Archaeology and Its Public(s): Thinking Through the Archaeology - Public Relationship

Rachel A. Varghese

1. Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi – 110 067, India (Email: racheltvarghese@gmail.com)

Abstract: The paper discusses the ways in which the relationship between archaeology and the public has been addressed in the academia. Moving from a brief overview of the emergence and evolution of the discipline of Public Archaeology, it goes on to the specific concern of how the idea of public is discussed in these studies. Through a discussion of selected texts and examples the paper underscores the necessity for marking the public in its multiplicity, and as having active agency in its relation to archaeology.

Keywords: Public Archaeology, Self-reflexivity, Public(s), Models of Public Archaeology, Conflict, Agency, Sub-Discipline

Introduction

Archaeology, by nature of its field practice, comes into interaction with the public in multiple ways. The conceptualization and execution of any archaeological project sees institutional, state and local interests factoring in at different stages. Unlike academic work that is confined to laboratories or libraries, the archaeologist must often negotiate with places used by people in several other ways. These aspects had rarely been discussed in academia prior to the 1970s, owing to the positivist understanding of archaeology as an objective scientific enterprise largely unaffected by contextual factors. Contextualising archaeological practice and knowledge production has not been an important concern of traditional culture-historical, and ‘new archaeological’ approaches. In the last four decades, the subjectivity of the archaeologist and the political/ideological dimensions of the disciplinary practice have been drawn to academic attention. This is the context in which public-archaeology engagement becomes an important theme in archaeology. This paper examines the ways in which this engagement has been understood within the discipline.

Public Archaeology: Emergence of the Sub-Discipline

One of the frames within which the relationship between archaeology and the public is explored is that of Public Archaeology. The term was first used by US anthropologist, Charles R. McGimsey (1972) in the 1972 volume of the same title. McGimsey’s work
was a response to the rapid destruction of archaeological sites in the United States as a result of developmental activities. In the early years, Public Archaeology essentially meant Cultural Resource Management (CRM) and conservation (King 1983, Merriman 2004). CRM is a broad term that can refer to any activity of conservation and management of cultural resources. The CRM approaches usually conceive of the agents of archaeology acting ‘on behalf of’ the public and in many parts of the globe this is a predominant approach towards institutionalised practices in Public Archaeology. A related development in the 1980’s and 1990’s especially in the United States is that of Educational Archaeology (for a detailed discussion, see, Jameson Jr. 2004, Frost 2004, McManamon 1991) which referred to actual classroom situations and also to diverse methods of conveying archaeological information to the lay public.

During the four decades following the publication of McGimsey’s work, Public Archaeology has acquired the status of a sub-discipline that looks into a wide range of issues of which CRM and Educational Archaeology are but a part. This is best illustrated by the definition of Public Archaeology by Tim Schadla-Hall (1999) in the editorial to the volume of the European Journal of Archaeology dedicated to Public Archaeology. Schadla-Hall defines Public Archaeology as “any area of archaeological activity that interacted or had the potential to interact with the public” (ibid, 147). This broadening of definition marks the reconsidations of the nature of public involvement in archaeology over a period of time. Another related development is the emergence of the idea of Community Archaeology. In the issue of World Archaeology dedicated to the subject Marshall (2002) uses the term to mean partial control by the community at every step of an archaeological project. She notes that while many of the concerns of Community Archaeology overlap with those of CRM, the recognition of the same or the use of the term Community Archaeology is absent, especially in some parts of the globe like the US. The distinct advantage of Community Archaeology over CRM initiatives is the possibility of its acceptance as part of academic research. CRM and heritage management are important elements of Community Archaeology. But it may also be perceived as “a specific approach to all aspects of archaeological practice” that look to “transform the nature of the discipline in fundamental ways” (Marshall 2002, 215). Public Archaeology, the first journal dedicated to the subject, began publication in the year 2000. The editorial (Ascherson 2000) to the first volume captures in a much more effective way than Schadla-Hall (1999) does, the transformations that the sub-discipline underwent since the 1970’s. Ascherson examines what caused the term Public Archaeology to ‘explode’ from its narrow meaning as “archaeology conducted or conserved for the general body by public authority” (Ascherson 2000, 2). The self-reflexivity that entered the discipline post 1980s rendered it less Eurocentric and led to a realisation that the present and not the past was the real locus of archaeology. Thus there was the recognition within the discipline of its political nature. Ascherson attributes the broadening of the scope of Public Archaeology to these changes. Thus, from the relatively narrow definitions of CRM and Educational Archaeology, Public Archaeology has come to include within its scope a very wide range of topics including but not limited to politics of the past, policies related to
archaeology, archaeology and its relation to the nation state, archaeology and the antiquities market, cultural destruction of archaeological heritage, public involvement in archaeology, media representation of archaeology and heritage tourism and archaeology.

