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**INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AFTER SIR JOHN MARSHALL  
AN APPRAISAL OF THE CONTENTS OF SIR LEONARD  
WOOLLEY'S 1939 REPORT TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA**



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**Abstract**

*This article deals with an important issue in the history of South Asian archaeology. The Archaeological Survey of India, which had been constituted in 1861, was headed by Sir John Marshall, as Director General, from 1902 to 1928. He was succeeded by four other heads till 1947. However, in the late 1930s it was felt that Indian archaeology needs revitalization; hence an archaeologist from the UK, Sir Leonard Woolley, was invited to study the state of Indian archaeology and provide recommendations for its future practice. Woolley submitted his report to the government in early 1939. Since the report is not widely available. This study has summarized its contents so as to presents its overview to the wider public.*

**Keywords:** Museums, excavation, Archaeological Survey of India, conservation, archaeology

## **Introduction**

Indo-Pakistani archaeology till 1947 is generally divided into three main periods. These are known after the names of three colonial Director Generals (DG) of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), namely Sir A. Cunningham, Sir J. Marshall and Sir M. Wheeler. Established in early 1861, in the result of Cunningham's efforts, the ASI saw vacillations in terms of its structure and functions throughout the latter half of nineteenth century. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, along with John Marshall (1902–1928), set new directions for Indian archaeology. The successors of Marshall continued to work in the same framework since 1928 till the partition. However, the year 1944 proved decisive in the history of Indo-Pakistani archaeology due to the appointment of Sir Mortimer Wheeler as the new DG of the ASI. He tried to restructure the Survey on the eve of the British departure from South Asia. But there is a crucial anecdote to this hallmark development, namely the examination of the state of Indian archaeology by Sir Leonard Woolley in 1938. He submitted a highly critical report about the archaeological practice and work till the date to the Government of India.

This study aims to introduce Woolley's inaccessible and largely forgotten report to wider public so as to be able to appreciate this academic and organizational phenomenon. Woolley's report serves as a reference to understanding subsequent archaeological work in the subcontinent, especially done during the Director Generalship of Mortimer Wheeler. This study gives summary of different crucial points and arguments Leonard Woolley presented in his report. But in the first place, a brief about him would be useful.

## **Who Was Leonard Woolley?**

Sir Charles Leonard Woolley was born to Rev. George Herbert and Sarah Woolley on April 17, 1880 and died on 22 February 1960. He got his education from various and finally graduated New College, Oxford. He then joined various archaeological expeditions to Africa and the Middle East. He got exceptional fame in the result of his excavations at Ur, Mesopotamia. Woolley published numerous books about finds which succeeded in capturing wider imagination owing to his lucid and eloquent style.

Woolley's philosophical and intellectual views are also important to note. In this regard, his popular books *Digging up the past* and *The young archaeologist* may be referred to. And his recommendations to the Government of India regarding archaeological work can be best understood in the light of all this.

### **Contents of the Woolley Report**

Sir Woolley submitted his highly controversial report to the government by the end of February 1939. It consists of six chapters, containing various subsections, and spreads over 47 pages.

Chapter first explains background to his arrival, along with the terms of reference,<sup>1</sup> and just introduces the whole report very briefly. The thrust of his discussion was that financial problems aside, sheer lack of trained people and experts within the Survey was responsible for its degeneration. He recommended a temporary advisor from home for plucking archaeology from this sorry state of affairs.

The second chapter deals with strategic planning for excavation by isolating potential sites. For this purpose, he first criticizes the work done to date. He observes that in the 1930s there was 'the lack of any coherent plan for archaeological activities.' By this he implies absence of calculated programme with regard to the selection of site and filling in of gaps in the cultural sequence of India (Woolley 1939: 4). Both these points are interconnected, rather one stems from the other. It qualifies the concept of problem-oriented research which helps to approach the choice of site for excavation strategically. From this perspective, Sir Leonard's assessment concerning North India notices a gap of about 2000 years between the end of the Indus civilization, sometime in the early half of the second millennium BCE, and the rule of Asoka in the third century BCE. In the South the problem was perceived as more grievous as the area was even devoid of the skeleton of chronological and cultural history. No correlation between the prehistoric and historic periods had been established. Keeping in view this situation, Woolley asserts, 'Clearly the time had come for a systematic plan of campaign directed to the filling-in of these gaps in knowledge.' He, thus, suggests a coherent plan in order to successfully address the problems (Woolley 1939: 4-5).

