

Indian Archaeology After Independence

Amalananda Ghosh and His Legacy

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First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-041-00258-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-60741-0 (ebk)

Chapter 8

Establishing Pan-Asian Archaeology

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003607410-8



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

8 Establishing Pan-Asian Archaeology

In response to the appeal of UNESCO for the saving of the archaeological treasures of Nubia, the Archaeological Survey will shortly send out a team for the excavation of a prehistoric site in that region. It is in the fitness of things that after a century of fruitful existence the Survey should now project its activities beyond the frontiers of its country.¹

An emphasis on engaging with the archaeology of neighbouring countries and extending the frontiers of knowledge across the political boundaries of India as defined in 1947 was a hallmark of Ghosh's vision. Representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nepal were invited to attend the first meeting of the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology (CABA) under Ghosh which was held on 14 August 1953. It is also one that the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) actively worked towards in the early years of Indian independence, but one that gradually dissipated in the 1970s. Over the years ASI lost this momentum as it increasingly focussed on Harappan sites and the archaeology of the Epics, to the detriment of archaeological research in countries outside India, especially of the historical periods. There has been no active engagement in introducing courses on Asian Archaeology, despite recommendations of the 1965 – Wheeler Committee Report that lectures at ASI's School of Archaeology (now renamed Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Institute of Archaeology) should include the archaeology of adjacent regions such as Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, Egypt, and Southeast Asia. This lack of interest is evident in the teaching programmes of not only the Institute of Archaeology but also in other teaching institutes such as the Deccan College.

Asian History and Archaeology was by no means a newfound interest in the country, but one that developed out of the wider intellectual base of anti-imperialist movements that emerged in the early twentieth century across Asia as an unintended outcome of the population movements that were characteristic of the colonial period. In Chapter 7 a reference has already been made to the inscriptions from Nalanda that mention Suvarnavipa, identified

with the island of Sumatra in present Indonesia and edited by Hirananda Sastri. In addition, the agenda of the Mahabodhi Society was discussed as it worked towards the restoration of Buddhist monuments and the retention of Buddhist relics in India. The headquarters of the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta was the meeting place of Buddhists who came to India from across the world. Clearly there were many participants in the trans-national movements across Asia.²

These movements involved the elite such as Rabindranath Tagore and the Japanese art critic and intellectual Okakura Kakuzō, the founder of the Japan Art Institute, who is known for his statement ‘Asia is One’ in his book *The Ideals of the East*.³ He travelled to India in 1902 and met Tagore in Calcutta, as also the frail Swami Vivekananda.⁴ This visit helped consolidate his views on art history and more importantly on early Buddhist art in India. In his speeches and interactions during his voyages in Southeast Asia, China, and Japan, Tagore invoked historical connections that linked Buddhist ideals of peace and brotherhood with ancient Indian civilisation.⁵ Visvabharati also served as a model for Taman Siswa in Indonesia, set up by the educator Ke Hadjar Dewantoro (1889–1959). It also established a student exchange programme with Tagore’s schools in Bengal in 1928 and artists such as Ki Soebaroto, the painter Rusli Rusli (1916–2005) and Affandi from Indonesia studied in Santiniketan.⁶

Some writings have narrowly defined this interest in Asia:

In its most concise formulation, this Nehruvian-style Buddhism consisted of a two-pronged approach, one concerning the uses of Buddhism in the domestic sphere – that is, for domestic consumption by citizens of the new nation – and one concerning the uses of Buddhism as an instrument of foreign policy.⁷

To suggest that it was primarily a Nehruvian strategy is to ignore the groundswell of work done by scholars and researchers over time.

There are earlier references to travels by Indian scholars to Nepal, China, and countries of Southeast Asia; the new inputs came from institutional collaborations at the Government level. Academic commitment with Nepal, for instance, dates to travels by several pundits from Kashmir to the region, especially those working on Dharma and Tantra. In more modern times, Rajendralal Mitra (1823/4–91) and Haraprasad Sastri (1852–1931) from Calcutta wrote on manuscripts available in Nepal relating to Mahayana Buddhism and allied subjects. Bhagwanlal Indraji’s (1839–88) travels differed in that his interest went beyond collection of manuscripts, and he often used information gained from personal observation for elucidating sculptures and architecture in India.⁸ Three of Bhagwanlal’s notebooks are mostly travelogues though they are not chronological and in his Nepal notebook he states:

Due to the monsoon, I spent several months in Nepal. During these months I got to know some Nepali Buddhists, and through them collected information on their religion, religious conditions, rituals, customs, and traditions. I could collect eighteen manuscripts and 60 old inscriptions visiting Kathmandu, Patan, Bhatgaon, and surrounding areas.⁹

This interest in the archaeology of countries outside India was by no means limited to scholars and archaeologists working in their private capacity but extended to ASI as well. In 1906–08, Colonel F.B. Prideaux, Political Agent, began archaeological investigations near A'ali in Bahrain on behalf of the Archaeological Survey of India. He opened 67 small mounds and dug into 8 A'ali mounds and recovered fragments of ivory statuettes and two gold rings. In 1929 Ernest Mackay was sent to Bahrain by Flinders Petrie for the British School of Archaeology in Egypt. He opened around 34 small tumuli, also near A'ali and dated them to around 1500 BCE. Mackay subsequently worked at Mohenjo-daro in the Indus valley.

Especially significant are the travels undertaken by the Hungarian-born British archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862–1943). In 1887 Stein came to India and initially joined Panjab University. He is known for the expeditions that he took into Central Asia, some of which were funded by the colonial Government in India. As a result, the British Raj acquired rights over the antiquities collected by him. These were housed in the Central Asian Antiquities Museum, New Delhi, pending the construction of the National Museum. Formed in 1929, the Central Asian Antiquities Museum housed the collections from Stein's 1900–01, 1906–08, and 1913–16 expeditions. These included terracotta images and stuccos from stupas and shrines, carved wooden pieces, wooden documents in Kharosthi script of the first to third centuries CE, grave furniture, textiles frescoes and paintings on silk, wooden boards, and paper dated from the seventh to tenth centuries.¹⁰ It is ironic that after acquiring the antiquities from Stein's expeditions, the Government had no consistent policy either for their display or study. This is evident from the fact that in 1942, the Central Asian Antiquities Museum was closed to the public, though it was reopened after Independence. In 1957, the Central Asian Collection was shifted to the National Museum, New Delhi, where it is currently housed.

