

## **World Archaeological Congress (WAC) 3, New Delhi, 4th - 11th December 1994**

Despite ominous portents, and after many obstacles had been surmounted, the third quadrennial meeting of the World Archaeological Congress finally took place last December amid some controversy and with considerable attention from the media, both local and international. The event was attended by a contingent of nine members of the Institute of Archaeology, and *PIA* managed to glean from some of them their impressions of the conference.

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The first impression of the Congress organisation was all efficiency. The smiling welcome from the WAC desk at the airport early in the morning, the help with sorting baggage and getting to one's accommodation, were very reassuring. The banners proclaiming 'WAC 3' from the airport to the congress venue seemingly heralded a well-publicised, well-run event.

But the first day of registration suddenly propelled one into the real state of affairs. Endless queues snaking around the hall led to desks for the registration forms, receipts for filled forms, the pay-desk, the receipts for payment, the issuing of congress packs, and accommodation allocations. Shouts and fist fights accompanied claims of dodgy dealing in the administration - my first queue dissolved in violence to reconvene two hours later. Those who had finally reached the head of all the appropriate queues were able to join the free sight-seeing bus excursions around the city. After this introduction, we felt that things could only get better, and searched among the contents of our complementary brief-cases for the academic programme. However, there was only a leaflet on the first day's talks on 'The Archaeology of India' - no hint of what might follow. It transpired that the session organisers had arrived to find that no schedules had been arranged, and now they were desperately beavering away to provide an academic programme ready for the start of the conference proper. All thanks to Jon Hather and his cohorts, who spent many hours and literally sleepless nights making order out of chaos.

The session on the theme 'Changes in agronomy' miraculously emerged, sited in one of the smaller halls, with better acoustics and visibility than most; the talks were generally stimulating and interesting, with useful contributions from the floor. Of the contributions in other themes that I would have liked to attend, most were held in the Museum, which took too long to reach during short programme slots. I sat in on a number of papers which were virtually impossible to hear, largely due to interference from the microphones in the adjacent rooms.

In retrospect, as for most meetings, the most useful aspect of the Congress was the opportunity to talk to colleagues during the refreshment breaks, when one could catch up with their recent work, as well as discuss the papers of the preceding sessions. For my part I found the Congress useful and interesting in my subject area, and was able to make some good contacts.

The social events, receptions and cultural displays were highly enjoyable, although the major excursion to Agra gave us frustratingly little time at the Taj. The daily lunch buffets proved that even after ten days Indian food could still be wonderful.

But was it too much to expect that more emphasis on the academic programme could have been given by our hosts? I am sure that many lessons have been learnt by the WAC Committee, and it will be interesting to see how things are run next time around at WAC 4.

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### **Truth, morality and politics in archaeology: the WAC 3 Ayodhya case study**

On the 15th March 1995 *The Times* of London reported that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which campaigns on a platform of Hindu nationalism, had won power in Gujarat and Maharashtra. In Bombay, the capital of the latter state, where Muslims 'have invariably suffered a higher toll in the bloodshed than have the region's Hindus', Muslims are at risk. Two weeks later, *The Times* (30th March 1995) reported that Bal Thackeray, *de facto* leader of Maharashtra state with a private army of 40,000 thugs threatened to wipe out most Muslims if any of them dared to touch his hair.

It is easy in the light of these reports to understand the tragic events more than two years ago, when Hindu fanatics shocked the world by demolishing the Babari [Babri] masjid, a mosque dating to the sixteenth century, in Ayodhya, northern India. They claimed that a Hindu temple dating from the eleventh-twelfth century AD was located at the same site before the construction of the mosque.

During WAC 3, the Ayodhya issue became a centre of controversy (Colley 1995). The events surrounding this issue during the conference on occasion put into sharp focus the glaring divergence between theory and practice in archaeology.

Shortly before a meeting in New Delhi, held a few days before the opening of the conference, the then President of WAC, Professor Jack Golson, and the WAC Executive were faced with a demand to ban any discussion of the Ayodhya issue during the conference. This demand was attributed to the Union Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh. Golson was handed a letter - presumably drafted by the Minister's office - by Professor V.N. Misra, Secretary General of the Indian Academic Committee of WAC 3 on behalf of Professor B.B. Lal, President of WAC 3. According to an account published in *Frontline*, an Indian national magazine, certain prominent Indian scholars and historians were of the opinion that key figures among the Indian organisers of WAC 3 (including B.B. Lal and Dr. S.P. Gupta) were implicated in political activism in favour of 'Hindu nationalism' (Muralidharan 1994).

