



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 16, Issue, 05, pp. 70427-70433, May, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.30858.05.2026>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

ARCHAEOLOGY, NATIONALISM, AND HISTORICAL IMAGINATION: REASSESSING THE WORK OF B. B. LAL

*Myungnam Kang

Institute of Indian Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, 107 Imun-ro, Dongdaemun-gu,
Seoul 02450, South Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 17th February, 2026

Received in revised form

08th March, 2026

Accepted 21st April, 2026

Published online 25th May, 2026

Key Words:

Archaeology, Nationalism, Historical Imagination,
B. B. Lal, Saraswati River, Aryan Origins,
Harappan Civilization, Historiography.

*Corresponding author: Myungnam Kang

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the archaeological work of B. B. Lal within the broader context of nationalism and historical imagination in modern India. It focused on how Lal's interpretations of material evidence, particularly in relation to the Saraswati river and the origins of the Aryans, were constructed and later recontextualized. Through a critical analysis of his major publications and archaeological projects, the study explored the methodological shift from empirical excavation to interpretive synthesis involving textual and geographical correlations. The findings suggested that Lal's work contributed to a narrative of cultural continuity between the Harappan and Vedic civilizations. This narrative was subsequently mobilized within wider ideological frameworks that emphasized the indigenous origins and antiquity of Indian civilization. The paper argued that archaeological knowledge, rather than being purely objective, operated within processes of selective interpretation and narrative construction. It concluded that Lal's work illustrated how material evidence could be integrated into broader projects of historical imagination shaped by nationalist concerns.

Copyright©2026, Dr. AKA Flaubert Koukougnon. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Dr. AKA Flaubert Koukougnon, 2026. "Les Difficultés d'application de l'approche par Compétences Dans les écoles Primaires en Côte d'Ivoire : Gestion des Paradoxes liés à la Notion de Compétence". *International Journal of Development Research*, 16, (05), 70427-70433.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between archaeology and the reconstruction of the past has long been regarded as a domain of empirical inquiry grounded in material evidence. In the South Asian context, however, archaeology has also played a central role in shaping competing narratives about the origins and continuity of Indian civilization. Far from functioning as a neutral repository of facts, archaeological interpretation has often intersected with broader intellectual and political projects, particularly those concerned with defining cultural identity and historical legitimacy. Debates surrounding the origins of early Indian civilization—especially the question of Aryan migration and the identification of Vedic geography—have exemplified this intersection. These debates have extended beyond academic discourse into the public sphere, where interpretations of the past have been mobilized to support differing visions of national history. In this context, archaeology has not only contributed evidence but has also participated in the construction of what may be termed "historical imagination," a process through which the past is selectively interpreted and narratively organized. The work of B. B. Lal occupies a particularly significant position within this landscape. As a former Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Lal was closely associated with major excavation projects and contributed extensively to the study of early Indian archaeology.

His early work adhered to established archaeological methodologies, focusing on stratigraphy, material culture, and the classification of ceramic traditions. However, his later writings increasingly engaged with questions that extended beyond empirical excavation, including the historicity of epic traditions, the identification of the Saraswati river, and the relationship between the Harappan and Vedic cultures.

These later interventions have attracted considerable attention, not only within academic circles but also in wider ideological debates. Lal's arguments regarding the indigenous origins of the Aryans and the continuity between the Harappan and Vedic civilizations have been taken up and circulated in broader narratives that emphasize the antiquity and autochthonous development of Indian civilization. As a result, his work provides a compelling case through which to examine how archaeological interpretations may be recontextualized within larger frameworks of cultural nationalism.

This paper seeks to reassess Lal's contributions by situating them within the interconnected domains of archaeology, nationalism, and historical imagination. Rather than evaluating the validity of his conclusions in isolation, the study focuses on the processes through which archaeological knowledge is produced, interpreted, and subsequently mobilized. It adopts a critical approach that combines textual analysis of Lal's writings with historiographical examination of their reception and reinterpretation in later discourse.

The central argument advanced here is that Lal's archaeological interpretations cannot be understood solely as empirical claims about the past. Instead, they must be viewed as part of a broader process in which material evidence is selectively integrated into narratives that seek to establish cultural continuity and historical depth. This process, described here as ideological rationalisation, highlights the extent to which archaeological knowledge is shaped not only by data but also by the interpretive frameworks within which that data is embedded. By examining the trajectory of Lal's work and its subsequent appropriation, this paper contributes to a wider discussion on the nature of historical knowledge and the role of archaeology in modern nation-building. It suggests that the past, as accessed through archaeology, is not simply discovered but actively constructed through ongoing interactions between evidence, interpretation, and ideology.

ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Archaeology in South Asia has never functioned as a purely technical or neutral discipline concerned only with the recovery of material remains. From its institutional beginnings under colonial rule, it has been closely entangled with broader intellectual frameworks that sought to define, classify, and narrate the past of the subcontinent. As a result, archaeological knowledge has been shaped not only by empirical discoveries but also by the interpretive paradigms within which those discoveries were situated.

The formal institutionalization of archaeology in South Asia is generally associated with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 under the leadership of Alexander Cunningham. Early archaeological efforts were closely aligned with colonial administrative and epistemological priorities, particularly the desire to map and systematize the cultural and historical landscape of India. As scholars such as Thomas R Trautmann have argued, colonial knowledge production in India was deeply implicated in projects of classification and control, where linguistic, racial, and cultural categories were constructed and stabilized through scholarly practices (Trautmann 1997).

Within this context, archaeology emerged as a crucial tool for producing what may be described as a "scientific" history of India. Excavations, surveys, and the classification of artifacts were presented as objective methods capable of uncovering an empirically verifiable past. Yet, as later scholarship has demonstrated, these practices were embedded within broader interpretive frameworks that often reflected European intellectual assumptions, including evolutionary models of civilization and racial theories concerning Indo-European origins (Chakrabarti 1988; Guha 2005). The identification of the so-called "Aryan" as an external, migrating population, for instance, was not simply a conclusion derived from evidence but was closely tied to philological and racial theories developed in nineteenth-century Europe.

The work of Mortimer Wheeler in the mid-twentieth century further illustrates the entanglement of archaeological interpretation with overarching historical narratives. Wheeler's excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro contributed significantly to the understanding of the Indus Valley Civilization. However, his interpretation of archaeological strata as evidence of an "Aryan invasion," including the well-known but later contested claim of massacre victims at Mohenjo-daro, reflected a particular narrative framework that linked material findings to the broader theory of Indo-Aryan migration (Wheeler 1947). Subsequent critiques have demonstrated that such interpretations often involved a degree of conjecture that exceeded the limits of the available evidence (Kennedy 1995).

In the post-independence period, Indian archaeology underwent significant institutional and intellectual transformations. While retaining many of the methodological foundations established during the colonial era, it also became increasingly involved in the

construction of national history. As Romila Thapar has observed, the writing of early Indian history has been shaped by competing attempts to define the origins and character of Indian civilization, often in relation to contemporary concerns about identity and nationhood (Thapar 2004). Archaeology, in this context, provided not only data but also a means of grounding historical narratives in material evidence, thereby lending them an aura of scientific legitimacy.

It is within this broader historiographical landscape that the concept of "historical imagination" becomes particularly useful. Historical imagination does not imply fabrication or invention in a simplistic sense; rather, it refers to the interpretive process through which disparate forms of evidence—textual, material, and geographical—are assembled into coherent narratives about the past. As Benedict Anderson has argued in a different but related context, nations themselves are "imagined communities," constructed through shared narratives that create a sense of continuity and belonging (Anderson 2006). In a similar manner, archaeological interpretations contribute to the imagining of deep historical pasts, providing temporal depth to narratives of cultural identity.

In South Asia, this process has been particularly evident in debates surrounding the relationship between the Indus Valley Civilization and Vedic culture. Competing interpretations have sought either to emphasize discontinuity—often associated with migration theories—or to assert continuity, linking the archaeological record directly to later textual traditions. As scholars such as Michael Witzel and Asko Parpola have shown, linguistic, textual, and archaeological evidence can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the assumptions and frameworks brought to bear on the data (Witzel 1995; Parpola 2015). The resulting debates are not merely technical disagreements but reflect deeper questions about how the past is conceptualized and what kinds of historical continuity are deemed plausible or desirable. Moreover, the intersection of archaeology and nationalism has intensified in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly with the rise of Hindu cultural nationalism. As Christophe Jaffrelot has argued, narratives of an ancient, continuous, and indigenous Hindu civilization have played a central role in the ideological construction of modern Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot 1996). In this context, archaeological findings are often mobilized as evidence to support claims of cultural antiquity and territorial legitimacy. The authority of archaeology, grounded in its association with scientific method, lends particular weight to such claims, even when the underlying interpretations remain contested.