As Woolley believed that a single site could not be so entirely productive as to give results with respect to all periods 'to bridge best the gaps in our knowledge', he figured out seven potential sites in North India based on the criteria<sup>2</sup> he had devised for such a selection. They include Kosumbi and

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<sup>1</sup> It runs like this (Woolley 1939: 1): "The Government of India will require to be given advice on the following points:-

- (1) The most promising sites or areas for exploration.
- (2) The best methods and agencies for achieving the speedy and fruitful development of exploration activities in general; consideration, in this regard, being had not only to Government but to non-official agencies such as universities, learned societies, etc.
- (3) The best method of training or electing officers for exploration work, including such points as the most suitable age for recruitment.
- (4) Any general points bearing on the field of exploration and excavation not covered by items 1-3."

<sup>2</sup> '(1) that the site should have been inhabited over a long period so that stratified conditions are probable affording evidence for a chronological sequence,

'(2) that some at least of such strata should belong to known historic periods for which coins or inscriptions are likely to assign them with reasonable certainty,

'(3) that the site should have been in the past of such importance that not only new coins and inscriptions likely to be found but the other objects should be of a quality really representative of the art of their periods,

'(4) that the site should be one tending itself to excavation' (Woolley 1939: 5).

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Bhita in Allahabad, Rajgir and Pataliputra in Patna area, Sar Dheri (Peshawar), Rohtak (Delhi) and Ramnagar in Bareilly. Out of these only Ramnagar and Rohtak were proposed for survey and excavation. The former had the prospects of giving results from Gupta period backward to prehistoric times while the later could offer data for later historic periods. Both the sites were also viewed to meet the training requirements for students and ASI's personnel (Woolley 1939: 5). The problem in the South was not different from that of the North. It was 'the correlation of the historic and the pre-historic by the establishment of a chronological type-sequence' (Woolley 1939: 7). A succession of excavations at various sites, moving from known to unknown, implying from medieval to prehistoric, was required. In this respect, the medieval Hampi was seen as a starting point to be followed by one either from Mamallapuram or Conjeeveran (now Kanchipuram) and still by Korkai (Thoothukudi). More value was added to Paithan with the hope that it 'may yield a type-sequence which will to some extent at least serve as a basis for South Indian archaeology generally'. He, once more, warns about the harms an unplanned work entails (Woolley 1939: 7).

Sir Leonard also points out the need of a country-wide archaeological survey and collection of objects. However, their proper treatment would be possible once excavations were done. It was also put down that the DG was at liberty to chalk out their own programme within the broader outline enunciated by Woolley (Woolley 1939: 7-8).

Chapter three addresses the point of excavation by nongovernment bodies (pp. 9-16). It convincingly presents the benefits of such projects. However, the incentives Woolley advocates for these institutions were too generous and it seemed difficult to accept his suggestion smoothly. A country as large as India, with numerous gaps in its ancient history, could hardly be covered by the ASI. Moreover, museums needed rich collections for public education, a fact which necessitated involvement of foreign and Indian bodies in excavation. But as they would not concede but for a good share in finds, Sir Leonard asserted that only the 'principle of division' could work. Museums funded excavations, he observed, for such a share which, according to Woolley, was not 'a sordid motive.' He argued that museums served wider public while scientific reports appeal to a limited number of experts. He, based on his experience in the Middle East, especially the Syrian example of equal distribution, suggested such a course of action for India. The notion that unique objects add value to national collections is negated on the ground that today's unique may not enjoy the same status tomorrow. He allowed that 'unique' could be refused by the DG to an excavator but, at the same time, he alerted that its surrender brings more benefits. This generosity was liable to incite interest abroad and to encourage excavators and tourists in favour of the country. The benefit, to him, was greater than 'a minor sacrifice' (Woolley 1939: 9-11).

While thinking about securing Indian interest, Woolley suggested four points to be taken into account. (1) License should be issued to those scientific bodies who would give surety that the objects be exhibited in public museums. They should not be treated as private property which would go against the purpose of education and interest of India. (2) Licensees should be qualified for excavations so as to ensure returns in terms of knowledge creation. (3) The scientific results should be published. (4) The foreign missions should train Indian students and ASI's officers in their excavations (Woolley 1939: 11-12).

