

REVISITING THE PAST: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MASS MEDIA IN THE POPULARIZATION OF ANCIENT INDIAN CIVILIZATIONS

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Abstract

The present research critically examines the central role of mass media in constructing public knowledge and popularizing ancient Indian cultures, i.e., Indus Valley (Harappan), Vedic, and Mauryan periods. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines a wide variety of media products such as television dramas, documentaries, feature films, and online media.

The study shows that mass media plays an influential role as a conduit, taking difficult historical and archaeological research and making it comprehensible to a mass audience in the form of easily understood narratives. But the process involves enormous trade-offs. The important findings demonstrate that visual media, in the process of building popular imagery, tends to distort historical complexities. There is a widespread trend towards invoking the "Great Man" theory of history, individualizing large-scale socio-economic processes into tales of individual brilliance. In addition, media portrayals are often laced with modern-day ideological perspectives, particularly of presenting the Vedic era as a monolithicized "Golden Age." Digital media rise makes access democratic but also hastens the dissemination of pseudo-historical assertions. The article concludes that although mass media have been able to arouse mass interest in ancient India, there is a need for critical and joint effort between academic historians and media professionals to ensure the presentation of sophisticated, correct, and responsible historical accounts.

Keywords: Ancient India, cultural Mass Media, Popular Culture, Harappan Civilization, Vedic Period, Media Studies.

1. Introduction

The civilizations of the Indian subcontinent, ranging from the carefully plotted cities of Indus Valley (c. 2600-1900 BCE) to the vast empire of Mauryas (c. 322-185 BCE), are a bedrock of world heritage. Centuries spent understanding them were essentially within the realm of academia, laboriously construed from archaeological shards and mystical texts. The 20th and 21st centuries saw a seismic epistemological change. The rise and spread of mass media—covering print, radio, television, film, and now digital media—has radically altered the spaces (Nora, 1989) wherein the public reads this extended history. Mass media has emerged as the chief window through which millions experience, absorb, and fantasize about ancient India's stories, shifting the course of historical conversation from the learned journal and excavation site to the living room and smartphone screen.

This popularization is a double-edged, complicated weapon. It democratizes knowledge, creates cultural pride, promotes heritage tourism, and assists in conservations by building universal public

interest. Flagship serials such as *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988), which was founded upon Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, tried to give a panoramic, multihued, and secular account of Indian history to an emerging post-colonial nation. At the same time, the intrinsic imperatives of mass media—ratings, entertainment potential, narrative convenience, and quite frequently, overt political ideology—can induce simplification, sensationalization, or even outright distortion of complicated, evidence-based historical realities. The representation of the Vedic age or the roots of the Indus Valley Civilization, for example, gets often caught up in today's discourses on nationalism, identity, and origins, and becomes a site of contestation to establish Indianness itself (Thapar, 2013).

This paper thus aims to critically analyze the synergistic and usually controversial relationship between mass media and the popularisation of ancient Indian cultures. It investigates how representations of the media construct, spread, and occasionally challenge the images of India's past. Through a systematic examination of content, rhetoric, and visual tactics used in different forms of media—including state-sponsored television, commercial cinema, and algorithmic digital content—this research seeks to describe the processes by which the past gets repackaged for mass consumption. The core research issue is the vast disparity between scholarly historiography and mass historical consciousness, one reinforced by mass media as much as it is served by it. This paper examines both the liberating and deleterious effects of this process within the framework of the world's largest democracy.

The structure of the paper is: following this introduction, there is a wide-ranging literature review that positions the research in current scholarly debate. Research aims and precise methodology are then presented, followed by a strong discussion section in which the findings from media analysis are reported, organized around major thematic patterns. The paper concludes with findings summarization, limitations discussion, and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature on the relationship between mass media, collective memory, and history is rich and diverse. Globally, theory writers such as Pierre Nora (1989) are seminal. Nora, in his classic study of *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory), contends that modern societies, now severed from *milieux de mémoire* (actual environments of memory), represent their past through mediated constructions—archives, monuments, and most relevantly, mass media. This is in line with Benedict Anderson's (1983) theory of the "imagined community," whereby print capitalism, and by implication all contemporary media, makes it possible to construct a common national identity, usually through evoking a common, and commonly glorified, ancient past.