The entanglement of archaeology with ideological narratives does not necessarily imply deliberate distortion or manipulation. Rather, it highlights the inherently interpretive nature of archaeological practice. As Sudeshna Guha has emphasized, archaeological evidence does not speak for itself; it acquires meaning only through processes of interpretation that are shaped by disciplinary conventions, intellectual traditions, and broader socio-political contexts (Guha 2005). Consequently, different readings of the same material record can coexist, each embedded within distinct frameworks of historical imagination.

This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the role of archaeology in South Asia. Instead of viewing archaeological knowledge as either purely objective or wholly ideological, it becomes possible to recognize it as a field in which empirical data and interpretive frameworks are in constant interaction. It is precisely this interaction that enables archaeology to participate in the construction of historical narratives that extend beyond the confines of academic discourse.

Against this background, the work of B B Lal can be more effectively situated and understood. His archaeological interpretations, particularly in their later phases, exemplify the ways in which material evidence, textual traditions, and geographical identifications can be brought together to produce narratives of cultural continuity. At the same time, the subsequent reception and appropriation of his

work illustrate how such narratives can be mobilized within broader projects of historical imagination shaped by nationalist concerns. The following sections examine this trajectory in detail, focusing on the methodological and interpretive dimensions of Lal's work and its place within the evolving relationship between archaeology and nationalism in South Asia.

B. B. LAL AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PAST

B. B. Lal occupies a complex and contested position in the archaeology of South Asia. His career cannot be reduced either to nationalist revisionism or to conventional archaeological professionalism. Rather, its significance lies in the movement between these two domains.

Lal's early work was grounded in field archaeology, stratigraphic observation, ceramic classification, and excavation reporting. His later writings, however, increasingly moved toward broader civilizational arguments concerning the antiquity, continuity, and indigeneity of Indian culture. This shift makes his work central to any discussion of archaeology, nationalism, and historical imagination in modern India. Lal's early archaeological formation was shaped by the methodological discipline of excavation. Having trained under Mortimer Wheeler, he inherited an archaeological practice that placed strong emphasis on stratigraphy, typology, and the disciplined recording of material evidence. His early research on Painted Grey Ware and sites associated with the Mahabharata, especially Hastinapura, reflected this methodological orientation. In *Excavation at Hastinapura and Other Explorations in the Upper Ganga and Sutlej Basins*, published in *Ancient India* in 1954–55, Lal presented the archaeological sequence of Hastinapura with considerable caution. The Painted Grey Ware horizon was linked to a specific cultural phase, but the connection with the Mahabharata tradition was not asserted as direct historical proof. Rather, the evidence was treated as suggestive, circumstantial, and provisional (Lal, 1954–55).

This caution is important because it reveals that Lal's early work did not simply collapse epic tradition into archaeological fact. At Hastinapura, the archaeological record was used to open a possible dialogue between text and material culture, not to settle the historicity of the epic once and for all. The significance of Painted Grey Ware lay in its chronological and cultural placement within the early historic development of the upper Gangetic basin. It allowed Lal to argue that the so-called "Dark Age" between the decline of the Harappan civilization and the emergence of early historic urbanism required reconsideration. Yet this argument remained within the framework of archaeological reconstruction rather than ideological assertion.

A more ambitious form of this approach appeared in Lal's later project on the "archaeology of the epics." In the 1970s, he directed investigations at sites associated with the Ramayana tradition, including Ayodhya, Bharadvaj Ashram, Nandigram, Chitrakoot, and Shringaverapura. These excavations marked a crucial methodological transition. Lal did not merely excavate settlements; he selected sites already embedded in Sanskrit and devotional memory. In doing so, he treated epic geography as a legitimate guide for archaeological inquiry. This did not necessarily mean that he regarded the epics as straightforward historical records. However, it did mean that textual tradition began to function as a structuring framework for archaeological investigation.

The methodological problem lies precisely here. The use of literary tradition as a heuristic tool is not inherently unscientific. Archaeologists have often used textual, oral, and geographical clues to identify sites. The difficulty emerges when the relation between text and artifact is converted from a question into a confirmation. In Lal's early work, the archaeological and textual records remained in a cautious relation. In his later writings, however, the balance

increasingly shifted toward a synthetic narrative in which archaeology was made to support claims of civilizational continuity.