In India, studies that use a Public Archaeology frame are sparse. Neelima Dahiya (1994) has authored a study that looks at public education of archaeology. She examines aspects of introducing archaeology at an informal level in history teaching in the school curricula in India. The study employs a questionnaire based survey among teachers and statistical analysis of experimental and traditional teaching sessions with students in selected schools that follow the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum in the states of Delhi and Haryana. On the basis of her statistical observations she argues that archaeology, especially through effective use of teaching aids, can help make the study of ancient history of India meaningful to the students. Dahiya finds archaeology to have a transformative role in modifying the student's attitude towards Ancient History as a discipline at an ideological level. Raczec et.al (2011), in an important field study talks of collaborative archaeology in the context of South Asia. The idea of collaborative archaeology, closely links with that of community archaeology and explores the ways in which multiple forms of knowledge possessed by communities associated with the archaeological site can be integrated into traditional archaeological interpretation. The focused discussion on the site of Chatrikhera in Rajasthan, brings out the multi-scalar and multi-regional conceptions of heritage, differential preferences in the communities’ and archaeologists’ relationship with archaeological material and the challenges in achieving collaboration at the level of practice. Selvakumar’s (2006) article titled ‘Public Archaeology in India: Perspectives from Kerala’ is a pioneering work that concerns itself with Public Archaeology as a sub-discipline. Selvakumar analyses the public responses to two excavation projects that he had been involved in and uses a questionnaire based survey to study the public attitude towards archaeology in the state of Kerala in South India. He compares his findings with a broader Indian scenario, based on generalized observations, to characterize the Kerala public as a category that is distinctly pro-active and able to influence the research decisions of the archaeologists. Selvakumar clearly places his work within Public Archaeology debates and seeks to address the lacuna in the field in India. He also moves beyond CRM based understanding, to take into account the importance of changing discourses on heritage, the politics of archaeology and the influence of public perception on the discipline. The dearth of studies that make conscious use of the Public Archaeology frame would suggest that the field and the debates that it has generated have not been addressed adequately by the Indian academia. One possible reason for this is the particular trajectory and role that archaeology has taken in the post-colony. The link that the discipline has had with nationalist history making and the regulation of archaeological practice across the country through bureaucratic traditions inherited from the colonial times makes it difficult for the discipline to engage with theoretical developments outside its boundaries or from other parts of the globe. I am not suggesting a complete absence of
such concerns in Indian archaeology. There are a few studies from the region that raise related concerns without identifying these as Public Archaeology issues. For instance, Sumathi Ramaswamy (2001) looks at the appropriation of the archaeology of Indus sites “by colonial and post‐colonial India’s intellectuals into the narrative contracts of various nationalist projects” (ibid, 106). Guha(2005) and Ratnagar(2007) respond to the use of archaeology in the legitimization of Hindutva politics in India. The detrimental role that archaeology and archaeologists have played in the Ayodhya issue, both up to the communal mobilization that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and in the legal procedures that followed has been discussed by several scholars (Abraham 2005, Bernbeck and Pollock 1996, Gopal et.al.1990,Guha-Thakurtha1997, Layton and Thomas 2001,Rao 1995,Mandal and Ratnagar 2007, Ratnagar 1994). Ashish Chadha’s (2007) unpublished doctoral dissertation titled “Performing Science, Producing Nation: Archaeology and the State in Postcolonial India” is an ethnographic examination of archaeology as a scientific enterprise in post‐colonial India. These studies among others have opened up important discussions about the inextricable way in which archaeology in India is related to the nation state and the contemporary political debates in the region. However, the question of the public, which is a central concern in Public Archaeology studies, does not figure in these discussions.