The remaining part of the chapter deals with legal-institutional issues such as terms of agreement between ASI and licensees, omissions in the law, excavation on private land and trafficking in antiquities and private collections (Woolley 1939: 13-16). Details of the first point, by and large, derive from the four points as discussed in the previous paragraph with an additional explication of

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preparing two catalogues of the two equally divided sets of objects by the licensee (supposed one for the Department and the other for the excavator/s). The next point explains that antiquities making national property lays down certain rules for treating it like this. The succeeding issue is about antiquities as occurring in private land. Woolley said that some excavations qualify permanent visibility and only in such cases private land can be expropriated. In cases otherwise, land could be taken over temporarily, especially for three years with due compensation for owners. About trafficking, he envisaged control only through 'the licensing of dealers' who could carry out their business in an accountable way. Rules about private collection were also suggested to be relaxed in the best interest of the owner and the Department.

Chapter four gives an insightful thought to point three of the above mentioned 'terms of reference', viz. what should be the selection criteria and how the personnel of the Survey should be trained. About the first, Woolley lamented 'the depletion of the *cadre* of officers' and recommended 'the necessary staff'. Insufficient staff affects the work. He enumerated that six officials had retired, eleven posts had been abolished and four scholarship cancelled. For the six archaeological circles only four superintendents and four assistant superintendents were at the time available. In order to rescue the Department from decline, Sir Leonard advised its reorganization. The first suggestion was to make a clear differentiation between conservation, excavation and museum management. Moreover, these appointments were seen as necessary: two circle superintendents, two assistant superintendents, two field directors, two assistant archaeologists, two protohistorian superintendents, one assistant superintendent for epigraphy, one assistant for physical anthropology and four student apprentices. It was expressed that all these slots may not be filled through fresh recruitments. To some could be promoted members from the lower cadre of ASI while, as Woolley wanted to review the museum structure and suggested some fundamental changes, three museum curators as spared would also be accommodated. The promoted ones would also have to undergo the necessary training as is suggested for the recruits. It was seen as 'a matter of the greatest importance' in the best interest of the present and future of ASI (Woolley 1939: 17).

Woolley also talked about age limit with respect to induction and student apprenticeship. Regarding the former, he laid down that a trained candidate, if overaged, might be given a certain age relaxation as they would be a more suitable candidate as compared to an untrained applicant. Keeping in view that an untrained inductee would spend a couple of years to get the required training, better is it not to lose a suitable aspirant. Different criteria were specified for student apprenticeship. Unlike recruits, student apprentices should be of younger age as they would have to be trained in the Department. They should preferably have a background in *literae humaniores*, historical studies and classical languages. Their selection was said to be made through recommendation by their teachers, in the framework of cooperation between the Survey and universities. Primarily intended for getting specialization, student-apprentices were supposed to be oriented to all technical aspects of archaeology during the first phase. The second phase consisted of some general pursuits along with some specialized assignments. In the last year, the DG would decide, keeping in view a student's leanings and the Department's need, which field a student should enter into for specialization. Job assurance by the end of the training was also proposed by Woolley. However, all this was to depend on a student's good progress and any laxity on their part could result in replacement. Volunteers were also not to be refused to participate in excavation and the rules devised for student-apprentices were also applicable to them (Woolley 1939: 18–20).

Chapter five (pp. 21–39) is very important in the sense that it critically reviews archaeological work

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so far done in India. It takes notice of three fields of activity i.e. conservation, excavation and museums. Appended to the chapter is a fourth part, named as General, which touches upon some very crucial points.

Conservation was an issue of critical complexity for Woolley. He lauded what had been done with respect to standing historical monuments. However, conservation and restoration in relation to archaeological remains was termed as against the ethics of archaeological activity. Failure to appreciate that both needed treatment of different nature was termed as 'a disastrous error'. Woolley pointed out, 'The two problems are radically different and the same rules cannot hold good for both; the indiscriminating and unintelligent adherence to precedent has here resulted in a gross waste of public money and the defeat of scientific aims' (Woolley 1939: 22). He observed that prior to undertaking any conservation work the following crucial questions have to be raised (Woolley 1939: 22):

Is the preservation of the ruin (a) materially possible, (b) desirable? Is it to be preserved in the interest, (a) of the scientist or (b) of the general public? How far are these two interests compatible, or which should be given preference over the other? Is the benefit accruing to (a) the scientist or (b) the general public likely to be proportionate to the cost of conservation and subsequent maintenance?