Stein had been anxious that after his death, the exploratory work that he had started in Central Asia and West Asia should continue, with perhaps attention being given to an assessment of Greek impact in the region. For this purpose, he bequeathed money to the British Academy, who was to retain the capital and invest the money to support research by a British or Hungarian citizen. The objective was 'the encouragement of research on the antiquities or historical geography or early history or arts of those parts of Asia, which came within the sphere of the ancient civilisations of India, China and Iran, including Central Asia.'¹¹ As Secretary of the British Academy, Wheeler and the Stein–Arnold Committee monitoring the fund, persuaded David Oates,

Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, to continue the survey and excavation of fortified sites in northern Iraq and the outcome of this was published in 1968.¹² The work of other recipients of the Stein-Arnold award was less focussed on continuing Stein's legacy and was more varied. This included Wheeler's excavations at Charsada, carried out in October-December 1958 in collaboration with the Pakistan Government, and in 1964, Raymond Allchin's dig at Shaikhhan-Dheri near Charsada.

In addition to central Asia and west Asia, the British Raj had also made archaeological forays into large parts of Southeast Asia. The British annexed Burma in 1852, and the archaeology of Burma continued to receive the attention of the British government. In 1905–6 the local archaeological office was transferred from Rangoon to Mandalay to facilitate revising the lists of antiquities and for supervising conservation work at Mandalay.¹³ Taw Sein Ko carried out archaeological exploration at Hmawza and Pagan in Burma and announced spectacular results regarding the early history of the country, such as the finds of Pyu inscriptions on urns and fifth- to sixth-century Pali epigraphs, which provided data on the early introduction of Buddhism.¹⁴ Architectural fellowships were constituted for training Burmese scholars, though they worked under the supervision of the Consulting Architect to the Government of Bombay.¹⁵ Following constitutional changes brought about by the Government of India Act of 1935, the Burma circle was detached from ASI and reorganised on an independent basis.¹⁶ However, collaboration between the two countries continued after Independence in the mid-twentieth century and the ASI exhibition on Buddhist art and antiquities hosted by the Burmese Government has already been discussed in Chapter 3.

While ASI's contribution towards the successful completion of the Buddhist exhibition was lauded by the Burmese authorities, recent writings suggest that this was a part of the large policy of Nehru's Government as it promoted his vision of non-alignment. In the next section we take up the issue of Nehruvian policies on the uses of Buddhism as soft power and his emphasis on non-alignment, as we focus on the Asian Relations Conference before moving on to the Asian Archaeology Conference hosted by ASI in 1961 and the archaeological expeditions to Egypt.

The Asian Relations Conference and the Archaeology of Southeast Asia

The Asian Relations Conference was held in New Delhi from 23 March to 2 April 1947, that is, almost four months before India attained independence from colonial rule. The Conference was hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs, which was formally established in November 1943 as India's first think tank, specifically focussed on studying international affairs and India's foreign policy in a new post-colonial world.¹⁷ The author, architect, and presiding genius of the Conference was Jawaharlal Nehru, Vice-President of the Executive Council of India. Delegates from the newly emerging

countries of South East Asia like Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam (Cochin China), and Laos attended what was the first major international conference held in India, with the largest delegation being from the Dutch colony of what was to become Indonesia.

The Muslim League was not represented at the Conference though its leaders were seen among the audience. An Australian delegate remarked that 'the disorder in various parts of the country made one wonder whether the Asian Relations Conference was a serious attempt on the part of Indian public men to lead opinion in Asia or a stage-play to divert attention from real issues.'¹⁸ One of the themes under discussion by a Round Table Group was Cultural Problems with a focus on scientific research.

Pandit Nehru said the Steering Committee had in mind an Asian institute to encourage research. He thought the initiative and general direction should remain in the hands of men of science because governments were not too willing to receive new ideas.¹⁹

It was this emphasis on involving specialists that perhaps led to the inclusion of archaeologists and in extending ASI's engagement with monuments and archaeological sites in Asia.

In 1948, the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Government of Indonesia wrote to Mr. Raghavan, Consul-General of India in Indonesia, inviting officers of the Department of Archaeology, Government of India, to visit Indonesia to inspect some of the monuments like the eighth - to ninth-centuries Buddhist temple of Barabudur/Borobudur in central Java to assess their state of preservation. Ghosh, the Director-General, Department of Archaeology, decided to send K. R. Srinivasan (1910–92), Superintendent of Archaeology, Central Circle, Patna and, the well-known Sanskrit scholar and art historian C. Sivaramamurti (1909–83), Superintendent, Archaeological Section, Indian Museum, Calcutta (now Kolkata). According to the terms of reference communicated by the Director-General of Archaeology, the former officer was to examine the state of conservation and structural features of Barabudur and other monuments to be visited, while Sivaramamurti was to make a general study of Barabudur from the point of view of art and iconography. The mission left Calcutta on 1st September 1948 and spent a month in Indonesia. Mr. Suhamir, Acting Chief of the Indonesian Archaeological Service, was attached to the mission, and he stayed with them throughout.

