

## Hasmukh Dhirajlal Sankalia, 1908–1989

*by K. Paddayya, Poona*

With the passing away of H. D. Sankalia (fig. 1), Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at Deccan College, Poona, on January 28, 1989 Indian archaeology has lost, using the phrase employed some 20 years ago by the legendary archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler, its student *par excellence* and its most outstanding spokesman for half a century, both in and outside the country. Indeed, with his death an entire era has come to an end – an era of total dedication to the cause of the discipline; of careful

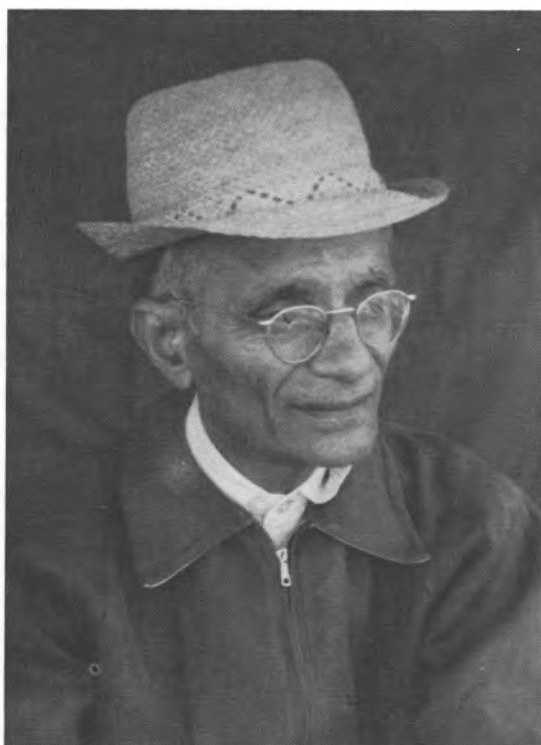


Fig. 1. H. D. Sankalia, 1908–1989.

planning and accomplishment of research projects; of prompt publication of results of fieldwork; of the initiation of several new branches of archaeology; and of ceaseless efforts to spread the knowledge of the past to the society at large.

Sankalia was born in Bombay on the 10th December 1908 in a middle-class Gujarati Bania family. The love for stories from the two great Indian Epics and Puranas fostered in him by his parents and a chance

reading in 1924 of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's book on *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* fired his curiosity to know more about the Aryans and, as the subsequent decades unfolded, the whole vista of Indian culture and history down to the present. It was but natural that he chose Sanskrit and History for his Intermediate and B. A. examinations. As advised by his teacher, the well-known Indologist Father Heras, Sankalia wrote a thesis on the ancient Buddhist University at Nalanda in Bihar as part of his M. A. examination of Bombay University and got through it with a First Class in 1932. During the preparation of this thesis he not only got an opportunity to familiarize himself with ancient Indian art, architecture and iconography but was also able to visit Nalanda and other ancient sites in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Although he himself had never visualized the possibility of going out of the country for higher studies, at the behest of Father Heras again Sankalia went to England in 1934 to undertake doctoral research under the guidance of K. de B. Codrington. In the University of London he attended lectures in Indian studies conducted by F. J. Richards and also benefited from courses on Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. The thesis itself, which he successfully completed in 1936, concerned a dynastic study of ancient monuments of Gujarat and entailed the use of data both from inscriptions and other such written sources and from two seasons of field survey of the monuments themselves.

The second big gain that accrued from his sojourn to England was the training he received in field archaeology under Mortimer Wheeler by participating in his excavations at the famous British site of Maiden Castle. The importance of the principles of stratigraphy and three-dimensional recording, the need for minute-to-minute supervision of trench, respect for manual labour, the need for involving the public in excavation and other field projects and sharing with it the knowledge acquired about the past all proved to be extremely useful in his later work in Indian archaeology and, in fact, served as a passport to his spectacular success.

With a Ph.D. in hand Sankalia returned to India in 1937 only to find there was no job waiting for him. Undaunted, he spent the next two years offering private tuitions, learning epigraphy and palaeography, and studying coins, miniature paintings and images in the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay. His marriage to Sarladevi took place in 1938. The honeymoon to Pahlgam in Kashmir that followed shortly was not merely a prelude to happy family life spanning five decades and more but proved to be a turning point in Sankalia's life. As his wife had later put it, he was very soon to marry the 'morse of archaeology' once and for all. The point is that the application which he had sent from Pahlgam in Kashmir for a post on the faculty at Deccan College in Poona, in response to a newspaper advertisement which he had accidentally come across at Lahore railway station, fetched him a call for personal interview and then the job itself. The training he had received in field archaeology in England was a decisive consideration in his selection.

