India has a historic and prehistoric past that goes back many centuries. The knowledge we have accumulated so far only begins to scratch the surface of what we know of the past.

"What I’ve tried to do is to get a sense of the past from what appears on the ground, from artifacts, from monuments, from mounds and related aspects of the material past. Along with this, very crucial to my own work has been understanding how my area of study (archaeology) has actually evolved."

Nayanjot Lahiri
Professor, Department of History, University of Delhi

Unearthing the mysteries of ancient India

Archaeology is the study of the material remains of the past in order to understand the character and changes in human cultures over time. It is through the knowledge and scientific examination of these remains that we are able to understand the lives of our ancestors and also perhaps the reasons why we are what we are today.

Prof. Nayanjot Lahiri is a scholar of proto-historic and historic India. Proto-history usually denotes cultures which have not yet developed a writing system but which sometimes figure in the written sources of other civilizations. In India, though, it is used to designate cultures that coincide with and follow the beginning of food production till the advent of historic India around the sixth century BCE. Proto-history is also used for describing the Harappan Civilization, a specific focus of Prof. Lahiri's work, because even while it had its own script, that still remains undeciphered.

Prof. Lahiri's work includes a historical analysis of the ancient inscriptions of Assam. Her extensive research of the movement of people and goods and trade routes in proto-historic and early historic India has led to rich descriptions of cultures from these eras based on the metallurgical traditions of India. This has in turn helped in connecting not only the archaeological and historical data but also the geological dimensions of these mobilizations.

Prof. Lahiri made a significant contribution to the study of ancient India by highlighting the interface between the use of copper and its alloys as reflected in the archaeological record, and ancient texts as also modern ethnographic literature. Ancient cultural preferences, through this approach, are shown as being an important factor in understanding the minutiae of metallurgical data.

Unearthing the mysteries of ancient India

Prof. Nayanjot Lahiri is an exceptional scholar of proto-historic and early India, and her wide-ranging work on the past and present illuminates many aspects even of contemporary Indian life. Her work on resource mobilization and routes of access in proto-historic and early historic India (1992) deals with archaeological and historical data, and their geological dimensions and integration into the ethnographic aspects of their distribution.

Prof. Lahiri's archival research into the study of archaeology in India ranges from how India's first cities — Harappa and Mohenjodaro — were discovered to the policies regarding monuments in British and independent India. Through this archival research, she has also highlighted how multi-cultural historic places of worship like Bodh Gaya, as reflected in the archaeology of worship there, came to be transformed into sites that were merely rooted in one religious tradition.

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