ASI's detailed report includes a sketch plan of the stupa, summary of the different surveys previously carried out, and a comparison with the surveys made in 1948.²⁰ It appears that the growth of vegetation had reached considerable proportions. Srinivasan lists the factors responsible for the weathering of the stones of Borobudur. The mission's report was submitted to the Ministry of Education Government of India by the Archaeology Department

vide letter no. 7548 dated 27 May 1950 but did not reach Indonesian authorities, since renewed armed conflict with European colonial powers had started in the region. In a letter dated 17 December 1956, J. K. van der Haagen, Head, Museums and Monuments Division, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), addressed to A. Ghosh, DGA, requested for a copy of the report. Ghosh forwarded the letter to the Ministry, but the reports could not be traced.²¹

In his farewell speech at the University of Indonesia in 1990, the Indonesian archaeologist and historian R. Soekmono (1922–97) described the visit of the Indian team as ‘rescue archaeology’ of the young Indonesian Republic’s cultural heritage. This step, during armed struggles, according to him was proof that ‘the Indonesian people’ could take care of their own heritage. Soekmono was also the Project Manager of the Borobudur Restoration Project in the 1970s. European researchers unfortunately view the statement differently and attribute it to India’s ambitions of establishing what the French and the British Orientalists referred to as ‘Greater India,’²² which according to them, fitted in with Nehru’s pan-Asianist ideals.²³ What is often forgotten in this is the key role that Nehru played in rescuing Sjahrir, the former Prime Minister of Indonesia, and other Indonesian resistance fighters who were fighting their Dutch colonisers when the Dutch attempted to quell Indonesian independence on 21 July 1947. Nehru sent Biju Patnaik to fly Sjahrir to Delhi so that he could attend the Asian Relations Conference and to foment international public opinion against the Dutch. For this act of bravery, Patnaik was given honorary citizenship in Indonesia.²⁴ The continued interest in the archaeology of Asia culminated in the theme of Asian Archaeology being taken up by ASI during its Centenary Celebrations in 1961, which also included an exhibition.

ASI’s Centenary Celebrations in 1961

The Centenary Celebrations in 1961 included an Exhibition highlighting the archaeological richness of the country, but more importantly a five-day conference on Asian Archaeology. This engagement with the archaeology of Asia was a prominent concern among archaeologists in the post-Independence period and unfortunately has yet to be replicated, though ASI continues to undertake conservation work in many countries of the region. Explaining the concept of the celebrations Ghosh wrote in the Preface to *Ancient India* no. 17:

A chief aim of the Centenary Celebrations will be an International Conference on Asian Archaeology. There is no causal connection between the two. Yet we thought that the Celebration might provide a suitable forum for bringing together the distinguished workers on Asian archaeology for discussing common problems of technology, for taking stock of our present-day knowledge and, if possible, for devising ways and means for periodical contacts.

The response to our call has been most encouraging; it has assured us of a truly international gathering and has brought in focus the need for such a gathering.²⁵

The then Prime Minister Nehru inaugurated the Centenary celebrations and the Asian Archaeology conference at Vigyan Bhavan on 14 December 1961, and said that archaeology gave a certain balance and perspective to 'our minds when looking into the past and made us a little more humble than we otherwise will be in a mechanical age.' He described the usefulness of archaeology in a utilitarian age as follows: 'I have yet to find out how one justified, mathematically or otherwise, the importance of beauty, goodness and aesthetics but we know that they are more important than many utilitarian objects.'

In his speech, Nehru referred to the salvage excavations by ASI at Nagarjunakonda where the Government was faced with a difficult choice between the claims of the present, such as irrigation over those of the past, that is allowing the buried city of Nagarjunakonda to remain as it was. The middle path adopted by the Government was to allow ASI to undertake excavations and remove the remains to an island in the middle of the dam lake. Prof. Humayun Kabir, the Union Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, also spoke on the occasion and highlighted ASI's achievement in terms of finding evidence for pit-dwellers near Srinagar, in the snow-clad regions of Kashmir; and excavating Harappan sites, which indicated the extensive nature of the culture. In his address, DG Ghosh emphasised that a focus on Asian Archaeology was important for a resolution of issues of terminology, as conditions in many regions of Asia were the same as in the subcontinent. He stressed the need to study archaeology not simply within the confines of the present political boundaries of the country but to look beyond.²⁶ Inaugurating the exhibition on the afternoon of December 14, 1961, Prof. Humayun Kabir, the Union Minister stated that it showed the 'world of variety of the archaeological wealth which exists in India (Figures 8.1).'²⁷

As envisioned by Ghosh, the exhibition was a joint effort of many institutions and presented to the public, insights into some important facets of the country's archaeological wealth. It was organised from 14 to 31 December 1961, and the objects on display were drawn both from ASI's own collections but also from those of other institutions, including Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai, National Museum, National Archives of India, and Indian Museum, Calcutta; 12 State Museums; four Departments of Archaeology; nine University Museums; and private individuals. DG expressed satisfaction that no organisation had turned down their request. Divided into ten sections, the exhibition covered a large timespan from the prehistoric period onwards. One part of the Exhibition was housed in the National Museum, while the other was showcased in a temporary exhibition building in the lawns of the ASI building on Janpath.



Figure 8.1 Prof Humayun Kabir and A. Ghosh at the Centenary Exhibition. (Courtesy Asim Ghosh).

A catalogue was brought out with each section being contributed by an officer of the Archaeology Department.²⁸ B. K. Thapar, for example, provided write-ups on the first three sections – The Stone Age; From Prehistory to History: Early Cultures of the North-west; and Megaliths. The second section mentioned the salvage excavations at Nagarjunakonda. B. B. Lal and S. Roy were the authors of the fourth section on methods and records. They highlighted the main function of the Survey which was the conservation of monuments and archaeological sites. This theme was addressed through photographs showing the condition of monuments before and after conservation and full-size copies of the cave paintings of Ajanta were made for the purpose. The book entitled *Ajanta Murals* edited by A. Ghosh was brought out soon thereafter.²⁹ In this section drawings of monuments and early paintings and photographs were exhibited as well as travelogues and rare publications some dating back to 1597 which are now in the collection of the Central Archaeological Library. The display included maps from the Archaeological Atlas under preparation by ASI.³⁰ Sections V to IX focussed on Architecture with contributions from K. R. Srinivasan and Z. A. Desai; Bronzes, Ivories, Coins and Seals (K. R. Vijayaraghavan); Inscriptions (M. Venkataramayya and Z. A. Desai); Terracottas (M. N. Deshpande); and Stone Sculptures

(K. R. Srinivasan). The final section was in the National Museum and comprised photographic enlargements of sculptures and monuments.