Sankalia joined Deccan College in 1939 as Professor of Proto-Indian and Ancient Indian History and, ignoring more lucrative offers from elsewhere at different stages, remained in it till his retirement in 1973. Additionally, he also served as Joint Director of the Institute for many years and as its Director from 1956 to 1959 and from 1970 to 1973. It may be recalled that after a brief interval of five years Deccan College, which had hitherto been undertaking undergraduate teaching only, was revived in 1939 by Bombay Government as a postgraduate and research institute for imparting postgraduate education and undertaking research in linguistics, archaeology and anthropology. Thanks to the dedicated services and path-breaking research schemes planned and accomplished by workers like S. M. Katre (Linguistics and Sanskrit), Sankalia himself, and the late Iravati Karve (Anthropology and Sociology) and their associates, the Institute was catapulted into fame within a short time and carved for itself a prominent place among the foremost institutions of higher learning and research in and outside the country.

Sankalia's own research in archaeology commenced in 1939 itself with the discovery of a megalithic burial site near Bhosari (a suburb of Poona). The intervening period of 45 years or so witnessed intense

research activity at the Institute. Sankalia and his colleagues/students conducted investigations practically in every branch of archaeology and in every part of the country (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir, Assam, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala). This wide geographical coverage, together with Sankalia's ready acceptance of students and faculty members alike from all parts of the country and encouragement to them irrespective of regional, linguistic and religious considerations, won for the Department the coveted status of a national centre for archaeological research.

In collaboration with his colleagues Sankalia carried out excavations at about 20 places, among which Langhnaj, Dwaraka, Somnath, Kolhapur, Nasik, Nevasa, Inamgaon, Ahar, Maheshwar-Navdatoli, Tripuri, Tekkalakota and Sanganakallu deserve special mention. True to his ceaseless quest for the 'unknown and unseen', he adopted a holistic attitude towards the discipline and stressed the need for development of and made original contributions to various branches: prehistory, protohistory, numismatics, palaeography and epigraphy, art and architecture, iconography, ethno-archaeology, and environmental archaeology.

Among his contributions to historical archaeology special mention should be made of the initiation of regional studies in historical geography and cultural ethnography based upon the investigation of ancient place- and personal names found in inscriptions, the identification of material culture remains of the Satavahana and later periods through excavations at sites like Kolhapur and Nevasa, and the use of archaeological data for ascertaining the historicity of events depicted in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

His work on the Ramayana is particularly noteworthy. He used the evidence from excavations, art and architecture, sculpture and even botanical data as the Occam's Razor for scraping away later accretions and interpolations and thus get to the core of the epic story. Till his death he tenaciously held (and this in the face of stiff opposition and ridicule from many quarters) that Ravana was probably a chief of the Gond tribe and not a ten-headed demon, that his Lanka or island kingdom was located in the area around Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh and not in Sri Lanka, that Rama never crossed the Narmada river and that his deification began from the 4th century A. D. onwards.

Soon after he joined Deccan College Sankalia realized that the archaeologist's job of reconstructing past human lifeways must be aided by various biological and earth sciences, and began to take immediate steps in this direction. Thanks to his vision the Department of Archaeology at Deccan College is one among those few archaeological institutions in the world which have a full complement of scientific and technical laboratories (geology and geomorphology, palaeobotany, archaeozoology, palaeontology, physical anthropology, archaeochemistry, photography and drawing sections, and now even computer archaeology).

Realizing also early in his career that India is one country in the world where the past literally lives into the present, Sankalia made provision for using the extant tribal and peasant ways of life as an interpretative means for clothing the dumb archaeological remains in flesh and blood. He thereby pioneered a branch of archaeology in India called ethnoarchaeology.

Sankalia played a pivotal role in the development of pre- and protohistoric studies in the country, and himself attached the greatest importance to his contribution to these two branches. His excavations at Langhnaj and other sites in Gujarat (from 1941 to 1963) were the first of their kind in the country aimed to reconstruct the Mesolithic phase (its stratigraphical position, material culture and food economy, and the racial features of its authors). His classic river valley studies at Nevasa on the river Pravara in Maharashtra (1955) established the relative chronological contexts of Stone Age cultures (Lower Palaeolithic to Mesolithic) on the basis of alluvial stratigraphy and, additionally, brought to light the Middle Palaeolithic culture for the first time in India. Subsequently, his colleagues and students recognized a similar succession of Stone Age cultures in many parts of central, western and south India.

