

IIAS Reports *continued*

International conference report

**Cultural Heritage: Environment, Ecology and Inter-Asian Interactions**

6-8 January 2014, Nalanda University, Bihar, India

Jointly organised with IIAS

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FROM 6-8 JANUARY 2014 Nalanda University hosted a highly successful conference on 'cultural heritage' specifically highlighting the role inter-Asian connections and environmental/ecological factors have played in the establishment and continued existence of heritage sites. Keynotes were delivered by Professors Engseong Ho, Akira Matsui and Frederick M. Asher. The final session of the conference on the heritage of Bihar was held on the lawn of the archaeological museum, right opposite the ruins of the ancient university of Nalanda itself.

**Approaching cultural heritage**

In Asia, the notion of 'heritage' is often associated with the construction of post-independence nation-state models, the definition of national 'traditions' and the idea of pre/post-colonial historical national continuity. As a result discussions about heritage often tend to be state-dominated, leaving little room for regional and trans-regional views. This dilemma is of particular relevance to Nalanda University, a new international university that is in the process of establishing a highly innovative academic program and campus with world class facilities in Rajgir, a small town in Bihar, India. This new university takes forward the academic excellence, teaching-learning model, and inter-Asian character of the ancient Nalanda. The conference on 'cultural heritage' took inspiration from this and sought to highlight how Asian connections and interactions have often given shape and meaning to the establishment of particular cultural heritage sites. Nalanda's first two Schools, Historical Studies and Environment & Ecology Studies, will commence in August 2014 and as a result the University was keen to explore the role ecological and environmental conditions have played in the establishment and preservation of particular sites as well.

**Inter-Asian connections**

In a highly thought-provoking and insightful Keynote, Engseong Ho of Duke University kicked-off the conference by highlighting the network of trade, politics and religion across the Indian Ocean through which he was able to lay bare the prophetic genealogies as well as the density of inter-Asian connections. Eminent scholar Anne Cheng (College de France) opened the first session by focusing on the centrality of India in the imperial Chinese era of the fourth century CE. India was imagined as the ideal kingdom at the time, while China was seen as inhabiting the margins. Subsequent papers by Padma D. Maitland (Berkeley) working on tourism and pilgrimage in Bodhi Gaya and its central place in the Buddhist imagery; Olga Deshpande of the Hermitage in Saint-Petersburg discussing how the image of Buddha travelled in Theravada; Andrea Aciri (ISEAS Singapore), exploring the history and ecology of Indic palm-leaf manuscript culture; and Grazia Marchiano, (University of Siena-Arezzo) investigating South Asian rock carvings from the Palaeolithic era, all perfectly illustrated the importance of examining the interplay of inter-Asian connections and ecological/environmental factors when focusing on cultural heritage.

**Technological interventions**

How research on this can benefit from technological interventions was made clear by another set of papers. Making use of digital techniques in order to recreate the architectural complexities of temples from the period of 400-900 CE, Sambit Datta (Curtin University) was able to highlight the many architectural linkages between temple building traditions of South and Southeast Asia. Making use of satellite imagery M.B. Rajani (Nalanda University) explores the man-made water bodies in the vicinity of the ancient university in order to understand its evolution and development. Investigating the Giant Tank in the Mannar District of Sri Lanka and making use of much simpler technology, Lodewijk Wagenaar (University of Amsterdam) and Alan Potkin (Digital Conservation Facility, Laos) aim to understand how the tank was originally 'engineered' and why subsequent restoration works during colonial days was only partially successful.