Some historians have described the exhibition as an act of ‘nationalism,’ since ‘Popularizing archaeology was an essential act of producing a new Indian subject citizen conversant in “national heritage” in the decades after independence. Archaeology and the associated exhibition practices had brought this ancient Indian nation into being.’³¹ These historians make no mention of the parallel conference on Asian Archaeology and the emphasis on the study of India’s past with reference to that of Asia. To reiterate – the inaugural address by Nehru, the vision of Ghosh as evident in the archaeological exhibition and the international conference need to be taken together as parts of the Centenary Celebrations and not fragmented.

The International Conference on Asian Archaeology (1961)

The International Conference on Asian Archaeology was hosted by ASI at the Vigyan Bhavan along with the Exhibition as mentioned above. It was attended by more than two hundred delegates from across the world. The DG, Amalananda Ghosh, was the General President of the conference while

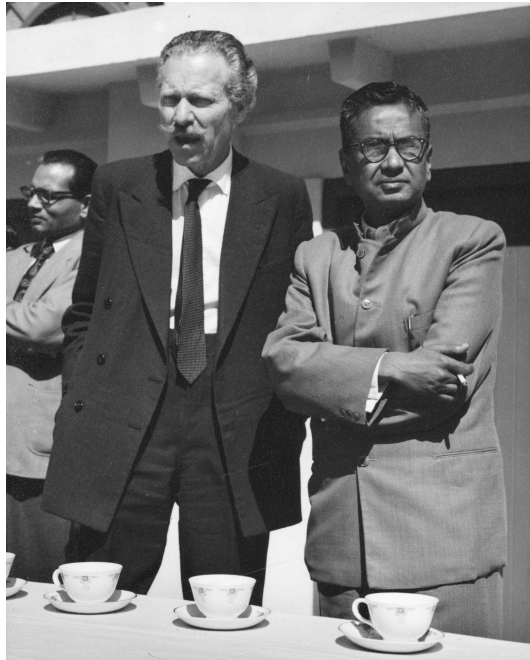


Figure 8.2 Mortimer Wheeler with A. Ghosh at the Asian Archaeology Conference. (Courtesy Asim Ghosh).



Figure 8.3 Mortimer Wheeler with A. Ghosh in the latter's office. (Courtesy Asim Ghosh).

B. B. Lal was General Secretary. The papers were divided into four themes: General Archaeology and Archaeological Methods presided over by Mortimer Wheeler (former DG of ASI) (Figures 8.2 and 8.3); Archaeology of the Stone and Bronze Ages with Robert J. Braidwood (University of Chicago) in the chair; Archaeology of the Later Ages under Tatsuro Yamamoto (University of Tokyo); and Art and Architecture presided over by S. Paranavitana (University of Colombo). The Secretaries of the sessions were drawn from ASI and were of the rank of Superintendents.

The delegates included archaeologists such as H. D. Sankalia, S. B. Deo, R. V. Joshi, and others from Deccan College; historians like Romila Thapar; the anthropologist Subhash C. Malik; Jean Filliozat (Director, EFEO); F. R. Allchin (University of Cambridge) (Figure 8.4); Jean-Marie Casal (CNRS); F. E. Zeuner (University of London), Takayasu Higuchi (Kyoto University), U. Aung Thaw (Archaeological Survey of Burma), Jeanine Auboyer (Musée Guimet), Heimo Rau (Goethe Institut), Odette Viennot (EFEO); Eletr Riad (Egypt's Cultural Attache in India), among others. Participation was thus inter-disciplinary and broad based.

One of the complex and knotty issues that plagued the study of Indian Prehistory was the adoption of European terminology to describe somewhat



Figure 8.4 A. Ghosh with Y. D. Sharma of ASI and F. R. Allchin. (Courtesy Asim Ghosh).

inadequately cultural phases in South Asia. The Asian Archaeology Conference addressed this by setting up a committee, consisting of the following archaeologists, to consider the problem of the terminology of Indian prehistory: Dr. F.R. Allchin, London; Professor R. J. Braidwood, Chicago; Dr. R. V. Joshi, Nagpur; Shri V. D. Krishnaswami, New Delhi; Shri B.B. Lai, New Delhi; Professor H. D. Sankalia, Poona; Professor B. Subbarao, Baroda; and Professor F. E. Zeuner, London.³² As H. D. Sankalia writes in the Postscript to the Preface of his book, the Asian Archaeology conference resolved 'that the Stone Age in India be divided provisionally into Early Stone Age (or Palaeolithic), Middle Stone Age, and Late Stone Age and the terms 'Series II,' 'Middle Palaeolithic,' 'Mesolithic' be not used.'³³ Clearly the conference was a serious attempt to generate a consensus on some of the tricky issues of terminology to be adopted in Indian prehistory.

Many scholars from institutions across the country, as well as from ASI, presented papers on a wide range of topics from prehistory to history, museums, paintings, sculptures, architecture, and so on.³⁴ The themes were by no means restricted to India, and both Indian and foreign participants addressed issues related to other parts of Asia, such as Rao (Lothal and West Asia), Ray (The Indo-Aryans and their early culture), Sankalia (New light on the relations

between India and Iran or Western Asia between 1500 and 1200 B.C.), Thapar (The West Asian background to the protohistoric pottery of India in the second and first millennia BC), Nizamuddin (Albiruni as an Archaeologist), Bibby (Bronze age cultures of the Persian Gulf in the light of recent excavations), Casal (Evolution of the Indus civilization pottery), Fairervis (The Indianisation of the Indo-Iranian borderlands – evidence of the origin of Indian civilization), Mallowan (The mechanism of long-distance trade), and Tolstova (Central Asiatic Scythians in the light of the latest archaeological discoveries).³⁵

Of relevance to this chapter is the presentation by the Egyptian Cultural Attache Eletr Riad on the Nubian Monuments, in view of ASI's campaign to Nubia, as will be discussed in the next section. Riad spoke of the construction of the High Dam on the river Nile near Aswan, which though essential for the development of the country would result in the submergence of the monuments of Nubia, such as the two Temples of Ramses II at Abu Simbel and the Sanctuary of Isis at Philae. On 8 March 1960, the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia was launched by UNESCO and Riad appealed for help from all Governments.³⁶ This was perhaps a follow-up reminder to the ASI team who had visited Egypt early in December 1960.

