

EMPEROR ASHOKA

Between Archaeology and Texts

Lecture by Dr. Nayanjot Lahiri

IIT Gandhinagar, 11 March 2014



(Sculptural Representation of Ashoka at Kanganahalli, Karnataka)

Emperor Ashoka, through his missives on stone, was the first Indian emperor who chose to carve out a subcontinental presence for himself. This is evident to anyone who has followed his trail, where one encounters him on rocks and pillars in all kinds of places that formed parts of

his empire in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan, as also in the historical echoes of his life and times in the Buddhist Chronicles of Sri Lanka.

What is equally significant, the multiple copies of his messages suggest that Ashoka wanted to be heard in the same way in Afghanistan and in Andhra, in Karnataka and in Kalinga. There is no example, in fact, of a ruler whose voice, in his own lifetime, resonated in such a unique way across South Asia and beyond, articulating the shifting contours of his imperial life and his aspirations. This is not the only version of his life that is available to scholars in search of Asoka but it certainly is the only one which was composed during his own lifetime.

The past, of course, is preserved in objects and in words. The challenge lies in trying to interweave Ashoka's story, as it were, in the 'Emperor's own voice' with the many stories that emerge about the lives and times of his more ordinary contemporaries. By Ashoka's own admission, his wide dominions had a large and diverse population — from city residents and members of religious sects, to ordinary rural folk, forest dwellers and fisher-people. Through archaeology, it becomes possible to peep into the places where they lived and the food they ate, to imagine their ideas about rulers and religion, to travel with them as they journeyed forth and appreciate the remarkable paintings that they sometimes made on the very waysides where the emperor's voice could be heard. Such archaeological glimpses, above all, offer a reality check on Ashoka's own prescriptions and proscriptions.

Such sights and subjects will be interwoven in Dr. Nayanjot Lahiri's lecture as she explores the India of Mauryan times to reconstruct the life and legend of Ashoka.

Dr. Nayanjot Lahiri is among the most noted historians of ancient India. Her areas of interest include Indian archaeology and early history, heritage studies and epigraphy. She is the author, among other titles, of *Pre-Ahom Assam* (1991), *The Archaeology of Indian Trade Routes* (1992), *The Decline and Fall of the Indus Civilization* (as editor, 2000), *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered* (2005), *Ancient India: New Research* (as co-editor, 2010) and *Marshalling the Past: Ancient India and its Modern Histories* (2012).

Through many articles in the national press, Dr Nayanjot Lahiri has often called attention to the challenging task of heritage conservation in India. She is a professor of history at the University of Delhi and the recipient of several awards, including the 2013 Infosys Prize in Humanities – Archaeology.