The Public in Archaeology
The major difference among the studies that address public engagement of archaeology is in the way these characterize the public and the extent to which agency is attributed to the public.

Public or Public(s)?
From the time when the discipline endorsed its engagement with the public as a matter of academic and practical concern, there has also been the tacit recognition that it would not be possible to talk of the public as a homogenous singular entity. McGimsey (1972), for instance, has a two‐fold approach to the public. He does imagine a universal singular public which has a “birthright” (ibid, 5) to knowledge including knowledge about the past. But he also talks about particular sets of the public and the varied nature of their association with specific archaeological material. Their relation to archaeology is defined and limited by the extent to which it is seen to facilitate or hinder the universal public right to knowledge. In studies that deal with Public Education, the multiplicity of public attitudes and perceptions are recognised and distinct sets of the public are defined so as to strategise the content and method of conveying archaeological messages to specific target groups (Fagan 1977, Mc Manamon 1991).

Usually, one of the primary divisions made is between the public as officialdom and the public as people. The former refers to the state and its institutions. These have an important say in archaeological practice in almost all parts of the world. This is especially true for countries like India where archaeology is a highly state controlled practice, the ASI being the sole licensing body of archaeological explorations and
excavations. Public funds generally support most archaeology projects. However, the
nation state is not the only mandating level at which institutions that work in the area
of archaeological heritage operate. There is a spectrum of such organisations operating
at different levels, namely international/ global, national and regional/local. A more
useful distinction would be between the institutionalized and non-institutionalized
public in cases where the state is not the sole agency that controls archaeological
practice. This holds well for the American continents and other parts of the world
where rescue/contractual archaeology has a major role. In the Indian context also such
a distinction would carry validity. Apart from the ASI, in India, there are university
departments which have engaged in archaeological activities over a long period and
have their own institutionalized means and methods of practicing the discipline. The
ASI, in recent years, has also been engaging with many non-governmental
organisations in the field of heritage like the INTACH or the Aga Khan foundation for
management and conservation activities. Similarly, in the context of the new globalized
discourses around heritage we have institutionalized interests coming into close
association with archaeology through supra-national bodies like the UNESCO or
through different players involved in the tourism industry. Institutionalised and non-
institutionalised interests need not always be mutually exclusive categories.
Institutions often represent the opinions of particular sections of the public.

Multiplicity in public attitudes and perceptions is visible at any archaeological site. A
recent example from Kerala, the site of Pattanam in Ernakulam District, could be
invoked to illustrate this aspect. The archaeological exercises from the late 1990s and
the proposition of identifying the site with the ancient port of Muziris entered public
discourse in a major way and saw convergence and dissonance among multiple
interest groups. The local population of Pattanam showed considerable enthusiasm in
the early years towards the excavation and towards the possibility of identifying the
site with Muziris. Over the years, the focus of the local population shifted from the
outcomes of the excavations to more immediate concerns like land and employment.
Thus, it is no longer possible to talk about a general local attitude to the excavations.
The responses to the Pattanam excavations have not been confined to the immediate
vicinity of the site alone. The Pattanam-Muziris identification also led to discontent on
part of the local population at Kodungallur, 10 kilometers North of Pattanam. At
Kodungallur, which had traditionally been associated with Muziris, the Pattanam-
Muziris association led to discontent which was channelized through seminars and the
formation of action councils. These early responses from Pattanam and Kodungallur
have been discussed by Selvakummar (2006) and Adarsh (2013). The media, especially
print media, had an important role in carrying these debates to a wider audience.
Another important space into which the discussions on Pattanam excavations entered
is that of print magazines, a space I would characterize as quasi-academic. Here the
debate was carried out primarily through the literary medium of magazines and
newspapers and involved academicians, public figures, politicians and other members
of the literary public. The identification of Pattanam with Muziris also generated
particular identity claims and vehement political opposition to the excavations
themselves. Over the years, Muziris as a word and idea, has become extensively popular and acquired the nature of a brand. One interesting development was the entry of Pattanam along with a number of other sites in the region into the global tourism imagery through the conceptualisation of the Muziris Heritage Project (MHP) by the Government of Kerala in 2006. This saw the coming in of other interest groups like government departments, tourism agencies and international bodies like the UNESCO. I have discussed elsewhere the way in which archaeology informed this new tourism-heritage imagination (Varghese 2015). The linking up of the excavations, to a grand scale heritage project, has had its reflection on expectations at the local level. The excavations are now expected to bring in infrastructural benefits to the locality. While each of these aspects merits a more detailed treatment, the effort here is to mark the public in its multiplicity. We see multiple categories of the public entering the picture. These include local and non-local population groups, organised interest groups, media, state institutions and commercial interests. More often than not, these categories are fluid and their concerns and perceptions overlap or depart over time. For instance I mentioned above, the change of local attitudes towards the Pattanam excavations over the years. With more immediate concerns like employment coming into the scenario, one sees factors like class and caste positions of the public comes into more sharp relief. Possibly, a wider, survey based study can tell us more about such factors.