This shift became especially visible in Lal's writings on the Saraswati river and the Aryan question. In *The Saraswati Flows On: The Continuity of Indian Culture*, Lal argued against the Aryan invasion or migration framework and emphasized the continuity of Indian civilization from the Harappan to the Vedic period (Lal, 2002). His argument rested on the identification of the Rigvedic Saraswati with the Ghaggar-Hakra system and on the claim that the river's prominence in Vedic literature indicated a much earlier Vedic presence in northwestern India. If the Saraswati had already declined before the commonly proposed date of Indo-Aryan migration, Lal reasoned, then the composers of the Rigveda must have belonged to an earlier indigenous cultural horizon.

In this argument, archaeology, hydrology, textual interpretation, and civilizational history were drawn together into a single explanatory model. The Harappan civilization was no longer treated as a distinct urban formation whose relationship to Vedic culture remained uncertain. Instead, it was increasingly interpreted as part of a continuous indigenous cultural stream. Lal's later book *The Rigvedic People: "Invaders" or "Immigrants" or Indigenous?* developed this position further by rejecting external-origin models and proposing that the Rigvedic people and the Harappans belonged to the same broad cultural world (Lal, 2015). The question of Aryan origins thus moved from the domain of philology and archaeology into a larger debate about national antiquity and cultural belonging.

The importance of Lal's later work lies not only in what it argued but also in how it argued. His writings frequently opposed what he regarded as outdated colonial paradigms, especially the Aryan invasion theory associated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century European scholarship. This critique had a legitimate historiographical target: colonial interpretations of Indian antiquity were often shaped by racial, linguistic, and civilizational hierarchies. Yet Lal's rejection of colonial models did not simply produce a neutral correction. It produced an alternative civilizational narrative in which indigeneity, continuity, and antiquity became central organizing principles.

This is where Lal's work became available for nationalist reinterpretation. His archaeological authority gave empirical weight to claims that Indian civilization developed indigenously and continuously from the Harappan world to the Vedic and later Hindu traditions. Such claims were especially attractive to Hindu nationalist discourse because they challenged the idea that major elements of early Indian culture had external origins. The figure of the Aryan was thereby transformed from migrant or outsider into autochthonous ancestor. The Harappan civilization, once interpreted through multiple competing frameworks, could be absorbed into a Sanskrit and Vedic civilizational genealogy.

The Ayodhya question further intensified the political implications of Lal's archaeology. In his later writings, especially *Rama: His Historicity, Mandir and Setu*, Lal argued that archaeological evidence supported the presence of a pre-existing temple structure beneath the Babri Masjid (Lal, 2008). This claim has remained highly contested. What matters for the present study is not simply whether Lal's interpretation was correct or incorrect, but how his archaeological claims entered a charged political field. At Ayodhya, the relation between material evidence and historical imagination became exceptionally visible. Archaeological features such as pillar bases or structural remains were not interpreted merely as architectural data; they became signs within a larger narrative of dispossession, recovery, and civilizational justice.

Lal's career therefore demonstrates a gradual expansion in the function of archaeological evidence. In the early excavation reports, material evidence was used to reconstruct cultural phases cautiously. In the epic archaeology projects, it was used to test the possible historical depth of textual traditions. In the Saraswati and Ayodhya writings, it increasingly became part of a larger argument about

civilizational continuity and indigenous antiquity. This trajectory does not require portraying Lal as simply a propagandist. Such a reading would be too reductive. His early archaeological work remains important, and even his later writings emerged from genuine dissatisfaction with colonial explanatory models. Nevertheless, the interpretive movement in his work reveals how archaeological evidence can be reorganized within broader ideological frameworks.

The central issue, then, is not merely Lal's personal intention but the epistemological transformation of archaeology itself. Lal's later work shows how material evidence may be asked to perform tasks that exceed the limits of excavation: to authenticate sacred geography, to stabilize civilizational identity, and to resolve modern political anxieties through claims about the ancient past. In this sense, his writings illustrate the process of ideological rationalisation, in which selected archaeological data are incorporated into a pre-existing narrative of cultural continuity and national belonging.

This does not mean that archaeology becomes false whenever it enters public debate. Rather, Lal's case shows that archaeological knowledge is always mediated by interpretation. The same artifact, site, or settlement pattern can support different historical narratives depending on the questions posed and the assumptions brought to the evidence. Lal's work is therefore best understood as a case in which the boundaries between archaeological reconstruction and historical imagination became increasingly porous. His significance lies precisely in this ambiguity: he was both a major professional archaeologist and a figure whose later interpretations helped authorize a powerful nationalist imagination of the Indian past.

