



Hasmukh Dhirajlal Sankalia

# IN MEMORIAM

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## Hasmukh Dhirajlal Sankalia 1908–1989

THE PASSING AWAY of Professor H. D. Sankalia on 28 January 1989 marks the end of a long and glorious era in Indian archaeology. It is unlikely that we will ever again see another archaeologist of his achievement, dedication, and versatility. Sankalia was born 10 December 1908 into a middle-class Gujarati family in Bombay. Right from his birth he had a weak constitution, and he remained thin and frail throughout his life. But he overcame this handicap by sheer willpower and strict discipline in his daily routine. Until his retirement in 1973, he spent several months of every year conducting field work in some part of the country, and set an example to his colleagues and students by his hard work in the field. He would walk for many kilometers during explorations, setting a pace that younger and healthier people found difficult to maintain. Quite a few young men and women who were unsure of their capacity to pursue an archaeological career drew inspiration from Sankalia's example. Sankalia was a blessed man in that he found his vocation very early in life, and he set out to fulfill it with a missionary zeal.

Sankalia developed an interest in history during his childhood from hearing the stories of the Puranas and the epics as told to him by his parents. Around the age of sixteen he happened to read Lokmanya Tilak's *Arctic Home in the Vedas*. This book made such an impression on him that he decided to pursue a career in ancient history. To equip himself for this task he set out to acquire a sound knowledge of Sanskrit. He obtained a master's degree in history from Bombay University in 1934 by writing a thesis on the University of Nalanda. The thesis was published as a book in the same year, and a second, revised edition appeared in 1973. On the advice and encouragement of his teacher, Father Heras, Sankalia went to England for further studies. His doctoral research at the University of London focused on the archaeology of Gujarat, and his dissertation was based on a study of Gujarati inscriptions, art, and architecture. He received his Ph.D. in 1936. While in England, Sankalia also took part in Mortimer Wheeler's excavations at the Roman site of Maiden Castle, where he learned the techniques of excavation.

After completing his graduate studies, Sankalia returned to India where in 1939 he was appointed a professor of Indian protohistory and ancient history at the newly founded Deccan College Post-Graduate & Research Institute in Pune. Here he found an environment and facilities conducive to his research, and he decided to remain. In

later years he received many offers of positions with better salaries from institutions outside Poona but he never changed or regretted his original decision. Sankalia developed a deep attachment to Deccan College and came to identify himself with the institution. While still in active service at the college, he built a house on campus so that he would be able to continue his research conveniently even after retirement. He lived in this house until his death. When he retired, he gave his entire personal collection of books to the Deccan College library. Deccan College gave Sankalia the facilities he needed and complete freedom to pursue his research, and Sankalia in return conferred prestige on the institution by his renowned academic achievements. Long before the scholar died, Sankalia and Deccan College had become synonymous in the eyes of the international academic community.

Soon after joining Deccan College, Sankalia began to work in prehistoric archaeology. He had had no formal instruction or practical training in this branch of archaeology, so he taught himself the discipline with the help of books and field work. Although he worked in every subdiscipline of archaeology, he devoted the largest part of his time and energy to prehistory, which he called his life's work. In 1941 he organized an expedition to Gujarat with the support of Rao Bahadur K. N. Dikshit, then director general of the Archaeological Survey of India, to follow up the almost forgotten work carried out more than half a century earlier by Robert Bruce Foote, father of Indian prehistory. During this expedition, Sankalia discovered many new palaeolithic and mesolithic sites, the most important being the mesolithic site of Langhnaj in Mehsana district. He carried out excavations at this site and discovered the first physical remains of Stone Age man here. The results of this work were published in 1946 under the title *Investigations into the Prehistoric Archaeology of Gujarat*. Sankalia spent several more seasons excavating at this site and published several papers on the findings. The consolidated results of these excavations were published in three volumes in 1965, under the title *Excavations at Langhnaj 1944-1963*, with archaeology covered by Sankalia, animal remains by J. Clutton-Brock, and human remains by S. Ehrhardt and K. A. R. Kennedy.

During his thirty-five years at Deccan College, Sankalia conducted excavations and explorations in almost all parts of India, from Gujarat to Assam and from Kashmir to Kerala, uncovering evidence of several Stone Age cultures. He published the results of these explorations and excavations in numerous articles and two monographs, *Godavari Palaeolithic Industry* and *Mesolithic and Pre-Mesolithic Industries from Sangankallu*.

