

Archaeology and the Construction of Identities in Medieval North India

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Archaeologists have at times perceived the early medieval to medieval period as marked by a break at the end of the twelfth century, thus separating the period 700–1200 CE—often described as the ‘Rajput’ period—from the period 1200–1500 CE—commonly designated as the ‘Sultanate’ period. It is frequently believed that this break is manifested in the entire range of archaeological materials with clear changes perceived between the two periods. Moreover, there has been a tendency to ascribe particular religious identities to the artefacts of the ‘Rajput’ and ‘Sultanate’ periods. Implicit in such a reading of the material culture are certain assumptions that have been made by archaeologists. One is that a change in political elites will bring about a change in daily practices and, concomitantly, in the artefacts. Another assumption is that certain artefacts indicate a specific religious/ethnic identity and that their use can be attributed only to a particular period. However, while excavating the cuttings at Indor Khera, which we dated from the tenth/eleventh to thirteenth/fourteenth centuries CE, we realized that not only was such a neat demarcation not evident in the material culture, but that the problem was far more complex and had not quite received the attention it deserved from archaeologists. This article discusses the issue of ascribing religious and ethnic identities to artefacts.

Acknowledgements: We thank the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, for giving us the licence to excavate at Indor Khera; the Centre of Advanced Study, Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, the Archaeological Survey of India and the Indian Council of Historical Research for funding this project; the two reviewers for commenting on this article; Professor Pushpa Prasad for studying the terracotta sealings obtained during the excavation; Professor Irfan Habib for identifying the *shashgani* coin; F. Habib for preparing the map; M. Taskeen for managing the camp; M. Abid and Ehtesham for overall help. During the excavations in the summer of 2006, we were able to stay at the Panchayat Ghar at Indor Khera and for this we are grateful to the village authorities. This article is dedicated to Suhas Kumar who would have been happy to see the completion of this article and whose commitment to work has always been a source of inspiration.

***Studies in History*, 24, 2, n.s. (2008): 173–193**

SAGE PUBLICATIONS Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore

DOI: 10.1177/025764300902400202

Introducing the Problem

From September 2005 to July 2006, we were individually cross-examined in the case pending before the Lucknow Bench of the Allahabad High Court on whether the Babri Masjid was built after the demolition of a Hindu temple that existed at the spot. One of the issues that repeatedly came up during the cross-examination was the religious identity of artefacts, or, in other words, whether an artefact was 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. Somewhat troubled when such questions were addressed to us, it set us thinking about how archaeological artefacts are generally perceived. This had cropped up even earlier, during the course of the excavations at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid at Ayodhya from March to August 2003, where we were invited as professional archaeologists by the Sunni Central Board for Waqfs. We were present there for considerable periods. Then too, the excavators of the Archaeological Survey of India imputed religious identities to artefacts.

Around the same time, we began excavating at the site of Indor Khera in western Uttar Pradesh. The test trenches that were opened in May–June 2006 revealed that the site has a long history of occupation dating back to about 1000 BCE. Two of these trial cuttings gave us a tentative chronology of the tenth/eleventh to the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries CE. In many cases, while excavating occupation levels of the early medieval to medieval period, archaeologists have identified two periods: one from 700 to 1200 CE and the other from 1200 to 1500 CE, often described as the 'Rajput' and the 'Sultanate' periods respectively, with clear changes perceived in the entire range of archaeological materials between the two periods. However, while excavating these two cuttings at Indor Khera, we realized, that at this site, the early medieval/'Rajput' to medieval/'Sultanate' periods could not be distinguished archaeologically. The artefactual assemblages as well as the structures, in fact, showed continuity. This led us to reexamine the archaeological evidences from other sites such as Hastinapura near Meerut, Ahichchhatra near Bareilly, Purana Qila and Lal Kot at Delhi, Thanesar at Kurukshetra and Rajghat at Varanasi, where occupation levels of these periods have been found. These sites were selected because they dealt with the concerned periods, were situated mostly in the same region and some information was available about them in the form of either excavation reports or preliminary findings published in *Indian Archaeology: A Review* (henceforth, *IAR*). A close study of the artefacts and structures from these sites actually corroborated the evidence from Indor Khera. Even though the material culture did not register marked disjunctures, archaeologists have tended to privilege a historical event. Certain assumptions, made by the archaeologists, are implicit in such a privileging. One assumption is that a change in political elites will bring about a change in quotidian practices and in the artefacts that are excavated by the archaeologist. It is also often assumed that certain artefacts indicate particular religious or ethnic identities and that their use can be attributed only to a specific period. This article seeks to

Studies in History, 24, 2 (2008): 173–193

understand this somewhat complex issue of ascribing religious and ethnic identities to artefacts in medieval North India.

The Site of Indor Khera¹

The site of Indor Khera (28°14' 57'' N, 78°12' 48'' E) is located in Tehsil Debai, District Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, on the right bank of the eastern branch of the Chhoiya Nadi, also called Nim Nadi. Indor Khera lies between the rivers Kali Nadi and Ganges (see map). The village of Indor is located 0.5 km off the Aligarh–Anupshahr road and is about 10 kms from the Ganges. The present-day village is located on top of the mound, which measures 285 m (North–South) × 428 m (East–West). The maximum height of the mound is now 17 m. The site of Indor Khera was first investigated in 1874–75, as mentioned in an earlier article.² Carllyle noted that the village occupied an area of 152 m × 152 m in the east-north-eastern side of the mound.³ Today, the village extends over the entire eastern, north-western and south-eastern portions of the mound and the adjacent area.

Three test trenches were opened at Indor Khera in May–June 2006. Two 4 m × 4 m trenches (A1 and A2) were cut at about the 196 m contour line on the southern edge of the mound. Another trench, A3,⁴ which had a cutting area of 4 m × 2 m, was about 100 m east of A1 and A2 and was at a lower level (193 m contour line) than the other two trenches. While A1 and A2 were excavated up to 2.10 m and 1.55 m respectively, A3 was dug till 4.26 m. On examination, we tentatively dated the material assemblages of A1 and A2 between the tenth/eleventh and thirteenth/fourteenth centuries CE and that of A3 roughly between 1000 BCE and 100 CE. However, it should not be deduced from this that there was a gap in occupation between the first and tenth centuries CE, as the intervening deposits have not yet been excavated. Further, the highest part of the mound is at 207 m. Thus, there are considerably more occupation deposits of periods later than the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries that remain to be investigated. The intention behind these preliminary soundings was to get an idea of the kinds of occupations at Indor Khera. The cuttings excavated in different parts of the mound have given us an idea of the long span of occupations at the site. We intend to undertake further excavations to obtain a complete stratigraphy.