RECONSTRUCTING THE VEDIC PAST: SARASWATI AND ARYAN ORIGINS

The question of the relationship between the Vedic tradition and the archaeological record constitutes one of the most contested issues in South Asian historiography. It is within this debate that the later work of B. B. Lal assumes particular significance. Moving beyond site-specific excavation, Lal increasingly sought to reconstruct a comprehensive account of early Indian civilization by integrating textual, geographical, and archaeological evidence. His work on the Saraswati river and the origins of the Aryans represents the most systematic articulation of this approach.

In *The Saraswati Flows On: The Continuity of Indian Culture* (2002), Lal advanced a central claim: that the Rigvedic Saraswati river could be identified with the Ghaggar-Hakra system, and that this identification had far-reaching implications for the chronology and location of early Vedic culture. Drawing upon geological studies, satellite imagery, and archaeological surveys, Lal argued that the Ghaggar-Hakra once sustained a major river system that declined over time due to tectonic and climatic changes. He correlated this reconstruction with the prominence of the Saraswati in the Rigveda, where it is described as a mighty river flowing from the mountains to the sea.

The significance of this identification lay in its chronological implications. If the Saraswati described in the Rigveda corresponded to a river that had already begun to dry up by the second millennium BCE, then, according to Lal, the composition of the Rigveda must predate the commonly accepted period associated with Indo-Aryan migration. This argument allowed him to challenge the Aryan migration theory by proposing that the Vedic people were not later arrivals but were already present in the northwestern subcontinent during or even before the decline of the Harappan civilization.

Lal extended this line of reasoning by examining the spatial distribution of archaeological sites along the Ghaggar-Hakra system. He noted that a significant number of Harappan settlements were located along this river system and argued that this concentration supported the identification of the region as a major center of early civilization. Rather than treating the Harappan and Vedic cultures as

distinct or sequential, Lal proposed a model of continuity in which the archaeological and textual records reflected different aspects of the same cultural tradition. In this framework, the Harappans were not a separate, pre-Vedic population but participants in a broader cultural continuum that later found expression in Vedic literature.

This argument was developed further in Lal's later work, including *The Rigvedic People: "Invaders"? "Immigrants"? or Indigenous?* (2015), where he explicitly rejected external-origin models of the Aryans. Lal framed the Aryan migration theory as a legacy of colonial scholarship that had imposed artificial divisions on Indian history. In its place, he proposed an indigenous origin model in which the development of Vedic culture was understood as an internal evolution within the subcontinent. The Rigvedic people, in this view, were not newcomers but inheritors and continuators of an already existing cultural and material tradition. A key feature of Lal's argument is the integration of multiple forms of evidence into a unified narrative. Textual references from the Rigveda are read alongside geological reconstructions of river systems and the archaeological distribution of settlements. This interdisciplinary approach gives the appearance of a converging line of evidence, in which independent sources seem to reinforce a single conclusion. However, the strength of this synthesis depends on the assumptions that govern the interpretation of each category of data.

The identification of the Saraswati with the Ghaggar-Hakra, for example, remains a subject of ongoing debate. While there is broad agreement that the Ghaggar-Hakra system once supported significant riverine activity, the extent, chronology, and cultural implications of this system are still contested. Scholars such as Michael Witzel have argued that the Saraswati described in the Rigveda does not correspond straightforwardly to a single geographical river but may reflect a combination of memory, poetic convention, and shifting environmental realities (Witzel 1995). Similarly, Asko Parpola has emphasized the complexity of correlating linguistic and archaeological evidence, suggesting that the relationship between the Harappan civilization and Vedic culture cannot be reduced to a simple model of continuity (Parpola 2015).

The question of chronology also presents significant challenges. Lal's argument relies on aligning the temporal horizon of the Rigveda with the earlier phases of the Ghaggar-Hakra river system. Yet the dating of the Rigveda remains highly debated, and archaeological evidence alone cannot definitively establish the chronology of textual composition. The use of textual descriptions as historical data requires careful consideration of genre, transmission, and symbolic language. In the Rigveda, rivers are not merely geographical features but also carry ritual and cosmological significance, complicating efforts to map them directly onto physical landscapes.

Despite these challenges, Lal's work demonstrates a consistent methodological orientation: the effort to reduce discontinuity and to emphasize coherence. Where earlier models highlighted breaks between the Harappan and Vedic periods, Lal's framework seeks to bridge these gaps by identifying points of overlap and continuity. This tendency is not unique to Lal but reflects a broader historiographical impulse to construct unified narratives of cultural development. What distinguishes Lal's work is the degree to which this impulse is supported by the authority of archaeological evidence.

