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EXCAVATING THE HIDDEN VOICE OF MARIA GRAHAM: THE FIRST WOMAN NARRATOR ON SOUTH ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Abstract: During the last four decades, archaeology of gender has emerged as an important theoretical perspective in archaeology. Such a perspective is also applied in the context of Indian archaeology. One of the ways of emphasising gender is by bringing to limelight the archaeological aspects of the travel accounts of women during the colonial period, which otherwise is known as excavating such hidden voices. This paper is one such act of 'excavation' involving the account of Maria Graham (1812), a British woman who travelled in India and Sri Lanka between 1809 and 1811, arriving at Bombay and departing from Madras. Graham is relevant now for several reasons. Firstly, she is the first woman writer on South Asian archaeology. Secondly, hers is an unpretentious and autobiographical style, influenced by Romanticism and the objective of her travel is modest 'a popular and comprehensive view of its scenery and monuments, and of the manners and habits of its natives and resident colonists' (preface). Thirdly, her account adds to the construction of Orientalism, since she spoke in eloquent terms of South Asia's ancient grandeur, but complained of the early nineteenth century squalor, emphasising, particularly in the preface, the legitimacy of British rule in the subcontinent to improve the lot of the 'natives'. Thus, the present paper is important for the history and historiography of Indian archaeology as well as archaeological theory with regard to gender.

Keywords: Maria Graham, Archaeology, South Asia, Gender, Historiography.

During the last four decades, archaeology of gender has emerged as an important theoretical perspective in archaeology (Conkey and Spector, 1984; Gilchrist, 1999; Sorensen, 2000; Nelson, 2009; Coltofean-Arizancu *et al,* 2021). Gender is understood as "the cultural interpretation of sexual difference that results in the categorisation of individuals, artefacts, spaces and bodies" (Gilchrist, 1999: Glossary xv). Although woman archaeologists have been in the profession earlier, it was not until 1980s when Conkey and Spector explicitly pointed out that "archaeology, like other traditional disciplines viewed through the lens of feminist criticism, has been neither objective nor inclusive on the subject of gender" (Conkey and Spector: 1984:1). Since then, there has been a proliferation of this perspective in various archaeological contexts of the world. Argued primarily from the feminist epistemological claims, the archaeology of gender involves sex/gender distinction, the nature of negotiation of gender roles in terms of food, dress, space and contact etc., and how gender is materially constituted (Sorensen, 2000). In case of India, lamenting the absence of interest in gender issues in Indian archaeology, it was Himansu Prabha Ray (2004a) who discussed such issues in pottery production in the Harappan Civilisation, Indian art, the issue of female ascetics and gendered texts as well as hero stones and representation of women. Such interest in archaeology of

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gender has been further taken up by other scholars in different ways. For example, while Bhardwaj (2004) tried to problematize the archaeology of female figurine in northwest India by discussing Mother Goddess, Lahiri (2012: Chapter 2, also see Singh: 2020:33-4) emphasised the contribution of Sultan Jahan Begum of Bhopal (r. 1901-26) in the restoration of Sanchi, known for its Buddhist heritage.

An important aspect of the 'gender genre' is an explicitly gender-sensitive approach by 'excavating' the 'hidden voices' – women as archaeologists – particularly in the history of archaeology (Diaz-Andreu and Sorensen, 1998). This paper is one such act of 'excavation' involving the account of Maria Graham (1812), a British woman who travelled in India and Sri Lanka between 1809 and 1811, arriving at Bombay (present Mumbai) and departing from Madras (present Chennai). Graham is relevant now for several reasons. Firstly, she is the first woman writer on South Asian archaeology (for a history of Indian archaeology, see Chakrabarti, 1988; Ray, 2004b). Secondly, hers is an unpretentious and autobiographical style, influenced by Romanticism and the objective of her travel is modest 'a popular and comprehensive view of its scenery and monuments, and of the manners and habits of its natives and resident colonists' (preface). Thirdly, her account adds to the construction of Orientalism (Said, 1979), since she spoke in eloquent terms of South Asia's ancient grandeur, but complained of the early nineteenth century squalor, emphasising, particularly in the preface, the legitimacy of British rule in the subcontinent to improve the lot of the 'natives'. At some places, the colonial arrogance spills out, although not as much as that of James Fergusson (1884) later. However, in order to appreciate Maria Graham in proper perspective, we have to situate her intellectually in some of the aesthetic movements in Europe.