The attempt to ban any discussion at WAC 3 was futile, in spite of the fact that the Executive, unaware of the political machinations that entrapped them and acting in good faith, fearing for the safety of the delegates and the Indian public, acceded to the demand handed to them. In addition to the information gleaned by Professor Golson and passed on to the Executive, concerned members of the Executive diligently followed what was published in the daily newspapers and magazines. They shared that information and spent long hours attempting to analyse and interpret what was happening around

them. It became clear towards the end of the conference that political manoeuvres were underway to undermine any attempt to raise the Ayodhya issue during the plenary session. In the end, the plenary session was allowed to deteriorate to the brink of physical altercations when resolutions calling for the condemnation of the destruction of archaeological heritage for sectarian purposes were under discussion. Although the presiding Indian organisers closed the session, members of the Executive and council passed the resolution and boycotted the closing ceremony.

The events in New Delhi exposed the absurdity of viewing archaeology as another field of politics; as well as the view that archaeological knowledge is highly if not totally subjective, making all interpretations of the past equally valid. Those holding such views would clearly have found nothing wrong with re-interpretation of the past by Hindu nationalists for purposes of political propaganda. Clearly, archaeological knowledge (or for that matter, any other kind of knowledge), is no more free from the interaction between observer and observed than is nuclear physics. However, nuclear physicists have not given up in the face of this conclusion, and have certainly not advocated that scientific interpretations are subjective and accordingly are all equally valid. What is important to realise here is that to be 'objective' does not mean to be free from the influence of the observer or analyst - such a position would certainly be beyond the capability of human beings, who depend on their senses for *grasping* the world. What 'science' calls for above all else is:

1) the adoption of conventions and standards for observation, analysis and interpretation;

2) allowance for cross-examination by others regardless of their creed, political persuasion, nationality, gender, or social status; and

3) admission of the fallibility of knowledge, even such knowledge that might have been previously adopted and accepted.

Without such canons of (scientific) enquiry, knowledge is likely to depend merely on authority, sentiment, persuasion and preference. Knowledge in a closed circle becomes dogma (sacred, unalterable, and absolute) as religious knowledge is often regarded. Humanity had fought hard to rid itself of the shrouds of dogma. The Enlightenment's lasting and most glorious legacy lies in its attack on dogma and its advocacy for 'rational' (read non-dogmatic, inter-subjective, 'verifiable') knowledge.

The enemies of the Enlightenment project today may be regarded as the descendants of the romantics who were appalled at the dreary and cold face of scientific inquiry. The industrial system which manipulated and fostered science-cum-technology has been both a blessing and a curse (as one example, how many lives are saved daily because of scientific advances in medicine?). But, one should not throw away science because it has been misused and abused, and surely anyone who recognises the limitations of science is free to engage in other creative activities that enrich science or supplement it. It is also misguided to attempt to refute the utility of scientific inquiry on the basis of the importance of subjective experience. It is also misguided to confuse 'subjective' experience with 'subjectivity' (the intrusion of errors as a result of negligence, omissions, ignorance or deceit on the part of individual researchers)

Archaeological interpretations are grounded in information obtained from excavations and surveys of (material) remains, as well as the results of recording, classifying, and analysing those remains. Undoubtedly, different methods of recovering archaeological remains and of recording, classification, and analysis are likely to yield

different results. But it is essential that such methods remain subject to consideration and re-consideration whenever necessary by a body of learned professionals, and that the material remains constitute the referential items for examination or re-examination by anyone who wishes to confirm or reject previous claims.

I realise that archaeological materials, including the stratigraphy of the site itself, may be destroyed in the process of excavation, and that certain curation and analytical techniques may damage archaeological objects. Nevertheless, the main objective is to minimise individual biases and analytical 'errors'. The weight of an object even in analytical chemistry cannot be established objectively. However, error (deviation from a hypothetical true weight) is established through the use of balances with high accuracy, conditions that minimise vibrations and air movement, and repeated measurements to arrive at an average. There are no 'facts' in archaeology, or any other field for that matter, if that means that they are incontrovertible and faithful statements about objects or events external to us. Facts are, to the best of our knowledge as a collective body of investigators using certain criteria of judgement, the most accurate, precise, and reliable accounts of observations. They are also accounts which we may believe to be accurate, precise, and reliably representative of observations by others. Accuracy, reliability, and precision, as in statistics, are matters of conventional wisdom and standards.