Stratigraphically, we identified three layers in Trenches A1 and A2.⁵ Layer 1 in both trenches was greyish-brown, compact with a few brick nodules, brickbats

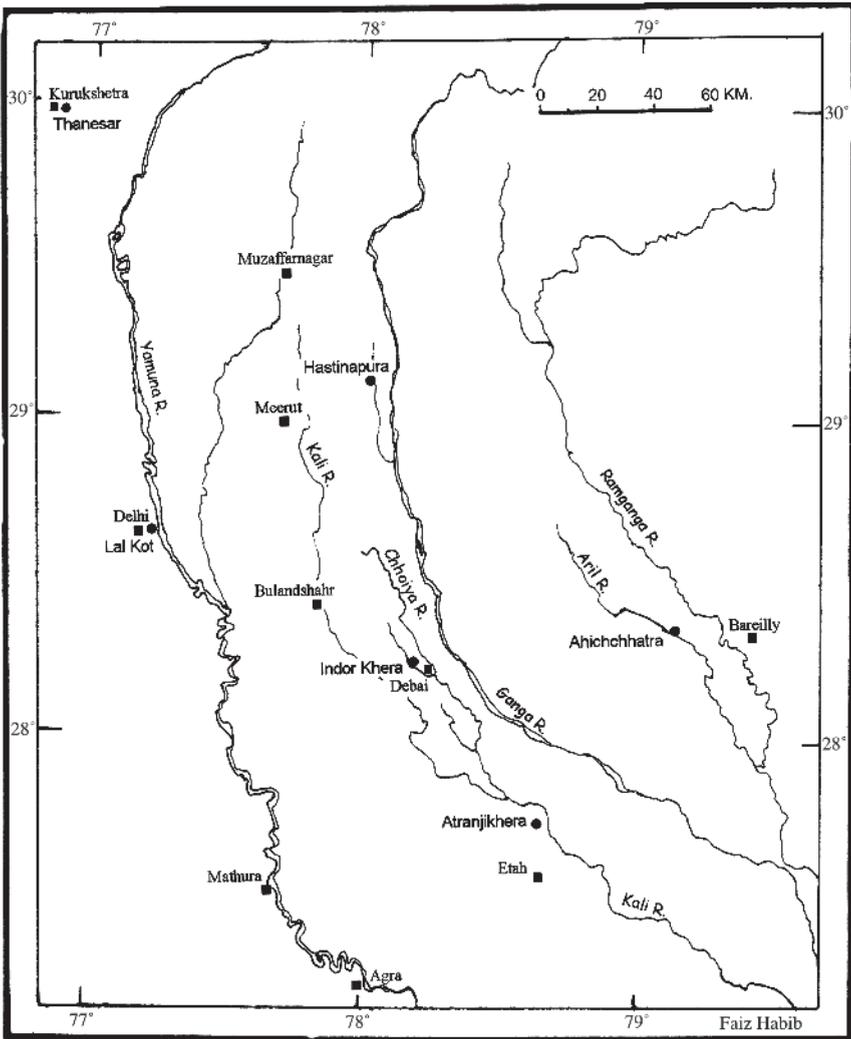
¹ This section summarizes some of the pertinent details of the excavations at the site of Indor Khera. These details help to contextualize the issues raised in this article. For a preliminary report including drawings of sections and plans, as well as the contour map of the site, see Menon and Varma (in review).

² Menon et al. (2005).

³ Carllyle (1879 [2000]: 56).

⁴ Menon et al. (2008).

⁵ Menon and Varma (in review).



and bones. In Trench A1, Layer 2 was greyish-brown, extremely loose in texture and filled with potsherds, brickbats and bones. There were also vitrified terracotta and clay lumps in the same layer. About twenty-eight over-vitrified terracotta lumps, light in weight and filled with holes were recovered. Four clay lumps comprising pieces of clay that were intended for use in pottery manufacture and which were accidentally burnt were also found. There was also one lump of vitrified clay with coarse fraction, like chaff, and one unburnt clay piece. Apart from that, there were four large lumps possibly representing wedged

Studies in History, 24, 2 (2008): 173–193

clay, measuring 11 to 14 cm in diameter, whose surfaces had been oxidized. Layer 2 in Trench A2 also revealed ash, numerous lumps—sixteen vitrified terracotta, nine accidentally-burnt clay and two unbaked clay—and two dabbers. In the south-western quadrant in Trench A1, a dump of pottery vessels and ash was found. Many of these vessels were unslipped, open-mouthed, string-cut convex bowls of thin section, perhaps intended for one-time use. We recovered 413 rims of such vessels in a 7 cm dig. Moreover, in this dig, there was only one other type of rim—an outwardly projecting rim of a miniature pot. From this dig, 181 bases of open-mouthed bowls were recorded. Thus, it appears that the area demarcated as A2 was used for pottery production and firing, and the surrounding area, particularly that of A1, for discarding refuse related to production as well as occupation.

Layer 3, greyish-brown and much more compact in nature than Layer 1, is associated with structures of brickbats and reused bricks. It thus represents primary habitational deposits. The contrast in the pottery of Layer 3 with the dump in the south-west quadrant in Trench A1 can also be seen in a dig of 8 cm in the south-east quadrant in the same trench, from where only 21 rims of open-mouthed bowls and 12 other types of rims have been recovered. From the same dig, 19 bases of open-mouthed bowls have also been found.

The pottery from Trenches A1 and A2 is largely of the red-ware category, of both slipped and unslipped types. The main shapes are basins, carinated cooking pots (*handis*), open-mouthed bowls, dishes, jars, spouted vessels and storage jars. Numerically, the most predominant shape is the open-mouthed convex bowl form. Decorations include paintings of linear designs (black on red), incised marks on rims and stamped designs with dusting of mica as well as micaceous bands. Apart from red wares, four sherds of glazed wares have been found from Trench A1, two from Layer 1 and two from the dump in the south-west quadrant. The glazed ware sherds found from Indor Khera are all of the type principally found at sites like Hastinapura, Rajghat and Lal Kot. This type is whitish in colour and has a sandy friable core. The other principal type, with a red terracotta core, which has also been found at Hastinapura and Rajghat, has so far not been discovered at Indor Khera.

