspective in which the Hindu...was seen as the counterpart."

iv Finegan (1952:121) informs us, as have several others before and after him that "The corresponding Persian form of the Sanskrit word (sindhu) was Hindu, and the Achaemenian kings designated the area beside the Indus as Hinduka The Greeks used forms based on Persian usage but in borrowing them omitted the *h* and made such words as Indos and India. While the former was the name of the river, the latter was applied to the whole country."

v Finegan (1952) finds resonance of later day Saktism, an offshoot of 'mainstream' Hinduism, in the so-called mother goddess cult of the Harappans, the latter itself a subject of much discussion in archaeology.

vi Jean-Francois Jarrige, the excavator at Nausharo.