**Conflict**

Most early studies around the globe concerned primarily with the management of archaeological heritage and public education, take for granted concepts like public interest, and the understanding of archaeologists working for the public good (McGimsey 1972, McManamon 1991). However public attitudes towards archaeology can be complex and would often conflict with that of the archaeologist. Archaeological sites are often located on private property. In the state of Kerala where land holdings are relatively small, archaeological interventions are sometimes perceived with mistrust due to fear of land acquisition by the state. This was evidenced at the site of Pattanam also. Mc Gimsey (1972)’s work itself was in response to the rapid destruction of archaeological sites in the state of Arkansas as part of development activities.

The complexity of public attitudes towards archaeology comes out clearly in the studies of the remains of indigenous groups in North America, Australia and elsewhere (McManamon 1991, Hubert 1994 McGuire 1994, 2004). The differential treatment of the remains of indigenous groups reflects the public attitudes held by sections of people, including archaeologists, who relegate the indigenous cultures as something belonging to the past. There are often demands from indigenous groups for removal of the remains of their ancestors from public displays in museums and sometimes to reburry these remains or those that are excavated with due ceremonial respect. To take an example, in 1986, an indigenous community of Brazil called Krahô made a demand to the Sao Paolo museum to return a lunate axe that the museum had acquired some years before, which they considered as part of their ethnic identity (Melatti 1986). After much media debates and official negotiations, the axe was
returned to the group. Archaeologists and heritage institutions have had multiform responses to such demands. Hubert (1994) discusses in detail instances of such organised demands and occasions where archaeologists and heritage organisations have responded by removing public displays of indigenous remains, or have formulated guidelines for consultation with indigenous groups regarding their course of action. One example for this from the United States is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990. This Act required federally funded museums and agencies to keep an inventory of human remains as well as sacred and funerary objects and repatriate them if demands for the same are made by indigenous groups.

**Agency**

One of the major differences among studies that look at the archaeology-public interface lies in the extent to which agency is attributed to the public. Recent theoretical scholarship in Public Archaeology uses models derived from Public Engagement of Science (PES) to characterize these multiple approaches (Merriman 2004, Holtorf 2007, Okamura and Matsuda 2011).

**Models of Public Archaeology**

Most of the early CRM and Educational Archaeology works assumed the public to be deficient in their knowledge of archaeology and held that the archaeologist is the sole repository of ‘authentic’ knowledge. This is the predominant attitude towards the public, especially in contexts of praxis where the archaeologist interacts with the public on field. Dahiya’s (2004) work mentioned above takes this approach towards public education of archaeology. She finds archaeology as having a transformative role in modifying the student’s attitude towards the discipline of Ancient History. She also demonstrates the potential role of Educational Archaeology in ideological inculcation, in this case, nationalism. For her this is an ideal consequence, and she is hence not critical of the role of the educator. The scientific and rational positioning of the discipline and of the educator by virtue of his/ her mastery over it is positioned at a higher level from that of the student. The student has to undergo a set of well-defined transformations in his/ her perceptions and ideology through the education he/ she receives. This top-down approach towards the public has been termed the Deficit Model by Merriman (2004). Holtorf (2007) subdivides the same as Education Model and Public Relations Model. The former emerges from the concern that people could gather a ‘wrong image’ of archaeology, and seeks to correct this. “In the Public Relations Model people are sought to be manipulated in order to make their opinions more compatible with the interests of professional archaeology” (Holtorf 2007, 116). Okamura and Matsuda (2011) use the term approach instead of models and their Education Approach and Public Relations approach are much the same as those of Holtorf discussed above.