As the structural remains at Indor Khera reveal, houses were made of mud, reused bricks and brickbats with mud mortar. Floors were of yellowish-brown rammed earth. Complete structures have not been recovered due to the small area of the opened trenches. In Trench A1, there are two structural phases. Five walls have been discerned in this trench, two of which belong to the earlier phase, and were perhaps part of a single house. The other three walls belong to the next phase and comprise of a grain-storage structure from which a large quantity of burnt grains have been recovered. The walls of this structure are constructed of rammed earth over a brickbat foundation, possibly plastered with lime. A circular feature with a diameter of 90 cm belongs to the same phase, within which there is

evidence of burning. This was possibly an oven or a fire installation. It appears that after the houses in Layer 3 went out of use, some of the rammed earth walls may have remained standing at different heights, and the area was subsequently used by potters and for dumping refuse.

There are three structural phases in Trench A2. In the first phase, there are three walls, the extant portions of which are made of brickbats. In the second phase, two walls are made of reused bricks and brickbats. These two walls are not built on any of the three walls of the first phase. Two walls, attributed to the third phase, are conjectured to be structurally connected. As in the earlier case, neither of these walls is built on the two walls of the preceding phase. There is a possibility that the upper portions of the walls in this phase were made of compacted earth. A yellowish-brown rammed earth floor, in some places about 3 cm thick, has also been recovered. On this floor, a large spread of bones (some of which were burnt), seeds and potsherds were found. Pieces of copper and iron have been found from the same area. On the eastern parts of the trench, there are blackish deposits with ash, along with over-vitrified clay lumps and other evidence of pottery production. Thus, the area seems to have been used for the production and open firing of pottery. This last phase of structural activity was perhaps associated with a household engaged in pottery manufacture.

On the whole, it appears that the walls of all three phases were built with brickbat foundations. What is also striking is that the plans of the walls in each of the phases in Trench A2 are completely different from each other. In no phase are the walls found resting on those of an earlier phase. While there are no changes in methods of construction or materials used, at the same time, there appears to have been little continuity in house plans in the different phases. From this, can one suppose that households unrelated to each other occupied this area in the three successive phases? Or does this indicate a change in the social use of space? These possibilities will be discussed later in this article.

Markers of Time

As far as the time span of A1 and A2 is concerned, we have had to depend on the ceramics. We compared the ceramic types at Indor Khara with those recovered from other sites such as Hastinapura, Ahichchhatra, Purana Qila, Lal Kot, Thanesar and Rajghat.

At Hastinapura, mainly red wares and glazed wares were found from Period V. The main shapes in red wares included knife-edged bowls, flat plates, pedestalled cups, double-spouted vases, vases with partially decorated rims, thick sturdy basins and *handis*. Vessels were both of the slipped and unslipped kinds. The surfaces of these vessels were often decorated with a dusting of mica, or powdered mica was mixed in the clay; these were all done prior to firing. Stamped patterns of checks with depressions filled with mica were found. Linear designs in black paint on a

red background were found on the shoulders of vessels.⁶ A study of the distribution of the thirty-two illustrated glazed ware sherds shows that these were found throughout (two were from the early levels, nine from the mid-levels, twenty from the late levels and one from the surface).⁷ Thus, it appears that at Hastinapura, glazed wares and vessel shapes like knife-edged bowls, carinated cooking pots and so forth in red wares occurred contemporaneously. Period V is dated between the late eleventh and early fifteenth centuries CE. This dating is based on the find of a coin of Balban (thirteenth century CE) from the middle levels of Period V and on the similarity of pottery (such as *handis*, double-spouted vases, knife-edged bowls and pedestalled cups) from the early levels with that from Stratum I of Ahichchhatra.⁸

From Ahichchhatra, Stratum I, wares in types such as carinated cooking vessels with lug handles, double-spouted jars, large storage jars, bowls with vertical sides and flat horizontal rims, miniature jars and pedestalled bowls were also unearthed. The most common type found were bowls with a 'wide-open mouth, thin wall, knife-edged rim and the body corrugated by the wheel.... The base is very small in comparison to the body. It would appear that vessels of this type were made to meet temporary needs and, having once been used, were thrown away'.⁹ Decorations were mainly incised geometrical patterns and some floral motifs. Most of the vessels had red slips. What is significant about this site is that no glazed wares were found. On the basis of three hoards of 203 debased Indo-Sassanian coins, Stratum I is dated between 850 and 1100 CE.¹⁰

From Purana Qila, knife-edged bowls, as a distinctive type, in red ware were recovered from the 'post-Gupta' period. From the succeeding 'Rajput' period both red and black wares, some of which had painted, stamped or incised designs were found. The forms in red wares included vases, high-necked jars and shallow dishes. Glazed wares were recovered from the 'Sultanate' period that followed this period.¹¹

The excavations at Lal Kot have revealed two periods: Period I, labelled as 'Rajput', which has been dated from the mid-eleventh to the end of the twelfth centuries CE and Period II, labelled as the 'Early Sultanate', which has been dated from the end of the twelfth to the end of fourteenth centuries CE. These dates have been arrived at on the basis of numismatic evidence: Period I from a coin of the twelfth century CE and Period II from coins of Rajput as well as Mohammed Ghorī, Iltutmish, Khalji and Tughlaq rulers. From Period I, mainly red wares, both plain and decorated, well fired, of medium to fine fabric have been recovered.

⁶ Lal (1954, 1955: 71–82).

⁷ Ibid. pp. 71–75.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 21–25.

⁹ Ghosh and Panigrahi (1946: 50–55).

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 39–40.

¹¹ *JAR* (1969–70: 5, 1970–71: 11).

Some vessels show occasional use of mica dust; others have paintings in black or have an application of chocolate slip, while a few have decorations incised or stamped on them. Painted decorations include parallel lines or criss-cross designs; stamped designs include a checked pattern and vertical lines of dots; and incised designs include wavy lines. The main forms comprise of bowls, basins, cooking *handis* with or without carinations, lids, vases, including miniature ones, lamps and spouted (single and double) vessels. Bowls are the most frequently recovered pottery type and 'almost all of them have sharp-edged rim, tapering profile and disc base'. There are also a few sherds of black slipped grey ware.¹² Plain glazed ware of ordinary terracotta core was reported from Phase 2 of Period I and Period II.¹³ The associated red wares of Period II consist of storage jars, basins, vases (including miniature ones), bowls, handled pots, cooking *handis* and spouted vessels.¹⁴ Other wares found are Chinese celadon and porcelain as well as grey ware, both plain and decorated, stone ware and green glass ware.

