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and more, at ISEAS'

## **REGIONAL OUTLOOK FORUM 2012**

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*Mr S. R. Nathan, flanked by Ambassador K. Kesavapany, Director, ISEAS (left) and Prof Wang Gungwu, Chairman, ISEAS Board of Trustees, (right) is welcomed into the ISEAS library. File photograph by Joyce Iris Zaide.*

## **ISEAS' New "Distinguished Fellow"**

The scholar in President Sellapan Ramanathan, popularly known as S.R. Nathan, came to the fore when he decided to join ISEAS on his retirement from the presidency in 2011. In a sense, his return to academia completed an intellectual journey that was interrupted early in his life because of personal and wider political circumstances.

President Nathan's father died when he was only eight. Although he studied at top schools, including Anglo-Chinese Primary School, he left home at 16 to work in an architectural firm and later moved to Muar, in Malaya. After the end of World War II, he took a break from his job as a clerk at the Public Works Department to pursue his studies. Helped by a S\$2,000-a-year bursary from Shell, he studied Social Work at the University of Malaya. He graduated with a distinction in the Diploma in Social Studies, following which he worked as a medical social worker and Seamen's Welfare Officer in the Ministry of Labour.

That close connection between study and work helps to explain a part of his personality: the deep thinker behind the quick doer.

Life would make Mr Nathan do a lot. His meteoric rise would take him to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence,

in both of which he held high-profile posts. He was a trouble-shooter who had to deal with terrorist acts in Singapore, for example. Upon his retirement from the civil service, he headed Singapore Press Holdings before being appointed High Commissioner to Malaysia and then Ambassador to the United States – two critical diplomatic postings for Singapore.

Mr Nathan's ascension to the presidency in 1999 marked the culmination of his contributions to the state. That part of his career stretched over a long 12 years.

Now, in joining ISEAS as a Distinguished Fellow, President Nathan will be able to "study" once more. However, that "study" will not be divorced from his rich experiences in fields that have been crucial to Singapore's well-being. Instead, he can be expected to draw on a lifetime of work to reflect on some of the issues that are integral to ISEAS' work as a premier research institute. He is also spending time at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. He was the founding Director of the School's predecessor, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

It is clear that it is never too late to return to academia – even for the country's President.

# REGIONAL OUTLOOK FORUM 2012

Below: Luncheon Speaker Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad and ISEAS Director Ambassador K. Kesavapany at the Regional Outlook Forum 2012 and (right) Keynote Speaker Dr Zhu Min, Deputy MD, IMF.



## Perak Academy honours ISEAS Chairman, Director

THE PERAK ACADEMY has conferred the title of 'Fellow' on both ISEAS Chairman Professor Wang Gungwu, and to ISEAS Director Ambassador K. Kesavapany. The honours were handed to them by HRH Raja Nazrin Shah, Crown Prince of the state of Perak, Malaysia at ISEAS earlier this year.

Prof Wang's honour comes in recognition of his outstanding achievements in the study of Chinese history including migration, nationalism and politics, and his contributions to strengthening ties between the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Perak Academy. Ambassador Kesavapany's honour recognizes his distinguished achievements in promoting and strengthening ties between the people and governments of Malaysia and Singapore, and supporting the co-operation between the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Perak Academy. Also present at the ceremony at ISEAS was Dato' Seri Dr Abdullah Fadil bin Che Wan, Chairman of the Perak Academy.



HRH Raja Nazrin Shah and Prof Wang Gungwu HRH Raja Nazrin Shah and Ambassador K. Kesavapany



## New Times Require New Thoughts

ISEAS' new Deputy Director DR OOI KEE BENG ruminates on what lies ahead

The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies is now 43 years old, and remains one of the major research institutes based in the region. The rapid developments that are taking place, both globally and regionally, keeps the Institute and its research staff on their toes.

2011 was an eventful year. The global economic crisis that began in 2008 shows no sign of going away anytime soon, and played backdrop to social upheavals throughout the Middle East; to political unrest and structural turbulence in the United States and Europe; and to huge natural disasters in Asia.

For ISEAS research, all this requires sensible shifts in concepts, methods, goals, and use of resources.

Firstly, there is a need for our researchers to make more use of each other, and perceive each other as a resource. This can be encouraged in different ways. Our in-house seminars should develop into discussions among peers on each other's ongoing projects. The tendency has often been for researchers to be overly polite and to avoid criticism of one another's work. Quality control is thus reduced to the end point when peer reviews are carried out by the publisher. This can be too little and too late. We should encourage in-house constructive criticism.

