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Records, Recoveries, Remnants and Inter-Asian Interconnections



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Records, Recoveries, Remnants and Inter-Asian Interconnections

Decoding Cultural Heritage

EDITED BY

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Bottom – A Nalanda classroom.

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*To Sensei,
my eternal mentor;
with deep gratitude,
for teaching me the Buddha's way*

CONTENTS

<i>Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
1. Introduction: Records, Recoveries, Remnants and Inter-Asian Interconnections — Decoding Cultural Heritage <i>Anjana Sharma</i>	1
2. Negotiating Place and Heritage: Creating Nalanda University <i>Gopa Sabharwal</i>	32
3. India, Magadha, Nalanda: Ecology and a Premodern World System <i>Frederick Asher</i>	51
4. Collecting the Region: Configuring Bihar in the Space of Museums <i>Sraman Mukherjee</i>	70
5. Heritage Preservation in the Gaya Region <i>Abhishek S. Amar</i>	86
6. Setting the “Records” Straight: Textual Sources on Nālandā and Their Historical Value <i>Max Deeg</i>	105
7. “Central India Is What Is Called the Middle Kingdom” <i>Anne Cheng</i>	141

8.	The Object The Tree: Emissaries of Buddhist Ground <i>Padma D. Maitland</i>	160
9.	Tracing Transregional Networks and Connections Across the Indic Manuscript Cultures of Nusantara (AD 1400–1600) <i>Andrea Acri</i>	184
10.	Seeking a Sufi Heritage in the Deccan <i>Kashshaf Ghani</i>	222
11.	Archaeological Remains at Nalanda: A Spatial Comparison of Nineteenth Century Observations and the Protected World Heritage Site <i>M.B. Rajani and Sonia Das</i>	239
12.	A Heritage Gem Sits in the Heart of a City, Unacknowledged, Incognito: The Case for Recognizing Kolkata Chinatown as a Historic Urban Landscape <i>Rinkoo Bhowmik</i>	257
	<i>Index</i>	271

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This collection of essays is a homage to the spirit of Nalanda which has brought into its embrace so many travellers over millennia; travellers drawn by its momentous vision and capacity to transform human life. I record my debt of gratitude to all who came as Seekers of the Great Law, Seekers tracing the pathways of humanity and peace, and Seekers whose minds were illumined by the transcendental vision of this ancient place of learning. This spirit of altruistic accommodation and shared struggle — that defines Nalanda — is best imaged through the iconic lines of the extraordinary world citizen, Rabindranath Tagore. His lines, written in the context of the Indian nationalist struggle, sit well with the Nalanda dream of being a university

*Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
Desert sand of dead habit...*

This volume is an attempt to retrieve the hope enshrined in these poetic numbers and a perfect way to retrieve the heart of Nalanda. It is also the time to thank some of those who have laboured hard to make the Nalanda vision one which will resonate globally. The first in this line of luminaries is the incomparable Amartya Sen, who never forgot the vision of a resurgent Nalanda he had as an eleven-year-old boy visiting the site of the ancient university with his redoubtable grandfather: a vision he silently nurtured through the busy decades of his distinguished transatlantic academic life. Gratitude also to the incredible George Yeo,

who instinctively and absolutely understood the untapped potential of this icon of Asian renaissance, even though situated far away in his ministerial office in Singapore. Both have served as Chancellors of the revived Nalanda university: distinguished revolutionaries dedicated to establishing, and later, defending the core principles of knowledge based on dialogue, of respect for all, and of humanistic education as the fundamental legacy of the ancient *mahavihara*.

The first encouragement to put together this collection came from the memorable Wang Gungwu: a historian with a legendary body of work. I took his words to heart since, from my first meeting with him in a cool February in New Delhi in 2011, he was unfailing in his courteous kindness and intelligent advice. I thank him here for his words of wisdom and his affectionate care that went a long way to sustain the sometime flagging spirit of Vice-Chancellor Sabharwal and I. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not thank a Governing Board member who always rolled up his sleeves and toiled in the trenches with us with remarkable good humour — the irrepressible Meghnad Desai, whose fundamental egalitarianism quickly disproved his lordly title! He was the wall one could lean on when needed.

When I was an undergraduate student choosing which discipline I would graduate in with Honours it was a toss-up between my twin loves — literature and history — and I chose the former and thrived. But, even in my own pursuit of higher education in English literature I found ways and means to keep my fascination for historicity and history alive and well. I owe a huge debt to my sojourn at Nalanda for giving me the opportunity to finally traverse — untrammelled — in the hills, plains, valleys and riverine basins of Historical Studies as Dean who was tasked to bring to life one of the first two Schools at Nalanda University — the School of Historical Studies. My new learning was in great part led by Sugato Bose (though he little knew it!), whose interdisciplinary readings of historical cycles and events spoke to me in manifold ways and shapes my own recent scholarship. So thank you Sugato for combining historical acuity with lambent prose! And Tansen Sen — a committed and thoughtful Sinologist — did much to sharpen my understanding through numerous exchanges via email and in person on inter-cultural Asian trails and their links with Buddhism. He was also generous in sharing ideas, networks and persons at all times to ensure that the Nalanda revival narrative reached far and wide.

There are many others who are part of the untold story of Nalanda and one of the foremost of these is Frederick Asher whose lifetime work as

a distinguished art historian on the Nalanda ruins broadcast the greatness of this historic site long years before its actual reconstruction. I would not have had the good fortune of his loyal friendship and deep scholarship if it had not been for a late night conversation, in humid Kolkata, with Philippe Peycam, peripatetic Director, International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden. So thank you Philippe for telling me that the *one* Nalanda scholar I could not do without was Rick. How right you were! I also thank him for ensuring that the first ever international conference in Rajgir got a head start because of the strong support of IIAS.

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Words of appreciation are due to all the contributors who worked with one mind to make sure that we have a first rate collection and who, moreover, put up with my queries, comments and editorial interventions! However, my final words of thankfulness are reserved for my friend, colleague, fellow traveller and foot soldier, Gopa Sabharwal, with whom I had the happiness and privilege of contributing — just a little — to the (re)founding of Nalanda.