Even at Thanesar, glazed ware has been found from the upper levels of the 'Rajput' period (eighth to twelfth centuries CE), along with contemporary red wares, which include stamped pottery with concentric circles and floral designs, and mat impressions. Knife-edged bowls and spouted vessels are the main types in red wares.¹⁵ In the 'Sultanate' period, red wares in a variety of jars, plates, bottle-necked *surahis*, bowls and basins as well as glazed wares have been found.¹⁶

Period VI at Rajghat, dated to 'sometime in the twelfth century', has revealed red wares and glazed wares.¹⁷ The red wares found here are coarse, wheel made, well fired and often with a red slip. Characteristic shapes are bowls with knife-edged rims or grooved rims, basins with beaked or nail-headed rims, vases with single or double spouts, basins (*dongas*) with lug handles, carinated cooking vessels (*handis*).¹⁸ Decorations of vessels in Period VI include techniques of cutting, incising, embossing and mica dusting.¹⁹ Unlike the red wares that are found throughout the period, glazed wares are confined mainly to the middle and late levels.²⁰

A comparison of the pottery of Indor Khera with that of Hastinapura, Ahichchhatra, Purana Qila, Lal Kot, Thanesar and Rajghat reveals some similarities in vessel forms and surface treatment including the use of slips and decorations. For instance, shapes such as basins, open-mouthed bowls, spouted vessels and carinated cooking pots are common to all these sites.

¹² Mani (1997: 55–59).

¹³ *IAR* (1991–92: 12).

¹⁴ Mani (1997: 69–73).

¹⁵ *IAR* (1987–88: 29, 1988–89: 22).

¹⁶ *IAR* (1987–88: 29–30, 1988–89: 22–23).

¹⁷ Roy and Singh (1976: 33).

¹⁸ Narain and Roy (1977: 75–84).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–10.

²⁰ Roy and Singh (1976: 33).

The foregoing discussion leads us to the case of Ahichchhatra where diagnostic types in red wares (knife-edged bowls, carinated cooking pots and spouted vessels) are found in contexts without any associated glazed wares and was dated between c. 850 and 1100 CE. It is clear that the site was subsequently abandoned. At sites such as Hastinapura, Rajghat, Thanesar and Lal Kot, we find occupations continuing into periods later than 1100 CE. At these sites in the same period, while the early levels have the diagnostic types in red ware, in the later levels, these occur together with glazed wares. The evidences from Hastinapura, Rajghat, Thanesar and Lal Kot are similar to those from the following: Bisani, District Sultanpur, where the diagnostic types in red wares and glazed wares were dated between 1000 and 1500 CE;²¹ Anand Bhawan campus and Jhusi, District Allahabad, where glazed ware is reported from the 'early medieval' period²² and Ramasare Purwa, District Lucknow, where red wares and glazed wares were found from the 'early medieval' period.²³

Thus, in light of these evidences, how do we interpret the evidence from Trenches A1 and A2 at Indor Khera and how do we date these levels? As mentioned earlier, glazed wares along with diagnostic types in red wares occur in Layer 1 and in the dump in the south-west quadrant, but not in Layer 3. The evidence at Indor Khera indicates occupations with the diagnostic types in red ware, however without glazed wares as at Ahichchhatra. This is followed by deposits with both the diagnostic types in red ware and glazed wares as at Hastinapura, Rajghat, Thanesar, Lal Kot and other sites mentioned earlier. Since at Indor Khera, the lowest levels of this period have so far not been excavated, we are tentatively dating the excavated deposits between the tenth/eleventh and thirteenth/fourteenth centuries CE. There is also evidence of a terracotta sealing, albeit from Layer 1 in Trench A1, dated to the tenth–eleventh centuries CE and read as *ga_nandaha*.²⁴ Further, the surface find of a *shashgani* or a six *jital* coin belonging to the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries CE (the Tughlaq period), though found from the north-western part of the mound is a useful chronological marker of these trenches.²⁵

We are aware that some doubts have been raised over the chronology of the period we are dealing with at Hastinapura and Ahichchhatra.²⁶ Instead of the

²¹ *IAR* (1995–96: 110–11).

²² *IAR* (1973–74: 26); *IAR* (1997–98: 170).

²³ *IAR* (1996–97: 153).

²⁴ Another sealing was found in section scraping from Trench A2. Read as *bhupa mahipati*, this has been dated to the second century CE.

²⁵ While we have sent one charcoal sample from these trenches for radiocarbon dating to the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany, Lucknow, this may not help us greatly as one needs a range of dates from this site as well as other sites, which are entirely absent. Moreover, in the excavation of deposits from which datable artefacts such as coins, inscribed seals and sealings are found, a much greater reliance is placed on these than on radiometric methods for ascertaining the chronology.

²⁶ Mandal (2007).

eleventh century CE for the beginning of Period V, a date of the thirteenth century CE has been suggested. This revision is based on a reading of the northern section of a trench at Hastinapura,²⁷ which posits that the coin of Balban, on which the dating of Period V is based, was found in the early levels of Period V rather than the middle levels.

The coin of Balban (marked by the symbol of a crescent) has been shown in Layer 8, between pegs XLVII and LIV. It is correlated to Layer 6 of the area lying between pegs LIV and LXXXVIII. Layer 5 of this area is the early contemporary one of sub-period 2 of Period V, as represented by Wall 78 (V2). Layer 5 has been correlated with Layer 7 of the area (XLVII–LIV) where the coin of Balban is located. Layer 7, formed during sub-period 2 of Period V, in fact, seals the coin. Therefore, the coin belongs to sub-period 1 (the early level) of Period V. It may also be noted that some sherds of glazed ware have been reported from an early level of Period V (*ibid.*, Figure 24, nos 3 and 5). In light of these facts, the dating of the beginning of Period V to the thirteenth century seems more plausible. Since this date is based on numismatic evidence, the assigning of the beginning of Period V to the eleventh century on the basis of ceramic evidence from Ahichchhatra may be revised. And, we may revise the dating of pottery types such as double spouted vases, knife-edged bowls, incense burners as characteristic of the eleventh century AD.²⁸

Our interpretation of the same section differs on three counts. First, the coin of Balban has been plotted across three unnumbered layers between Pit 2 and Pit 3 and it is therefore not easy to correlate the layers on either side of Pit 2. Second, contrary to the assertion that Layer 7 seals the coin and, hence, that the coin should be dated to sub-period 1 of Period V, our reading of the section near Peg XLVII (the peg nearest to the coin) shows that Layer 4 in fact seals the coin. Thus, we fail to understand how the location of the coin has been attributed to Layer 8 or to the early levels of Period V. This is also belied by the section drawing itself, where the coin has been clearly plotted in the middle levels of Period V. Third, the sealing of the coin by Layer 7 (belonging to sub-period 2) does not necessarily imply that Layer 8 belongs to sub-period 1 as both layers 7 and 8 could be of the same sub-period.²⁹ Thus, we do not agree with the revised chronology for Period V at Hastinapura or Stratum I at Ahichchhatra.³⁰

²⁷ Lal (1954, 1955: Plate XXIII).