Archaeological data, factual or putative, are the building blocks of interpretations and models that are deemed adequate as long as they are logically consistent, concordant with observations by competent investigators, and congruent with previously accepted principles.

From this perspective it would be ludicrous to ponder whether there are archaeological facts, when, as in the case of Ayodhya, the claims for certain archaeological remains can be checked by a body of non-partisan professional archaeologists. In what appears to be a propaganda-coloured brochure by Sharma *et al.* (n.d.: 1), claims are made for the destruction in the early sixteenth century of a Hindu temple at the site of the Babari mosque. They provide as evidence 'a big hoard of beautifully carved buff sandstone pieces in a large pit' 12 feet from the ground level near the 'Ramajanma Bhumi temple'. Allegedly, careful study by 'eight eminent archaeologists and historians found that all these objects are architectural members of a Hindu temple-complex of the 11th century AD'. The objects, however, were recovered 'on the 18th of June 1992, when the ground near the Ramajanma Bhumi was being leveled'. The document further states: 'On the 22nd and 23rd of July Dr. K.M. Srivastava and Dr. S.P. Gupta (S.P. Gupta served as a member of the Indian Organising Committee of WAC 3) went to Ayodhya and scraped the section facing east and also dug at least two feet still deeper in a small area along this section. They discovered a huge burnt-brick wall of more than a dozen courses running along the section and beyond it. Below this after a little break, the remains of another rock-wall have been found. At two different pre-Islamic levels there are the remains of brick-laid floors' (*ibid.*: 12). Also discussed is evidence for destruction, which 'conclusively proves what Prof. B.B. Lal, the previous excavator of this site, has been repeatedly saying that here at the Ramajanma Bhumi there was an impressive structure of the 11th-12th century built on pillars standing on a series of parallel burnt-brick bases which was destroyed in the early 16th century; in all likelihood the bases carried on them the same temple-pillars which were fixed in the 'mosque' " (*ibid.*: 12).

According to Muralidharan (1994), writing in *Frontline* (a national magazine

from the publishers of *The Hindu*), B.B. Lal (who served as the president of WAC 3) commenced an excavation project at Ayodhya in the mid-1970s. His findings indicated continuous occupation of the site between the seventh century AD and the thirteenth century AD, followed by a break of a few centuries. According to Muralidharan (1994: 100), Lal did not revise his conclusions until 1989, when he wrote in a journal of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh) party (advocating Hindu 'nationalism') that his excavations had uncovered a series of brick pillar bases just beyond the Babari mosque, and it seemed reasonable to suppose that these were the remnants of a pillared temple which stood at the site prior to the mosque. Lal apparently did not provide any documentation of his findings until two years later when he produced a photograph. 'At the same time, the plea was advanced on behalf of Lal, that the site notebook pertaining to the excavation could not be located, since it had been prepared many years before (*ibid.*: 100). Investigations by a team of historians and archaeologists including R.S. Sharma and Suraj Bhan concluded that the provenance of the so called pillar bases could not be firmly established; and that these remnants belonged to 'an ordinary structure of reused bricks, which was neither religious nor monumental'. K.V. Soundara Rajan, who collaborated with Lal on the excavation, affirmed that the supposed pillar bases had indeed been found, but that they could have belonged to a structure contemporary or slightly antecedent to the mosque - either ancillary to or independent of it. Mandal, archaeologist at Allahabad University concluded that 'It is highly probable that the so called pillar bases are actually portions of walls of different structural phases' (1993). The remnants consist of clusters of bricks laid haphazardly and seem to date between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century AD.

Instead of a ban on discussion of the Ayodhya issue at WAC 3, which proved to be unsuccessful precisely because a ban was called for, and because the press in India greeted the delegates every morning with information - much needed information - on what was going on, archaeology would have been better served if a symposium had been devoted to a discussion of the issue. But more importantly, a non-partisan team of delegates from other countries could have been invited to Ayodhya to inspect the alleged discoveries and to examine field notes and other excavation documents.