In recent years this characterization of the public as a passive or deficient category has undergone radical rethinking. This is reflected in the way the public-archaeology
relationship has been perceived. The notion of the public as a “critical body external to that of the state” (Merriman 2004, 1) deriving from the Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere (Habermas 1991) is central to this rethinking. The recognition that archaeological interpretation draws upon the subjectivity of the archaeologist has by extension led to the understanding that the “non-archaeologists will re-appropriate, re-interpret and re-negotiate meanings of archaeological resources to their own personal agendas” (Merriman 2004, 7). This has been called the Multiple Perspective model by Merriman. In a similar vein Holtorf (2007) talks about the Democratic Model where the expectation is for the “professionals to change according to what people actually want from archaeology” (Holtorf 2007, 119). As per the model, as expected in a democratic society, archaeologists “ought to accept how mature adults prefer to depict both the past and archaeology” (Holtorf 2007, 119). The Democratic Model has the drawback of falling into extreme relativism whereby all alternative interpretations are placed on an equal footing with archaeological interpretations, without critical evaluation. Alternatively, Okamura and Matsuda (2011; also see Matsuda 2016) identify two different approaches when acknowledging multiplicity in public attitudes and the agency of the public. The first is the Pluralist or Multi-vocal approach. It seeks “to identify and acknowledge various interpretations of archaeological materials made by different social groups and individuals in various contexts of contemporary society” (Okamura and Matsuda 2011, 6). In this approach, archaeology is only one way of making sense of the past, and it tries to understand how archaeology can engage meaningfully with other interpretations. Multi-vocal/pluralist approach goes beyond mere recognition of the multiple interpretations of the past to suggest active engagement with them. The second is the Critical Approach which “engages with the politics of the past. typically by seeking to unsettle the interpretation of the past by socially dominant groups, in particular ethnocentric and elitist groups, or to help socially subjugated groups achieve due socio-political recognition by promoting their views of the past” (Matsuda 2016, 3). Thus, while the critical approach also recognizes multiple interpretations of the past, unlike the Democratic Model or Pluralist Approach, it seeks to make a critical intervention by assuming an ethical or political position.

Discussion
While it initially addressed a very narrow set of concerns, we have seen that, Public Archaeology has over the years broadened in scope primarily by rethinking the archaeology-public relationship. The recognition of multiplicity in public attitudes and perceptions has allowed us to think of the public in the plural. The multiple public(s) of archaeology can derive meanings from archaeological resources in ways that are very different from the archaeologists’ own notions regarding these resources. For instance, we have examples from Kerala where megalithic monuments like dolmens are used as places of worship by the local populace. Sometimes this process of meaning-making also draws from archaeology as a discipline, albeit in ways that are different from those employed by archaeologists. There are a number of instances where archaeology
figures in different ways as part of artistic projects. In the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2012, the Afghan-based US artist, Aman Mojadidi did a mixed media installation called History Lay Beneath Our Feet? (Mojadidi 2012) where he created an imaginary archaeological excavation site named Khana E- Bashary (Humanist House) Heritage Project. The installation had multiple components including excavation trenches, information boards and a tool/storage house cum workspace, all invoking excavation in process. Here, the artist used tools and methods derived from archaeology to narrate the history of migration of his own family. Another installation of interest from the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2012 was Black Gold by artist Vivan Sundaram (2012). Black Gold used local body sherds from Pattanam excavations for an artistic recreation of the lost city of Muziris. Here rather than archaeological method, it is archaeological material itself that is re-interpreted by the artist to produce new meanings.

We have seen that it is possible for public attitudes to be in conflict with those of archaeologists. As in the case of the rights of indigenous groups over their ancestral remains, it sometimes becomes essential for archaeologists to modify their academic practices in response to larger public interests and taking ethical positions. Selvakumar (2006) discusses the case of the excavation of a sailboat at Kadakkarappali near Thaikkal in Alappuzha district in central Kerala. A proposal to remove the boat from its original context to the Hill Palace Museum, Thripunithura managed by the state department of archaeology, was met with stiff resistance from the local public. They formed a History and Heritage Protection Council, which formed an important pressure group influencing the decision to protect the sailboat at the site itself.