²⁸ Mandal (2007: 70).

²⁹ While we disagree with Mandal's revision, there are clearly problems in the concerned section drawing. For instance, plotting a coin across three layers is problematic as is also the absence of numbering of the layers between Pits 2 and 3, where the coin was found.

³⁰ The site of Ahichchhatra is currently being re-excavated and it remains to be seen whether or not the chronological span based on pottery types and coins for Stratum I will hold.

Situating Identity and Material Culture in a Historical Context

It is clear from the discussion on the chronology of the levels excavated in Trenches A1 and A2 that we are dealing with a period (from the tenth/eleventh to the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries) which has usually not been conceptualized as a single entity. Rather, the late twelfth century has generally been seen to mark the end of one period and the beginning of another. Underlying this idea is the historical shift in polity with the beginning of Turkish rule in 1192. In archaeology, this has resulted in religious or ethnic identities being imposed on material culture, with the period before 1192 being labelled as 'Hindu', 'Late Hindu' or 'Rajput' and the following period as 'Mohammedan', 'Muslim' or 'Sultanate'. Thus, at Lal Kot, for example, we find the excavator identifying the two periods as 'Rajput' and 'Sultanate':

The site of Lal Kot has revealed a sequence of only two cultural periods, the main authors of each of which belonged of (*sic*) two distinct socio-cultural systems and followed different religions, customs and traditions. Literary, epigraphical and other historical sources contain enough data about this. Antiquarian remains found from excavations at Lal Kot focus further light on this aspect and provide further evidence and details on changing aspects of material culture during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries AD when the political supremacy of the traditional Rajput rulers came to an end in North India and its place was taken over by Turkish Sultans who promulgated Islam and strengthened its roots in India. While antiquities and pottery recovered from Period I or the Rajput period represent culture and tradition of Brahmanical and Jaina settlement of the Rajputs, the material culture of Period II or early Sultanate period shows an abrupt change which on one hand ends several traditions and on the other introduces new ones. Such changing aspects also point to the fact that the site represents the citadel part within the fort which was occupied in both the periods by the populations consisting of two different socio-religious orders and in both the periods there was no mix (*sic*) population at the site.... A detailed study of pottery and antiquities recovered from excavations in their proper stratigraphical context definitely helps in formulating dividing lines between cultural assemblage of different phases of Rajput and early Sultanate periods and factual analysis of the archaeological material focuses light on the socio-economic and cultural elements of the history of the period. The large number of antiquities and variety of shapes and types of ceramics recovered from the excavations in their proper stratigraphical context have made the site as index-site of early medieval period for identity and chronological sequence of the period.³¹

³¹ Mani (1997: 84–85).

Ascribing such identities ('Rajput', 'Sultanate') to material culture can be found at other sites in North India such as Rajghat. At this site, Period VI follows Period V dated between 700 and 1200 CE. 'Sometime in the twelfth century, the site belonged to an occupation by a set of people whose cultural equipment stood in marked contrast to that of the preceding period.'³²

The tendency to ascribe particular religious identities to artefacts can be traced to archaeological practices from the colonial period in India. Nineteenth-century studies of monuments and archaeological remains tended to categorize them as 'Buddhist', 'Hindu' and 'Mohammedan'. Since the monuments then studied were largely religious in nature, such a classification, to some extent, can be understood. However, what is deeply problematic is the attribution of religious identities to archaeological remains such as bricks, coins, fortification and even sites or mounds. For example, Carlleyle in his work at Indor Khera mentioned 'six coins of the early Hindu moulded type, which commonly bear Buddhist symbols' and 'twenty eight coins of the Buddhist satrap type'.³³ Further, he remarked that the fortification at Indor Khera had the characteristics of 'one of the most ancient forms of Hindu fortification'.³⁴ He also excavated 'walls of an ancient building ... composed of very large ancient Hindu bricks'.³⁵ The mound of Nilauti near Jalali in Uttar Pradesh was referred to as 'ruins of an ancient Hindu town' or 'old Hindu site'. He further referred to Kitkhari Khera as the remains of another ancient 'Hindu' site.³⁶ In the context of Sankara, bricks were referred to as of the 'Muhammadan' period or size.³⁷ Similarly, there was a reference to 'Muhammadan' forts.³⁸ Also found at the same place was a sculpture of 'a Hindu wooden house' with 'figures of a man and a woman, apparently wearing Buddhist headdresses'.³⁹

At Ahar, the excavator mentioned finds of 'Muhammadan copper coins', 'glazed Muhammadan pottery' and 'Muhammadan antiquities' and 'carved Hindu bricks'.⁴⁰ However, alongside the persistent use of religious categories such as 'Buddhist', 'Hindu' and 'Muhammadan' for artefacts, there was the introduction of socio-political or dynastic labels, such as 'Mauryan', 'Sunga' and so on. For example, the terracottas recovered at Bhita were classified into five chronological divisions: 'primitive', 'Maurya', 'Sunga and Andhra', 'Kushana' and 'Gupta and later'.⁴¹ The pottery recovered was in turn divided into 'primitive', 'Maurya, Sunga,

³² Roy and Singh (1976: 32–33).

³³ Carlleyle (1879 [2000]: 41).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁴⁰ Vats (1928 [1990]: 57–58).

⁴¹ Marshall (1915 [2002]: 71).

Andhra', 'Kushana', 'Gupta', 'Late Gupta' and 'Medieval'.⁴² Other kinds of artefacts, such as stone objects including figurines and sculpted slabs as well as steatite and marble boxes, copper and brass objects, iron objects and gold jewellery, were similarly categorized. This was done on the basis of stratigraphy, stylistic analysis as well as finds of inscribed material and coins.