Still, the interpretive leap from bricks to a Hindu temple of a specific date requires a great deal of archaeological information. But even if it was 'conclusively' established that the remnants of a temple, a Hindu temple, exist at Ayodhya what justification would that be for the destruction of the Babari mosque, an archaeological site dating to the sixteenth century? International conventions forbid the destruction of archaeological heritage for sectarian or partisan purposes, and call for their preservation. Any decision to sacrifice major archaeological sites for a common good is an onerous decision and must involve international bodies as has been the case in campaign to salvage the antiquities in Nubia in conjunction with the construction of the Aswan High Dam. The malicious destruction of the cultural heritage of a people in order to serve chauvinistic political goals is morally indefensible. The Nazi manipulation of the past in occupied Poland (Mikolajczyk 1990) is a case in point. Artefacts of Slavic origin were either dispersed or destroyed, and an earthenware urn from a cremation cemetery dating to the second-third centuries AD at Biala, near Łódź, distinguished by a swastika motif, became a prime exhibit as evidence of the proto-Germanic character of central Poland.

Today, with the re-emergence of the ugly head of fascism both in and outside Europe, the resurgence of militant fundamentalism, and the appearance of chauvinism,

archaeologists face a responsibility they can no longer shun. The trials at Nuremberg have established the principle of the moral responsibility and accountability of those who participate in the actions of political regimes that violate human rights. The United Nation's Bill of Human Rights, endorsed by representatives from the majority of world nations, provides the basis for arbitration in such matters. International codes produced by the ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and other bodies concerned with conservation of world heritage sites and monuments, are binding and must be invoked in adjudicating cases involving the potential damage or demolition of cultural heritage. The flux of national boundaries and national identities, and the turnover of political regimes of different agendas, necessitates a code of ethics that overrides the mandates of transient chauvinistic or sectarian regimes in the fields of human rights and cultural heritage. Respect for national sovereignty, political parties, and religions does not imply license to trample the human rights of individuals or the destruction of a cultural heritage that belongs to future generations of humanity. The greatest legacy of archaeology resides in its role in revealing the cultural unity of human civilisation. Despite archaeology's chequered history, and the political contexts in which it emerged (Scarre 1990), most archaeologists today would agree on the common descent of humankind, and on our collective cultural heritage. Our past consists of a constant flux of nations and peoples that rise and vanish. Their knowledge is shared among nations and transmitted to future generations who, in a short span of time, may develop new loyalties and worship different gods. As archaeologists, we should aim to unmask the fundamental forces and principles that have guided the course of our history and those that undergird the institutions of civilisation. The tendency to treat world archaeology from an overwhelmingly regional perspective reflects and perpetuates a dated and dangerous view of our common past.

In contemporary archaeology, we can no longer ignore the moral dimension of our discipline. As Ucko (1990: xx) rightly remarks, 'the problem confronting archaeology today is an acutely moral one'. The moral dimensions of nuclear physics, genetic engineering, or economics are perhaps clearer than ours, but archaeological knowledge can further causes that can perpetuate injustice, incite wars, and bolster violations of basic human rights. Current debates that lock theoretical discussions in the format of a confrontation between proponents of 'positivism' and 'anti-positivism' may enrich our understanding and enhance our awareness of the shortcomings of any single paradigm, but such debates should not steal the show from the fundamental problem facing archaeology today. WAC, by sponsoring symposia and publishing a series of books in the *One World Archaeology* series on such issues as *Domination and Resistance* (edited by D. Miller *et al.*), *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (edited by S.J. Shennan), *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions* (edited by R. Layton), and *The Excluded Past: archaeology and education* (edited by P. Stone and R. McKenzie) serves an important role in focusing our attention on issues of high priority. The decision to publish books in this series in paperback editions to make them more accessible is laudable. The publisher's willingness to distribute a number of books at no cost to researchers and institutions in 'Third World' countries is truly commendable.

The academic program of WAC 3, sidelined in the flurry over Ayodhya, should not be overlooked. There were themes dealing with 'Culture property, conservation, and public awareness', 'Relationships between archaeological theory and practice', and 'Technological innovations and power'. Participants discussed pressing issues related to

the preservation and conservation of sites in the light of threats from urbanisation, industrialisation, tourism, and looting. 'Education and the past', a subject of special interest for WAC, was also discussed. Issues of morality in archaeology include the role archaeologists play in making the results of their work accessible to those who have long been denied access to archaeological knowledge, or those who have been subjected to dogmatic or elitist interpretations of the past.

