



# Dr. Debala Mitra

The first woman Director General of ASI



The entire outlook of the world on our country's past changed when Dr. Debala Mitra (14.12.1925 – 2.12.2003) became the first woman Director-General of ASI. A pioneering figure in the study of Indian art and architecture, particularly Buddhist monuments, Debala Mitra left an indelible mark through her meticulous scholarship and dedication towards excavations and preservation.

Debala was born to Rakhai Chand Pal, a school headmaster at Khulna in Bengal Province (now Bangladesh). She showed keen interest in learning and exploring things even as a little girl. She stood first in the Bengal presidency among the girls in the year 1940 passing five subjects: history, Sanskrit, geography, mathematics and

hygiene. Young Debala got married while she was about to complete her school education. In fact, her elder brother Nirmal convinced about his sister's passion for learning took a promise from her in-laws to allow Debala to continue her academic journey after marriage. Her husband, Mohanlal Mitra, who had just started his career as a college teacher, and his family believed in the power of education and supported her. She again got first division in Intermediate of Arts and stood 19<sup>th</sup> in order of merit. She got a general scholarship award along with Ashutosh Mukherjee scholarship with exceptional marks in Sanskrit and completed her BA at Ashutosh College in 1944.

Debala completed her MA in ancient history and culture from the University of Calcutta in 1946,



and was awarded with a silver medal. She secured Rai Radhika Prasanna Mukherjee gold medal, Harasundari silver medal, English prize and Jyotsna Pathak memorial prize on different subjects in the examinations. Gaining recognition for her academic prowess, she joined the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1952, served in different capacities in various parts of India and rose to become its first woman Director General in 1975.

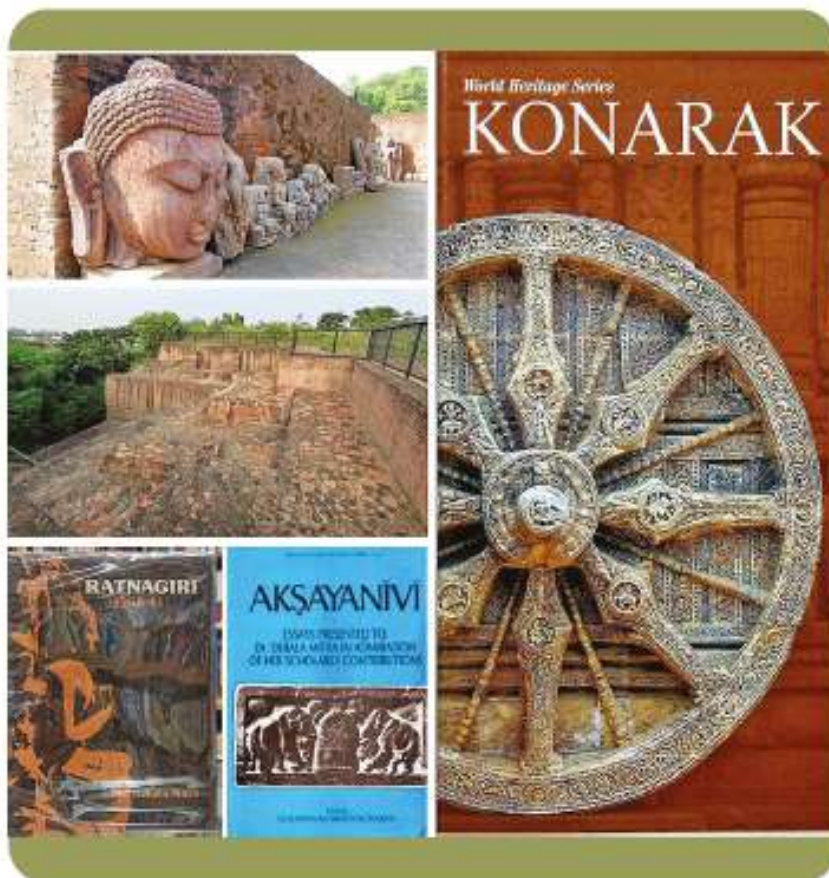
During her tenure at ASI, she played a significant role in archaeological excavations at Ropar (Harappan settlement in Punjab), Nohar, Sothi, Maski, Tamluk of Bengal, and she spearheaded excavations in Jaugada, Udaygiri, Khandagiri, Ratnagiri and many other sites in Orissa. Tilaurakot (identified as Kapilavastu), Kodan of Nepal and in northeast India.