His detailed surveys and excavations at the Neolithic site of Sanganakallu in South India (1965) revealed the existence of three Stone Age cultures below the Neolithic deposits, viz., a Middel Palaeolithic industry of basalt, a flake-cum-blade industry of quartz with Upper Palaeolithic affiliation, and a Mesolithic industry of siliceous rocks. In 1968 Sankalia established the presence of Early Man in Kashmir by recovering artifactual data from boulder conglomerate of Second Glacial age at a place called Pahlgam on the river Liddar, where he had gone on honeymoon thirty years earlier. In 1983 he startled residents of Poona by announcing the discovery of an Acheulian site on the premises of his own bungalow on Deccan College campus.

In protohistory Sankalia's lasting contribution lies in the identification of Ahar, Malwa and Jorwe cultures of the Chalcolithic phase. These cultures date to the time period between the second millennium B. C. and early part of the first millennium B. C., and as such serve to fill up the so-called Dark Age between the end of the Indus Civilization and the early historical period.

Sankalia was always receptive to novel ideas and research orientations. It is therefore not surprising that he took upon himself the task of critically examining the relevance of the New Archaeology almost immediately after its inception in England and North America in the late 60's and early 70's. His book *New Archaeology: Its Scope and Application to India* (1977) is the first and only one of its kind published in the country so far. He achieved a great measure of success in the application of processual perspective of the New Archaeology in his prolonged excavations at the Chalcolithic site of Inamgaon and also exhorted his colleagues to test it in their respective research projects.

Sankalia always upheld the principle that 'research unaccompanied by prompt publication is sheer waste' and adhered to it religiously. His publications are prodigious in number. These include over a dozen site reports (individually or else jointly with his colleagues), another dozen books devoted to regional studies or specific topics, four major works of synthesis in Indian archaeology, and over 200 research papers published both in national and in international journals such as *Man*, *Antiquity*, *World Archaeology*, *Current Anthropology* and *American Anthropologist*.

Sankalia considered teaching a sacred duty and took keen personal interest in the work and welfare of his students. About 50 Ph. D. dissertations were completed under his supervision. He trained three generations of students and many of them rose to positions of eminence both in the universities and in the central and state departments of archaeology. Far from resenting Sankalia's task-master attitude, his students adored him as a guru in the best traditions of the land, always eager to learn with them. Many of them still recall with gratitude his strong admonitions whenever he noticed wasteful use of time, money and materials on their part and how these have shaped their *Weltanschauung*. His colleagues and students recall too how eager he always was to share new knowledge with them. I still vividly remember several instances of Sankalia literally breaking out of his chamber and into that of a colleague/student to announce the receipt in the day's mail of an important new book or research article sent by others or else a letter/book-review criticizing his own views on a particular topic.

Sankalia's students and colleagues also acknowledge with gratitude that, unlike most big men in the academic world, he never pampered any one of them but only respected all those who put up good work and fired those who failed to apply themselves to their jobs. Apart from infusing the spirit of humility, this attitude of Sankalia forced them to learn to stand on their own feet. This is the simple explanation for the leading position which the Department of Archaeology at Deccan College continues to occupy in Indian archaeology a full decade and half after Sankalia's retirement, whereas the general trend in the country is that the institution suffers an eclipse after the exit of its founder.

In his endeavours in uncovering the country's past Sankalia travelled widely within the country and felt equally at home in different geographical and cultural settings, be it the snow-clad Kashmir valley, the arid zone of Rajasthan, the ethnographically rich zone constituted by Chota Nagpur plateau, the enchanting Brahmaputra valley in eastern India, the semi-arid granite belt in southern India, or the

Malabar and Coromandel coasts. It is little surprise then that his death is seen everywhere as the loss of a father-figure in Indian archaeology.

While continuing to be a research worker of the first rank, Sankalia ridiculed the idea of 'knowledge of the past for its own sake' and insisted that historians and archaeologists must play their role in the life of the nation. With a view to sharing knowledge about the past with the society, he organized exhibitions at excavation sites, established a museum at Deccan College and published introductory books about archaeology as well as numerous articles on individual topics in Marathi, Hindi and Gujarati magazines and newspapers. Even in the face of insulting and threatening letters he courageously put forward his point of view emanating from study of the country's past, be it his opposition to prohibition, ban on cow-slaughter and imposition of Hindi or about the artificial nature of border disputes between states.