The success of the international conference can be judged from the fact that in the concluding session the delegates supported by Max E. L. Mallowan (1904–78), the celebrated British Professor of Western Asiatic Archaeology at the University of London decided that it should be continued and held quinquennially or recurring every five years. In his editorial in the *Puratattva*, the Journal of the Indian Archaeological Society, B. K. Thapar, the then DG of ASI referred to the two international conferences on Asian Archaeology that were held in keeping with this resolution: one at Colombo³⁷ and the other at Bahrain.³⁸ Taking the cue from the growing interest in South Asian archaeology, an Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe was founded in 1970, and this Association initiated a South Asian Archaeology conference to be held every two years.

On 1 March 1970, the third International Conference on Asian Archaeology opened in Bahrain. In honour of the occasion, Bahrain issued four commemorative stamps on that date. Many of the papers presented at the Bahrain conference related to the archaeology of the Gulf and its interactions with Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. At the conclusion of the meeting, a small group of British archaeologists

were invited to visit the Emiri Documentation Centre in Abu Dhabi, and it was during this visit that disappointment was expressed by some of the UK participants that there was no British involvement in the exciting archaeological activity in the Gulf states.

This initial frustration eventually led to the setting up of the Seminar and Society for Arabian Studies in the UK.³⁹

Thapar regretted the fact that the process was not continued in India:

With a view to solving the various problems of Asian archaeology as also to indicating lines on which future research should be carried, it seems necessary that we should revive the Resolution adopted in 1961 to set up a permanent secretariat for the purpose of summoning future sessions of Asian Conference. If scholars based in Europe can hold Conference of South Asian Archaeology biennially, we in South Asia should not lag holding regular conferences.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, this has not been translated into action on the ground and continues as a cherished dream.

ASI Excavations and UNESCO's Mission

Carrying out archaeological work in another non-aligned nation-state not only represented a favourable international intervention for India but also allowed the country to rearrange colonial logics of archaeological knowledge production to its advantage and to claim expertise in their use. The Archaeological Survey of India then attempted to perform this expertise elsewhere and thereby bolster the post-partition narrative of a 'greater India.'⁴¹

This statement is not supported by data presented in this chapter about ASI's involvement in many projects across Asia. As shown in an earlier publication British colonial officials had been involved in archaeological work outside India since the nineteenth century and this trend continued under Mortimer Wheeler.⁴² On 10 October 1945, Wheeler started on a month's archaeological tour of Iran accompanied by Mohammad Nazim, Superintendent, Frontier Circle, Lahore, even though Members of the Legislative Assembly in India were critical of Wheeler's mission to Iran in 1945 and then to Afghanistan at government expense since his mission was more as a tourist than that of an archaeologist.⁴³

After independence a cultural agreement was signed between the Governments of India and Afghanistan in 1969 both for conservation work as also for archaeological exploration and excavation.⁴⁴ In another example of collaboration, 70 graves near Hamad town, Bahrain were excavated by archaeologists from ASI.⁴⁵ A Department of Archaeology was established in Nepal in 1952 shortly after King Tribhuvan opened the country to Indian archaeologists. The Director-General of ASI, Mr. A. Ghosh, visited the country to advise on the reorganisation of the department. As a result, Dr. R. V. Joshi undertook prehistoric investigations in the Kathmandu valley and especially the basins of the two rivers Bagmati and Manohara that drain into the Kathmandu valley.⁴⁶ An iconographical survey in Nepal was carried

out jointly by the Department of Archaeology and Culture of His Majesty's Government, Nepal, and the Archaeological Survey of India under the direction of Shri Krishna Deva of the Survey in the months of May and June 1963.⁴⁷ As discussed in Chapter 7, a second ASI archaeological expedition at this time was sent to Nepal under Debala Mitra, though the visits of Indian archaeologists to that country started as early as the nineteenth century with the work undertaken in 1899 by Purna Chandra Mukherji.⁴⁸

Thus, foreign expeditions were undertaken by ASI in different countries of Asia, some of them at the request of newly independent nations such as the one to Borobudur in Indonesia. These were continued in the post-1947 period; some under bilateral arrangements, while others included participation in larger global projects under the aegis of newly established international bodies for cultural and educational cooperation, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization or UNESCO, which had been founded on 16 November 1945 with 44 governments represented – India being a founding member. An urgent need was felt in Europe to erase the deep scars of Nazi excesses, looting of art treasures and the destruction of cultural heritage. In 1949, the Indian National Commission for cooperation with UNESCO was founded.⁴⁹

Scholars have argued that 'the discipline of archaeology was originally part of UNESCO's early intellectual momentum' as evident from attempts at salvage and reconstruction. UNESCO launched its most ambitious mission for the Rescue of the Nubian Monuments and Sites from 1959 to 1980. Sir Mortimer Wheeler labelled the rescue of Abu Simbel an 'unparalleled and indeed almost frightening feat of engineering.'⁵⁰ Though not an Egyptologist, Sir Mortimer Wheeler was selected by the minister for education to represent the United Kingdom in the Nubian Monuments Campaign and was put on UNESCO's International Action Committee. Hundreds of archaeologists from more than 20 nations launched more than 30 survey and excavation projects across Nubia.⁵¹ They were almost entirely European and North American projects but also included Egyptian, Russian, Argentinean, and Ghanaian teams as well as smaller contingents of Indian and Pakistani archaeologists.⁵²

On 14 February 1960, the Director-General of UNESCO met the Indian Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs and sought his help with excavation work at Nubia which was to be submerged after the construction of the High Dam at Aswan. The Director-General of Archaeology was asked to work out a plan for India's participation in the project and the expenditure involved. The Government of India decided to send a small team in December 1960 comprising the Director-General of Archaeology (A. Ghosh) who would be the leader of the team and the Director of the School of Archaeology (B.B. Lal), to visit Egypt and choose a suitable site for excavation.