Her excavations at Ratnagiri between 1958-1961 were a landmark achievement in Indian archaeology. Under her leadership, ASI discovered a large stupa surrounded by numerous smaller stupas, which established that Ratnagiri was a thriving Buddhist centre in olden days. The uncovering of three large monasteries, with richly carved stone gateway and central shrine containing a large Buddha statue, illustrated the architectural and artistic prowess of the time. Unearthing a vast and intricate Buddhist monastic complex with rich collection of plentiful sculptures, such as Buddha heads, bronze artifacts and concentrated stupas, attested the cultural and religious richness of Ratnagiri from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Her comparative studies of diverse Buddhist locations reveal the widespread diffusion of Buddhist architecture, their

religious rituals across our country and in neighbouring countries.

As an expert trained in the field of conservation and preservation, she insisted on documentation. Her meticulous documentation of these artifacts in the *ASI's Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India* paved the way for further scholarly foundation for future researches. Dr. Debala during her visit to Bodhgaya in 1987 had seen an 8<sup>th</sup> CE statue of Buddha in *Abhaya mudra*, photographed and catalogued it along with all other statues present there. To her shock, she found this huge statue missing in her next visit to the same monastery in March 1989. She reported this theft to ASI and plunged into action to trace the stolen idol thief. One of her friends drew her attention to a standing Buddha figure published in the catalogue of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which was a new purchase through illegal trafficking in 1990. Thanks to her vivid cataloguing, Debala ascertained that it was the same sculpture that was missing from the Buddhist matam, then the ASI reported the matter to the Indian Embassy, New York. The statue was collected from Metropolitan Museum by ASI in 1999, after many rounds of debates. Thanks to the efforts of Debala, this piece of history returned home, twenty five years after it was stolen from us. She was not alive to see the Buddha statue reinstalled in the pilgrim city of Bodhgaya in 2016.

Balancing family and career is not easy for any caregiver. When one is in a field like archaeology, it needs extensive travelling and toiling under the sun. Considering the times when Dr. Mitra was leading our country's archaeological missions, the sacrifices she and her family made must be numerous.





She was awarded Doctor of Philosophy from University of Calcutta in 1975 for her elaborate thesis on Temple of Telkupi of West Bengal.

Her flair for languages grew with her interest to understand original texts, historical artefacts and various inscriptions. This motivated her to learn foreign languages too later, to work at places of historical importance across the world. She attended the French language course at Alliance Française and Language School at Paris. Meanwhile, she studied the art of Cambodia at I'cole du Louvre during 1962-1963. She was awarded Dr. B.C law gold medal by the Asiatic Society for her outstanding contribution in the field of architecture, art and iconography.

She spearheaded extensive archaeological explorations and excavations at various sites across India unearthing valuable insights into the country's rich historical past. Her leadership was

instrumental in the conservation of significant historical sites, including Buddhist monuments in eastern India. Her research works in Buddhist art and iconography, particularly on the Buddhist monuments of Orissa, significantly helped the scholars across the globe advance their understanding of this field. Her works on *Ratnagiri, Ajanta, Telkupi: A Submerged Temple-Site in West Bengal, Buddhist Monuments and Bronzes from Achutrajpur Orissa, Indian Archaeology – A Review*, have become standard references. Her scholarly contributions are characterised by meticulous detail, insightful analysis and a deep understanding of Indian art and archaeology.

Dr. Debala Mitra lectured extensively on Indian art and culture both in India and abroad. She participated in many international conferences and seminars sharing her expertise and contributing to the global understanding of Indian art and archaeology.

With her vast knowledge on Buddhist iconography, she chaired the National Committee for Lumbini development project and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and served on numerous other bodies including Sri Lanka's cultural triangle. She was also a member of the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology, Asiatic Society and National Council for Science Museums.

More than an archaeologist, Dr. Debala Mitra was a visionary who saw history as a dynamic entity that needed to be understood and preserved. She helped us shun the colonial mindset in approaching our history and break their narratives, through her research. Her works became a cornerstone for scholars interested in Indian art history. Through her expertise, she continuously played a crucial role in promoting archaeological research and documentation, creating strategies in combating art theft and illicit trafficking, ensuring the preservation of India's rich cultural heritage for future generations.