In conclusion, the Ayodhya issue reveals the importance of adhering to (scientific) standards and canons for ascertaining the credibility of archaeological observations and the adequacy of archaeological interpretations and models. It also alerts us to the need to consider the moral responsibility of archaeologists in the light of the empowering force of the past and the potential for subverting archaeological information to serve destructive sectarian or partisan policies.

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Many people left New Delhi last December exhausted, some left disappointed, a few left slightly disillusioned, and some that I spoke to went home with the certain knowledge that their colleagues' first words on their return would be "I told you so". Most delegates to the conference, however, went home excited that their research had been presented to a worldwide forum and that they had met colleagues from countries that they could probably never afford to visit themselves. I am unsure of the expectations of WAC 3 of

my colleagues in the UK and the USA, but to a large extent I suspect they weren't met. But it wasn't just India, and although both the country's bureaucracy and individual Indian academics' little idiosyncrasies were partly to blame, the incompetence, laziness and intolerance of western delegates also played its part.

I certainly couldn't put a finger on my expectations before the conference but, whatever they were, they changed not long after I arrived in New Delhi at around midnight five days before the start of the conference. The bus taking delegates to their hotels refused to take me to my guest house because I had booked it myself rather than through the conference organisation. I was rather unceremoniously dumped in a large layby inhabited by a few auto-rickshaw drivers and their rather questionable vehicles. I had the address of the guest house with me and despite the complete lack of a common language was soon riding along quite happily around the New Delhi suburbs. This went on for some while and then, as time approached 2.30 we stopped at the roadside, where a couple of what turned out to be the driver's friends were merrily setting fire to someone's (hopefully) discarded furniture. We alighted and warmed ourselves by the flames until the last chair leg turned to ash and then got back on and resumed our search for the elusive guest house. We did find it, of course, an hour or so later, but the point of this story is not that everything comes to those who wait, but to illustrate the total helplessness of the situation. There was absolutely nothing I could do to get to my guest house any sooner, but perhaps I shouldn't have expected to have made what I found out later was no more than a twenty minute journey, in anything less than three hours. And this is perhaps where many people from the UK and the USA felt let down. I feel as though they really expected a conference of around nine hundred delegates from all over the world, speaking numerous different languages, in what must be one of the most over-bureaucratic cities in the world, where archaeology is openly and overtly part of party politics, to run like a one day meeting of the Neolithic Studies Group. One UK academic was heard to say that with organisation as poor as this he would never come to another WAC conference. I don't suppose he will be missed. For people who came with the expectation of seeing, listening to and talking to archaeologists from more countries around the world than they would ever meet outside a WAC conference, this expectation was fulfilled. And it is for these delegates, whether they come from Berkeley or Botswana, that the conference worked. For despite the political wranglings and the problems with organisation, the conference did run its course, will present in *One World Archaeology* publications a great deal of new and important work and, of possibly more importance, has a WAC executive committee in place for the next conference.

By the way, for those members of the Institute who heard Chris Tilley at a recent Prehistory seminar, during a rather naive swipe at WAC, full of middle-class value judgements, state that the *One World Archaeology* logo on the front of each publication has Europe at its centre, it hasn't - have a look.

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Theme nine ('Heritage, conservation, management and protection') looked very promising. It offered me an opportunity to stand back from detailed research on materials, and to take stock of some of the wider conservation issues. The titles of some of the sub-themes gave the promised flavour: 'Heritage management in the face of modern life', and 'Ethics and decision making in heritage management'. The titles of individual papers kept up the promise: for example 'The role of cultural property in tourism promotion', 'Conflict between preservation and development in Japan', and 'Present legislation regarding conservation of cultural property: a reappraisal'.

In the event, the sessions did not live up to their promise. No abstracts were available, despite having been supplied months in advance. No attempt was made to adhere to the published programme, and it was only at the end of the week that any attempt was made to put up any sort of daily programme. It was impossible to be present for any particular paper that you wanted to hear - you did not even know what *day* it was going to be on, let alone what *time*.