Ghosh left Delhi on 6 December, reaching Cairo the next day when he visited the Egyptian Museum and the chief Islamic monuments in Cairo and had general discussions with Asstt. Director-General of Antiquities. On 8

December, he was taken to the pyramids and other monuments at Giza and Sakkara by the first Curator of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Lal left Delhi the same day, joining A. Ghosh in Cairo on 9 December. After examining the material which had come from areas to be submerged and consulting the reports, a list of suitable sites for excavation was prepared. In the afternoon of 13 December Ghosh and Lal left Aswan. Their survey showed that the living conditions in Nubia were very hard, as there were no roads, and the only transportation was the occasional boat service which operated between Aswan and Wadi Halfa (Sudan). There were no houses near the sites and the area was rocky, making it difficult to pitch tents. Hence, a boat with a large number of cabins would need to be arranged for the excavations. On 17 December 1960, DGA Ghosh and Lal had a meeting with Dr. Mohamed Anouar Shoukry, Director-General of Antiquities. The list of possible sites for excavation was discussed with him, who informed them that prehistoric exploration of the Nubian region was underway by UNESCO and the final selection of sites should only be made after that. Dr. Shoukry also said that it would not be possible for the excavating team to take the antiquities to India to write the report. ASI team also met Dr. Louis A. Christophe, Regional Representative of UNESCO.⁵³

Finally, on 17 October 1961, Dr. Shoukry informed Ghosh that the site of Afyeh-Tumas region, 15 km north of Aneiba, the headquarters of Egyptian



Figure 8.5 Indian archaeological expedition to Nubia – 1962. (Courtesy ASI).

Nubia on the west bank, which had earlier been allotted to the Museum of Leiden, is again available as the Museum has renounced its claim to the site. A boat with 12 cabins was arranged for the work and the expedition reached Egypt about the middle of January 1962 and left for home at the beginning of May. The Director-General of Archaeology in India visited the excavations towards the end of March 1962, to give finishing touches to the field-work, and the Indian Ambassador in Egypt, H.E. Shri Azim Hussain, also paid a visit when the work was on (Figure 8.5).

Led by Shri B. B. Lal, Director of the School of Archaeology of the Survey, the expedition comprised of four other members: Shri K. M. Srivastava, Senior Exploration Assistant, Shri R. Chatterji, Photographer-Instructor, Shri S. P. Jain, Surveyor-Instructor, and Shri Amir Singh, Draftsman.⁵⁴ Mrs. Kusum Lal accompanied her husband to the excavations and volunteered to register the antiquities and sort out and mark the pottery.⁵⁵ (Figures 8.6 and 8.7).

The official account of the Nubia expedition mentions two contributions to the archaeology of Egypt: the first was the discovery of Middle Stone Age tools at Afyeh, which do not seem to have been known earlier; and, second, the excavation of the cemetery at Tumas, which yielded bowls of black-and-red ware and jar-stands of red ware, almost identical with those found in the megalithic tombs of south India.



Figure 8.6 Excavated Stone Tools, Nubia. (Courtesy ASI).



Figure 8.7 Unexcavated grave at Nubia in 1962. (Courtesy ASI).

The cemetery was located to the west of the village of Tumas and about half-a-kilometre from the site of Afyeh. Many of the graves in the cemetery at Tumas were found to have been plundered.⁵⁶ This similarity in pottery was subsequently quoted by Sankalia in his book, though, somewhat incorrectly, as pointed out by the American archaeologist George F. Dales (1927–92) from the University of Pennsylvania:

Sankalia's description of the similarity between South Indian "megalithic" burial circles, containing a distinctive black-and-red pottery, and recent finds from Egyptian Nubia is misleading. B. B. Lal, Director of the Indian Expedition to Nubia (*Illustrated London News*, April 20, 1963: 579–81), draws parallel with Nubian C-Group pottery of the first half of the second millennium BC, not with the earliest "black-topped" prehistoric wares of Badari and Der Tasa as Sankalia reports. There certainly are some similarities as described by Lal, but again part of the mystery should disappear when more is learned about the place of the so-called "megaliths" in the purely Indian context.⁵⁷

As recorded in the minutes of the CABA meeting minutes of 1953, A. Ghosh's name was recommended to the Indian Commission of UNESCO, and after his retirement from ASI, he was appointed UNESCO Consultant in 1968–69.

In the 1960s, UNESCO was still a growing organisation, and the different conventions were yet to be put in place. At this time Ghosh travelled to the countries of Qatar (February–March 1968), Bahrain (March–April 1968), Yemen Arab Republic, and Saudi Arabia (November 1968–January 1969) to advise them on organising archaeology departments and archaeological museums.