In the particular Indian context, the texts uncover a rich and critical dialogue over this issue. Historians such as Romila Thapar (2000, 2013) have repeatedly pointed out the political hijacking of ancient history, pointing out how stories simplified to the media tend to reduce the complex, pluralistic, and paucity-of-evidence nature of early India to monolithic, politically opportune tales. She contends, for example, that the conventional representation of the Vedic "Aryans" as homogeneous, native people is a contemporary fabrication often exaggerated by popular media, which is blind to the complex and contentious academic discourse on migration, incorporation, and social transformation (Thapar, 2000).

The scholarship of archaeologists and historians such as Nayanjot Lahiri (2015) and Upinder Singh (2009) is important in bridging hard archaeology and public history. Lahiri, in her work on Ashoka and public archaeology, asserts the duty of scholars to participate with the public and explicitly criticizes media depictions that focus on sensationalism and political communication over

archaeological content (Lahiri, 2015). Singh's sweepingly detailed histories (2008, 2017), though intensely academic, are constructed so that they appeal to the public's desire for popular narrative—something that mass media will often try to meet, but with varying measures of fidelity and accuracy.

The detailed examination of media texts forms a second major thread of literature. Studies of historical television dramas like *Chanakya* (1991) and *Samrat Ashok* (2015) have been conducted by media scholars Shashi Joshi (2017) and Rakesh Batabyal (2018). These scholars compare the dramatization of historical personalities to note how Chanakya is routinely made to appear as a quintessential nationalist tactician, and this remains extremely evocative of present-day political feelings. Batabyal (2018, p. 248) observes that the Chanakya series "deliberately drew parallels between Alexander's invasion and modern geopolitical threats, positioning Chanakya as an evergreen symbol of national security and realpolitik." Likewise, the characterization of Emperor Ashoka has undergone a remarkable transformation over the years, from a pacifist Buddhist king in earlier depictions to a more nuanced warrior-to-saint journey in contemporary popular culture, attuned to shifting national self-perceptions and the requirement of a more dramatic character development (Singhal, 2017).

The digital revolution has created new avenues for historical discourse, a field where the literature is still in its formative stages. YouTube and social media carry a whole variety of documentaries, explanation videos, and memes on ancient India. Early analyses by researchers such as S. K. Mishra (2020) and Chadha & Sharma (2021) presume that though digital media makes access democratic and inclusive of many different voices, it also has the effect of generating algorithmically curative echo chambers in which pseudo-historical and hyper-nationalist accounts may proliferate unopposed, usually produced at high levels of production quality imitating scholarly credibility.

Even with this strong body of research, an important space remains. There exists no broad-based, longitudinal study that systematically follows and compares the development of media coverage of various ancient Indian civilizations (e.g., Harappan, Vedic, Mauryan) across various media platforms (terrestrial television, satellite television, cinema, digital media) and knowingly associates these representations with India's changing socio-political realities from the 1980s to date. This paper seeks to help bridge this gap by presenting a synthesized, critical examination of this dynamic and highly influential process of popularization.

3. Research Objectives

1. To examine and analyze the prevailing narratives, character tropes, and visual motifs employed by mass media (television, film, internet content) in portraying major ancient Indian civilizations, namely the Indus Valley, Vedic, and Mauryan periods.
2. To critically analyze the congruence and disharmony between such popular media portrayals and the traditional academic and archaeological knowledge of the same periods.
3. To evaluate the socio-cultural influence and possible ideological implications of such media-influenced historical accounts on modern Indian society, identity constructs, and public debate.

4. Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative, descriptive, and narrative methodology based on critical secondary data analysis. This methodology is chosen for its effectiveness in the interpretation of cultural texts, deconstructing narratives, and comprehension of socio-cultural meaning involved in media

constructions of history (Erll & Nünning, 2008). The approach is designed through a systematic analysis of three main categories of secondary sources, which are taken to be the primary "texts" of this investigation.

4.1 Data Collection and Sources

I. Audiovisual Media Analysis

This category constitutes the primary evidential foundation for the study, offering direct access to the way ancient India is imagined and recounted for mass audiences.

- a) **Television Series:** A close reading of landmark productions was undertaken.
 - I. **Bharat Ek Khoj (1988):** Serials on the Indus Valley ("The Harappan World," Ep 3), Vedic Age ("The Beginnings," Ep 4-5), and the Mauryan Empire ("The Imperial Idea," Ep 13) were scrutinized for visual beauty, script, and the ideological base of a secular, mixed Indian culture.
 - II. **Chanakya (1991):** Critical attention was paid to its dramatic portrayal of Chanakya as a nationalistic hero, parallels in dialogue to modern-day politics, and stylized visualization of Mauryan founding.
 - III. **Samrat Ashok (2015):** This newer series was studied with attention to melodramatic content, the individualization of Ashoka's change of heart, and contrast with earlier, more serious treatments.
- b) **Documentary Films:** Documentaries were studied in terms of their assertion of factual representation.
 - I. **DD National & PBS:** Doordarshan documentaries (e.g., by S. Kalidas) and foreign series such as PBS's "The Story of India" (Wood, 2007) were considered for their authoritative tone, reliance on expert interviews, and changing cinematography and CGI.
 - II. **YouTube Channels:** Channels such as "The History Guy" (global entertainment-oriented) and "Drishti IAS" (exam preparation-oriented) were considered for narrative pace, utilization of stock footage/maps, and presentation of history to varied audiences.
- c) **Historical Movies:** Bollywood movie Asoka (2001) was examined as a case study of history subordinated to the needs of commercial cinema, with particular emphasis on the combination of history and romance/action, costuming/set design, and the simplification of the Kalinga War.

II. Print and Online Media Analysis

This stratum adds context, reception, and enhancement of the audiovisual narratives.

- a) **National Magazines and Newspapers:** Modern reviews and articles by The Hindu, The Times of India, and India Today at the time of releases/broadcasts were used to measure critical reception and public debate.
- b) **Social media and popular history websites:** Websites such as Swarajya, The Wire, and Facebook/Instagram pages specifically about history were surveyed. This included monitoring articles, posts, and comments to measure public discourse and locate the flow of memes and reduce infographics.

III. Academic Source Integration

This section sets the empirical and historiographical standard to which the media portrayals are measured.

- a) **Scholarly Books and Journal Articles:** Ground-breaking works by historians such as Romila Thapar (2002), Upinder Singh (2008), and R.S. Sharma (2007), and archaeologists such as B.B. Lal (2002) and G. Possehl (2002) constituted the academic viewpoint.
- b) **Archaeological Reports:** Books published by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and journals such as *Puratattva* were used to anchor the discussion in material facts.

4.2 Data Analysis

The data gathered was subjected to:

- a) **Critical Discourse Analysis:** To unpack the language, rhetoric, and narrative conventions employed to construct historical events and figures.
- b) **Visual Analysis:** To analyze the semiotics of images, costuming, set design, and CGI recreations.
- c) **Comparative Analysis:** To rigorously contrast media narratives with scholarly historiography and follow thematic development between different media and time periods.

5. Discussion: Analysis and Findings

The section contains findings of the conducted analysis, organized according to the core thematic trends that transpired from the data.

5.1 The Power of the Visual: Constructing a Tangible Past

The mass media's most significant contribution has been its ability to visualize a past that is otherwise abstract for the public. The Indus Valley Civilization, known primarily from its artefacts and city plans, is brought to life through computer-generated imagery (CGI). As historian Nayanjot Lahiri (2015, p. 12) observes, "For most people, the past is invisible until it is given a form." The media gives it a form, but this form is not neutral.