**Questions of authority, autonomy and ownership**

Questions of authority, autonomy and ownership, often drawing directly upon the observation of changing geopolitical conditions, clearly bound another set of papers. Independent scholar Alex McKay kicked off with a particularly pertinent question informed by his work on the emergence of Gangotri as a prominent pilgrimage site: who actually has the authority to determine the importance or sacredness of a particular site? Engaging in Japanese naturalist Minakata Kumagusu's work and criticism of the Japanese state's attempt to regulate Shinto shrines, allowed Brij Tankha of the Institute of Chinese Studies in Delhi to elucidate on the question of state authority and nation-state building, which often has far reaching consequences for the way (sacred) sites continue to function or even exist. Saayan Chattopadhyay (University of Calcutta) provided a reading of similar issues in his exploration of the rapidly growing popularity of the Durga



puja festival in Kolkata. Christoph Antons (Deakin University), raising awareness of the often contested nature of intangible heritage, brought to light the way 'rights discourses' take shape especially in relation to the environment in which they are said to have originated. In relation to this both, Preetee Sharma (Jawahar Nehru University), Shaik Azahar Shaik Hussain (Universiti Malaysia Serawak) and Alice Lowsons (University of Exeter) drew attention to the way landscape, regions and memories are connected, respectively in the case of the Buddhist sites of Suryapahar (Assam), the heritage left by the 'white rajahs' in Serawak, and the trade in heritage items in the Chettinad region of Tamil Nadu. As the work of Elizabeth Cecil (Brown University) illustrated (focusing on a number of cave sites in Maharashtra), there are a myriad factors that determine if a particular 'sacred' site becomes heritage and how this is engaged with 'locally'. Swadhin Sen (Jahangirnagar University) raised an important question that had direct relation to this: how can we understand the growing disparities between the perceptions of heritage?

**Environment, ecology & great Asia**

Akira Matsui's evocative Keynote on the devastating effects of the 2011 tsunami in Japan not only brought to the fore the way environmental factors can impact on cultural heritage, but also that when it comes to such disasters there are no national borders. In that sense many other papers sought to highlight further the idea of a Greater Asia or a pan-Asia characterized by connections and interactions. While Sun Bo (National Museum of China and Peking University) illustrated how inter-Asian linkages and related geopolitical developments had informed the construction of Xiuding Temple Pagoda; Sraman Mukherjee (Presidency University, Kolkata) took an inter-Asian perspective in order to make sense of the circulation of Buddhist corporeal relics especially in relation to the 'articulation of pan Asian moral geographies'. Examining the work of several Greater India scholars, such as Kalidas Nag, enabled Carolin Stolte (Leiden University) to discuss the way in which relationships between India and Central Asia developed. Finally Marieke Bloembergen (KITLV) focused on the scholarly and spiritual knowledge exchange between India and Indonesia in relation to two major Javanese sites: Borobudur and Prambanan.

**Nalanda University, Patliputra and 'Bihar'**

In his powerful Keynote on the final day of the conference, Frederick M. Asher (University of Minnesota) elaborated on 'Monsoon Asia's' pre-modern connections via texts, histories and ideas especially in relation to the role of ecology in stimulating trade and sustaining large networks. As such his Keynote generated considerable discussion about the ancient Nalanda University as well as other important historical sites in Bihar. Other presentations such as the one by Diwakar Kumar Singh (Delhi University) on Buddhist sites in and around Nalanda; Abhishek Amar (Hamilton College) engaging in questions of heritage and history-making in the Gaya Region; Murari Kumar Jha (National University of Singapore) discussing the rise and demise of Pataliputra (current day Patna, the capital of Bihar) as an imperial centre in the fourth century BCE; and Sraman Mukherjee examining the displaced identity of Bihar Sharif as a centre for collectible heritage.

**Research agenda and network**

The conference was highly successful with engaged participants from 15 countries. This conference unveiled the launch of a new research agenda that aims to give inter-Asian connections and environmental/ecological factors a more prominent place in research on cultural heritage. Furthermore, it has led to the formation of a new network of scholars working on related topics who will find a welcome and enthusiastic partner in Nalanda University.

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Top: Engseong Ho delivering his Keynote

Below: Group photo of conference participants

Bottom: Ruins of Nalanda University