A large part of the blame must be taken, not by WAC or the Indian organisers, but by the chairman of this group of sessions. He should not only have publicised the programme in advance, but he should also have imposed more discipline on the sessions. During one session, the person who was to present the next paper was running through his slides by projecting them alongside the slides of the ongoing lecture; during another session, the room lights flashed on and off every few seconds without the chairman making any effort to put things right; and by the final paper, there were only nine people left in the audience, eight of whom were talking to each other continuously.

It was not surprising then, that the sessions did not stimulate any great discussion. There was much wringing of hands over the threats to the cultural heritage, but little serious debate. There were many case studies, but little attempt to draw out underlying principles. There were many insights into the politics and in-fighting that hinders progress in many countries, but little effort to transcend them.

It sounds as though WAC was a disaster for me. It was not. The best parts of any conference are the people that one meets outside the formal sessions, the ideas that come from a new environment and a different pace, and the insights and perspectives to be gained from other delegates. The conference was rich in all of these, and I came back with a much deeper understanding of the difficulties that face conservation and heritage management in cultures very different from that of Europe or North America.

There are many high points to remember, but the high point of the academic sessions was undoubtedly the Indian delegate who presented his paper in the manner of a 33rpm record played at well over 78rpm. I still cannot imagine how he managed to enunciate all his words so meticulously whilst going at such break-neck speed. I could hardly contain myself, and the man next to me had tears of laughter running down his face. At the end of it, he turned to me and said, "It was worth the registration fee, just for that!".

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Despite being Indian, WAC 3, held in New Delhi, was for me in some ways as new and unpredictable an experience as it may have been to some foreign delegates. I had come into archaeology as an outsider from materials science, and this was the first major international conference on archaeology I was attending in India.

As pointed out in a report in *India Today*, archaeology in India is a rather underfunded field, which has generally received step-motherly treatment from the Government, in what is after all a developing country. Hence, having been used to the sadly dingy and decrepit venues that I usually associated with Indian archaeology and museology, it came as something of a shock (but - I will confess - secret relief) to note that archaeology had moved upmarket, executive-style, to the Taj Palace Hotel, and had seemingly become more professional. It was more shocking, however, to visit the lawns of Purana Qila next to the zoo and to see, sure enough, the tents propped up there which had been reported by the press to be housing some Indian delegates in the Delhi winter as if they were on a dig.

The Indian press seemed to be having a field day cataloguing the unfolding 'fiasco' and 'farce'; the politicised scenario; the clash between left and right, with the left claiming they were being elbowed out, leading to the conference being held to coincide with the second anniversary of the demolition of the Babri [Babari] mosque in Ayodhya (claimed to be the site of a shrine to the Hindu god Ram) by right-wing Hindu extremists; the President of India refusing to inaugurate the conference; conflicting resolutions being passed concerning the Ayodhya issue; the lapses in accommodation facilities and missing deposits; the chaotic schedules and the lack of pre-circulated papers etc., etc. Added to which, some prominent Indian delegates I met left in exasperation claiming that their papers had not been listed on the notice boards.

Despite all the clouds, there were some silver linings. In fact I was quite impressed by certain aspects of the conference which were rather well organised (knowing the kind of chaos one can sometimes expect in India). I must say I was quite taken by the scented invitations on hand-made paper, and was happy to eat some good food, probably out of homesickness. Then, like me, quite a few delegates enjoyed the social events and the Indian dance performances. (I was especially gratified to see the 64-year old doyenne of dance, Yamini Krishnamurthi, still in action). And luckily, some sixth sense warned me against attending the plenary session, which reportedly ended in 'pandemonium' - a term sometimes used by the Indian press when describing Delhi parliamentary sessions. Then the conference, being in India, did provide an international forum for Asian archaeologists from India, Sri Lanka, etc., (including young, up-and-coming, and apolitical archaeologists), who might otherwise find it prohibitively difficult or expensive to attend international conferences and to be published internationally. I even caught up with a Thai archaeologist, Yenchit Sukhawasana, formerly studying at the Institute of Archaeology. She was quite excited by the excerpts from a lively TV series made by an Indian woman director, Chandita Mukherjee, popularising scientific archaeology for the rural masses, interspersed with song, dance and anecdote; and she wanted to do the same in Thailand. Then, in my own session on archaeometallurgy, there was plenty of opportunity for up-and-coming archaeologists and materials scientists-turned-archaeologists to get feedback from some of the leading national and international

experts in the field, and vice versa. Unfortunately I missed out on quite a lot of the proceedings, not so much because of the schedules, which were given a semblance of order at the eleventh hour thanks to the efforts of some of the western delegates, but because I was frantically working on my paper till the last minute, with my session being held nearly at the end of the conference.

