

## Competitive Exams: Current Affairs 2011: Archeology

### Archaeology

Archaeology in India has progressively changed from antiquarian pursuit to rigorous science. Leading this transformation has been the Archaeological Survey of India. Since its establishment in 1861, it has been digging and discovering 'precious historical sites, and deciphering and describing' thousands of important inscriptions.

The 150th anniversary is an occasion for the nation to acknowledge the ASI's commendable track record and reflect on its future. Alexander Cunningham's 1861 memorandum to Lord Canning, which impressed on the colonial power the supreme need to undertake a systematic survey of monuments in India, led to the appointment of the first Archaeological Surveyor. Ten years later, the ASI became a distinct department, with a monthly budget of Rs. 54, 000.

Since then, it has taken up important excavations at sites such as Kusinagara, which provided an archaeological basis for Buddhist history. It recovered the famous Lion Capital at Sarnath, which has become a part of the national emblem. It unearthed key evidence at the urn burial site at Adichchanallur, which spotlighted the unique features of the Iron Age in South India. The high point in the ASI's history was the 1921 discovery of Indus Valley sites at Harappa (by Daya Ram Sahni) and at Mohenjodaro (by R D Banerji).

While epigraphy, excavation, and setting up site museums were part of ASI activities from the start, the periodic conservation of monuments and sites was taken up only from the 1940s.

Here too, much of the work has been first rate, with the magnificent preservation of the millennium old Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur standing out as an example.

The ASI has shared its expertise with other countries and done significant work at Bamiyan and Angkor Vat.

On the flip side, it has been able to protect only 3, 676 historic sites, leaving an estimated 700, 000 heritage structures unattended. If this huge deficit can be blamed on poor funding by the government and shortage of trained human resources, the delays in writing and publishing excavation reports and the loss of 35 nationally important monuments to encroachment represent serious professional failures.

Another area where the ASI has not done well is in adopting cutting edge technologies for Archaeological Prospection.

The way forward is to correct these deficiencies, provide more autonomy to the ASI's regional circle offices, and do regular performance audits. Finally, the ASI must be encouraged to engage

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local communities in the protection of archaeological heritage, a strategy found to be rewarding in many countries.

Courtesy: The Hindu and Times of India

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