He blamed that these points did not occur to the mind of the ASI officials while doing conservation. Woolley still conceded that conservation to the extent of saving endangered evidence with 'a clear distinction between any new work and the old' was crucial. Similarly, keeping in view ordinary people's interest, a certain degree of reconstruction could make sense. It should not be excessive lest visitors feel cheated. An easily accessible site may be selected for conservation so as to keep balance between the amount of expenditure and degree of visitation. Woolley examined much work done so far and did not find it at par with the above-mentioned principles. He scorned that the restoration and conservation had affected the originality of archaeological sites so much so that even an expert eye also could not differentiate what was new and what was original (Woolley 1939: 21ff). He concludes his analysis as follows:

. . . the state of affairs does call for explanation. There is no doubt that the efforts of the Department have been well-meaning throughout, and no disputing the fact that they have been misdirected; work has been conscientiously done, but it is bad work. The experience of the officers is very limited and their training has been negligible; they are aware of this, and do not therefore trust their own judgement, having no sure criteria whereon judgement could be based; and they have in consequence preferred to take the easiest way, that of following a rule once laid down without enquiring whether it applies or not (Woolley 1939: 26).

Sir Leonard also subject to severe attack the Survey's excavation work (pp. 26–28). He was of the opinion that valuable work could not be done by those 'who are not gazette officers and have necessarily any background of scholarship or any experience in fieldwork' (Woolley 1939: 26). During his visits to different sites, where excavation had been going on, he found all the work directed by those not qualified for the job. He says that even officers of the Survey showed inexperience. They lacked trained observation and the capability of meting out proper treatment to the evidence. Woolley concludes that 'on almost every site which I visited there was evidence of the work having been done in an amateur fashion by men anxious indeed to do well but not sufficiently trained and experienced to know what good work is' (Woolley 1939: 28).

The museum policy of the ASI was also much censured by Woolley (pp. 28–34). He said that in dealing with museums, he was 'concerned not so much with any detailed criticism of the individual institutions as with the policy of the Department which has in my opinion been radically wrong and detrimental to the real interest of archaeology' (1939: 3). The principal point which attracted harsh disapproval was the phenomenon of *site museums*. Conceptualizing his critique around the three

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major functions of a museum – preserving material, science and research and public education – site museums appeared to him as inaccessible and short of the required support. Terming it a failure, Sir Leonard argued for, except Taxila and Sarnath Museums, closure of museums at Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Nalanda and Nagarjunakonda. It would not only save money but would attend to the need of the above-mentioned trio-function which a museum should serve. He also advised that a central, in other words national, museum should be built at Delhi, a place much suitable for the purpose. This institution should attend to all the needs with respect to the principal functions of museum.

In the last part of the chapter, four important issues have been discussed (Woolley 1939: 34–39). They are regarding the call for popular publications, the Survey's collaboration with other museums in the country, having contacts with universities and cooperating with anthropologists. All this relate to ASI's obligations with the theoretical assumption of archaeology's vitality in Indian socio-cultural life.

Leonard Woolley was much critical about publication policy of ASI. The *Annual Reports* and *Memoirs* were termed as 'highly technical', expensive and, even, not coming out on time. He baulked at assigning much space unnecessarily to reporting conservation work with minute details. Woolley viewed it apt to report significant museum acquisitions and to present summaries on epigraphic works. Only summary of excavation was allowed to be published (however, in case no detailed report was intended to be produced later, a comprehensive scientific report was to be accommodated in the *Annual Reports*). Sir Leonard also alleged that 'there is actually a ban upon its [ASI] officers publishing privately accounts of their works.' He states that such works should be, with DG's imprimatur, published as 'the results of the Department's labours ought to be given to the general public whether through official or through private channels' (Woolley 1939: 35). The issue of cooperation between ASI and museums all over India has also been worked on with a special focus. Woolley observes that such a scheme should predispose people to museums. That museums, other than that of the Survey, should be made 'functionally efficient' necessitates that they be provided antiquities. Closing up of some site museums along with new excavations could meet this demand. Museums, on the other hand, should ensure proper and scientific housing of objects, their management by scientist and use for public education. The cooperation was required owing to the fact that non-ASI's museums could not do it on their own due to scientific and financial reasons. Hence, the idea of 'permanent loan' or in other circumstances issuance of license to museums have been suggested. Similarly, a close relationship with universities was also seen as of vital significance. Sir Leonard suggested that there should be held regular lectures in universities by well qualified officers of the Survey for dissemination of archaeological work. There may also be some sort of official attachments or at times part-time fellowships from universities for the said purpose. It was also suggested that there should be collaboration with anthropologists as knowledge about present Indian society could help in explaining and interpreting archaeological material. The conservative nature of Indian society had maximized benefits of anthropology to archaeology.