In recognition of his outstanding services to Indian archaeology Sankalia was bestowed with numerous prizes, fellowships and public honours. The notable among these were the presentation of Chakrabarty Silver Medal by the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1972) and Robert Bruce Foote Plaque by Calcutta University for his work in prehistory; and the award of a Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fellowship (1968–70) for carrying out an integrated study of prehistoric and protohistoric cultures and the title of Padma Bhushan in 1974 by the Government of India for his overall contribution to Indian archaeology.

Sankalia was an honorary fellow or member of many research bodies and institutions including the British Academy and the Explorer's Club of America. He presided over many regional and national seminars and conferences, and delivered extension or memorial lectures at different places all over the country. He visited the U.S. and many countries in Europe, both for participating in conferences and as a member of the cultural delegations sent by the Government of India (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Prof. H. D. Sankalia (second from right) with Mrs. and Mr. Genscher, Minister of Interior, Federal Republic of Germany, at the opening of Wing for Indian Art in the Museum of Oriental Art, Berlin in 1971. The fourth person from right is Prof. S. B. Deo, one of the oldest students of Prof. Sankalia and successor to his Chair at Deccan College.

All those who were associated with Sankalia will recognize in him not merely an outstanding scholar and teacher but a human being possessing a rare ensemble of personal qualities: a man of humility but not lacking in courage when it is called for; a rare degree of honesty as concerns utilization of public resources; a fighter for justice, however high the authorities may be; a person with unshakable faith in the role of the Divine Force but without being given to populist religious beliefs; a person with a rather inflammable temperament but magnanimous enough to apologize for a wrong action or utterance; and a teacher and colleague who would inspire confidence at all times but would be the last to exploit a weakness or helpless situation for personal ends.

Above all, Sankalia was a seer with a supreme sense of sacrifice, who willingly denied himself the normal pleasures of family life and flatly rejected offers of visiting professorship and the like from prestigious American and European universities in order to give his undivided attention to the development of the institution and discipline so dear to him. He was a man of frugal habits in food and living. He was an enlightened citizen too who kept himself fully informed of the goings-on within the country and outside till the end. He was one of those not-so-common academics who would feel distressed by disruptions caused to public life due to natural calamities and strikes and other such agitations.

True to his own ideal that 'Teachers are students for ever', Sankalia kept himself busy reading and writing till death. It was a rare day in his life that did not commence a little past midnight. He published his autobiography entitled *Born for Archaeology* in 1978. In tune with his rationalistic outlook he donated his body for use by students of anatomy, although it had to be cremated in deference to his wife's wishes.

#### Major Books and Excavation Reports of H. D. Sankalia

- 1934 The University of Nalanda. Madras. Revised edition, 1973.
- 1941 The Archaeology of Gujarat, including Kathiawar. Bombay.
- 1946 Historical Geography and Cultural Ethnography of Gujarat. Poona.
- 1946 Investigations into the Prehistoric Archaeology of Gujarat. Baroda.
- 1952 Excavation at Brahmapuri (Kolhapur) 1945-46. Poona. Jointly with others.
- 1952 The Godavari Palaeolithic Industry. Poona.
- 1955 Report on the Excavations at Nasik and Jorwe 1950-51. Poona. Jointly with others.
- 1958 Excavations at Maheshwar and Navdatoli. Poona. Jointly with others.
- 1960 From History to Prehistory at Nevasa. Poona. Jointly with others.
- 1962 Indian Archaeology Today. Bombay.
- 1963 Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan. Bombay. Revised Edition, 1974. Poona.
- 1965 Excavations at Langhnaj: 1944-63: Part I Archaeology. Poona.
- 1965 Introduction to Archaeology. Poona.
- 1965 Stone Age Tools: Their Techniques and Probable Functions. Poona. Reprinted, 1982.
- 1969 Excavations at Ahar (Tambavati). Poona. Jointly with others.
- 1969 Mesolithic and Pre-Mesolithic Industries from the Excavations at Sanganakallu, Bellary 1965. Poona.
- 1971 Chalcolithic Navdatoli. Poona and Baroda. Jointly with others.
- 1973 Ramayana: Myth or Reality. New Delhi.
- 1977 Prehistory in India. New Delhi.
- 1977 Mahabharata and Ramayana: Fancy or History. Bombay.
- 1977 Aspects of Indian History and Archaeology (Collected Essays). Delhi.
- 1978 Prehistoric Art in India. Bombay.
- 1982 The Ramayana in Historical Perspective. Delhi.
- 1987 Prehistoric and Historic Archaeology of Gujarat. Delhi.
- 1988 Excavations at Inamgaon: Volume I, Parts i and ii. Poona. Jointly with others.