Alongside his work in prehistory, Sankalia turned his attention to protohistory as well. In the 1940s little was known of India's history between the Stone Age and historical times, except for the Indus civilization whose known remains were then confined to northwest India (now Pakistan). In the early 1950s Sankalia excavated the site of Jorwe in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, where he discovered a chalcolithic culture. This excavation provided the first evidence of a settled farming people in Maharashtra and opened a new chapter in the archaeology of India.

Over the next two decades Sankalia carried out excavations at several chalcolithic and neolithic sites—Nevasa and Inamgaon in Maharashtra, Maheshwar and Navdatoli in Madhya Pradesh, Ahar in Rajasthan, and Tekkalakota and Sangankallu in Karnataka. These excavations threw a floodlight on the culture and society of the pioneering agricultural settlers in western India. Sankalia's work also encouraged other archaeologists to explore and excavate similar sites in different parts of the

country. Thanks to his and other archaeologists' excavations, today we have a fairly clear picture of the continuous human occupation of different regions of western India from Rajasthan to Karnataka. Sankalia promptly published the results of his excavations in the form of papers in Indian and foreign journals and as comprehensive reports.

Besides conducting original research and writing up the results, Sankalia also wrote several syntheses of Indian prehistory and protohistory in the form of articles and books, which he revised periodically to bring them up to date. Among his major publications of this kind are *Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan* (1962, 1974), *Indian Archaeology Today* (1962, 1979), and *Prehistory of India* (1977). His *Prehistory of India and Pakistan* remains the most masterly and exhaustive survey of the subject.

Although Sankalia's major research interest throughout his career remained prehistory and protohistory, he found time to pursue other lines of research as well. For example, he excavated the historical sites of Kolhapur, Nasik, Nevasa, Dwarka, and Tripuri. He also retained his early interest in traditional historical archaeology—the study of art, iconography, architecture, numismatics, epigraphy, and palaeography—and wrote many papers on such subjects. One of his main interests was the reconstruction of historical geography and cultural ethnography from the data available in inscriptions. He applied this methodology to the inscriptions from Gujarat and reported his conclusions in the Thakker Vassonji Madhavji Lectures which he delivered at the University of Bombay in 1944. The lectures were later published as a book. Yet another important field of Sankalia's research was a critical study of the *Ramayana* in the light of the internal evidence of the epic and available archaeological data. He came to the conclusion that the story could not have been composed before the early centuries of the Christian era, and that Ravana's Lanka could not have been the present-day island of Sri Lanka. Rather, the Lanka of the *Ramayana* was located somewhere in the area defined by the borders of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, and Orissa. He elaborated his ideas on the historicity of the *Ramayana* in several papers and two books, *Ramayana: Myth or Reality?* (1973) and *Ramayana in a Historical Perspective* (1982). These unconventional views made him the target of severe criticism from orthodox Hindus, but he held his position steadfastly.

Apart from being a researcher of exceptional dedication and versatility, Sankalia was a teacher par excellence. He loved teaching, both inside and outside the classroom. Nearly fifty students from different parts of India and abroad completed their doctorates under his supervision. Many of them went on to occupy important positions in universities and other archaeological institutions and have contributed substantially to the unraveling of India's past. Indeed, Sankalia trained several generations of students, and Indian archaeology as it is today was largely shaped by him. Sharing his knowledge with students and others was a passion with Sankalia, and he was able to inculcate in his students a spirit of inquiry, a love of knowledge, and a sense of commitment and dedication. As soon as he read an important new book or article, Sankalia would bring it to the notice of his students so that they could use it for their own research.

Sankalia did not treat archaeological knowledge as the cloistered preserve of a professional elite. He strongly believed that since archaeological activity was carried out with public money, the people had a right to the knowledge gained from this

research. To this end he wrote copiously in newspapers and popular magazines and published a number of booklets in simple language in English, Hindi, Marathi, and Gujarati, explaining his research findings. He also organized exhibitions at his excavation sites so that the local people could learn the history of their region. He was strongly critical of archaeologists who did not care to share their findings with the public. Thanks to his popular writings, Sankalia became a household name all over India, to such an extent that in the popular mind he came to be identified with archaeology.