Aesthetic Movements in Europe in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

With the establishment of British power in India in the second half of the eighteenth century, a new kind of travellers came to India in search of 'sublime' and 'picturesque' elements in Indian architecture, describing them for their visual and aesthetic qualities. The aesthetic movements of the eighteenth century - with the twofold function of shaping romantic sensibilities on the one hand and of reducing formalism and the rule of taste dominating classical art on the other – much influenced this new group (Mitter: 1977:120-2). Thus not only the traditional concept of the decisive rules in art was gradually replaced by the notion of the primacy of taste, but art critics recognised qualities other than beauty as important aesthetic criteria. The first alternative to the category of beauty to emerge was the concept of the 'sublime' whose qualities included the size of the object – so large that the human mind failed to comprehend it, greatness and uncommon aspects; for Burke, the essential elements of the 'sublime' was obscurity of the subject arousing fear induced by ignorance (Mitter: 1977:122). The second important aesthetic

movement was that of the 'picturesque' which may be regarded as belonging to the period of transition from classical formalism to 'romantic disorder'; it was also an attack on the classical notion of beauty as it advocated 'disorder' and 'irregularity' in landscape in both art and nature (Mitter: 1977:122). Although it was a minor phase in the history of taste, the picturesque movement none the less encouraged travel solely for pleasure. This movement influenced English middle class literate women who began to travel widely in the nineteenth century, partly facilitated by the British rule in India (Mitter: 1977:131). Maria Graham, an amateur artist, was one such earlier traveller.

Life History and Works

Maria Graham, later Lady Callcott (Stephen and Lee: 1908:710-1; Gotch, 1937; Ghose, 1998: xi) was born on 19th July, 1785 near Cockermouth, the daughter of Rear-Admiral Dundas. She showed a passionate love for books, nature, poetry and painting from an early age. Her school holidays were usually spent at the house of her uncle, Sir David Dundas, in Richmond, which was frequented by luminaries like Rogers, Thomas Campbell and Lawrence. She sailed with her father and sister for India in December 1808. She married Captain Thomas Graham in 1809. She travelled in India, came back to England in 1811 and lived in London for some time, when she was acquainted with Sir James Mackintosh and Sir Samuel Romilly. She spent some time in Italy in 1819 and sailed for South America in 1821. Sadly, Captain Graham died off Cape Horn in April 1822. She proceeded to Brazil and Chile. After her return to England, she was engaged in literary activities. She married the artist Augustus Wall Callcott in 1827. In 1828 they went on a long Italian tour. Unfortunately, she ruptured a blood-vessel in 1831 and became an invalid. She died on 28th November, 1842.

Despite her personal tragedy and ill health, she wrote many books. Well known mostly for her *Little Arthur's History of England* published in 1835, her works can be grouped under four categories. The first is her travel accounts, the 'journals' of her visits to India, Brazil and Chile (the latter two published in 1824) and the account of her experience near Rome published in 1820 as well as her voyage to the Sandwich islands. The second is general history. Besides *Little Arthur's History*, she wrote *A Short History of Spain* (two volumes) in 1828. The third type is art history including *Memoir of the Life of Nicholas Poussin* (1820), *Description of the Chapel of the Annunziata dell Arena in Padua* (1835), *Essays towards the History of Painting* (1836), and *Continuation of Essays towards the History of Painting* (1838). The fourth is miscellaneous, ranging from *Letter to the President and Members of the Geological Society* (1834) to *Seven Ages of Shakespeare–An Essay* (1840), *The Little Brackenburners and Little Mary's four Saturdays* (1841) and *A Scripture Herbal* (1842). The common link in all these volumes is the primary objective to engage in popular writing.

In the present paper, the emphasis will be on her 'journal' on India (1812) which is her first publication. A review was published in 1812 in *Quarterly Review* (vol. 8) which stated in a condescending note; 'a book by a young lady, who probably went to India like most young ladies, to procure a husband instead of information, is a literary curiosity which we are not disposed to overlook' (p. 406). However, the popularity of her account may be gauged from the publication of its second edition in 1813 and its French translation in 1841. In the second edition she mentioned in a footnote (p. 28) that she did not go to India in search of a husband. Rather, her work was 'really or truly written ---- for the amusement of an intimate friend" on his/her parting request' (p.:iv). Its merit 'must consist in the fidelity and liveliness of a transcript from new impressions' without any attempt 'to reduce its redundancies or to strengthen its colouring' (p. v). Her philosophy and background comes close to Romanticism. Dissatisfied with the consequences of Industrial Revolution, Romanticism celebrated the innocence and simplicity of the past and emphasised that the then Orient represented the 'adolescence of Europe'. This provoked some Europeans to take interest in the Orient. In this regard, Graham confessed that 'she did not go far enough to meet with any of those remnants of the age of gold – any of those combinations of innocence, benevolence, and voluptuous simplicity' (p. vi). Rather her experience was just the opposite.