In many of these countries, foreign teams had been carrying out archaeological work. In Qatar, for instance, the Danish Expedition explored the region from 1956 to 1964 with the support of the Government of Qatar, the Qatar Petroleum Company, and the Danish Carlsberg Foundation.⁵⁸ These pioneering attempts had largely focussed on Stone Age archaeology, which by and large followed that of the Arabian Peninsula as a whole. In addition, the cairns and the tumuli through habitation sites had yet to be located. The most distinctive were the rock engravings discovered in 1957 at a dozen sites around the coast of Qatar. The largest group is at Al Jassasiya, some 60 km north of Doha, on low limestone hills. The Report by Ghosh outlines directions for future work, such as studying the Stone Age of Qatar in its wider context; excavating the habitation site of Jebel Jassasiya; exploration for possible habitation sites associated with the burials; and exploration of the Khor area to be followed by excavations of one or more of the mounds in the region. He mentions the city of al-Wakrar, south of Doha, which we now know was a pearling centre in antiquity. The last recommendation on the Khor area had special significance for the archaeology of the Harappans in India since Gulf (Bahrain) seals had been found at the sites of Mohenjodaro and Lothal in the subcontinent.⁵⁹

In addition to Qatar, the Danish Archaeological Expedition explored the island of Bahrain from 1953 to 1965 with the support of the Bahrain Government, which contributed one-third of the cost, the other contributors being Bahrain Petroleum Company and the Danish Carlsberg Foundation.⁶⁰ A prominent feature of the archaeological landscape of Bahrain are the burial mounds which have given the country the name of ‘the most extensive necropolis of the world.’ Many of these were dug into for grave goods, though dating and an analytical archaeology of these were missing. In the meanwhile, the mounds were being levelled by quarrying.

In his recommendations Ghosh strongly urged the setting up of an archaeological organisation at the Government level both in Qatar and in Bahrain; framing of antiquarian laws; and a museum not only to house the artefacts that the Danish expedition had collected and had since been kept in Aarhus, Denmark, but one that was a National Museum and reflected the country’s past. As Ghosh stated:

No country can depend on foreign missions to unravel its archaeology. The interests of foreign missions are likely to lie in some particular aspects of archaeology to their liking; they cannot be expected to deal with the country’s archaeology in its entirety.⁶¹

Unlike Qatar and Bahrain, the Government of Saudi Arabia set up a Department of Antiquities in 1963–64 with a director as its sole member, but since then the strength of the Department had risen to 15.⁶² However, the services of a photographer were lacking besides clear instructions relating to the duties and responsibilities of each of the members. Ghosh also recommended the setting up of zones in the country to facilitate administration, as also training programmes on the practical aspects of archaeology. The Ministry was also advised to sanction an annual budget for the Department.

As in the case of Saudi Arabia, in Yemen also a small Antiquities Department had been set up in the mid-1960s but with only two members on its staff. Given the rich cultural heritage of the country Ghosh recommended that ‘the sites of Ma’rib in al Jauf are of such great importance that they deserve to be excavated by foreign teams organized and assisted by UNESCO.’⁶³ He has also noted that a UNESCO expert from Italy was already helping the authorities set up a museum. Nevertheless, on receipt of a request from the Minister of Education of the Yemen Arab Republic, UNESCO sent letters dated 15 June 1970 requesting help from Member States.

Asian Archaeology: 1980s and Beyond

Papers presented at the 1961 Asian Archaeology Conference included those on Central Asia, Ceylon, and Southeast Asia, especially in Sections III and IV relating to Archaeology, Art, and Architecture of the Later Ages.⁶⁴ These included diverse topics such as Roman influence on Satavahana terracottas (M.N. Deshpande); correlation of epigraphic studies in south India and Southeast Asia (K.G. Krishnan); to Kushan remains at Kara Tepe (B. Stavisky and E. G. Pchelina); and Indian cultural influences in Burma (U Aung Thaw) presented in Section III. The next section had more themes to offer on Indonesian art (D.P. Ghosh), Buddhist architecture of Ceylon (C. E. Godakumbara), Indian influence on paintings in Kucha (Heimo Rau), transformation of narrative sculpture into canonical icons in India and Southeast Asia (P.R. Srinivasan), and a study of architecture in Kerala and China (N. G. Unnithan). From 1966 to 1974, Klaus Fischer carried out excavations in Afghanistan, and he spoke on the Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain monuments in that country – a theme no doubt of wider resonance to the audience.

As already mentioned above, this momentum of involving Indian scholars in discussion with those from other countries on themes related to Asian archaeology was lost by the 1970s since ASI did not follow up with convening other such conferences. This disinterest in the archaeology of other Asian countries coincided with a change in focus from archaeology to conservation in UNESCO as it sought worldwide support for its 1972 World Heritage Convention to which India is a signatory. Henceforth, the expeditions abroad were restricted to carrying out conservation works first in Afghanistan and from the 1980s to Angkor in Kampuchea (Cambodia).

The stupendous temples at Angkor had drawn the attention of French explorers in the mid-nineteenth century and by 1907, the French colonial administration had wrested control of the province of Siem Reap along with many others from the kingdom of Siam. Even after Cambodian independence in 1953, French experts continued to retain management control of the monument. This monopoly ended in 1975 when Khmer Rouge rose to power. In 1979 the Vietnamese army liberated Siem Reap and established the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). India was one of the few countries to recognise the new government. In November 1980, in response to an appeal by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then in exile in China, a team of nine members of the Survey under K. M. Srivastava visited Kampuchea for four months starting in February 1982 to prepare a comprehensive project report on the preservation of the temple of Angkor Wat. The team set up two laboratories, one chemical and the other photographic. In addition, three persons from Kampuchea were given training in conservation and photography and equipment, and instruments were also made available to them to start documentation and preliminary works on preservation.⁶⁵

As a result conservation work was done for several seasons from 1986 to 1993. The Ministry of External Affairs financed this work through its ITEC programme. Perhaps the most dramatic of the efforts was the rebuilding of the southern part of the east gallery (the Churning of the Sea of Milk gallery), which involved the reassembly of approximately twenty-five hundred unmarked stones. While all this work under very trying circumstance received little acclaim from art lovers worldwide, an unsubstantiated news report in the *New York Times Magazine* of 21 June 1992 regarding the alleged use of sulphuric acid for cleaning the stone surface of the monument raised a storm! These unfavourable reports appeared at a time when several countries such as the French were clamouring for international participation in the conservation of Angkor and UNESCO was under pressure to convene experts' meetings on the issue.