The implications of this approach extend beyond academic debate. By proposing that the Harappan civilization and Vedic culture form part of a continuous indigenous tradition, Lal's work provides a historical foundation for claims about the deep antiquity and autonomy of Indian civilization. The Aryan question, in this context, is not merely about migration patterns but about the ownership of the past. An indigenous model affirms a narrative in which the cultural and intellectual traditions of India emerge from within the subcontinent, unmediated by external influences.

This is precisely the point at which archaeology intersects with historical imagination. Lal's reconstruction of the Vedic past does not

simply present new evidence; it reorganizes existing evidence within a framework that prioritizes continuity, indigeneity, and civilizational depth. The resulting narrative is compelling not only because of its empirical claims but also because of its coherence and resonance with broader cultural concerns. It offers a past that is internally consistent, territorially grounded, and temporally expansive.

At the same time, this coherence is achieved through selective emphasis. Certain forms of evidence are foregrounded, while others are treated as secondary or problematic. Alternative interpretations that emphasize discontinuity or external interaction are not always fully integrated into the model. This does not invalidate Lal's work but highlights the interpretive choices that underlie it. Archaeological data do not inherently dictate a single historical narrative; they become meaningful within the frameworks through which they are interpreted. In this sense, Lal's reconstruction of the Vedic past exemplifies the process of ideological rationalisation. Material evidence, textual tradition, and environmental reconstruction are brought together in a way that aligns with a particular vision of the past—one that emphasizes continuity and indigenous development. This process does not necessarily involve the fabrication of evidence. Rather, it involves the selective organization and interpretation of evidence in order to produce a coherent and persuasive historical narrative.

The significance of Lal's work, therefore, lies not only in its specific claims about the Saraswati river or Aryan origins but also in its demonstration of how archaeology can be mobilized to construct large-scale historical narratives. By integrating diverse forms of evidence into a unified account of the Vedic past, Lal contributed to a powerful model of civilizational continuity that continues to shape debates about the origins of Indian culture. The following section examines how this model has been received, reinterpreted, and mobilized within broader frameworks of cultural nationalism.

FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE TO NATIONALIST IMAGINATION: IDEOLOGICAL RATIONALISATION

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the archaeological work of B B Lal cannot be fully understood within the confines of disciplinary practice alone. His interpretations of the Saraswati river, the Harappan civilization, and the origins of the Aryans extend beyond technical debates and enter into a broader field in which the past is actively constructed, contested, and mobilized. It is within this field that archaeology becomes entangled with nationalism and historical imagination.

The reception of Lal's later work provides a particularly revealing case of this entanglement. While his arguments were framed as contributions to long-standing academic debates, they were also taken up within wider ideological discourses, especially those associated with Hindu cultural nationalism. In these contexts, Lal's emphasis on continuity between the Harappan and Vedic worlds, as well as his rejection of Aryan migration models, was reinterpreted as empirical confirmation of an indigenous and uninterrupted civilizational history. The authority of archaeology, grounded in its association with scientific method, played a crucial role in lending legitimacy to these narratives.

This process may be described as ideological rationalisation. By this is meant the interpretive movement through which selected forms of evidence are reorganized and integrated into pre-existing ideological frameworks. In the case under consideration, archaeological data concerning settlement patterns, river systems, and material culture are aligned with textual interpretations and broader claims about civilizational identity. The resulting synthesis does not simply reflect the evidence; it actively produces a particular vision of the past.

It is important to emphasize that ideological rationalisation does not necessarily involve the fabrication or falsification of data. Rather, it

operates through selection, emphasis, and narrative structuring. Certain elements of the archaeological record are foregrounded because they support a coherent story of continuity, while others are minimized or treated as anomalies. In this sense, the process is less about distortion than about the construction of intelligibility. Archaeological evidence, which in itself may be fragmentary and ambiguous, is reorganized into a narrative that appears internally consistent and historically meaningful.

The transformation of Lal's work within nationalist discourse illustrates this process clearly. His identification of the Saraswati with the Ghaggar-Hakra system, for example, becomes more than a geographical hypothesis; it becomes a foundational element in a narrative that situates the origins of Vedic culture firmly within the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, his arguments for cultural continuity between the Harappan and Vedic periods are extended beyond their original scope to support broader claims about the unity and antiquity of Indian civilization. In each case, the interpretive move involves a shift from probabilistic argument to narrative certainty. This shift is closely tied to the function of historical imagination. Historical imagination, as used here, refers to the capacity to organize disparate forms of evidence into a coherent account of the past that resonates with present concerns. In nationalist contexts, such imagination often seeks to establish deep temporal roots for contemporary identities, thereby naturalizing their existence and authority. Archaeology, with its ability to provide material traces of antiquity, becomes a particularly powerful resource in this process.