In the post-colonial period, dynastic markers continued to be used for classifying artefacts, but going by the entries in *IAR* (beginning 1953), it appears that more categories were introduced such as 'Pushyabhuti' or 'Vardhana', 'Rajput', 'Sultanate', 'Mughal' and 'Sikh'. While archaeological work in the colonial period did not engage much with the 'medieval' levels, in the past six decades there has been relatively more interest in the later periods of history starting from the latter half of the first millennium CE. This is one reason why these new categories emerged in this period. The use of such classifiers is not only because a certain primacy has been given to political developments by archaeologists, but also because of the assumption that material culture mirrors dynastic change. Though such political shifts are certainly significant for the historian, they are seldom reflected in material culture. This is not to say that material culture does not change over time; rather, such changes may be due to factors other than political.

We need to look more carefully at how identities such as 'Rajput' and 'Sultanate' have been ascribed to material culture. In this context, Lal Kot at Delhi provides a useful case for such an analysis as it is one of the few sites in North India where the 'early medieval' to 'medieval' transition has been investigated archaeologically and for which an excavation report has been published. While Lal Kot was excavated from 1992 to 1995, there is also evidence for a similar transition from Purana Qila in Delhi, excavated intermittently much earlier, from 1954 to 1955 and then again from 1969 to 1973. Not too many details are available for Purana Qila as only summary findings have been published in *IAR*. Nonetheless, the published evidence corroborates the arguments being made in this article.

Revisiting the Material Culture of Medieval North India

Among the artefacts found at Purana Qila in the 'Rajput' period were copper coins of the bull-and-horseman type, crude terracotta figurines, terracotta beads, moulded bricks, a sherd with damaged Nagari inscription, a carnelian bead, carved stone tablets, a small stone figure of Vishnu and some pieces of coral, crystal and copper objects.⁴³ From the 'Sultanate' period, coins of Balban and Firoz Shah Tughlaq as well as a hoard of coins of Rajput and Sultanate rulers were found.⁴⁴ However, the artefacts reported for the combined 'Sultanate–Mughal' period

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 80–85.

⁴³ *IAR* (1969–70: 5, 1970–71: 11).

⁴⁴ *IAR* (1969–70: 11, 1971–72: 7).

comprised of animal and human terracotta figurines, earthen lamps and some coins including those of Muhammad Tughluq.⁴⁵

Artefacts found in the 'Rajput' period at Lal Kot were a small rectangular sandstone sculpture of Ganesha, a terracotta mould for casting a Jain tirthankara figure, an inscribed sherd with Brahmi script of the Gupta period (c. 400 CE), an inscribed sherd with Nagari letters, a copper coin with a Nagari legend of the twelfth century CE, copper coins of the bull-and-horseman type, a copper ring, iron arrowhead, beads of terracotta (including those of arecanut shape), glass and semi-precious stones, hoppers, bangle fragments of glass, ivory and bone, finger ring pieces of copper, quartz, lapis lazuli and terracotta animal and human figurines.⁴⁶

Artefacts of the 'Sultanate' period at Lal Kot included 277 circular copper coins. 'The earliest coins are of bull-and-horseman type which were started by Rajput rulers and continued to be issued by the early Sultans of Delhi. At least two of the coins of Muhammad Ghori bear Nagari legend.... Some of the coins are Adali coins issued by Iltutmish and other slave rulers....'⁴⁷ Coins of Khalji and Tughlaq rulers were also reportedly found. About 900 human and animal terracotta figurines were found, with the human figurines being of two types—soldiers and horse riders. Both these types were bearded. Animal figurines were of horse, elephant, camel, monkey and dog. Beads and pendants of glass, terracotta, ivory, coral, bone and semi-precious stones like carnelian, lapis lazuli and quartz were recovered as also bangle pieces of glass, ivory and bone. Objects made of ivory included ring, gamesman, dice and human head. Bone objects were also excavated, as well as gold foil and wires and a silver foil amulet. Rings of semi-precious stones, copper and ivory were also found. Copper objects included ear cleaners, an incense burner, rings and bowls. Iron objects used in the 'Sultanate' period comprised arrowheads, knives, doornails and hooks. Terracotta objects included a whistle. Fragments of inscribed Persian glazed tiles with Arabic legends were also recovered.

Structural remains of Period I at Lal Kot consisted of random rubble walls with medium-sized stones set in mud mortar. Floors were of red *murrām*, or mud, or mud mixed with lime. Lime-plastered drains were uncovered from this period. According to the excavator, 'structures of the Rajput period have been encountered but because of the large scale building activities of different phases of early Sultanate period the area for excavations in Rajput levels was found very limited and hence definite plans of Rajput buildings could not be traced out.'⁴⁸ In Period II too, rubble walls and floors of lime, mud, brick jelly, lime-plastered brick and stone paving were found. Drains with lime plaster too were found in Period II. Much more structural evidence is available from this period, along with plastered

⁴⁵ *IAR* (1970–71: 11).

⁴⁶ Mani (1997).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

and painted decorations. Particularly significant is an early 'Sultanate' period palace, in Room 1, of which four pillar bases of 'Rajput' style have been recovered. These pillar bases:

... resemble reused pillar bases found in a very large quantity at Quwwatul Islam mosque and Sultan Ghari's tomb and *were quite seemingly works of the transitional period of Rajput-Mamluk phase when traditional Indian architecture had not seen much change at least till the time of Iltutmish* whose coins have been found from the working level of these structures.⁴⁹ (emphasis added)

However, there is also another interpretation provided: 'The pre-Muslim association of this structural period of early Sultanate age is evidenced by [a] number of scattered or reused architectural and sculptural stone fragments. Among them ... [are] four decorated pillar bases reused in room-1 of palace complex...'⁵⁰

The terracotta male figurines at Purana Qila, which were assigned stratigraphically to the 'Rajput' period in 1969–71, were two decades later attributed to the 'Sultanate–Mughal' period when the site of Lal Kot was excavated. 'Crude terracotta human figurines were also found but after the excavations at Lal Kot handmade bearded male figurines in terracotta have been assigned to the early Sultanate period and not to the Rajput period as they have been assigned during excavations at Purana Qila.'⁵¹ Similarly at Lal Kot, several terracotta human figurines, particularly a standing female figure in *anjali* pose, stratigraphically found in occupation deposits of the 'Sultanate' period were reassigned to the 'Rajput' period.⁵² Further, several architectural and sculptural fragments found on the surface or in 'Sultanate' levels were attributed to the 'Rajput' period.