On South Asian Antiquities

During her stay, Graham visited mostly coastal areas (but also Poona) of the three Presidencies – Bombay, Madras and Calcutta – and Sri Lanka. According to her, the cave of Carli (Karle) was 'really one of the most magnificent chambers I ever saw, both as to proportions and workmanship', 'commanding one of the finest prospects in the world' (p. 64). At Mahaballipooram, near Madras, she described the 'gopuram' and 'mutnapom' (open temple), the representation of 'one of the adventures of Christna' (Krishna), the 'sacred austerities' practised by 'Arjoon' (p. 159) and the 'models of temples' called 'rutts' (five of them) (p. 162). In Sri Lanka, she referred to the Buddhist remains at Bellegam (pp. 88-89) as well as 'a gigantic four-handed statue of Vishnu of a dark-blue colour which appears to be a porcelain' (p. 89). The main features of her descriptions of sacred monuments include her personal autobiographical narrative style without maintaining an objective distance from the reader, measurements of various caves, mythological background to understand the Buddhist and Hindu pantheon and in some cases their illustrations. Another important feature was her comparison not only between Indian monuments such as Elephanta and Karle, but also her relating some features to Gothic and even 'negro' features. For example, at Karle, she 'fancied' herself as 'in a Gothic cathedral' (p. 64). The hair of a Buddha figure at Bellegam was 'curled like that of a negro and on the crown of his head is a flame-like ornament, such as I have seen in Montfaucon and Denon, on the heads of the Egyptian deities'

(pp. 88-9). The 'more picturesque and wild' scenery between Chowk and Panwell (Poona – Bombay region) reminded her 'of Scottish Highland scenery' (p. 62). The scenery at Trincomale "is the most beautiful I ever saw; I can compare it to nothing but Loch Catrine on a gigantic scale" (p. 120).

Graham also reported the forts, palaces and public buildings, both live and in ruins. She copied 'some sketches of ancient Hindoo tombs, called by the natives Pandoo Koolis' from Colonel Mackenzie's collection. These were what we now call megaliths of South India. She found in them 'an extraordinary resemblance to the Druidical vestiges in Europe, in Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, and Scotland' and she was 'tempted to imagine that there must have existed, between the inhabitants of those remote nations, a connection sufficiently intimate to have transmitted similar customs to their descendants, although their common origins be forgotten' (p. 169). This is an example of her belief in syncretism.

Graham also reported the recovery of Roman coins from South India by Colonel Mackenzie. She also spoke of the copper plates of South India which were 'inscribed grants of land for the maintenance of the temples, being dated above a thousand years ago, and referring to the sculptured rocks' of Mahaballipoor (p. 157). She also showed concern about the permission of the Madras Government to use stone quarries 'near the best executed caves' of Mahaballipoor (p. 168) and was also disappointed about 'the intemperate zeal of the Portuguese, who made war upon the gods and temples' (p. 57) at Elephanta. This implies her appreciation for the rich architectural and sculptural tradition of India as well as a deep concern for its conservation.

Construction of the Orientalist Canon: 'Us' and 'Them'

The absence of the mention of the Asiatic Society of Bengal or of Sir William Jones in Graham's account may appear surprising; however, it may be due to the audience she had in her mind for writing. However, one finds a similarity between her and the spirit of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in general and of its Founder President, Sir William Jones, in particular in terms of the attitude to India – her greatness in antiquity but the contemporary degradation and a philosophy of syncretism. Thus, speaking about Elephanta, Graham stated:

"The temple of Elephanta, and other equally wonderful caverns in the neighbourhood, must have been the works of a people far advanced in the arts of civilized life, and possessed of wealth and power; -----. It would be curious to follow out the advancement and fall of the arts which produced such monuments; but not a trace of their history remains, and we are left to seek it in the natural progress of a people subtle and ingenious, but depressed by superstition, and the utter impossibility of rising individuals, by any virtues or any talents, to a higher rank in society than that occupied by their forefathers" (p.58).