UNESCO declared Angkor a World Heritage Site in December 1992, and Angkor Wat, Ta Phrom, Prea Khan, Bayon, Beng Mealea, and other complexes were recognised as World Heritage Monuments.⁶⁶ After an inter-governmental conference in Tokyo in 1993, an International Coordinating Committee (ICC) was established to oversee the restoration work at Angkor. The committee meets several times a year in plenary and technical sessions, and the Khmers themselves are active participants through the establishment of APSARA (Authority for the Protection of the Sites and Administration of the Region of Angkor). The Government of India offered to restore and conserve the Ta Phrom complex, and ASI undertook this challenging task in December 2004.

Nearly three years of extensive documentation, studies, and analysis gave the ASI team an insight into the issues involved in the preservation of the temple, and its efforts have been lauded by conservation architects:

The ASI was involved in the conservation of Angkor Wat during the difficult period of civil war in Cambodia and is currently engaged in the conservation of Ta Prohm. Their interventions at Angkor Wat have attracted much international criticism, some of it truly unjustified, some of it arguable; however, their work at Ta Prohm should lay to rest any question of their competence. By any standards, the engagement at Ta Prohm, with its characteristic intertwining of vegetation and building, presented an unprecedented challenge that is being competently and imaginatively handled by the ASI.⁶⁷

No doubt, ASI's efforts at aiding the conservation of many World Heritage sites such as Vat Phou Temple in Lao PDR, structural conservation, and chemical preservation at Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia, and Ananda Temple in Myanmar have won laurels. However, this emphasis on conservation at the expense of research and archaeological engagement with the archaeology of countries of Asia has proved disastrous for the organisation. This is nowhere more evident than in its inability to modify its mandate from focussing on single monuments or group of monuments to address larger concepts of 'Routes' which initially emerged and evolved as an idea of movement and dialogue in UNESCO between 1988 and 1994 when initiatives on the Silk Road expeditions and the Slave Road were launched as the 'Roads of Dialogue.'

In 2014, India presented 'Project Mausam' at the UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting in Doha, Qatar, emphasising cultural corridors or heritage routes created by winds or monsoons which powered wooden sailing ships across the Indian Ocean. India's objective was to partner with other countries and to inscribe on the World Heritage list some of the heritage routes through which knowledge traditions and religious beliefs had spread across the Indian Ocean. As emphasised in the publication released in 2014 at the time of the launch of the Project in Doha, the focus of the initiative was not only to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world but also to highlight local community initiatives and to underscore the importance of regional governance and the management of heritage sites by creating public awareness at the level of the society.⁶⁸ The 2019 Working Group Report of the Niti Aayog on Improving Heritage Management in India reaffirmed its commitment to building on the 2014 Mausam Initiative that has been dormant for a decade and to take active steps to propose Project Mausam for trans-national nomination.

While it is necessary to reorient ourselves to the Indian Ocean for the sense of its geopolitical importance and the nature of community, it also becomes necessary to evolve policies and stakes in the more critical task of preserving this heritage. This can be done both at global levels by projecting it at the UNESCO's World Heritage Convention and through regional institutions like Indian Ocean Rim Association

(IORA), which is mandated to do this. An additional responsibility, if we mean maritime missions and soft power initiatives like the Mausam Initiative to have credibility, is to invest in research into the past so that we get our history right and not sacrifice historical facts to valorise past exploits.⁶⁹

The affirmation provided to Project Mausam notwithstanding, progress on the Project has been slow despite the money sanctioned for it. The first Standing Finance Committee (SFC) Memorandum for Project Mausam was approved by the Ministry of Culture for two years from April 2015 to March 2017 with a total cost amounting to Rs. 150,244,502. The project was subsequently extended, and the slow progress of Mausam in the second phase was being reviewed by the Ministry of Culture at various levels from time to time. Secretary (Culture) reviewed the project on 10 June, 25 June, and 02 November 2020. Hon'ble Culture Minister reviewed the Project on 24 August 2020 and again on 19 November 2020. As a result of these reviews, it was realised that though Project Mausam has not been able to realise its objectives in past four years, it is still a potentially rich project having historical, cultural, and strategic rewards critical for the country. Therefore, it was decided that the project needs to be continued. However, to address the slow rate of progress a proper administrative and monitoring mechanism may be needed to be put in place.⁷⁰

According to the Press Information Bureau release dated 9 October 2022, ASI organised a two-day National Conference on Project Mausam – Jaladhipurayatra: Exploring Cross- Cultural Linkages along the Indian Ocean Rim Countries to facilitate the nomination of trans-national heritage.

One session exclusively deals [dealt] with issues relating to the World Heritage properties with special reference to identification of historical sites and structures located in different countries of the Indian Ocean region and exemplifying inter-country relations, thus qualifying for trans-national nomination for UNESCO World Heritage certification. This was followed by a unique session in which the representatives and ambassadors of the different Indian Ocean region countries discussed different aspects of the region's inter-country ties and trans-national nomination of important sites in the region for the World Heritage status.⁷¹

These claims by the Government were not supported by ASI with action on the ground, and the Project continues to be confined to the web pages of the Ministry of Culture.⁷²

ASI and the Ministry of Culture hosted the 46th session of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in New Delhi from 21 to 31 July 2024. This global event was an ideal opportunity for ASI to present its vision of Project Mausam and to take forward the discussions that had taken place with the

Ambassadors in Delhi in 2022. Instead, the ASI organised two-panel discussions as side events: one on 23 July 2024 on ‘Archaeology and Epic in the Light of New Researches’; and a second one on 26 July 2024 on ‘Culture Follows Commerce: Historical Interactions Across the Eastern Indian Ocean (Project Mausam).’ The discussion on Project Mausam was largely an in-house event with most of the discussants from ASI. As the experience with Project Mausam has shown, it is not easy or possible to reinvigorate archaeological research in ASI and to rekindle interest in the archaeology of Asia even though the Government has incurred huge expenditure in efforts to do so. There has been radical change in ASI’s ability to undertake research since the 1970s, and only introspection within the organisation can help show the way forward.

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