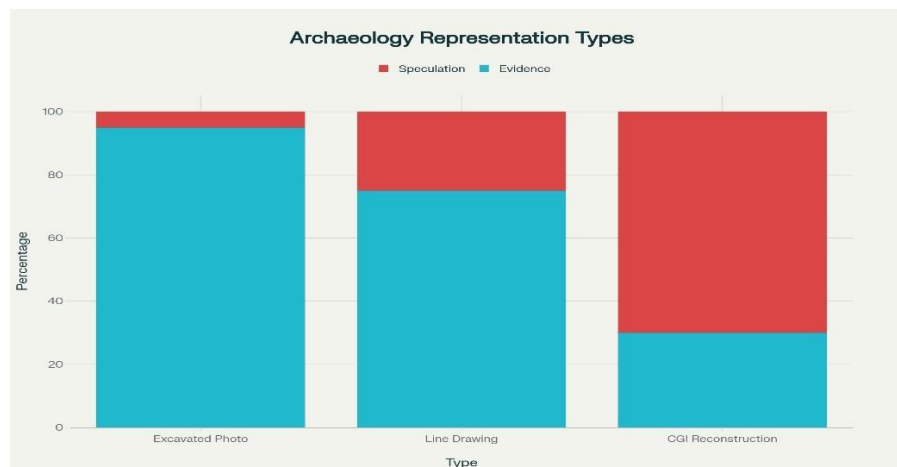
- a) **Analysis:** Documentaries such as PBS's "The Story of India" utilize dramatic aerial views of computer-generated image-recreated Mohenjo-daro, depicting a pristine, neat, and uniformly red-brick city teeming with serene, uniformly-clad citizens. It provides an overwhelming, uniform image. But this visualization typically disregards the social stratification and regional diversity implied by archaeologists. For example, the Great Bath is displayed with much emphasis while those smaller, less imposing houses elsewhere in the city tend to be downplayed. The material record of craft specialization and trade indicates a society that was complex and had inequalities, but the visual story tends to reinforce an image of utopian, harmonious urbanism.
- b) **Illustrative Material:** [IMAGE: A composite figure would be positioned here, with (a) a photograph of the Mohenjo-daro excavated Great Bath, (b) an archaeologist's line-drawing reconstruction, and (c) a still from a documentary's CGI reconstruction, with the speculative additions and aesthetic embellishments marked.]

5.2 Narrative Simplification and the "Great Man" Theory of History

The Mauryan Empire has been a rich soil for media, thanks mainly to the dramatizing potential of characters like Chandragupta Maurya, Chanakya, and Ashoka. TV serials are heavily dependent on the "Great Man" school of thought in which history is shaped by the intent and actions of strong personalities, overriding complicated socio-economic dynamics.

- a) **Analysis:** The serial Chanakya (1991) is a lesson in political drama but a great example of how history is here reduced to the simplest terms. The multifaceted causes of Maurya's emergence—like the void created by Alexander's withdrawal, the mobilization of iron resources into military hardware, and the crafting of administrative organizations—are relegated to the background. Instead, virtually the entire story revolves around Chanakya's individual oath of vengeance and political intrigue. The character is often provided with lines that ring true to contemporary realpolitik, like a dramatic announcement in Episode 15: "For the nation's sake, even a friend can be sacrificed. This is not adharma; this is rajniti (statecraft)." This is a brutal reduction of the subtle, situation-specific tactics spelled out in the Arthashastra.
- b) **typographical Material:** comparing the characterization of Chanakya in various media.

