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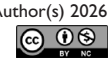
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Developing Indian pasts? The Archaeological Survey of India, 'postcolonial' archaeology, and technical assistance in Nepal

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Abstract

This article examines archaeological assistance provided to Nepal by the Archaeological Survey of India as part of India's aid efforts there in the 1960s. It demonstrates how that work, which endeavored to show long-standing Indian–Nepali connections and strengthen the two countries' contemporary relationship, sat within a complex set of threads tying it to wider interest in the regional past of post-Partition India. Those threads were filtered through the British Raj, European Orientalism, and local responses to it; they were also connected to post-Partition India's attempts to assert its regional power and the archaeological theorization and materialization of an 'Indian' identity. The Indian bureaucracy that helped to link India and Nepal both powered this Indian archaeological work abroad and, at times, proved to be its undoing. Observing this messy nexus of paperwork and archaeological practice, the article argues for further investigation of the movement and circulation of archaeological knowledge in this critical period in global history: an investigation that will reveal both a more complex picture of how that knowledge has operated 'in transit', while deepening understanding of archaeology's messy coloniality at a time when ethical questions relating to the discipline have come to the fore.

Keywords

Archaeology, Archaeological Survey of India, Colombo Plan, India, Nepal, technical assistance

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Why, in May 1960, was the Director General of Archaeology in India, Amalananda Ghosh (1910–81), "deputed . . . to advise His Majesty's Government of Nepal on the re-organization of the archaeological service of that country"?[1] What prompted this action, which was part of the first sustained burst of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) work abroad since "the epoch-making expeditions of Sir Aurel Stein in Central Asia, the last of which took place in 1913–14"?[2] More widely, what does this event and the practices it enabled tell us about the place and role of archaeology in a postwar world whose geopolitical plates were gradually shifting? Since the days of the Raj, the possibility of Indian-sponsored archaeological work in the regions surrounding the country was one that had lingered.[3] In this article I show how, in the early 1960s, Nepal, located on India's northeastern border, provided one among several fields for the latest iteration of such extraterritorial practice: a move conducted as part of post-Partition – and 'postcolonial' – India's aid efforts. Adapted to the growing rhetoric of international development, archaeology could be used to attempt to create Indian influence – and 'India' itself – elsewhere.

As Nepal underwent a troubled transition from authoritarianism during the 1950s and 60s, so the ASI (founded under the British in 1861, and headed by Ghosh from 1953 until 1968) attempted to make Nepali archaeological infrastructure in the Indian image. Simultaneously, Indian archaeologists working with Nepalis investigated potential cross-border links that might join the two countries together across time. Many of those connections related to the development of Buddhism, but they also bear traces of Hindu nationalist understandings of India's place in the world developed during – and as a response to – colonial rule. In a process whose extractive nature at times seemed clear, for post-Partition India, Nepal became a convenient, 'under-developed' locus for the application of a form of material and intellectual expertise: one enacted through archaeological survey and excavation, the writing of archaeological reports, and bureaucracy.[4] As with many development projects, these actions were far from completely successful, and ultimately worked to displace politics to the realm of the 'technical'.[5] Such outcomes, however, can tell us something of the place of archaeology in a changing world.

1. Amalananda Ghosh (ed.), *Indian Archaeology 1961–62: A Review* (New Delhi: ASI, 1964), p.65.
2. Ibid., p.64. For Stein, see e.g., Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Colonial Archaeology in South Asia: The Legacy of Sir Mortimer Wheeler* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.219–26. Ghosh's date here is incorrect: Stein's third Central Asian expedition took place from 1913 until 1916. Stein also undertook an aborted expedition in 1930, in addition to one to the province of Fars in Persia from 1933 to 1934. For a summary, see Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, "The Aurel Stein Collection," <https://royalasiaticsociety.org/the-aurel-stein-collection/> (29 October 2025).
3. Ray, *Colonial*, pp.218–38 (note 2).
4. On the ASI's bureaucracy, see Ashish Avikunthak, *Bureaucratic Archaeology: State, Science, and Past in Postcolonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
5. On development, see e.g., James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Specifically, the ASI's actions demonstrate why attempting to place archaeology within fixed categories like 'colonial' or 'postcolonial' is misguided at best.[6] The ASI's work in Nepal occurred in a complex temporal continuum that, while not embodying a direct connection, included drawing on motivations and forms of knowledge developed in and in relation to British India by Europeans and Indians. Simultaneously, those actions attended to India's own post-Partition interests in cultural and political cooperation, which were themselves tied to the growing power of international development and intergovernmentalism. In a context, today, in which simplistic statements about archaeology's history abound, examining the ASI's work in Nepal shows how the complexity of the discipline's historical place might usefully be reflected upon.[7]

This examination reminds us that there is no one place where the history of archaeology might be told *from*, making it relevant to recent work in the history of science that has sought to decenter that field's historiography.[8] As the ASI's Nepali intervention shows, it is difficult to suggest that archaeological knowledge was formulated only in certain places or in unidirectional ways. Archaeology can be tied, without doubt, to colonialism, as archaeology in India clearly was. Yet formerly colonial places including, but certainly not limited to, India also had interests – both extractive and collaborative – tied to archaeological work in what became their 'abroad'.[9] What is necessary, then, is understanding what such interventions entailed, the practices involved in them, and the genealogies that those practices stemmed from. As with other fields of knowledge, understanding archaeology's history involves understanding the practices that made archaeological work *work*: what those practices involved, the ways those practices traveled (or not), and the range of interactions involved in them.[10] Without that investigation, attempts to understand archaeology's contested history are unlikely to be satisfactory.

This article addresses the historical complexity of archaeology in the 'postcolonial' world, focusing on Indian archaeological work in and with 1960s Nepal to do

6. Such attempts likely stem from Bruce Trigger, "Alternative Archaeologies: Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist," *Man* (New Series) 19 (1984): 355–70. Ironically, Trigger cautions on p.358 that such terms "capture only certain broad features of very complex situations." For this issue in India, see e.g., Sudeshna Guha, "Imposing the Habit of Science: Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Indian Archaeology," *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 13 (2003): 4–10, 9.
7. Such statements invariably relate to debates surrounding the (rightful) restitution of objects taken during colonial rule, which remain embedded within culture-war framings. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Ministry of Culture, Government of France, 2018) provides a way forward.
8. See e.g., Sujit Sivasundaram, "Sciences and the Global: On Methods, Questions, and Theory," *Isis* 101 (2010): 146–58, and Jane H. Murphy and Sahar Bazzaz, "Introduction. Re-Examining Globalization and the History of Science: Ottoman and Middle Eastern Experiences," *British Journal for the History of Science* 55 (2022): 411–22.
9. See e.g., William Carruthers, *Flooded Pasts: UNESCO, Nubia, and the Recolonization of Archaeology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), p.214, for newly independent Ghana's work in Sudan.
10. See e.g., James A. Secord, "Knowledge in Transit," *Isis* 95 (2004): 654–72.

so.[11] Starting by setting that work within its contexts – of India's contemporary archaeological work abroad, the country's wider international interventions, and the history of Nepal – I demonstrate how and why members of the ASI attempted, not always successfully, to assert Indian archaeological standards beyond India's borders. In doing so, I show how this international collaboration made possible the movement of practices promoting narratives about India's past that, more recently, have reverberated elsewhere with considerable violence.[12] Intended or not, the entanglement of archaeology and development has always had consequences.

Indian archaeology abroad

Since Indian Partition and independence in 1947, the ASI had slowly increased its work abroad.[13] The gestation of that work had, however, begun a year previously. The ASI referenced the Central Asian surveys of the archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862–1943) as an earlier institutional touchstone. Likewise, as we shall see, ASI archaeologists in Nepal built that work on – and connected it to – late-nineteenth-century Indian archaeological survey in the country's Tarai region: the southern lowland valleys running along the Indian border (Figure 1) understood as a key location in the development of Buddhism.[14] Yet the most recent iteration of ASI work abroad began immediately after the Second World War. In 1945, Mortimer Wheeler (1890–1976), the ASI's final British –and soon-to-depart – Director General, visited Iran on behalf of the organization. In 1946, he conducted a similar visit to Afghanistan.[15] In doing so, Wheeler promoted ideas about Indian archaeological work's place in the world, hinting at the future potential of this form of soft power.[16] He also played on older ideas about India's regional past that the ASI would, to some extent, prove a conductor for: helping to make 'India' outside India.