Such reassignments have serious archaeological implications. For one, archaeological deposits in a primary context at a site imply that all the artefacts found together are contemporaneous with each other. Thus, if one category of artefacts is reassigned to a later phase/period, associated categories of artefacts found in the same stratigraphical context would then necessarily also have to be reassigned. In other words, if the bearded male figurines were reassigned to the 'Sultanate–Mughal' period, other artefacts like moulded bricks, copper coins with bull-and-horseman motif, a sherd with Nagari inscription, a carved stone tablet, a small figure of Vishnu and so forth should also have been reassigned to the same period. By this rationale, the entire artefactual assemblage of the 'Sultanate' period (and not just selective terracotta female figurines) at Lal Kot would also have to be reassigned to the 'Rajput' period.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 39.

⁵² Ibid., p. 59.

Thus, at both the sites discussed previously, two chronological periods have been delineated in the material culture on the basis of stylistic differences, which in turn have been ascribed different identities. A 'Rajput' identity has been read archaeologically in terms of certain diagnostic red ware categories, such as carinated cooking vessels with lug handles, double-spouted jars, large storage jars, bowls with vertical sides and flat horizontal rims, miniature jars, pedestalled bowls, the most common type being bowls with wide-open mouth, thin wall and knife-edged rim; coins with bull-and-horseman motif; terracotta female figurines; architectural elements including moulded bricks, sculpted stones and pillar bases; sculptural fragments of Brahmanical and Jaina divinities. A 'Sultanate' identity has been ascribed on the basis of glazed ware, coins of Sultanate rulers and human terracotta figurines of bearded soldiers and horse-riders, as well as Persian glazed tiles with Arabic legends. Thus, on the one hand inscribed material and coins are used as chronological markers and on the other, certain identities have been ascribed to particular styles of material culture.

Such a construction of identities from styles of material culture conflicts with the stratigraphical evidence. For example, at Purana Qila, terracotta figurines of 'soldiers and horse-riders' were actually found from levels attributed to the 'Rajput' period, but were slotted in the 'Sultanate' period after the excavations at Lal Kot. On the other hand, at Lal Kot, artefacts found from the 'Sultanate' period were stylistically attributed to the 'Rajput' period: for instance, the female terracotta figurines. Coins with bull-and-horseman motif, supposedly of 'Rajput' style, have not only been found at Lal Kot from both periods, but are said to have been issued by the early Sultans. The discussion of pillar bases of 'Rajput' style found in the early Sultanate palace presents a simplistic reading of a particular style in ethnic terms. A survey of the small finds as well as structural remains also shows no stylistic differences between the 'Rajput' and 'Sultanate' periods. To us it appears that style and ethnicity are being seen as bounded, closed entities and what is perhaps required is a more complex variegated reading of material culture.

Archaeological 'Culture', Style and Ethnicity

The reading of a certain identity from the material culture can be traced to the persistence of the culture-historical approach in Indian archaeology:

One of the principle assumptions underlying the culture-historical approach is that bounded, homogeneous cultural entities correlate with particular peoples, ethnic groups, tribes, and/or races. This assumption was based on a normative conception of culture; that within a given group cultural practices and beliefs tend to conform to prescriptive ideational norms or rules of behaviour. Such a conceptualization of culture is based on the assumption that it is made up of a set of shared ideas or beliefs, which are maintained by regular interaction within

Studies in History, 24, 2 (2008): 173–193

the group, and the transmission of shared cultural norms to subsequent generations through the process of socialization, which purportedly results in a continuous cumulative cultural tradition.⁵³

More specifically, such bounded, homogeneous cultural entities are seen in material terms or are interpreted as archaeological 'cultures', and these in turn are equated with ethnic groups. As early as the late 1960s, Barth had pointed out that the perceptible differences of an ethnic group from others would lay in physical aspects or signs, such as dress, language and house form, and on values and standards that provided the moral grounding for the group. For him, an ethnic group shared basic cultural values 'realized in overt unity in cultural forms'.⁵⁴ However, Clarke pointed out the difficulties of using material elements to differentiate groups in a study of about a hundred Native American ethnic groups or 'tribes' as he called them, in the north-west coast of California. It was seen that an artefact or element list of 1,000 to 2,000 artefacts encompassed the main cultural manifestations of these 'tribes'.⁵⁵ Of the 2,000 artefacts, only about 450 were expected to survive under the best archaeological conditions. It appears then that what was actually being studied was only about fifteen per cent of the basic culture. While this itself was significant, it was also found that each 'tribe' shared at least thirty per cent of traits with other 'tribes' that had no linguistic, political or ideological relationship with each other. Only where 'tribes' were very closely connected or linguistically related did seventy per cent of the traits match up. Clarke felt that a 30 per cent similarity of traits may indicate nothing more than the knowledge of common technologies or ways of doing things, and not necessarily the shared knowledge of closely related communities. Thus, even though Clarke had refined the concept of an archaeological 'culture', he argued that archaeological entities cannot be equated with 'social, linguistic and racial groupings'.

We need to consider certain critiques relating to the concept of archaeological 'cultures'. For one, the equation of archaeological 'cultures' with entities like 'tribes', societies, ethnic groups and so forth has long been questioned. Moreover, the construction of archaeological 'cultures' has generally been based on spatial and temporal variations in the material record. Such an interpretation is premised on the assumption that these variations are a reflection of different people. However, there may be multiple factors that may explain these variations in the material record. 'Variation in artefacts across space and time arises as a result of an enormous range of different processes, from the problems of coping with a specific environment to the distribution of social power, the organization of material production

⁵³ Jones (1997: 24).

⁵⁴ Barth (1969).

⁵⁵ Clarke (1978: 375–78).

or changing patterns of religion and iconography.⁵⁶ If we look at archaeological material, it is in actuality difficult to delineate neat, 'bounded entities'. Rather, there are 'an enormous variety of cross-cutting patterns'.⁵⁷ Therefore, a view that is currently held is that there are no such entities as archaeological 'cultures'.