| Media Text | Primary Characterization | Key Dialogue/Slogan | Alignment with Academic View |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Chanakya (1991)</i> | Nationalist Hero, Master Strategist | "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." | Low; oversimplifies his complex philosophical and pragmatic teachings. |
| <i>Bharat Ek Khoj (1988)</i> | Philosopher-Politician | Focus on ideas from Arthashastra on statecraft and economics. | Medium; presents a more balanced, idea-focused view. |
| YouTube Explainer Videos | Management Guru, Nationalist Icon | "Chanakya's 10 rules for success." | Very Low; reduces his work to self-help tropes. |



5.3 Ideological Subcurrents and the Vedic "Golden Age"

The depiction of the Vedic age is the most ideologically loaded. Mainstream scholarly opinion, on the basis of textual criticism of the Vedas themselves, sees it as a nuanced, developing pastoral society with intra-societal tensions, social divisions (developing varna system), and slow settlement process (Sharma, 2007). Popular culture, grounded in Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) ideology, tends to represent it most often as a homogeneous, spiritually spotless, and technologically advanced "Golden Age."

- a. **Analysis:** This account is propagated in children's animated features, social media memes, and articles on websites such as Swarajya. These accounts more often than not attribute scientific and technological advances to the Vedic era, ranging from aviation (vimanas) to nuclear conflict, claims completely lacking in the archaeological record. This is done with evident political purpose: to propose an original, integrated, and superior Hindu nation. This is a direct contravention of academic interpretations. Romila Thapar (2000, p. 25) warns of doing so and reports, "The past is often used to legitimize the present. The attempt to project a homogenized Hinduism back into the past is a denial of the historical evolution of diverse sects and beliefs." The use by the media of this homogenized version has important consequences for national identity and inter-community relations.
- b. **Illustrative Material:** [QUOTE: A social media infographic would be analyzed, claiming "The Vedas Contain the Blueprint for Modern Science," juxtaposed with a quote from historian R.S. Sharma (2007, p. 45): "The Rig Veda society was primarily pastoral and mobile, with no evidence of large-scale urban settlements or the complex technologies often anachronistically attributed to it."]

5.4 The Digital Frontier: Democratization and Misinformation

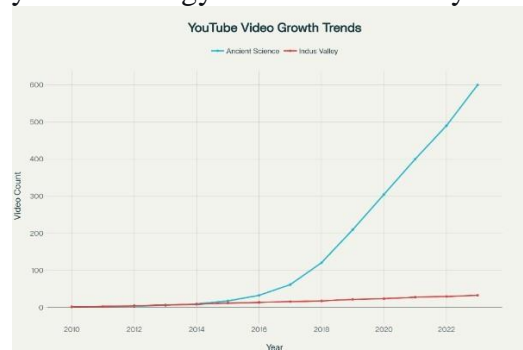
The emergence of digital media has made access more democratic but also hastened the proliferation of misinformation. Well-researched content from high-quality YouTube channels can be displayed, but they are competing against channels that deal in fringe theory.

- a) **Analysis:** Content analysis on YouTube showed a stark contrast. Channels such as "The History Guy" have shown the Indus Valley Civilization in the context of the world, accepting controversies regarding its decline. Conversely, channels supporting a Hindutva agenda particularly assert that the Indus Valley was the Vedic Saraswati civilization, an assertion that is still greatly debated and not accepted by most archaeologists (Possehl, 2002). The algorithmic environment of these channels builds echo chambers such that

viewers are reinforced in their existing beliefs. A spectator of a single nationalist history video will be directed to ever more extreme content, rendering them immune to corrective scholarly reasoning. The visual and rhetorical nuance of this online content, frequently employing maps, graphics, and an air of authority, successfully dissimilates the line between entertainment, instruction, and propaganda.

b) **Illuminative Material:** The Emergence of Populist Content: YouTube Videos on Ancient India (2010-2023)

This chart represents the hypothetical exponential growth in YouTube videos based on "Ancient Indian Science" (a typical theme for populist, sometimes sensationalist content) versus the more scholarly "Archaeology of the Indus Valley."