Wheeler's time at the ASI is well known. Suffice it to say, however, that he was appointed to his position in 1944 after a 1939 report written by his archaeological compatriot Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) criticized the ASI's workings in "offensive" terms.[17] Woolley claimed the rapid decline of the ASI under the directors general, British and Indian, who had run the organization following the retirement of John Marshall

11. Cf. Ray, *Colonial*, pp.236–8 (note 2), and Jagat Pati Joshi, "Indian Archaeological Expeditions Abroad," in Jagat Pati Joshi (ed.) *Facets of Indian Civilization*, vol. 2, *Historical Archaeology, Art and Architecture, Beyond Indian Frontiers* (New Delhi: Aryan, 1997), pp.597–610, 600–2.
12. Most famously at Ayodhya, for which see Avikunthak, *Bureaucratic*, pp.227–47 (note 4).
13. For another account of this work, see Himanshu Prabha Ray and Ajay Yadav, *Indian Archaeology after Independence: Amalananda Ghosh and His Legacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2026), pp.170–95.
14. Axel Michaels, *Nepal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp.53–61.
15. For discussions of both visits, see Ray, *Colonial*, 228–30 (note 2). On Afghanistan, cf. Joshi, "Indian," p.597 (note 11).
16. On heritage and soft power, see Tim Winter, "Heritage Diplomacy," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21 (2015): 997–1015.
17. Guha, "Imposing," p.4 (note 6). Cf. Avikunthak, *Bureaucratic*, p.15 (note 4). The report was so harsh that it went unpublished.

Figure 1. Map of Nepal and surrounding area, with Lumbini region highlighted (map drawn by Bill Nelson).

(1876–1958) in 1928. Wheeler was appointed to 'reform' the organization: despite his own self-aggrandizement and continued and justified arguments about the extent of his influence, his strengthening of its colonial-militaristic leanings remains relevant.[18] In this context, Wheeler – alongside epigrapher and Joint ASI Director General N. P. Chakravarti (1893–1956), appointed in 1945 – undertook a series of actions that meant that he and the Indian government would later have Aurel Stein and India's regional archaeological position on the brain.[19]

18. Avikunthak, *Bureaucratic*, pp.79, 84 (note 4). Ray, *Colonial*, p.253 demonstrates the varied consequences of Wheeler's ASI leadership (note 2).
19. On N(iranjan) P(rasad) Chakravarti, see Sourindranath Roy, *The Story of Indian Archaeology, 1784–1947* (New Delhi: ASI, 1961), p.126.

Wheeler's 1946 visit to Afghanistan comprised a government-sponsored "cultural mission" during which he was shown the site of Bactra (contemporary Balkh), which had once been a major city on the trade routes across Central Asia to India.[20] Wheeler, never missing the chance to develop spatially expansive ancient historical narratives, would later write that "I doubt whether any site outside India is likely to have so important a bearing upon certain aspects of Early Indian History and Archaeology."[21] He also suggested that, if "such missions [as his] were to secure an enduring cooperation; they must be followed by action."[22] There was some opposition to Wheeler's foreign visits.[23] Nevertheless, following this and earlier such interventions, interest in the ASI's work abroad continued. In 1954, India's Central Advisory Board of Archaeology – comprised of representatives from the Indian government, the Indian states, and Indian universities and learned societies – recommended sending a mission to Afghanistan to look for "sculptures, inscriptions and caves and archaeological sites of interest to India."[24] That mission went to Afghanistan for two and a half months in the middle of 1956.[25] Wheeler, by that time the Secretary of the British Academy, did not fail to notice.[26] The interests of the Raj persevered in more ways than one.

On July 5 that year (while the ASI's team was still in Afghanistan), Wheeler met with Jawaharlal Nehru while the Indian premier was visiting London, presenting to him a proposal about joint Indian–British excavations at Bactra. Wheeler made his proposal on the basis of contemporary Indian interest in Afghanistan and the position of the British Academy as executor of Aurel Stein's estate: as Wheeler wrote, Stein had made "a special mention of Bactra as the place nearest to . . . [his] heart."[27] Wheeler also noted that in 1949, around the time he became the British Academy's Secretary, he had in fact arranged permission to undertake excavations at Bactra.[28] Yet neither that investigation nor Wheeler's suggested joint excavation ever took place. By the end of the 1950s both British and Indian enthusiasm for work in Afghanistan seemed to have dissipated, both for financial reasons and reluctance, at least according to Wheeler, on the part of the Afghan government.[29]

20. Joshi, "Indian," p.597 (note 11).
21. Wheeler's capitalization. Wheeler to Jawaharlal Nehru, July 5, 1956, "Archaeological Explorations on the Site of the Late City of Balkh in Afghanistan—Proposal to Send a Joint Indo British Expedition For," Ministry of Education C–1 Section, file F.3–149/56–C1, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi.
22. Unidentified source quoted in Joshi, "Indian," p.597 (note 11).
23. Ray, *Colonial*, p.230 notes that at least one member of India's Legislative Assembly was critical of Wheeler's Iran and Afghanistan visits (note 2).
24. Joshi, "Indian," p.597 (note 11). For the Board, see Sudeshna Guha, *Artefacts of History: Archaeology, Historiography and Indian Pasts* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2015), pp.243–5.
25. Joshi, "Indian," p.597 (note 11).
26. Jacquetta Hawkes, *Mortimer Wheeler: Adventurer in Archaeology* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), pp.262–97.
27. Wheeler to Nehru, July 5, 1956, "Archaeological Explorations," NAI.
28. Ibid., and Wheeler to Ghosh, July 30, 1958, "Archaeological Explorations," NAI.
29. Wheeler to Ghosh, July 30, 1958, and Nehru to Humayun Kabir, 21 April 1959, "Archaeological Explorations," NAI.

The idea, however, that it would be in India's political and scholarly interest to undertake research in, and build strategic relationships with, nearby countries like Afghanistan endured. Indeed, it was not simply in Afghanistan where Indian overtures had happened. Soon after Wheeler left India – and now under N. P. Chakravarti's director-generalship – the ASI had courted Indonesia, sending two officials there in 1948, the year before Indonesian independence: providing technical assistance, the Indians studied the condition of the Buddhist temple complex at Borobudur in terms of its future conservation.[30] It is through this combined geopolitical and archaeological strategy – linked to earlier work, but funneled through the developing prism of Indian independence and international aid – that the ASI's work in Nepal needs to be understood.

It helped that the ancient historical element of such work could provide a fulcrum around which a new Indian future might be built. Nehru himself had discussed India's international relationships in his 1946 book *The Discovery of India*, written while he was incarcerated during the Second World War. Discussing how Britain had "barred all the doors and stopped all the routes that connected us with our neighbours in Asia," he also ruminated on the vexed notion of "Greater India" and how those people he described as "Indian colonists" had once spread across Southeast Asia in particular.[31] As Susan Bayly has noted, Nehru was aware of the "problematic implications" of Greater India, an idea "of Indian culture as a supra-local civilising force" that engaged with European Orientalist scholarship, and which "subsumed virtually the whole of Buddhist and Hindu-Buddhist east and southeast Asia into the purview of Indian civilizational studies."[32] That idea had been promoted by the members of Calcutta's Greater India Society, founded in 1926, many of whom were Hindu nationalists.[33] As concerned as he was with the threat of communalism, however, given his own writings on, and interest in, India's ancient history it is little wonder that Nehru was attentive to Wheeler's suggested Afghanistan work or to his country's wider regional relationships, Southeast Asian or otherwise.[34]

Post-Partition, Nehru and others attempted to chart a course away from the Greater India discourse, recognizing its condescension as regional independence movements came to fruition and moves toward nonalignment took shape.[35] At the 1947 Asian

30. B. B. Lal, *Indian Archaeology Since Independence* (Delhi, Varanasi and Patna: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), p.60. Cf. Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff, "Conserving the Past, Mobilizing the Indonesian Future: Archaeological Sites, Regime Change and Heritage Politics in Indonesia in the 1950s," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 167 (2011): 405–36, 428.
31. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, [1946] 2010), p.152, 213.
32. Susan Bayly, "Imagining 'Greater India': French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode," *Modern Asian Studies* 38 (2004): 703–44, 706, 718.
33. Ibid., p.706. Marieke Bloembergen, "The Politics of 'Greater India,' a Moral Geography: Movable Antiquities and Charmed Knowledge Networks between Indonesia, India, and the West," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63 (2021): 170–211, 171, shows how ideas relating to Greater India percolate in recent "transregional" scholarship.
34. See Nehru, *The Discovery*, p.64 onwards for this interest (note 31).
35. Madhavan K. Palat, "Nehru's Southeast Asia," in Himanshu Prabha Ray (ed.) *Recentring Southeast Asia: Politics, Religion and Maritime Connections* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2024), pp.1–36, 15–16 [page numbers from e-book version].