Marking the public as having active agency has allowed for thinking beyond the top-down approach, and to understand archaeological practice and knowledge production as mediated in different ways by its interaction with the public. Two important instances where this has come out in a stark manner are the court ordered excavations at Ayodhya in 2003 and the excavations at Unnao in Uttar Pradesh in 2013. Following the orders of the High Court of Allahabad, the ASI conducted excavations from 12 March 2003 to 22 August 2003 at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid in Uttar Pradesh. The report was submitted to the court on 22 August 2003. The excavations were a highly mediated exercise with the court defining even the research objectives. If one examines the orders related to the excavations and the discussion of archaeology in the judgment, one finds the court intervening in the excavations at multiple levels, including in decisions regarding the duration and extent of the excavations, personnel employed, research and methodological issues, storage and recording of finds as well as time allotted for report generation. The primary purpose of the report generated was to formulate the decision regarding a title suit of immense political significance. The report of the ASI was discussed by the judges and lawyers in different ways subjecting them to multiple interpretations. An examination of the report (Mani and Manjhi 2003) brings out an important aspect. While the report mentions the extraordinary circumstances in which the excavations were conducted, it does not recognise these conditions to have any implication upon the knowledge produced on ground. This
stems from a notion that the ASI holds that archaeology is an objective scientific enterprise unaffected by contextual factors (a position which the judiciary also shares). A detailed examination of the judicial documents would necessitate the rethinking of such notions.

The ASI excavated Daundia Khera of Unnao district in October 2013, following a dream that a local seer, Shobhan Sarkar had, in which a 19th century ruler of the area Rao Raja Ram Bhaksh Singh advised him in his dream that a thousand tonnes of gold was buried in the site which could be dug up and used for the country’s economic development. The initial requests by Sarkar were not heeded to by the state. However, following the interest of a union minister of state, Charan Das Mahant, the GSI conducted soundings in the area followed by excavation of two trenches by the ASI. The excavations dubbed as the Gold Rush caught huge public attention and media frenzy, perhaps far outdoing what has been received by any excavations in the country other than the one in Ayodhya. During the course of the events, the credentials of the ASI were brought into question in the media, for having bypassed the usual enquiries and disciplinary procedures that precede an excavation to embark upon a treasure hunt on the whims of a sadhu.

Both the Ayodhya excavations and the Unnao excavations are exceptional in that the demand for excavations comes from outside the discipline and the excavations themselves are expected to provide solutions to non-academic concerns. While these could be considered extreme cases where archaeological knowledge production is determined to an unusual degree by institutional and non-institutional public demands, one can see such influences operating in other instances also. Chaddha (2007) for instance points out how in the post partition phase, during the 1950s, nationalist compulsions led to large scale excavations of Indus sites in the western states of India, presumably to compensate for the loss of Harappa and Mohenjodaro to Pakistan. Here the nationalist demands are not exerted from outside the discipline, but are incorporated into the trajectory of its evolution, determining disciplinary priorities. From the discussion, it emerges that public engagement of archaeology may not be considered as lying outside the practices of the discipline/profession. Rather, it determines these in important ways. Such an understanding is absent in much of the public relations and educational initiatives by archaeologists, where, in the majority of cases, the public is assumed to be deficient in their knowledge and alternative interpretations are rejected in toto. This is due to a lack of self- reflexivity within archaeology whereby contextual factors and subjective positioning of the archaeologist are not acknowledged as important factors of knowledge production. Models that are more inclusive and critical are based on such an understanding. These require archaeology to move away from positivist and exclusive preoccupations and incorporate theoretical insights from the social sciences in much the same way that Science and Technology Studies (STS) have done. The few studies from India, mentioned at the beginning of the discussion, that discuss the politics of archaeology show such openness. By extension, bringing in new perspectives from Public
Archaeology studies, especially regarding characterization of the public, would facilitate inclusive field practices and critical academic introspection.

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