The last chapter of the report is chapter six which revisits finances of the Department and its personnel (Woolley 1939: 40–47). There is no doubt that the worldwide financial crisis during the 1930s had affected all realms of life. The ASI had not escaped its effects. However, Sir Leonard also holds other factors responsible for the poor working of the Survey. Due to uncalculated conservation and excavation work since the early years of the century the whole set up had greatly suffered. Conservation would often be prioritized in annual budgetary estimates and it would heavily cost excavation or staff or both. This situation called for stabilization of the budget,

meaning the fixation of cost for various activities. So far, there was no separate fund for excavation and whatever, in times of financial drifts, would remain from conservation would imprecisely be spent on digging here and there out of the fear of lapse. Therefore, Woolley felt a need of having a prudent planning much in advance for excavation work. He dispenses with the problem of lapse by saying that the unconsumed amount should be transferred for the next year excavation. The policy of the 'garden upkeep' was also despised. To control the finances, Woolley reiterated that the closure of some site museums, reforming conservation work and revisiting the publication scheme would be helpful. Clerical assistance for smooth accounting was also stressed upon in order to save ASI's officers from the job for which they were rather unfit. A new post of Deputy Director General was also suggested whose job would be either to supervise conservation or excavation, the other being directed by the DG. A lot of new suggestions about circles' officers' duties were presented. Furthermore, travelling scholarships for training purpose were recommended. A new budget for the suggested new programme was presented and it was compared to the budget of 1936–1937 and Woolley was happy that a little increase would ensure great benefits.<sup>3</sup>

### **Final Words**

Woolley criticized nearly all archaeological methods and pursuits in the subcontinent which were followed since the dawn of the twentieth century. He censured the excavation methods and policy. The critique was two-pronged viz. that the exclusion of non-Government bodies, both local and foreign, goes in disfavour to the cause of science and research and that undeliberate digging just wastes energies of ASI. So he suggested permission to institutions other than the Survey to make excavations and at the same time argued for strategic planning concerning excavations. Furthermore, he scorned the conservation policy of the Survey and pointed out serious shortcoming in the conservation and restoration works so far done. Another important critique of Woolley was with respect to museum policy. He maintained that except Taxila and Sarnath other site museums are of no practical use. Rather they were termed as detrimental to the cause of research and education and resources of the Survey department. He suggested that large and central museums shall keep continue. The idea of a national museum was also presented. Two pure innovations of Woolley were the idea of training indigenous scholars in the modern methods and practice of archaeology and involvement of universities and popular publications.

The report submitted by Woolley was shelved for the time being, perhaps due to precarious political situation in India. Scholars such as Sir Aurel Stein and D.H. Gordon, among others, did not feel happy with it (Ray 2008: 19–20). Latter scholars, i.e. Sourindranath Roy and Dilip Chakrabarti, also found something wrong in it. However, M.E.L. Mallowan (1960) appreciates the strengths of his report. 'Here he made many valuable recommendations on the most promising sites or areas for exploration; on the best methods and agencies for the development of exploration not only by the Government but by universities and learned societies; on the best method of training or selecting officers for exploration work. He completed this task in a remarkably short time with considerable perceptiveness. Many of his recommendations were carried out and the subsequent fruitful developments in India and also in Pakistan owed much to his advice.'

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<sup>3</sup> 'But given reforms on the lines I have suggested, and this small extra expenditure which they involve, India will in a short space [span] of time be in possession of a first-class archaeological service which will amply repay its cost. The material for such a service is ready to hand and it only requires to be trained and organised to be of the utmost value both to international science and to the cause of popular education in this country' (Woolley 1939: 46).



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