Relations Conference, held in New Delhi on the eve of Indian independence, "Nehru emphasized the reciprocal relationship between Asian cultures without invoking a supremacy of one culture over others."[36] Yet as India attempted to find its geopolitical place, so interest in investigating and utilizing the partitioned country's regional connections remained. Until the late 1950s, for example, India promoted a vision of an ancient and peaceful Buddhist past perceived as both 'Indian' and capable of promoting "pan-Asian unity." Materializing that vision included the ASI restoring Buddhist sites within India (and likely prompted the work at Borobudur). In time, the wider aspirations of such work proved untenable partially due to the aggressive breakdown of the Indo-Chinese relationship over Tibet.[37] Nepal's position between India and Tibet would, however, make it a place of continued Indian interest.

In the early 1960s, meanwhile, the ASI worked abroad elsewhere. In 1962, the organization sent a team to Egypt. There, ASI representatives excavated sites due to be flooded by the reservoir of the then under-construction Aswan High Dam, working under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia. That project took place in both Egypt and Sudan, although a plan for the ASI to excavate a site on the Sudanese side of the Nubian border would not come to fruition. The ASI's Egyptian excavation did, however, become ground for rumination on the westerly connections of India's ancient history.[38] Alongside helping a fellow nonaligned nation-state, this Nubian collaboration further strengthened the intellectual possibilities of such assistance work among Indian decision makers, helping to make the case for its continued undertaking elsewhere.

Such international collaboration, moreover, was not only connected to archaeology. Instead, it was tied to wider attempts to propagate Indian cultural connections abroad. In December 1961, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations organized an Asian History Congress in New Delhi. Ghosh sat on the preparatory committee.[39] Nehru, meanwhile, gave an inaugural address in which he stated that "you have really to consider everything today in a world perspective."[40] Cementing Nehru's view, Indian Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs Humayun Kabir (1906–69) noted that one of the steering committee's resolutions was to foster "permanent contact

36. Jolita Zabarskaité, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965: The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), p.329.
37. Douglas F. Ober, "From Buddha Bones to Bo Trees: Nehruvian India, Buddhism, and the Poetics of Power, 1947–1956," *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (2019): 1312–50, 1314–15, 1319, 1344–9.
38. William Carruthers, "Archaeological (Non?) Alignments: Egypt, India, and Global Geographies of the Post-War Past," *South Asian Studies* 36 (2020): 45–60.
39. K. S. Lal (ed.), *Studies in Asian History: Proceedings of the Asian History Congress, 1961* (New Delhi and London: Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Asia Publishing House, 1969), p.541.
40. Jawaharlal Nehru, "'Inaugural Address' by Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India" in Ibid., pp.8–12, 10.

between historians of Asian countries."[41] Certain delegates were critical of some of the meeting's discussions: the historian Niharranjan Ray (1903–81) of the University of Calcutta stated that it was impossible to explain the country's place in the world "only by reference to India"; he likewise bemoaned the rhetoric of Greater India's continued prevalence.[42] Wider interest in such questions, however, seemed assured: whether from the Indian or the international side.

A day after the Asian History Congress ended, an International Conference on Asian Archaeology began, taking place in the same city on the centenary of the ASI's foundation. Like the congress, the conference was an event that wore its international genealogies on its sleeve. Ghosh was the conference's "General President." Section presidents, meanwhile, included the ever-present Wheeler and the prehistorian Robert J. Braidwood (1907–2003) of the University of Chicago.[43] Papers delivered at the conference had an undeniable regional bent: whether attempting to advance international collaboration in understanding the regional past, striving for new forms of analytic complexity within that process, or adhering to older forms of cultural history and racial thinking connected both to archaeological and Greater Indian thought.[44] It was in this complex set of circumstances – alongside India's other interventions in the country – that the ASI's work in Nepal took shape.

Developing Nepal

Those interventions included a wider program of Indian aid to Nepal. India had been providing that aid since 1951, when a Nepali revolution had taken place.[45] Despite a principle of respecting Nepali independence, India would nevertheless brook no unfavorable actions from its northeastern neighbor.

Beyond interest in Nepal's past, the stakes of the Nepali situation for India and other countries were clear. The 1951 revolution heralded the end of the rule established over Nepal by the Rana dynasty in the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, it also saw the return of King Tribhuvan (r. 1911–50, 1951–5), the latest in a line of monarchs who had been confined to their palace by the Ranas. Since November 1950, Tribhuvan had been in exile

41. Humayun Kabir, "Address by Prof. Humayun Kabir, President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations," in Lal, *Studies in Asian History*, pp.499–500, 499 (note 39).
42. Niharranjan Ray, "Speeches by Some Delegates: N. R. Ray," in Lal, *Studies in Asian History*, pp.518–19 (note 39).
43. ASI (ed.), *International Conference on Asian Archaeology: Summaries of Papers; New Delhi, 14th to 20th December 1961* (Faridabad: Government of India, 1961), p.i. The conference was one of several ASI centenary events, for which see Sraman Mukherjee, "Being and Becoming Indian: The Nation in Archaeology," *South Asian Studies* 26 (2010): 219–34.
44. Ibid., referencing the following abstracts in order: K. V. Soundara Rajan, "Progress and Prospects of Asian Prehistoric Archaeology—A Plea," pp.17–19; F. R. Allchin, "The Indian Ground Stone Axe—Relations, Affinities and Origins," pp.22–3; B. K. Chatterjee and G. D. Kumar, "Comparative Study and Racial Analysis of Human Remains of Harappa," pp.30–2.
45. Srikant Dutt, "Indian Aid to Co-Developing Countries," *Economic and Political Weekly* 15 (5 April 1980): 672–8.

in New Delhi, which since 1946 had itself been home to the anti-Rana Nepali National Congress.[46] There, he had been granted asylum and welcomed by Nehru, who became a "commanding arbiter" of the Nepali revolution's outcomes.[47] Now, Tribhuvan became head of state of a new Nepalese 'parliamentary democracy'. Yet this troubled, faltering democracy did not last long.[48] In December 1960, Tribhuvan's successor, Mahendra (r. 1955–1972), launched a coup: political parties were banned, and the monarch took on sole authority.[49]

In the midst of – and certainly not despite – these events, India began to give Nepal "large-scale" assistance, one among many countries to do so.[50] Writing in 1965, Eugene Bramer Mihaly noted how, "thrust into prominence by its strategic position in the Himalayan fastness separating India and China, Nepal has attracted unusual attention from aid donors."[51] Under Mahendra, Nepali "Himalayan neutralism" gathered strength, a process that lessened Indian clout there.[52] Nevertheless, the Indian Aid Mission established in Kathmandu in 1954 helped India to build an organized assistance program, despite ill feeling caused by the country's high-handedness toward the Nepalese.[53] Archaeology became part of that project, many of whose activities occurred within the context of Indian and Nepali membership of the Colombo Plan.