Her construction of the 'native' becomes explicit when she says,

"I am unwilling to think the natives of any country naturally inferior to those of another, and I therefore endeavour to account to myself for the great moral disparity between the Europeans and the Asiatics, by supposing that the severities of the northern climate, and the difficulty of raising food, give a spur to industry and invention, to surmount the disadvantages of nature, and to procure property and comforts, which are valued in proportion to the difficulty with which they are attained. But no such incitements to exertion exist in this climate, and the mind sinks in proportion to the inactivity of the body" (p.92-3).

However, Graham did not explain, unless she assumed a climatic change from the antiquity to the present, as to how could the Indians transcend the climatic limitation in antiquity in creating the marvellous art historic remains she adored so much. Another interesting example in her narrative differentiating the 'colonial resident' and the 'native' is her mention of the 'fox-chase, a favourite amusement of Englishmen here' (p. 75) and 'the great sport of the Mahrattas', i.e. ram-fighting (p.76).

One needs to state here that her constructions of 'us' and 'them' are not monoliths. As to 'natives', she discusses various religious communities, including comparative social status, between Brahmin and Pariah, Muslim man and woman and the different occupational groups such as barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters and traders etc. Her stereotypical attitude to the Muslim women (p.17-9) conforms to Yegenoglu's view that 'the figure of the 'veiled Oriental woman' has a particular place in these (18th and 19th century European) texts, not only as signifying Oriental woman as mysterious and exotic but also as signifying the Orient as feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous' (Yegenoglu: 1998:11). The ethnography becomes all the more interesting when she compares the Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Colombo British residents with each other, especially their women. She also mentioned about the tension between the military and civilian residents in Madras. Moreover, her attitude to other Europeans like the Portuguese and Dutch shows an air of superiority.

Graham's expectation under the influence of the Romantic philosophy and her observations of South Asia stand at opposite poles, the difference being 'greater than she found it easy to reconcile to herself' (Graham: 1812: vii).

"My expectation of Hindoo innocence and virtue are fast giving way, and I fear that even among the Pariahs I shall not find anything like St.Pierre's Chaumiere Indienne. In fact, ------ their minds are degraded in proportion to their personal situation" (Graham: 1812: 15).

In some other cases, her experience is different although the contempt for the 'native' remains. For example, according to her,

"I everyday find some traces of the manners and simplicity of the antique

ages; but the arts and the virtues that adorned them are sunk in the years of slavery under which the devoted Hindoo have bent; those people, if they have the virtues of slaves, patience, meakness, forbearance, and gentleness, have their vices also. They are cunning, incapable of truth; they disregard the imputation of lying and perjury, and would consider it folly not to practice them for their own interest" (Graham: 1812: 27).

Her colonial arrogance also is known when she wrote at Cape Town 'I was delighted with the fine complexities and good-natured unaffected manners of the Dutch women, after seeing the pale faces and languid affectation of the British Indians' (Graham: 1812: 174). The deliverance from all 'their moral and religious degradation' (ibid, p:72) lay in the civilising mission of the British rule, and hence she 'could even be almost reconciled to the methods by which the Europeans have acquired possession of the country' (ibid, p:72) and hoped that by her account she 'may perhaps continue, in some instances, to direct the attention of those in whose hands so much of their destiny is placed' (ibid, p: vii).

To conclude, the consequence of the gaze of 'a contemplative spectator' (ibid, p:ii) does afford, as Graham mentions in her preface, 'some entertainment, and some matter of useful meditation even to the reflective reader' (ibid, p:vii). However, although she went beyond the bound of the Middle Age in appreciating the art history and antiquity of South Asia, the implication of 'the civilising mission' of the Orientalist canon was a constraining influence – a contradiction which remained a hallmark of Orientalism. Her engaging gaze constructed both 'us' and 'them' not in a monolithic manner. Rather her reflexive attitude critically evaluated the British and European residents in different parts of India as well as the various castes and communities of India. But the implicit reference point for her ethnography was England and hence the 'natives', non-British Europeans and even some English resident women fell below this scale. Moreover, her narrative style enables the reader to share her experience of archaeological sites and monuments combined with natural landscape. Because of all these, one could say that Maria Graham adds significantly, to use Indira Ghose's phrase, to 'the treasure trove of diversity' of writings of the British women travellers to India during the colonial period (Ghose: 1998:12) and also helps in 'dismantling the stereotype' (ibid, 1998:2) of the negative portrayal of the English woman as the 'memsahib' who, as Sir David Lean groused (although he used the term 'the women'), 'lost us the Empire' (ibid, 1998:1).

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