Throughout his life Sankalia remained a student at heart. He had an insatiable hunger for knowledge. He kept himself abreast of all new developments in archaeology. Long before the larger archaeological community realized the importance of ethnoarchaeology (the study of living societies as an aid to reconstructing the past), Sankalia asked one of his students, as early as 1962, to write a thesis on ethnoarchaeology. Soon after he made provision for the regular teaching of this branch of archaeology at the beginning graduate level. Similarly, when the New Archaeology movement began in the West in the early 1960s, Sankalia immediately grasped its importance. He chose *New Archaeology and Its Application to India* as the subject of his D. N. Majumdar Memorial Lectures in 1974; the lectures were published as a book in 1977. He realized quite early the importance of rock art in prehistory and encouraged one of his students to take up its study for his doctoral research. Sankalia himself chose prehistoric art as the subject of his Father Heras Memorial Lectures in 1974.

Apart from his monumental research work and numerous publications, Sankalia's lasting contribution to archaeology is the development of the Department of Archaeology at Deccan College. Founded in 1939 under Sankalia's leadership, it had developed into a premier research institution by the time of his retirement in 1973. Step by step he created teaching posts in different branches of archaeology and technical posts for drawing, survey, photography, and modeling. Sankalia fully recognized the need for expertise in the physical and biological sciences in order to study varied archaeological materials and to provide comprehensive training for young archaeologists. To this end, he created teaching and research posts in archaeological chemistry, geology, geomorphology, palaeontology, and palaeobotany, and arranged the construction of laboratory facilities in these fields. He also built a fine museum in the department, mainly to display finds from the excavations and explorations conducted by him, his colleagues, and his students. The University has given generous grants to the department and accorded it the status first of Department of Special Assistance and later of Center of Advanced Study. No other archaeological center in South Asia today can boast of having staff or facilities to equal those of Deccan College, or of enjoying such a high reputation. That Sankalia's colleagues and students have maintained the dynamism he encouraged and the high standard of research he set is a tribute to the spirit of research Sankalia was able to inculcate among them.

As a human being Sankalia was exceptionally simple, unassuming, and honest. Everyone, irrespective of status, had easy access to him in his office or at home. He took a keen personal interest in the welfare of his students and of the employees of the college. During his daily morning walks around campus, people would approach him with their problems; he would listen to their story and then direct the appropriate official to attend to the matter promptly. He had great respect for the

dignity of labor and did not consider any type of work inferior to any other. He strongly disapproved of waste and was scrupulous about the thrifty and proper use of both public and private funds. His increasing fame and status did not in the least affect Sankalia's intrinsic humility and simplicity. For example, he avoided being nominated to serve on government committees, since he considered them a distraction from his research.

Recognition and honors from academic institutions, government, and the public came to Sankalia in abundance. He was invited to lecture by numerous universities in India and abroad. The prestigious lectures delivered by him include: Thakkar Vassonji Madhavji Memorial lectures (University of Bombay, 1944, 1965), Bhagwanlal Indrajii Memorial Lectures (University of Bombay, 1960), Father Heras Memorial Lectures (St. Xavier's College, Bombay, 1960, 1974), Rao Bahadur Gaurishankar Ojha Memorial Lectures (Rajasthan Vidyapeeth, Udaipur, 1969), and D. N. Majumdar Memorial Lectures (Ethnographic Folk Culture Society, Lucknow, 1974). He was awarded Bhagwanlal Indrajii Prize in 1933 for his master's thesis on the University of Nalanda; the Silver Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Bombay, in 1944; the Gold Medal of the Gujarat Sahitya Sabha, Ahmedabad, in 1967; the Dadabhoy Naoroji Prize in 1968; the Chakrabarty Silver Medal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1972; the Robert Bruce Foote Plaque of the Anthropology Department of Calcutta University in 1974; the Hari Om Trust Prize of South Gujarat University, Surat, in 1975; the Campbell Memorial Gold Medal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay in 1977; the Vishwa Gurjari Award of Ahmedabad in 1981; and the Explorer's Medal of the Explorer's Club, New York, in 1984.

Sankalia was granted honorary fellowship in several prestigious academic societies and institutions, including the Indian Archaeological Society, Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association, and the British Academy. He was Honorary Tagore Professor of Indian History and Culture at the M.S. University of Baroda from 1960 to 1965. The president of India conferred on him the title of Padma Bhusan in 1974 in recognition of his immense contribution to archaeological studies.

Sankalia formally retired from Deccan College in 1973; the college authorities made him professor emeritus in recognition of his important role in the development of the college. The only difference retirement made to Sankalia was that he stopped doing field work, but he continued to read and write until almost the last day of his life. His death was due to old age and weakness and not to any particular illness. He was widely mourned in India and abroad. Sankalia's name and memory will live forever in the form of his monumental research work and in the future of Deccan College, which he contributed so much to build as a great center of learning.

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