Officially named the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic and Social Development in Asia and the Pacific, that program was (and still is) a majority South and Southeast Asian intergovernmental project. India joined at its start in 1951; Nepal – sponsored by India – would follow a year later. Devised at the January 1950 Commonwealth meeting in Colombo (in then-Ceylon), the project was predicated in part on familiar postwar ideas about development as a path to political, social, and trading 'stability'.[54] More particularly, the project was predicated on shared international concerns about the postwar position of Southeast Asia in the face of the spread of communism: not least due to the October 1949 proclamation of the People's Republic of China.[55] India used the Colombo Plan to provide bilateral technical aid to countries it wished to bring under its influence, sending experts abroad and receiving overseas trainees at 'home'. The ASI's work in Nepal sat in that context.[56] As much as that work was a matter of providing – and emphasizing that India possessed – the technical expertise to be of assistance to Nepal so, too, was this bilateral process also a matter of laying the bureaucratic, infrastructural, and historical groundwork for a past and future Indian place in a country that India wanted to facilitate a continued "special (economic and political) relationship with."[57]

46. Eugene Bramer Mihaly, *Foreign Aid and Politics in Nepal: A Case Study* (London: Oxford University Press and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1965), p.16.
47. Ibid., p.17.
48. Michaels, *Nepal*, pp.217–19 (note 14).
49. Ibid., pp.219–20, 245.
50. Dutt, "Indian Aid," p.672 (note 45).
51. Mihaly, *Foreign Aid*, p.4 (note 46).
52. Ibid., p.64.
53. Ibid., pp.47–50.
54. Daniel Oakman, *Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010).
55. Ibid., pp.32, 65.
56. Dutt, "Indian Aid," pp.672, 677 (note 45).
57. Mihaly, *Foreign Aid*, p.46 (note 46).

Into Nepal

In 1959, the "proposal received from the Indian Aid Mission, Nepal" that began the ASI's work there arrived.[58] Nepal's Department of Archaeology had been established in 1953, and an Ancient Monuments Preservation Act arrived in 1956 "on the British-Indian model."[59] Deprioritizing Nepal's *Guthi* land-trust system, which – rooted in community and caste – had previously been responsible for the care of such places, it became clear that the state lacked archaeological capacity.[60] With the help of S. S. Bhandarkar, head of the Indian Aid Mission and educational adviser to the Nepali government, the work of building that capacity began in May 1960 with Ghosh's deputation.[61]

ASI fieldwork would start after Mahendra's December 1960 coup. The ASI sent two expeditions to Nepal, both of which conducted surveys in collaboration with officials from the Nepali Department of Archaeology. Those expeditions attempted to provide technical assistance geared toward crafting Indian influence, while simultaneously investigating questions key to India's past and future. The first expedition, led by ASI Superintendent for Prehistory R. V. Joshi, took place in the Kathmandu Valley during September and October 1961, investigating Pleistocene geology and searching – unsuccessfully – for prehistoric lithics (stone tools).[62] The second, led by Debala Mitra (1925–2003; ASI Director General 1981–3), ran during the first half of 1962, surveying for archaeological remains in the Nepali Tarai.[63]

Mitra's Tarai survey – taking place in the region, west of Lumbini, traditionally identified as the birthplace of the Buddha – presented several opportunities for India to press temporally deep claims.[64] Mitra's team found pottery associated with Indian sites, whose importance would, as we shall see, come into play during the work's final publication.[65] They also undertook short-lived excavations at the sites of Kodan and Tilaurakot.[66] Some claimed that Tilaurakot was "ancient Kapila-vastu," meant to be the home of the young Buddha.[67] Given the development of Buddhism in the ancient kingdom of Magadha,

58. Ghosh, *Indian Archaeology 1961–62*, p.65 (note 1).
59. Prakash Darnal, "Archaeological Activities in Nepal since 1893 A.D. to 2002 A.D.," *Ancient Nepal* 150 (2002): 39–48, 40. For the quote: Michaels, *Nepal*, p.252 (note 14).
60. Michaels, *Nepal*, p.252 (note 14).
61. On Bhandarkar, see S. B. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations in the Nepal Tarai* (Kathmandu: His Majesty's Government Department of Archaeology, 1968), p.2.
62. Ghosh, *Indian Archaeology 1961–62*, p.65 (note 1).
63. Ibid.
64. Arguments about the status of Lumbini continue, for which see e.g., Max Deeg, "Beyond World Heritage: Lumbinī—The Creation of a More Meaningful Site?," in Himanshu Prabha Ray (ed.) *Decolonizing Heritage in South Asia: the Global, the National and the Transnational* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2018), pp.178–94.
65. Ghosh, *Indian Archaeology 1961–62*, p.71 (note 1).
66. Debala Mitra, *Excavation at Tilaura-kot and Kodan and Explorations in the Nepalese Tarai: Report on the Work Undertaken in 1962 Jointly by the Department of Archaeology, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, and the Archaeological Survey of India* (Kathmandu: The Department of Archaeology, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Financed by the Indian Co-Operation Mission, 1972), p.2.
67. Ghosh, *Indian Archaeology 1961–62*, p.73 (note 1).

parts of which formed the Indian–Nepali border state of Bihar, India's interest in this site had clear reasoning in terms of tracing Indian connections with Nepal.[68] Impossible as it was to make an identification of the site with Kapilavastu, the mere operation of these excavations sowed the seeds of this cross-border link, generating press interest and creating a "fact on the ground" that would continue to serve ASI purposes.[69]

The ASI strengthened such moves by embedding their excavations within a *longue durée* history of responsible Indian archaeological intervention in Nepal. The survey team visited multiple places examined in the late-nineteenth century by ASI official P. C. Mukherji (c.1845–1903), noting that they "had suffered wanton damage at the hands of man."[70] Given the ASI's earlier interest in studying the condition of Indonesia's Borobudur, it is not far-fetched to see this statement as a hint that this regional conservation strategy might be pressed in Nepal, too. The mobilization of Mukherji, however, was about more than future conservation projects. Instead, it was about placing the new ASI work in a continuum with that of an older iteration of the organization, emphasizing the ASI as a long-lived arbiter of proper – but now 'postcolonial' – archaeological knowledge for the surrounding region.

Reports on the Tarai work emphasize that Mukherji's 1899 survey, although not undertaken to the self-declared standards of the 1960s, was nevertheless prosecuted to a better standard than that of Mukherji's ASI contemporary, the German Indologist Alois Anton Führer. Führer's report on similar work conducted at the invitation of Nepal during the 1890s had to be withdrawn from publication after it was discovered that he had fabricated evidence and sold fake relics; Mukherji was sent to Nepal by the historian Vincent A. Smith of the Indian Civil Service to check Führer's results.[71] Debala Mitra suggested of Mukherji that, given "the limited time at his disposal and condition under which he worked practically single-handed with a sole draftsman . . . his work is highly satisfactory." She also excused Mukherji's becoming "partially obsessed by the Buddhist association of the region, which led him to recognize Buddhist monuments in several structures and mounds in spite of the absence of specifically Buddhist antiquities." This, said Mitra, was "quite admissible considering the time in which he worked."[72] Mukherji may not have been perfect, but his work might be mobilized to justify continued Indian archaeological intervention in Nepal.

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68. Made clear in Deo, *Archaeological Investigations*, p.2 (note 61).
69. "Archaeologists' New Find near Lumbini," *The Statesman*, 22 September 1964. Ghosh, *Indian Archaeology 1961–62*, p.73, declares the inconclusive nature of the excavation (note 1). On archaeological circularity, see Nadia Abu el-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
70. Ghosh, *Indian Archaeology 1961–62*, p.72 (note 1).
71. Vincent A. Smith, "Preparatory Note," in Purna Chandra Mukherji, *A Report on a Tour of Exploration of the Antiquities in the Tarai, Nepal, the Region of Kapilavastu; during February and March, 1899*, ASI Imperial Series XXVI, Part 1 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1901), pp.1–22, 1. Führer's report is Alois Anton Führer, *Antiquities of the Buddha Sakyamuni's Birthplace in the Nepalese Tarai*, Archaeological Survey of Northern India Volume 6 (Allahabad: Government Press, 1897).
72. Mitra, *Excavation*, pp.6–7 (note 66).

The Tarai archaeological survey thus offered several useful opportunities for India's work in the country. Shifts in Nepali political power only strengthened such initiatives. Under Mahendra's rule, Nepal had begun to show more favor to China and the Nepalese Communist Party. In the face of this shift, in early 1962 – even as the ASI's Tarai survey took place – members of the Nepali Congress began to make armed raids into southern Nepal from India, assisted by an Indian government content, given its concerns about communism, to ignore such actions.[73] India wanted ways to defend the Tarai from hostile forces who might use it to conduct a southward invasion: during Tribhuvan's reign, India had already intervened militarily in the region in a bid to halt civil unrest there, fomenting anti-Indian campaigns in the process.[74] In this context, survey work, never far from military interests, became even more important a part of Indian strategy than it had been previously. The Survey of India had been undertaking a geographical review of Nepal since 1956.[75] Now, in late 1963, the ASI, working closely with S. S. Bhandarkar, began to organize more archaeological surveys in the Tarai.[76] The Indian government, after all, had an "almost unconscious view that Nepal was actually part of India, and that Nepal benefited from Indian gains."[77] Surveys could tie the countries together in a manner that ensured future Indian and Nepali security.