Often, variations in artefacts have been framed in terms of style. The culture-historical approach used style to define particular artefact-types that in turn were used to map archaeological 'cultures'. 'To the culture-historian style was to be used in the service of chronology. The significance of variation was that it would be a record of change.'⁵⁸ With the advent of 'New Archaeology', the emphasis shifted from culture history to cultural processes. 'Stylistic—or any other—patterning in artefacts and archaeological materials were conceived of as cultural products that comprised codes for us to read. From this, it followed that there was a methodological emphasis on strategies for pattern-*recognition*, because the patterns are said to inform us about style, its spatio-temporal context, and its role in the cultural system' (emphasis in original).⁵⁹ Style was hence seen as passive, from which one could decipher social or ethnic groups. In both culture-historical and processual approaches, stylistic variation was equated with ethnic entities, but with a slight difference: in the former, the equation was largely in general terms, while in the latter, rather specific dimensions of artefact variability were studied such as stylistic variation in pottery decoration. In contrast, more recently it has been argued that style plays an 'active role in symbolizing identity ... [and] is actively produced, maintained and manipulated in the process of communication and the mediation of social relationships'.⁶⁰

There has also been a reconceptualization of ethnicity in relation to archaeology in recent years. Ethnicity has been defined by Shennan as 'self-conscious identification with a particular social group'.⁶¹ Elaborating further, Jones includes in ethnicity 'all those social and psychological phenomena associated with a culturally constructed group identity' that in turn can be seen as a 'self-conceptualization which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or common descent'.⁶² However, to capture an abstraction like a self-conscious identification within a particular social group through the archaeological record is not easy. Conkey argues against seeing material culture as an end product that reflects social entities at one or several levels. Instead, she points out:

⁵⁶ Shennan (1989: 17).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Conkey (1990: 8).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Jones (1997: 115).

⁶¹ Shennan (1989: 6).

⁶² Jones (1997: xiii).

... (m)aterial culture is itself an active constitutive element of social practice and style is more about context than about group. What we can learn about from the study of style is the contexts in which groups, or other socio-cultural phenomena, are brought into existence. What style can “reveal” (if this is admissible any more) is the mobilization of group as process, but it also means that we are not limited to “group” in the study of style.⁶³

Therefore, if ethnicity has to be addressed by the archaeologist, it has to be analyzed in terms of a social process rather than a descriptive, static category. In other words, archaeologists need to move from descriptive to explanatory frameworks that discuss how ethnicities are articulated in the material record as well as why they emerge or how they are maintained. Once it is realized that ethnic identities need to be located in particular contexts and are highly ‘evanescent’, fluid and dynamic, it will become apparent that that they cannot be analyzed only in terms of style or fossilized in material culture.

Constructing Identities in Medieval North India

If we go back to Purana Qila, Rajghat and Lal Kot, it becomes easy to understand that arising from a culture-historical frame is the use of style and material culture to delineate a chronological period and an ethnic identity. There is linearity in the way ethnic identities have been constructed and perceived as if in a sequence, that is, ‘Rajput’ followed by ‘Sultanate’. This idea of ‘bounded entities’ assumes that the ‘Rajput’ and ‘Sultanate’ periods would necessarily show a marked change in material culture. However, does the material culture really support such an assumption?

Apart from the Sultanate coins, none of the other artefacts can be ascribed to a precise chronological period. To take the example of ceramics, a type such as knife edged bowls can be found from as early as the fourth century CE as at Aunahan in the mid-Ganga plains⁶⁴ to the fifteenth century CE as at several sites, such as Rajghat and Hastinapura. More specifically, at Hastinapura as also at Bisani, there are no such binaries as ‘Rajput’ and ‘Sultanate’. Rather, the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries CE have been discussed as a single entity.

While the excavators of Rajghat pointed out a marked change in cultural assemblage between Period V and Period VI,⁶⁵ this appears to be contradicted by their own study of some of the artefacts. For instance, they point out that terracotta figurines of Period VI are ‘of poor skill and *more or less represent a continuation of the preceding period*. One fragmentary specimen shows a figure of Karttikeya riding on his peacock. The period was very rich in animal figurines, which consist

⁶³ Conkey (1990: 12–13).

⁶⁴ *IAR* (1995–96: 99).

⁶⁵ Roy and Singh (1976: 33).

of bull, elephant, horse, ram, bear and sheep. More than half of the figurines are those of bulls, either crude or realistic. Except for a few specimens, all are hand-modelled' (emphasis added).⁶⁶ Our own examination of the terracotta human figurines and other small finds too does not show any marked stylistic differences between objects of Periods V and VI.⁶⁷

The excavations at Indor Khera corroborate the foregoing argument. Neither the ceramics, nor the small finds, such as objects of terracotta including gamesmen, bangles, studs, tools, hopscotches, dabbers, balls, wheels, beads, marbles, buttons, discs, reels and figurines; glass bangles and beads; iron nails and blades; copper rings; grinding stones and beads of semi-precious stones suggest a marked change taking place within our period of tenth/eleventh to the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries CE.⁶⁸ As far as structural remains at Indor Khera are concerned, all three structural phases have houses made of mud, reused bricks and brickbats with mud mortar. Floors, throughout, are made of yellowish-brown rammed earth. The same manner of construction, with brickbat foundations is found in all three phases. The only change that is visible is in the orientation of walls, which is different in all three phases. This may indicate reworkings at the individual household level—that certain social practices related to the use of space may have been changing—rather than changes at the level of the larger social group.

Thus, even when material culture does not quite support the neat delineation of ethnic/religious identities, the persistence of a culture-historical frame has led to identities such as 'Rajput' and 'Sultanate' being ascribed to artefacts. It nevertheless needs to be borne in mind that archaeologists have framed these identities as religious categories as well. The implication is that certain types of female terracotta figurines or architectural and sculptural fragments can have only one religious identity and can be found only in the 'Rajput' period. Or, particular types of male terracotta figurines have only one religious identity and can be assigned only to the 'Sultanate' period.

What emerges from such an interpretation is the construction of a passive 'Rajput' identity from the material record. That ethnic identities have a dynamism of their own in their articulation and transformation, is belied by the manner in which a 'Rajput' identity is perceived. While from texts one may be able to read the articulation and transformations of 'Rajput' identities, archaeological records do not allow us to 'see' the 'mobilization of group(s) as process'. Thus, it is about time we asked if a 'Rajput' identity can at all be read in archaeological terms.

There is also perhaps a need to question some assumptions that are often made by archaeologists. One assumption is that change in political elites lead to changes in artefacts. A second assumption is that some artefacts have a specific ethnic/religious identity and can be found only in a particular period. Let us for a moment

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁶⁷ Narain and Singh (1977); Narain and Agrawala (1978).

⁶⁸ Menon and Varma (in review).

accept that some terracotta figurines have a 'Hindu' identity. Why can such figurines not be found in the 'Sultanate/Muslim' period? Our argument is that even if certain artefacts have a particular religious/ethnic identity, these are unlikely to disappear unless a religious community itself disappears, which, historically, is not the case. But such are the preconceptions that fundamental principles of stratigraphy are overturned and artefacts are reassigned to periods in which they were not actually found.

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