Coming back to the cloudy side, this conference made it clear that the politicisation of religious identity by the right-wing BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) (which has in the past six or seven years emerged on the political horizon in India to pose a dilemma for the country's secular and democratic constitution) has coincided with an increasing agenda for legitimising the views and actions of the Hindu right through archaeology. In this case, WAC could not have been held in a more inopportune location, as the BJP party had at that time been elected to power only in the Union Territory of Delhi, while the centrist Congress Party was in power in the capital, so that WAC was caught on a seesaw between the two parties. (At best, one wonders whether archaeologists would be less vulnerable to political manoeuvrings if they were better funded, or even privately funded as is the increasing trend with many things in India!).

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to take the view that Third World countries such as India are not engaged in archaeology as a liberal humanist discipline as much as in the West, but only as an exercise in asserting religious, regional or national identities, even at the cost of harmony. It was in Europe, specifically in the Fascist Germany of the 1930s, that the most ominous attempts to legitimise a narrow national identity through archaeology occurred; and in fact served to some extent as a model for ultra-nationalists the world over. Nation-building at the expense of each other's archaeological monuments has also occurred in Greece and Turkey. Archaeology in the Third World has inevitably tended to become politicised or caught up in aspects of nationalistic debate, due to its relevance to issues of decolonisation. Furthermore, one cannot wish away the fact that, in the case of India, archaeology may have a certain relevance in reconstructing a past tied up with religion (e.g. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain) which, in the case of the Hindu majority, is widely perceived to have been obscured, and even obliterated to some extent, by historical factors including the advent of Muslim rule and, subsequently, European colonisation, which are also comparatively better documented historically. There were those among the Indian archaeological fraternity who pointedly stayed away from WAC; and even for those Indian delegates who did attend the conference, the seemingly symbolic timing of the inauguration on 6th December coinciding with the second anniversary of the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya did pose a dilemma - many of the Indian delegates present had strongly condemned the destruction of an existing archaeological and religious structure as an inflammatory vote-catching exercise by the Hindu right aimed at fuelling and exploiting the religious sentiment of the Hindu majority.

The absenteeism of some Indian delegates also says something of the ideological divisions within the Indian archaeological fraternity. They included secularists, serious historians and archaeologists, leftists (often from eastern India), Muslims, and even south Indians, who are usually suspicious of whiffs of north Indian chauvinism, and who regard the Hindu right as a regional north Indian phenomenon. Sometimes this suspicion is not unfounded: for instance the exhibition held in the National Museum during the conference, on the prehistory of the Indus Valley and the megaliths, seemed to exclude the important early megalithic sites of the south.

In the context of nationalism and archaeology, other countries in South Asia may have more severely mistreated their archaeological monuments and prehistory - despite also having essentially multi-religious and even multi-ethnic pasts like India - due to the existence of democratic and secular institutions even more flawed than those of India, and to their possession of less freedom of expression. I am told that archaeological one-upmanship has occurred in Sri Lanka during the course of the bloody ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamils, with each side claiming for itself the position of original inhabitants of the island. In the neighbouring Muslim-dominated countries, a Muslim friend from Bangladesh tells me that old Hindu-Buddhist structures have been vandalised; while around a hundred Hindu shrines are reported to have been destroyed in Pakistan in the aftermath of the destruction at Ayodhya. Tibetan refugees who have resettled in the Indian Himalaya tell tragic tales of the destruction of scores of Buddhist monasteries by the Chinese.

To end on a lighter note and just to illustrate the idiosyncratic, and even surreal, interactions which occur between regional politics and historical study in India, the south of India had its own World Tamil Conference in January. Here the foreign delegates were each presented with expensive watches neatly and ingeniously inserted with a photograph of the current chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Ms. Jayalalitha, a former film star. In retrospect however, like the average cinema-struck Indian, I might even have preferred the histrionics of a megalomaniac film-star to some of those which occurred at WAC 3!