Bhandarkar worked to strengthen India's hand through such means even as he emphasized that the ASI needed to accede to certain Nepali wishes in the process. Arranging the project, he collaborated with S. B. Deo, Colombo Plan Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University.[78] In doing so, Bhandarkar told Ghosh that "the Nepal government is rather anxious that we do not insist this time upon the 50:50 distribution of antiquities" excavated during the work, as had happened after Mitra's survey.[79] Later, he also explained that India needed to concede that the second survey include a small excavation.[80] Without that concession (which Ghosh happily made), the money granted by Nepal's Ministry of Planning to part-fund the work would not appear.[81] "As you know," wrote Bhandarkar, "the local Department's grants are very meagre and unless they fall in line at least partly with the wishes of the [Nepali] Planning Ministry, they will not get any more budget for either exploration or excavation next year."[82] When necessary, the bureaucracy made sure that Indian–Nepali links remained

73. Mihaly, *Foreign Aid*, pp.111–12 (note 46).
74. Michaels, *Nepal*, pp.218–19 (note 14).
75. Mihaly, *Foreign Aid*, p.90, 147 (note 46).
76. "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation in the Terai Region of Nepal by the Dept. of Archaeology Govt. of Nepal—Ass. Required from the Govt. of India," file 9/5/3/63–M/1963/Monuments, NAI.
77. Mihaly, *Foreign Aid*, p.149 (note 46).
78. For Deo's involvement, see Bhandarkar to Ghosh, 13 September 1963, and correspondence throughout "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation," NAI (note 76).
79. Bhandarkar to Ghosh, 13 September 1963 (note 78).
80. Bhandarkar to Ghosh, 18 March 1964, "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation," NAI (note 76).
81. Ghosh to Bhandarkar, 18 September 1963, "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation," NAI (note 76).
82. Bhandarkar to Ghosh, 18 March 1964, "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation," NAI (note 76).

firm. The next Indian Tarai survey, to which we will return, thus took place under Deo in 1964, examining the area to Lumbini's east.[83]

Meanwhile, Bhandarkar emphasized to Indian officials exactly why such a survey was important. In a letter to Mrs. M. Bhalla, Undersecretary for Nepal Aid in India's Ministry of External Affairs, Bhandarkar made two points. First – and despite the uncertainties around that designation – he mentioned that Tilaurakot was "perhaps Kapilvatsu [*sic*] itself," playing on ideas about India's historic regional connections.[84] Ancient historical innuendo was important to sell the ASI's Nepali work to government officials, regardless of its dubious content. Consequently, Bhandarkar also argued that surveying the Tarai would be useful to archaeologists working in the neighboring Indian border states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. "In fact," wrote Bhandarkar, "our Archaeology [*sic*] is likely to gain more from such excavations than the local one."[85] India needed to use Nepal to assert its own position in the world, and the necessary resources took bureaucratic politesse to obtain.

Indeed, Bhandarkar pushed the Indian–Nepali cause to the possible detriment of other alliances. In March 1964, he wrote to Ghosh noting that "I have only recently persuaded Nepal Government [*sic*] to ask for the services of an Indian Archaeologist as their Adviser [*sic*] who was 'dumped' on them a few months back by UNTAB," the United Nations Technical Assistance Board. Bhandarkar felt that replacing the Irish UNTAB appointee, Liam de Paor (1926–98), with an Indian representative was important because "once he is here, we shall be better able to regulate the Department [of Archaeology]'s work on systematic lines."[86] Even as the ASI had worked with UNESCO in Egypt, so Bhandarkar felt able to reject other UN initiatives if they clashed with Indian interests in Nepal. Specific Indian standards mattered: de Paor's replacement was the ASI-sourced N. R. Banerjee.[87]

Training archaeologists

India also attempted to promote specific archaeological standards in other ways. Despite the concessions made around the Tarai surveys, the ASI asserted its authority in the field by adjudicating the caliber of Nepal's archaeologists: not every Nepali might become an 'archaeologist' in the ASI vein, even if their job title suggested that they already were one.

Under the Colombo Plan, India, via the ASI, was meant to provide field training for a member of Nepal's Department of Archaeology. Yet at least one candidate nominated for this work did not measure up to ASI standards. In late 1962, the government of Nepal

83. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations*, p.2. (note 61).
84. Bhandarkar to Bhalla, 8 December 1963, "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation", NAI (note 76).
85. Ibid.
86. Bhandarkar to Ghosh, 18 March 1964, "Proposal to Carry Out Excavation," NAI (note 76). Liam de Paor was an archaeologist and historian who ultimately spent a year in Nepal, for whom see Michael Ryan, "De Paor, Liam," in *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, October 2009), <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.002466.v1> (15 July 2025).
87. Mitra, *Excavation*, p.4 (note 66).

nominated the department's Chief Research Officer Janak Lal Sharma.[88] Ghosh, however, wrote to Bhandarkar to inform him that, since instruction would take place in English and since Sharma "has not the required background of scientific archaeology, he is not likely to benefit by training in field excavation."[89] The Nepali had acted as a key fixer and go-between for the ASI: arranging customs clearance for a jeep and accompanying Mitra's Tarai survey party throughout its work.[90] Even then, however, Ghosh felt free to cast negative judgment on him.

Indian bureaucracy could discipline Nepal's archaeologists in the most officious way: through controlling admission to the country's vaunted Institute of Archaeology, founded in 1959 under Ghosh's director-generalship. That institution placed its origins in a Wheeler-run School of Archaeology at the site of Taxila (now in Pakistan), in 1944; an attendee, B. B. Lal (1921–2022), would run the new institute.[91] When Ghosh rejected Janak Lal Sharma, the Institute of Archaeology was in fact undergoing a strategic opening to non-Indians, moving beyond the less formalized archaeological training that had occasionally been offered to foreign scholars under Marshall's ASI.[92] This new opening, however, was clearly restrictive, despite the systematic opportunities that it offered in tune with India's international development interests. In the spring of 1963, Nepal nominated another candidate, Indra Puri, a teacher who held a degree in Ancient Indian History and Culture. The ASI replied, however, that it was too late for that year's excavation program and to wait until August.[93] For some, the process of bureaucratic communication could circumscribe opportunities rather than opening them up.

That bureaucracy, however, could also cut both ways. In February 1963, Ghosh was told that, through the Colombo Plan, the ASI had been asked to provide iconographic training for a Nepali student.[94] Instead of rejecting the candidate, Ghosh now had to reply that the ASI could not provide such tuition. He therefore suggested that the Indian official dealing with the case ask New Delhi's National Museum whether they could provide the training instead.[95] Making matters worse, this reply fell on deaf ears: the National Museum was unable to help, so the Indian Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs again asked the ASI whether they could assist.[96] By August, Nepal was said to be

88. J.M. Gugnani to Director General, ASI, 11 October 1962, "Training Facilities for a Nominee of the Govt. of Nepal during 1962–63 in Field Excavation," file 9/6/3/62–M/1962/Monuments, NAI. On Sharma, see Mitra, *Excavation*, p.4 (note 66).
89. Ghosh to Bhandarkar, 5 December 1962, "Training Facilities," NAI (note 88).
90. Mitra, *Excavation*, p.1 (note 66).
91. On the ASI School and Institute and this lineage, see Avikunthak, *Bureaucratic*, p.15, 89, 133 (note 4).
92. On that opening, see Carruthers, "Archaeological," p.47 (note 38). On training under Marshall, see Guha, "Imposing," pp.8–9 (note 6).
93. DDG ASI to A. Phanendrudu, 6 April 1963, "Training Facilities," NAI (note 88).
94. J. M. Gugnani to Director General, ASI, 23 February 1963, "Technical Cooperation Scheme (Colombo Plan)—Training Facilities for the Nominee of the Govt. of Nepal in Iconography/Numismatics," file 15/1/4/63–M/1963/Monuments, NAI.
95. Ghosh to Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, 15 March 1963, "Technical Cooperation," NAI (note 94).
96. J. M. Gugnani to Ghosh, 23 May 1963, and 3 July 1963, "Technical Cooperation" NAI (note 94).

