Steve Farmer describes himself as “the ultimate collaborationist,” but he has a way of making enemies. When he showed up at a 2002 Harvard University gathering to propose that the Indus script is no script at all, participants recall that his ideas were greeted with shouts of derision. And his positions on the role of the Indus civilization in Indian history have earned him a place in the demonology of Indian nationalists.

Yet despite what many call an abrasive personality, this former street kid from Chicago, who lacks a high school diploma, has shaken up the closed field of Indus studies (see main text). “It is healthy the way this is turning things upside down,” says archaeologist Steven Weber of Washington State University in Vancouver.

Farmer’s linguistic ability got him off the streets when he joined the Army in the 1960s. After learning Russian at the military’s language school in Monterey, California, he worked for the National Security Agency listening in on the conversations of Soviet pilots. Then, radicalized by the Vietnam War, he left the military for academia. After winning a high school equivalency diploma, he studied history at the University of Maryland, College Park, and earned a Ph.D. in comparative cultural history at Stanford University in California. He taught history of science and European history at George Mason University outside Washington, D.C., and then moved to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge as a tenure-track professor. But he says he rejected full-time academic life to avoid teaching courses he found boring and moved back to California, where he was on the adjunct faculty at Ohlone College in Fremont until 1997. To support his scholarly pursuits, Farmer has edited a journal on narcolepsy, worked on a PGA golf tournament training program, and helped develop a device to aid people with brain disorders.

In 1999, after putting together a model of cross-cultural frameworks for premodern history using ancient China as an example, he turned his attention to India. “I didn’t know anything about this stuff,” he says. “I was the naive outsider too dumb not to recognize the field’s taboos.” But he was struck by the brevity of Indus inscriptions and unconvincing by the many efforts to decipher the symbols. He didn’t hesitate to poke fun at Indian nationalists who attempted their own decipherments and who promulgated theories connecting the Indus to Hindu culture. “I still get death threats daily,” he says. “And I’m careful about opening packages from India.” He also was irritated by what he calls archaeologists’ proclivity to “hoard data.”

“He can be abrasive and aggressive, and many in the field find him presumptuous,” says linguist George Thompson of Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Massachusetts. At the 2002 Harvard meeting, a few of the academics present hooted Farmer off the stage. “People were literally screaming,” Farmer recalls. Nonetheless, his arguments ultimately impressed Harvard anthropologist Richard Meadow, who granted him access to unpublished Harappa data. “Steve stepped in and did an enormous amount of work” on the Harappa data, says Thompson.

His arrogance makes him hard for some scholars to get along with. “I’ve remade the field,” he recently boasted. Others resent his methods. “He uses verbose arguments,” says archaeologist J. Mark Kenoyer of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, co-director of the Harappa dig. “And he’s not basing it on science.” Adds linguist Gregory Possehl of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, “I don’t think his ideas are interesting or viable, and I’m surprised they have raised interest.” At this point, however, that interest is undeniable, so Indus specialists are making room, albeit reluctantly, for a new member of their small family. But the intellectually peripatetic Farmer insists he will not make himself at home: “This is just a chapter in my book.”

–A.L.