The interaction between archaeology and nationalism in this context is not unidirectional. It would be misleading to suggest that archaeology is simply appropriated by ideology from the outside. Rather, the interpretive flexibility inherent in archaeological practice allows it to be rearticulated within different narrative frameworks. As Romila Thapar has argued, historical traditions are continuously reinterpreted in response to changing social and political conditions (Thapar 2004). Lal's work exemplifies how such reinterpretation can operate at the level of both academic discourse and public history.

At the same time, the authority of archaeology introduces a particular dynamic into this process. Because archaeological knowledge is associated with empirical verification, it carries a form of epistemic weight that other types of historical narrative may lack. When archaeological interpretations are incorporated into nationalist discourse, they can transform speculative or symbolic claims into seemingly factual assertions. This does not mean that the interpretations themselves are invalid, but it does mean that their epistemological status can be altered as they move across contexts.

The Ayodhya controversy provides a striking example of this dynamic. Archaeological claims regarding structural remains were not confined to academic debate but became central to legal, political, and religious arguments about the site. In this setting, the distinction between evidence and interpretation became increasingly difficult to maintain. Material findings were read not only as indicators of past habitation or construction but as signs within a larger narrative of historical grievance and restitution. The past, in this sense, was not merely reconstructed but actively mobilized.

The broader implication of this analysis is that archaeology participates in the production of what may be termed narrative regimes of the past. These regimes are not fixed or uniform; they are constituted through ongoing interactions between evidence, interpretation, and ideological framing. Lal's work, particularly in its later phases, demonstrates how archaeological interpretations can become central components of such regimes, contributing to the formation of historically grounded yet politically resonant narratives.

This perspective allows for a more nuanced evaluation of Lal's contribution. Rather than categorizing his work as either objective scholarship or ideological intervention, it becomes possible to see it as occupying a space in which both dimensions are present. His archaeological findings and interpretations provided the material for

multiple readings, some of which were subsequently incorporated into nationalist frameworks. The significance of his work lies precisely in this capacity to move across domains, from excavation report to civilizational narrative.

In this sense, the movement from evidence to imagination is not a departure from archaeology but an extension of its interpretive possibilities. Archaeological data do not exist in isolation; they acquire meaning through the narratives that are constructed around them. The concept of ideological rationalisation highlights the processes through which these narratives are formed, stabilized, and disseminated. It underscores the fact that the past, as accessed through archaeology, is not simply discovered but continuously reinterpreted in relation to present concerns.

By examining this process in relation to Lal's work, the present study contributes to a broader understanding of how historical knowledge is produced and transformed. It suggests that the authority of archaeology lies not only in its empirical methods but also in its capacity to generate narratives that shape collective understandings of the past. In modern South Asia, where questions of identity, belonging, and historical legitimacy remain deeply contested, this capacity assumes particular importance.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to reassess the archaeological work of B B Lal by situating it within the interconnected domains of archaeology, nationalism, and historical imagination. Rather than treating his writings as isolated scholarly interventions or evaluating them solely in terms of empirical validity, the analysis has focused on the processes through which archaeological knowledge is produced, interpreted, and subsequently mobilized. In doing so, the paper has argued that Lal's work is best understood not as a departure from archaeological practice but as an extension of its interpretive possibilities.

The examination of Lal's career has revealed a discernible shift in the function of archaeological evidence. His early work, grounded in stratigraphic excavation and material analysis, approached the relationship between text and artifact with caution and methodological restraint. However, his later writings increasingly sought to integrate archaeological findings with textual and geographical data in order to construct broader narratives of civilizational continuity. This transition did not simply reflect a change in scholarly focus; it marked a reorientation in the epistemological role assigned to archaeological evidence. Material remains were no longer treated primarily as indicators of discrete cultural phases but as elements within a larger, continuous historical narrative.

It is in this context that the concept of ideological rationalisation becomes particularly useful. The analysis has demonstrated that Lal's reconstruction of the Vedic past involved the selective organization of diverse forms of evidence into a coherent narrative emphasizing continuity, indigeneity, and antiquity. This process did not necessarily involve the fabrication of data. Rather, it operated through the prioritization of certain interpretations and the marginalization of others, thereby producing a historically persuasive account that aligned with broader cultural and ideological concerns. Archaeological knowledge, in this sense, functioned not only as a descriptive enterprise but also as a narrative practice.