"pressing hard for an urgent confirmation, " even as the ASI stated that the organization could provide no assistance in the area, and that "perhaps the authorities of Calcutta University may be contacted for arranging such a training."[97]

Beyond providing an example of bureaucratic buck-passing, what this back-and-forth reveals is the extent to which the ASI was not always able to assert any sort of standard at all. Try as Indian officials might, fulfilling Colombo Plan requests for technical assistance sometimes proved impossible. Occasionally, then, correspondence relating to those requests had to be filed away: the case, regrettably, closed. There were, however, other chances for India to attempt to create influence.

Reading archaeology

In the library, books could play their part in shaping the future of Nepal's past. Ghosh's report on reorganizing Nepal's Department of Archaeology suggested ordering a "complete list of library books which the . . . Department should have costing about Rs. 20,000/-." In September 1962, however, Bhandarkar wrote to Ghosh to inform him that "since we can spend only Rs. 5,000/- this year, I suggest that we start with the books on India, Asia and the general books included on your list."[98] Ghosh's recommendations, while hardly surprising – they included runs of the ASI journals *Ancient India* and *Indian Archaeology: A Review* – nevertheless reveal what he considered the intellectual possibilities for Nepali archaeology. Those choices not only reflected the trajectories of archaeology in India, but also shaped the intellectual world within which Nepali archaeological practice might now sit.

That world was predominantly an Anglophone one. Nepal's sole official language had become Nepali in 1958.[99] Yet of the 150 volumes Ghosh chose, all but one were written in English: a situation reflective of Ghosh's position in the Anglophone Indian civil service and the lack of volumes in Nepali, which only became a teaching language in 1975 (the Department of Archaeology launched an English–Nepali journal, *Ancient Nepal*, in 1967).[100] Ghosh's recommendations also possessed a preponderance of British authors, emphasizing the colonial lineage from which he drew and an academic year (1948–9) spent at the University of London's Institute of Archaeology (IoA).[101] The "General"

97. D.P. Das to Director General ASI, 1 August 1963, and Director General of Archaeology to Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, 17 August 1963, "Technical Cooperation," NAI (note 94).
98. Bhandarkar to Ghosh, 3 September 1962, "Assistance to the Nepalese Govt. for the reorganisation of their Deptt. Of Archaeology," file 22/13/62/M–1962/Monuments," NAI. The quotation regarding the initial amount is also in this letter.
99. Michaels, *Nepal*, p.253 (note 14).
100. On Nepali in teaching, see ibid., p.247. The list is "List of Books on Archaeology," c. December 1962, "Assistance," NAI (note 98). The French exception was Marie-Henriette Alimen, *Atlas de préhistoire*, vol. 1, *Stations préhistoriques, méthodes en préhistoire, chronologie, matière premières et techniques; Archéologie préhistorique de l'Europe* (Paris: Boubée, 1950). For the journal, see Ramesh Jung Thapa, "Notes and News," *Ancient Nepal: Journal of the Department of Archaeology* 1 (1967): ix–xi.
101. CV from c. April 1967, UNESCO personnel file, Amalananda Ghosh, PER/REC.3/31 C.003.4/62-4, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

section of the list included both Mortimer Wheeler's field manual, *Archaeology from the Earth*, and Leonard Woolley's effort, *Digging up the Past*.[102] Ghosh made certain that the Woolley–Wheeler genealogy endured, while also listing predictable works by older British archaeological figures connected with India: the volumes by John Marshall on Taxila, for example.[103] Ghosh recommended, too, an English-language archaeological manual written by an Indian, Sadanand Kashinath Dikshit, Curator of the Dhubela Palace Museum in Madhya Pradesh.[104] Yet it is books by Ghosh's British connections that predominate.

Taking those publications written by his London teachers, for instance, Ghosh included Ian Cornwall's *Soils for the Archaeologist*, which sought "to synthesize, for those archaeologists whose background is chiefly humanist, the kind of information that an archaeologist trained in certain methods used by the natural sciences can extract from the evidence provided by the [archaeological] deposits themselves."[105] Following this didactic thread, Ghosh also included Kathleen Kenyon's *Beginning in Archaeology*, within which the IoA's wartime director attempted "to explain what archaeology is, how one can set about becoming an archaeologist, and to give an introduction to archaeological methods as an aid to, but not a substitute for, practical experience."[106]

Selecting such volumes, Ghosh indicated the importance of international (and formerly imperial) links to the ASI: a go-between for – but also a credible developer of – such knowledge across Asia. Indeed, attempts to educate Nepali students in India may have failed, but S. B. Deo's work in the Tarai involved initiating students from Tribhuvan University in archaeological field methods.[107] Ghosh, meanwhile, made sure to raise the ASI's own flag, listing Sourindranath Roy's official history of archaeology in India, *The Story of Indian Archaeology, 1784–1947*. That book was a Whiggish affair, commissioned by Ghosh, who "has helped me at every stage of the work."[108] In it, Roy described India's stop-start progress toward ever-more-perfect archaeological practice as one that allowed the country "to establish her lost links with a great past whose magnificence was beyond her distant dreams." Nepal's archaeologists could read all about it, in addition to the importance of Aurel Stein's work outside India's borders, which led to "magnificent discoveries."[109]

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102. Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology from the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, [1954] 1956); Leonard Woolley, *Digging up the Past*, 2nd ed. (London: Ernest Benn, 1954).
103. John Marshall, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila under the Orders of the Government of India between the Years 1913 and 1934*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951).
104. Sadanand Kashinath Dikshit, *An Introduction to Archaeology* (Bombay and Calcutta: Asia Publishing House, 1955), p.iii.
105. Ian Cornwall, *Soils for the Archaeologist* (London: Phoenix House, 1958), p.16.
106. Quotes from Kathleen Kenyon, *Beginning in Archaeology*, 2nd enlarged ed. (London and New York: Phoenix House and Frederick A. Praeger, 1953), p.9. Ghosh listed the 1952 first edition, published by Phoenix House in London.
107. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations*, p.2 (note 61).
108. Roy, *The Story*, p.iii (note 19). On the book, see Mukherjee, "Being and Becoming Indian," pp.228–30 (note 43).
109. Roy, *The Story*, pp.1, 106 (note 19).

Ghosh's list, however, also gave space to publications espousing theories that would prove even more problematic. Despite not endorsing such thinking, he nevertheless included volumes like K. N. Sastri's *New Light on the Indus Civilization*, perhaps then the only book on the matter written by an Indian.[110] Sastri proposed a much earlier date for the Indus Valley sites than previously suggested and "postulated that the Civilisation was partly contemporary with 'Vedic times'."[111] As Sudeshna Guha states, such statements placed the book within a movement that "aimed towards an ostensibly nonbiased narrative of the long ancestry of the Hindu Civilisation": one connected to "the anti-colonial nationalist historiography that prevailed in the 1950s [and which] also launched the archaeological scholarship of the Indian Epic traditions."[112] Whether or not such scholarship, which had clear Hindu nationalist overtones, can be seen "as automatically begetting the fundamentalist politics of [India] today" is a matter, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes, that demands careful reflection. It certainly, however, articulated a primordial interpretation of India's ancient history: one whose Hindu-centrism had clear links to ideas like Greater India. Consequently, Ghosh's list emphasizes how "the articulation of national scholarly authorities was embroiled in these cultural claims and affective bonds."[113]

Nepali archaeologists were thus exposed to such views, in addition to the similar ones of H. D. Sankalia (1908–89). A Professor at Deccan College, Pune, and an adviser to the ASI, Sankalia's influence was pervasive in Indian archaeology; his writings showed how "projects of historicizing the nation's epic past could rest within the sanctified domain of academic and scientific research without robbing the latter of any of its force."[114] In his Ghosh-listed *Indian Archaeology Today*, Sankalia discussed the association of a form of pottery known as Painted Grey Ware with "the traditional *Mahabharata* sites." The suggested connection between such pottery and the epics sat within a research framework that would make its presence felt in Nepal, even as Sankalia cautioned that "we know nothing indeed about other aspects of the people who introduced this pottery."[115] As Sudeshna Guha has argued, such research was "premised upon the rationality of obtaining material truths about a literary and mythological universe."[116] Ghosh's listing of such volumes reflected how the ASI's work in Nepal might, intentionally or otherwise, find itself part of such speculation.