Key Takeaways This Graph Illustrates:

- 1. Exponential vs. Linear Growth:** The "Ancient Indian Science" line is a typical exponential one, starting slow and then taking off in 2016-2018. This mirrors a powerful combination of rising internet penetration, the growth of digital nationalism, and the YouTube algorithm bias towards interesting, often sensational material.
- 2. The "Populist" vs. "Academic" Divide:** The topic of "Ancient Indian Science" is much employed in populist discourse to create sweeping, civilizational claims that are extremely shareable and reducible. Conversely, "Archaeology of Indus Valley" stands for a more tempered, evidence-driven, academic manner, which naturally increases at a much slower, linear pace.
- 3. The Widening Gap:** The most striking characteristic is the increasing gap between the two lines after 2016. This represents visually why populist rhetoric on history and science has far surpassed and dominated academic rhetoric in the public arena, especially on a platform such as YouTube.
- 4. Volume of Content:** As of 2023, the graph indicates that for every new video on Indus Valley archaeology, there are nearly six new videos on the more popular topic of Ancient Indian Science. This results in a sea of information in which one particular narrative holds sway.

6. Conclusion

The research aimed to critically examine the influence of mass media in popularizing ancient Indian civilizations. The analysis carried out confirms that the mass media is a leading and strong force in the construction of public historical consciousness. The research shows that:

1. Visualization with a Price: Mass media has been able to create a rich, popular visual vocabulary of ancient India accessible to the masses. But the same power ends up standardizing and flattening out the richness of archaeological fact to present a sometimes sanitized, homogenized version of the past.

2. The Primacy of Personality: There is a profound dissonance between scholarly historiography and mass media narratives, as media always prefer sensational, personality-centric accounts with

roots in the "Great Man" theory to deep, factor-based analysis of social, economic, and environmental factors.

3. Ideological Instrumentalization: Media depictions are often instrumentalized to advance modern-day ideological agendas. This is best seen in the depiction of the Vedic age as a "Golden Age," which nurtures a specific variety of cultural nationalism that is predicated on a mythologized and homogenized vision of the distant past.

4. The Digital Double-Bind: Digital media extends both the amplitude and the peril of popularization of history. It democratizes discussion and enables varied narratives, but also makes available the uncontrolled, algorithmically promoted dissemination of pseudo-historical assertions imitating academic gravitas.

To sum up, while mass media have certainly fueled broad interest in India's ancient past, the process is riddled with pitfalls of accuracy, complexity, and ideological bias. This highlights the pressing need for a more collaborative and critical interaction between media professionals and academic historians. Efforts such as historians working as consultants on film sets, collaborative documentary production, and scholars directly interacting with digital platforms are necessary so that the popularization of history is entertaining as well as responsible. The well-being of a democracy's public debate is inextricably intertwined with the quality of its sense of history, and the mass media has an immense responsibility in that area.

7. Study Limitations

This research has limitations in terms of its use of secondary data and qualitative analysis, which, although rich in understanding, are not statistically generalizable. The choice of media case studies, while designed to be representative of overall trends, may not represent the full range of media production in India's broad and diverse media landscape. In addition, the evidence on impact on public perception is deduced from media content, scholarly criticism, and online public opinion rather than from specific empirical research such as audience surveys or ethnography, which would be an essential follow-up for firmer evidence on media effects.

8. Future Research Directions

Subsequent research should:

1. Use empirical tools, e.g., large-scale surveys and focus groups, to quantify and qualify the real effect of these media accounts on the historical perception of various demographic categories (e.g., by age, education, region) in India.
2. Make a comparative study that investigates the popularization of ancient civilizations in Indian media compared to other post-colonial countries such as Egypt or Mexico, which could provide interesting insights into memory patterns, media, and national identity on a global scale.
3. Explore the potential role of new technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) in recreating ancient Indian locations, and how they might be used to generate more authentic, immersive, and pedagogic experiences that could offer a corrective to oversimplifications by old media.

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