

## eminent alumna – academic Nayanjot Lahiri ...

“Monumental indifference to our heritage”



**Professor Nayanjot Lahiri**

BA His Hons 1979 St Stephen's

MA His 1981

M Phil 1983 and Ph D His 1991

Lecturer D o His Hindu 1982 – 1993

Reader D o His University of Delhi 1993 – 2001

Dean of Colleges 2007 – 2010 and Dean International Relations 2006 – 2007

***The Infosys Prize 2013***

‘Nothing can ever happen twice’ is how Wislawa Szymborska, the 1996 Polish Nobel Prize winner, began a celebrated poem. The poem is quintessentially Szymborskian in that the simplicity of its beginning soon moves on to provide a profound commentary, tellingly captured in these lines:

‘No two nights will teach what bliss is / in precisely the same way, / with exactly the same kisses.’

Szymborska could well have been making an observation about the past — where certain junctures are exceptional, and never quite unfold again in the same way. One such moment in ancient India can still be imbibed in the forests of Chhattisgarh, a state marked by much beauty, and marred by even more bloodshed. Buried in the Ramgarh hill in a jungle, there is a lovely lovely tale, in the form of a 3c BCE epigraph in the ancient Brahmi script. This, the Jogimara cave inscription, simply says:

‘Sutanuka.../ a Devadasi. / Sutanuka by name, a Devadasi. / The excellent among young men loved her, / The sculptor named Devadinna.’

There are other caves of a similar age, one of which is inscribed with an equally ancient epigraph, so evidently, our sculptor happened to be in the midst of a small community of people who lived here. Scholars have debated about how this epigraph can be used to date the ‘devadasi’ practice while others have concerned themselves with the profession of Devadinna. Since the cave was once vividly painted, of which only faint traces remain, it is possible that he may not have been a sculptor but an artist or perhaps, both. Was he separated from Sutanuka? The message bears the marks of a man pining for his beloved. If they were together, what were they doing in the middle of the Surguja forests? There are many things that remain in doubt. But there is little doubt that this love embraced sexual pleasure. The word used to communicate that Devadinna loved Sutanuka is derived from ‘kama’.

There is no historical persona here who speaks about her or his beloved in this charming way. The couple here, on the other hand, is ordinary people, not connected with royalty or riches. Yet, the fact that their presence has been

inscribed in such a simple and intimate manner makes them appear to be surprisingly modern. This is because they epitomise a romantic ideal of the couple-the sort that one sometimes reads about in novels - unencumbered by caste, class or community. For this reason, *I think of Sutanuka and Devadonna as the 'first couple' of ancient India.*

**Nayanjot Lahiri** is professor of history, Ashoka University. The views expressed are personal.

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## **Nayanjot Lahiri**

**The Infosys Prize 2013 in Humanities – Archaeology was awarded to Nayanjot** for her outstanding contribution towards the integration of archaeological knowledge with the historical understanding of India from the earliest times. She is an exceptional scholar of proto-historic and early India. Her wide-ranging work on the past and present illuminates many aspects that include contemporary Indian society.

### Congratulatory Message From Jury Chair **Amartya Sen**

"I am delighted to be able to join Narayana Murthy in congratulating Prof. Nayanjot Lahiri for winning the Infosys Prize for Humanities in the field of archaeology. She is one of the leading archaeologists in the country with very innovative work stretching back from the early days when she was working on the early history of ancient inscriptions of Assam. She has brought to light an understanding of ancient Indian history drawing on archaeological records and historical records and linking them in a way that has transformed the subject"

Her research interests include Indian archaeology, archeological theory, heritage studies and ancient India.

Among her legion works is "Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered".

She began her career as Lecturer in History, Hindu College, 1982 – 1993 .

### The Infosys Citation

Professor Nayanjot Lahiri has researched on diverse themes, and in each case, her emphasis has been to look at the details of the related historical universe and to ascertain how, if at all, the historical picture conveyed by archaeology is reflected in later contexts and traditions. She uses a large variety of sources to analyze the relevant data, and one of her academic achievements has been to add a rich ethnographic perspective to her study of trade and metals. These studies gained further depth from the author's close understanding of the geography and geology of the concerned areas.

Ethnography, geography, geology all add to the rich historical texture of Prof. Lahiri's archaeological studies. In the case of the history of Indian archaeology her knowledge of the sources, including their socio-political nuances, is thorough and impeccable. The impact of Professor Lahiri's research has gone a long way to *establish the discipline of archaeology* as an integral part of the broader world of historical and social science research.