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110. Personal commiunication: Sudeshna Guha, July 2025. K. N. Sastri, *New Light on the Indus Civilization*, vol. 1, *Religion and Chronology* (Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, 1957).
111. Guha, *Artefacts*, p.192 (note 24). 'Vedic times' is a scare quote, but refers to discussion in Sastri, *New Light*, p.5 (note 110).
112. Guha, *Artefacts*, p.193 (note 24). For such scholarship, see e.g. B. B. Lal, "Excavation at Hastināpura and other Explorations in the Upper Gangā and Sutlej Basins 1950–2: New Light on the Dark Age between the End of the Harappā Culture and the Early Historical Period," *Ancient India* 10 and 11 (1954 and 1955): 4–151.
113. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), pp xix, xx.
114. Ibid., p.xix. Cf. H. D. Sankalia, *Born for Archaeology: An Autobiography* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1978).
115. H. D. Sankalia, *Indian Archaeology Today* (Bombay, Calcutta, New Delhi, Madras, London, and New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p.76.
116. Guha, *Artefacts*, p.193 (note 24).

Things fall apart?

That connection occurred particularly in the publications of the two Tarai surveys. Within them, Indian archaeologists pressed the literary and visual technology – the words and pictures – of the archaeological monograph into service to make those publications exemplify speculative connections between material culture, Greater India, and the Indian epics.[117] That materialization was innuendo-laden but clear.

In his survey volume, for instance, S. B. Deo – himself later of Deccan College – emphasized that the site of Banjarahi, which he and his team excavated in 1964, "was littered with sherds of the Grey Ware, similar to that from Hastinapura," a site located northeast of Delhi and mentioned in the *Mahabharata*.[118] Together with other objects found at Banjarahi, these sherds "revealed the antiquity of cultural contacts between India and the present areas of Nepal." Moreover, "the ceramic similarities between early Banjarahi and Hastinapura stand testimony to this." Going further, Deo stated that those similarities themselves "corroborated the ceramic sequence arrived at at Tilaurakot" by Debala Mitra during her work there in 1962.[119] Pottery excavated in Nepal and interpreted by Deo and Mitra thus tied things together in a way that, when written down and illustrated in any number of drawings (Figure 2), at once provided evidence of a cross-border link and, through comparison of the two sites, its own confirmation.

This circular logic also tied events in Nepal to ASI investigations whose connection to Sastri's and Sankalia's work was evident.[120] In the early 1950s, former Wheeler pupil – and future ASI director general – B. B. Lal had undertaken a project called the "Archaeology of the Mahabharata Sites" that sought to "correlate events and sites mentioned in the epic to archaeological excavations at Hastinapura and explorations" elsewhere. Making such identifications was at best ambiguous, yet Lal, despite declaring his reservations, made "the controversial assertion that the pre-Buddhist Painted Grey Ware found at these sites was associated with the Mahabharata."[121] In the final publications of the two Tarai surveys, Deo and Mitra mobilized such logic to connect Hastinapura and Nepal through pottery sequences of this and other related material. Excavating these objects and investigating the stratigraphy of the archaeological trenches within which such material had been found, Deo and Mitra's images of that work used visual norms promoted by Wheeler (Figures 3 and 4) to try and make their fieldwork legible and authoritative, obviating the need for its replication or witnessing by others.[122]

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117. On those technologies, see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1985] 2011), p.25.
118. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations*, p.3 (note 61).
119. Ibid., p.28.
120. On such logic, see Abu el-Haj, *Facts*, p.79 (note 69).
121. Avikunthak, *Bureaucratic*, p.52 (note 4). For Lal's publication and qualification of the work, see Lal, "Excavation," p.151 (note 112).
122. On such "virtual witnessing," see Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan*, p.60 (note 117).

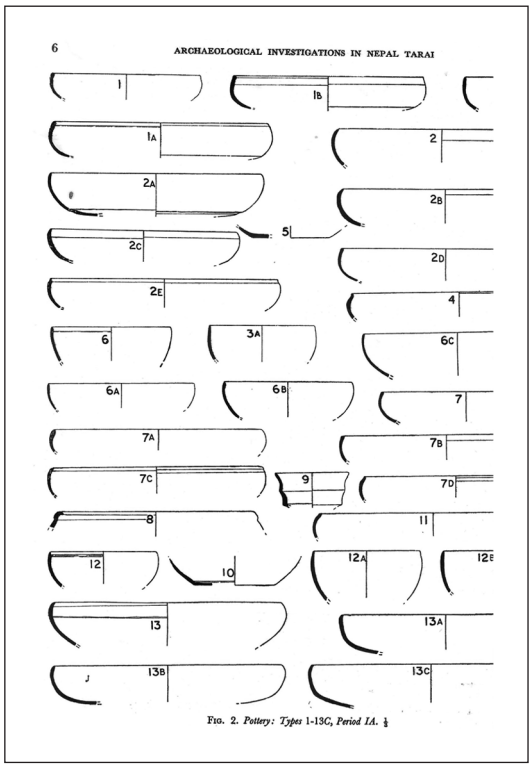

Figure 2. Illustration of pottery types. S. B. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations in the Nepal Tarai* (Kathmandu: His Majesty's Government Department of Archaeology, 1968), figure 2.

Beyond even the time these publications took to appear, however – Deo publishing two volumes in 1968 and Mitra one in 1972 – the ASI's work in Nepal proved something of a failure.[123] After the Tarai surveys, S. B. Deo conducted a small-scale excavation in Kathmandu in January 1965.[124] That work, however, appears to have been the end of the ASI's Nepal intervention. It seems likely that Nehru's death in May 1964 helped to distract attention from the work. Continued Indian food shortages, meanwhile, also diverted resources, as did regional instability: the Sino-Indian War of late 1962 had already complicated such ventures elsewhere.[125] The Indo-Pakistani War of

123. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations* (note 61); S. B. Deo, *Archaeological Excavations in Kathmandu, 1965: Report on the Work Undertaken Jointly by the Department of Archaeology, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, and the Indian Co-Operation Mission, Nepal* (Kathmandu: Department of Archaeology, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, 1968); Mitra, *Excavation* (note 66).
124. Deo, *Archaeological Excavations*, p.1 (note 123).
125. Carruthers, "Archaeological," p.56 (note 38).

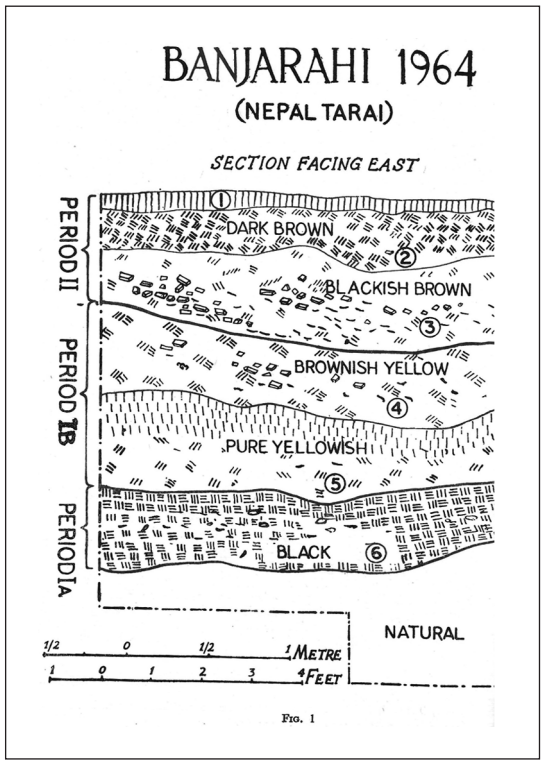

Figure 3. Wheeler-style section drawing, Banjarahi. S. B. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations in the Nepal Tarai* (Kathmandu: His Majesty's Government Department of Archaeology, 1968), figure 1.