The subsequent reception of Lal's work further underscores this point. His arguments regarding the Saraswati river and the indigenous origins of the Aryans were taken up within wider discourses of cultural nationalism, where they acquired meanings that extended beyond their original academic context. The authority of archaeology played a crucial role in this transformation, lending empirical weight to claims about the antiquity and continuity of Indian civilization. As archaeological interpretations circulated beyond the boundaries of the

discipline, they contributed to the formation of narratives that sought to stabilize cultural identity through appeals to the deep past.

This analysis suggests that the relationship between archaeology and nationalism cannot be understood in terms of simple appropriation or misuse. Such formulations risk obscuring the interpretive dynamics that make archaeological knowledge available for multiple readings. Rather than being imposed upon an otherwise neutral discipline, ideological frameworks interact with the inherent flexibility of archaeological interpretation. It is precisely because archaeological data are fragmentary, context-dependent, and open to interpretation that they can be incorporated into different narrative configurations.

The case of Lal therefore highlights a broader methodological issue in the study of the past. Archaeology does not merely uncover history; it participates in its construction. The movement from evidence to narrative—from excavation to imagination—is not an aberration but a fundamental aspect of how historical knowledge is produced. Recognizing this does not entail abandoning the empirical basis of archaeology. Instead, it requires a critical awareness of the interpretive frameworks through which evidence is organized and given meaning.

More broadly, the findings of this paper contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of historical knowledge in modern societies. In contexts where questions of identity and belonging are closely tied to interpretations of the past, the stakes of historical reconstruction are particularly high. Archaeology, with its capacity to provide tangible connections to antiquity, occupies a privileged position in these debates. Its authority can both illuminate the past and reinforce particular visions of it.

In conclusion, the work of B B Lal demonstrates how archaeological interpretation operates at the intersection of evidence, narrative, and ideology. His writings reveal not only the possibilities but also the limits of using material remains to construct comprehensive accounts of the past. By examining the processes through which his work has been produced, interpreted, and mobilized, this study has emphasized the need to approach archaeological knowledge as an inherently interpretive practice. Such an approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the past is continually reimagined in relation to the present, and how disciplines like archaeology contribute to that ongoing process.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. 2006. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Bryant, E. 2001. *The quest for the origins of Vedic culture: The Indo-Aryan migration debate*. Oxford University Press.
- Chakrabarti, D. K. 1988. *A history of Indian archaeology: From the beginning to 1947*. Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Guha, S. 2005. Negotiating evidence: History, archaeology and the Indus civilization. *Modern Asian Studies*, 39(2), 399–426.
- Habib, I. 2001. Imagining the Saraswati. *Social Scientist*, 29(1/2), 3–44.
- Jaffrelot, C. 1996. *The Hindu nationalist movement and Indian politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Kennedy, K. A. R. 1995. Have Aryans been identified in the prehistoric skeletal record from South Asia? In G. Erdosy (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of ancient South Asia: Language, material culture and ethnicity*, 32–66. Walter de Gruyter.
- Lal, B. B. 1954–55. Excavations at Hastinapura and other explorations in the upper Ganga and Sutlej basins. *Ancient India*, 10–11, 5–151.
- Lal, B. B. 1997. *India 1947–1997: New light on the Indus civilization*. Aryan Books International.
- Lal, B. B. 2002. *The Saraswati flows on: The continuity of Indian culture*. Aryan Books International.
- Lal, B. B. 2008. *Rama: His historicity, mandir and setu*. Aryan Books International.

- Lal, B. B. 2015. *The Rigvedic people: "Invaders"? "Immigrants"? or indigenous?* Aryan Books International.
- Parpola, A. 2015. *The roots of Hinduism: The early Aryans and the Indus civilization.* Oxford University Press.
- Thapar, R. 2004. *The past as present: Forging contemporary identities through history.* Aleph Book Company.
- Trautmann, T. R. 1997. *Aryans and British India.* University of California Press.
- Wheeler, R. E. M. 1947. Harappa 1946: The defences and cemetery R-37. *Ancient India*, 3, 58–130.
- Witzel, M. 1995. Early Sanskritization: Origins and development of the Kuru state. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 1(4), 1–26.
- Witzel, M. 2001. Autochthonous Aryans? The evidence from Old Indian and Iranian texts. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 7(3), 1–115.
