
The Concept of Community Archaeology and Heritage Management in India

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The concept of direct community involvement in archaeology (popularly known as community archaeology) as well as subsequent management of the archaeological sites, heritage spaces and structures has been an established practice in Europe, North America, Australia as well as in some parts of Africa and Asia. The concept stems from the emergence of post-processual theory in archaeology during nineteen eighties and nineties where interpretation of past material culture has been 'democratized' by allowing the possibility of expressing different perspectives and dimensions, that gives a varied range of meaning to a single artifact, or a landscape (Simpson & Williams, 2008). This intellectual shift, along with several indigenous rights movements (Simpson & Williams, 2008) has helped in accepting the role local communities can play in a better understanding of the past and preservation of the past heritage, being involved directly with the archaeological as well as heritage management projects. The concept has gradually gained ground in Europe, North America and Australia, and many such projects are being successfully conceived and run by universities, private archaeology and heritage management companies as well as local community archaeology groups. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of community archaeology through certain case studies and attempt to understand how the concept could be beneficial to the scene of Indian archaeology and heritage management.

Before discussing community archaeology any further, it is essential to understand what a community consists of. Definition of community is never straightforward and a community hardly constitutes of homogenous elements. The definition becomes trickier when dealing with countries with a colonial past like India, where the term 'community' becomes ambiguous as it signifies wide range of divisions within the social organization. As Sen (2002) rightly showed that in the case of Bangladesh (this is true for India as well), the concepts of *jati*, *samaj* and *sampraday* translates into 'community' in English. Therefore it is essential that the archaeologist should understand the constitution of community in the context of his work, rather than having a pre-conceived notion about it. This understanding is the crucial starting point for any archaeology project that aims at community involvement. From the point of view of a community based archaeology project, the concerned community can be of two different kinds. The first and most obvious kind are those who live in the immediate vicinity of the place where the project (survey, excavation or conservation) is to be carried out. These residents engage with the landscape and the structures in the landscape on a regular basis and they define and redefine these constantly while incorporating them into local perceptions and narratives of the past. The second kind community consists of the people who can trace a descent from the people who once lived in the proximity of the site. These group often stays remote from the site itself

and do not often have any close cultural similarity (Marshall, 2002). In case of India, the descendants of the erstwhile land lord families could be cited as an example. The active involvements of these descendant communities are also crucial in the success of a community archaeology or heritage management project.

Here I would introduce two community based archaeology projects, one directed by Howard Williams (2008) under X-Arch and funded by Heritage Lottery Fund among different village communities of Devon in England (2006-2009); the other being undertaken by Department of Archaeology at Southampton University at Quseir in Egypt (Moser et al., 2002). The X-Arch project was primarily concerned with supporting the local amateur heritage or archaeology societies or communities themselves to plan and direct projects in their locality in rural Devon. The nature of support required by each community or society is varied and the support sought and provided consisted of guidance of trained archaeologists as well as supporting the project by providing specialist equipments such as geophysical survey tools as well as supporting these groups to undertake small scale excavations (Simpson & Williams, 2008). Also, the project aimed at taking archaeology to schools in Devon by means of engaging the schoolchildren in various archaeology related workshops in the schools themselves as well as at the Streatham campus of University of Exeter. The archaeology projects ran by the Department of Archaeology at Exeter University also facilitated in providing a firsthand experience in handling archaeological tools by organizing digs (Simpson & Williams, 2008). Since the elements of these X-Arch supported projects are designed by the communities themselves rather than professional archaeologists, it establishes an interest in the local heritage among the rural community, including schoolchildren by allowing them to engage directly with their past, besides getting trained and supported by the professional archaeologists.

The Quseir project on the other hand concentrates on a single site in Egypt and seeks to involve the community directly on every aspect of the project culminating in creation of a heritage center to house and display the findings from the excavations for the people of Quseir as well as the visiting tourists (Moser et al., 2002). Quseir el-Qadim is situated on the Red Sea coast and has been identified as the ancient major port site of Myos Hormos in the course of this excavation. The project aimed at involving the residents of Quseir directly in excavation, study and conservation of their past which was expected to generate an interest in their own heritage ultimately leading to a better understanding of the archaeological record as well as proper conservation of it. In order to achieve these ends, the archaeologists from Southampton University had undertaken the following strategies as outlined by Moser et al. (2002)—

1. Corresponding with the representatives of the local community and local heritage groups on a regular basis informing them about every stage of excavation and welcoming their suggestion and participation, as well as circulating plain language reports at different stages.
2. Employment and training of local people in the project to assure the continuity of the project as well as taking crucial decisions about display strategies of the finds on behalf of the community.
3. Public presentation of the finds and allowing the community to interpret them.

4. Interviewing the local people about memories and folklores related to the site.
5. Providing education resources by organizing site visits from schools, publication of children's books relating to the site and creation of a digital artifact database for community access.
6. Creation of photographic and video records as well as marketing merchandise related to the project controlled by the local community.

These strategies facilitated enough access of the local community to their own heritage rather than making them feel alienated from the work, which often is the characteristic in Egypt. Alienation of the local communities from archaeological or heritage management has also been a characteristic in the Indian context as well where community access to the excavation site as well as the information are strictly controlled giving rise to a sense of skepticism among the community.

Now we arrive to the crucial question regarding the possibilities of a community based approach in archaeology and heritage management in India. India is a vast country with diverse cultures and communities. Also India has a large number of tangible and intangible heritages, and the supervising body, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) or the State Archaeology departments are inadequately staffed to maintain and conserve most of them properly. Accepting community involvement in archaeology could be a solution to the problem (or excuse) of too much heritage. This could be done by installing a community heritage liaison officer in each district of the states of India, who would be responsible in spreading heritage awareness among the community by organizing workshops in schools and colleges, encouraging the communities to form local heritage groups and supporting these groups actively by helping them design heritage related projects and workshops, provide adequate funding to execute such projects as well as encouraging them to publish the results of the project. The exclusion of the local community from archaeological excavations must also be reconsidered. The locals normally feel a fear induced skepticism regarding the motives of archaeological surveys or excavations, since they fear that their lands would be taken over by the government; or, even they suspect that the project is directed by the motive of a treasure hunt and subsequent profit from it. From viewpoint of an archaeologist, the suspicions range from stealing of antiquities to damage of the sites. Community involvement provides a platform for reconciliation for both these groups. By allowing openness in an archaeological project by the way of informing the communities and involving them directly in the planning and execution of the project, as well as by training them in archaeological and conservation methods and allowing them engage with their local heritage ultimately generating a positive interest, this unhealthy mutual mistrust can be reconciled. This will not only provide an amicable working condition for the archaeologists, but also it would assure that the community taking keen interest in their heritage, would help in its preservation and conservation in the future. From an academic point of view, community involvement would also help in a holistic understanding of the archaeological record since it is expected to accommodate the voice of the local community to interpret their own past.

In conclusion it must be mentioned that working with the local community would never be free from challenges while trying to accommodate the interests of

both parties. However, this might bring about a better workability of archaeology and heritage management sectors in India, and open a new avenue of research in community heritage methodologies. Further, the spread of heritage awareness would be a much easier and continuous process, as opposed to the present practice of holding occasional heritage awareness drives, where people often fail to connect themselves due to an overtly generalized focus. Finally, this would provide a solution to the problem of unemployment, that young archaeologists like myself face in India, as community archaeology is expected to create local government bodies to help organize and drive these community initiatives.

References:

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