August and September 1965 drained Indian resources further, as did the devaluation of the Indian Rupee in 1966, at which point any further ASI schemes in Nepal appear to have been dropped.[126] Officials laid plans for further Indian work in the country throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, but never successfully.[127]

By then, isolated ASI work abroad elsewhere – a return to Afghanistan to help conserve the Bamiyan Buddhas, and a similar initiative at Cambodia's Angkor Wat during the late 1980s and early 1990s – perhaps paid more dividends in terms of visibility and financial outlay.[128] Nepal, meanwhile, had become a competitive archaeological and cultural field. A

126. L. P. Singh to Thomas Abraham, 12 November 1971, "Proposal for Various Schemes of Work in Nepal in the Fields of Archaeology and Allied Disciplines," file 30/4/1972/M, NAI.
127. See ibid. and throughout "Proposal for Various Schemes."
128. On the ASI's 1969 to 1976 work at Bamiyan, see Yoko Taniguchi, "Cultural Identity and the Revival of Values after the Demolishment [*sic*] of Bamiyan's Buddhist Wall Paintings," in Masanori Nagaoka (ed.) *The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues: Heritage Reconstruction in Theory and Practice* (Paris, Kabul, and Cham: UNESCO, UNESCO Office in Kabul, and Springer Nature, 2020), pp.51–70, 55. On the ASI at Angkor, see Michael Falser, *Angkor*

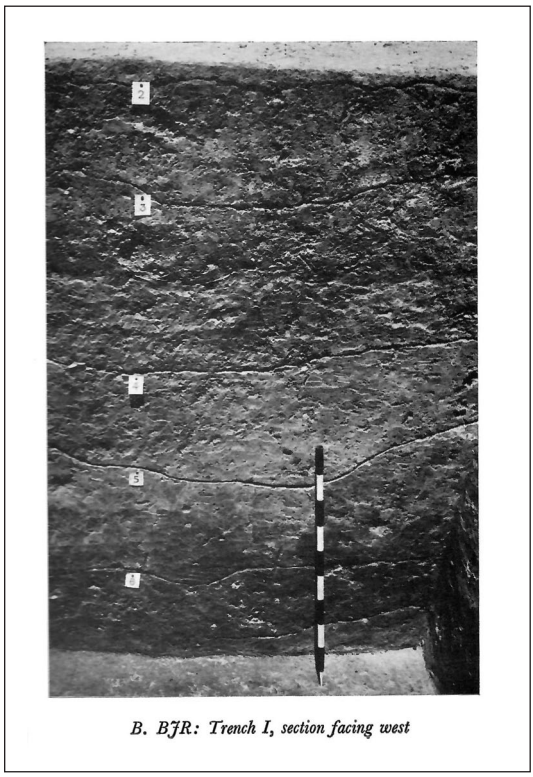

Figure 4. Wheeler-style photograph of a trench section, Banjarahi. S. B. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations in the Nepal Tarai* (Kathmandu: His Majesty's Government Department of Archaeology, 1968), plate II.

1971 report written by Indian Ambassador to Nepal L. P. Singh noted that "we have often endeavoured to point out the presence of numerous foreign competitors" involved in such work, fearing that India's contribution would look paltry despite "our frequent references to our much vaunted common links in the past." Making his point, Singh enclosed Indian reports from the late 1960s that enumerated relevant work being undertaken in Nepal by Britain, West Germany, France, Japan, and the United States.[129]

It was a crowded field, made more crowded by the Nepal Department of Archaeology itself, which excavated outside Kathmandu in 1966 and at Tilaurakot – with Japanese assistance – from 1967 until 1968.[130] L. P. Singh's take on this Japanese work was scathing: "the primitiveness of their methods of interpretation and layout and pursuit of the problems are

Wat: A Transcultural History of Heritage, vol. 2, *Angkor in Cambodia: From Jungle Find to Global Icon* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), pp.282–3.

129. Singh to Abraham, 12 November 1971, "Proposal for Various Schemes," NAI (note 126).

130. Deo, *Archaeological Investigations*, fn.1, p.1 (note 61).

obvious." He also noted that "their sole obsession has been to prove the questionable identification of the site with Kapilavastu," explicitly contradicting Bhandarkar's earlier opinion. Singh, however, noted that, unfortunately for India, the team from Tokyo's Rissho University were "being suffered until the expirty [*sic*] of their agreement."[131]

Today, some sideline the ASI's work in Nepal, even as the area that its officials investigated is valorized. The Lumbini region remains a place of immense global – and Nepali – interest: "Lumbini, the Birthplace of the Lord Buddha" has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997, and Tilaurakot has been on Nepal's "Tentative List" of future World Heritage Site nominations since 1996.[132] A report on a UNESCO-funded geophysical survey at Tilaurakot (in part carried out by archaeologists from Durham University) was, meanwhile, critical of Debala Mitra's work at the site, even as contention surrounds that survey team's continued work in the region and at Lumbini in particular, where Japanese archaeologists have again recently worked.[133] As Japan sponsors site management work there, large-scale excavations take place at Tilaurakot, and both Tilaurakot and Lumbini are mooted by UNESCO as "part of a Buddhist trail," the ASI's work has fallen by the wayside.[134] Lost to the footnotes of archaeological publication and to the machinations of international soft power, the ASI's work in Nepal seems to have fallen apart as quickly as it came together.

Conclusion

The ASI's work in Nepal formed a troubled part of post-Partition India's geopolitical strategy. The organization's surveys were stop-start, ASI-provided training was hit and miss, and the import to Nepal of library volumes was incomplete. At best, India's archaeological work in Nepal was messy, which surely accounts for its later failure in the face of geopolitical hurdles. Embedded in, but constitutive of, its time and place, the ASI's work in Nepal never managed to escape that context, or a country that had become a competitive arena of international assistance and soft power thanks in part to India's own presence there.

Simultaneously, India's archaeological work in Nepal sits within a series of temporal threads whose strands are hard to unravel, and which point to the unevenness with which archaeological knowledge practices moved around the world after 1945. The work is not the oft-recounted story of postwar aid, in which a global power attempts to import technical assistance to a newly independent country. Instead, it is the tale of how a once-colonized place like India might attempt to create new forms of dependency, while

131. Singh to Abraham, 12 November 1971, "Proposal for Various Schemes," NAI (note 126).
132. UNESCO, "Lumbini, the Birthplace of the Lord Buddha," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/666/> (18 July 2025), and "Tilaurakot, the Archaeological Remains of Ancient Shakya Kingdom," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/840/> (18 July 2025).
133. A. Schmidt, R. A. E. Coningham, K. M. Strickland, and C. E. Davis, "A Pilot Geophysical Evaluation of the Site of Tilaurakot, Nepal," *Ancient Nepal* 177 (2011): 1–16, 3. For critique and the Japanese work, see Deeg, "Beyond" (note 64).
134. UNESCO, "On Buddha's Trail, from Lumbini to Tilaurakot" 20 April 2016, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1484/> (18 July 2025); UNESCO, "New Season of Archaeological Excavations Commences at Tilaurakot-Kapilavastu," 23 January 2020, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-season-archaeological-investigations-commences-tilaurakot-kapilavastu> (25 September 2025).

incorporating a complex assortment of colonial-era knowledge practices, responses to them, and theories developing in contemporary Indian archaeology. To fit this work within a neat label, temporal or otherwise, would be foolhardy, particularly given the bumpiness of its day-to-day undertaking.

In that sense, the ASI's work in Nepal provides a true picture of "knowledge in transit." As James A. Secord wrote, "to make knowledge move is the most difficult form of power to achieve."[135] Indian archaeologists in Nepal sometimes achieved that power, but often, too, struggled to attain it: the halting and fragmentary movement of practices and goods within and across the Nepali border provides ample evidence that archaeological transit was not always possible. Given such disjunction, this example suggests the need to redouble efforts to understand archaeology's practices at a critical time in global history. Which of archaeology's many colonial entanglements, for instance, continued to operate, and where? In what ways, conversely, did such practices lose traction? Such questions remain understudied, yet – alongside opening new historical horizons – also bear heavily on the ethical issues central to wider discussions about archaeology and related disciplines today, in which understanding the coloniality of such fields sits centrally. The ASI's work in Nepal demonstrates just how complex answers to those questions might be. It also points to the necessity of answering them.

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135. Secord, "Knowledge," p.670 (note 10).