Tighter cooperation among researchers within the different research programmes will give significant returns, especially if enhanced by frequent cooperation among the programme coordinators. The latter point – coordinator cooperation – is vital to the well-being of the institute. Good decisions are most probable when based on good advice. And good advice is most forthcoming when the institutional synergy is excellent.

Since ISEAS is already an enviably advanced

institute supported by a highly efficient administrative unit with a proficient computer division; a publications unit that is versatile and professional; and a research library that boasts one of the world's best collections of material on Southeast Asia; we have our work cut out for us.

We merely need to make more use of what we already have.

Where ISEAS researchers are concerned, this means that the flow of ideas, be these about research or institutional matters, must be constructive, multi-directional, and increasingly structured.

I informed the ISEAS Board of Trustees during the job interview that I would seek to do at least two things if I became Deputy Director. One was that ISEAS should see itself as a key resource for young scholars from throughout Southeast Asia. This can be done for example, through a Young Scholar programme, or a disciplined focus on mentorship for research associates and young visiting fellows. Such scholars should certainly include chosen members of the civil service, as was one of the goals of ISEAS when it was formed in 1968.

My second point was about research itself and about the need for new thinking not only where disciplinary divisions are concerned but also about empirical work in general.

We live in a time of increasing regionalism, and rightly, we have been doing a lot of work in that direction, including many pioneering projects of a historical nature. However, painting the big picture easily becomes a fad and a goal in itself. This needs to be strongly balanced by work that may seemingly go in the other direction. But the two are interconnected.

Regionalism means that the role of the nation has changed, and in many cases

has become less significant than before. Sub-national and transnational trends thus become increasingly important to watch. Where politics is concerned, the focus on nations and national actors must be complemented by studies that are anthropological in nature. The same thing goes for economics, where more attention should be paid to transnational economics, socio-economic matters and the political economy. Social and cultural studies are necessarily rather anthropological in character, but even there, approaches other than the national need to be adopted.

What all this means is that concrete empirical studies should be encouraged institutionally. Much discussion on this score needs to be done internally in the coming months.

ISEAS has become a key resource for information about Southeast Asia, not only through our books and seminars, but also through briefings that our fellows give to journalists, scholars and diplomats, as well as through their participation in conferences around the world.

The latter amounts to a lot of cutting-edge work, and the result should be brought home in effective ways; such as through more public seminars by our fellows being held at ISEAS, and through our working papers series and our many journals. The writing of opinion pieces et cetera, should not be the final expression of this expertise.

Ambassador Kesavapany recruited me into ISEAS over seven years ago. I am extremely grateful to him for what I managed to accomplish under his directorship, particularly in the study of Malaysia and Singapore.

It is time for me to give something back to the institute. I will need the help of all at ISEAS, and friends of ISEAS, for this.



**We live in a time of increasing regionalism, and rightly, we have been doing a lot of work in that direction, including many pioneering projects of a historical nature.**



# The Belitung Shipwreck Controversy

*Nota Bene: After this article was published, the Smithsonian very recently came to a decision against hosting the exhibition as originally scheduled for spring 2012, but is instead looking into the possibility of re-excavating the site.*

BY LU CAIXIA

For twelve centuries, a historical treasure lay untouched beneath the Gaspar Strait, one of the northern entrances to the Java Sea, unknown even to the inhabitants of a nearby island who ply its turquoise waters. It was not until one August day in 1998 that fishermen searching for sea cucumbers stumbled upon the amazing cache – the largest collection of Tang Dynasty artefacts ever seen, entombed in the oldest Arab vessel found in East Asian waters.

The Belitung shipwreck cargo, as it was later named after the island which lay a mere three kilometres away, has now encountered a fierce storm of another kind after emerging from its watery grave. The precious cargo – some 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers and other ceramics, as well as lead ingots, bronze mirrors and intricate gold and silver vessels – which survived the sea currents for more than 1000 years and even the political turmoil following the fall of Indonesian President Suharto, is now caught in a maelstrom of strong objections, by some American and European archaeologists and museum representatives, to its exhibition in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (part of the Smithsonian). These objections were expressed earlier this year to protest the Smithsonian's plans to exhibit the Belitung artefacts in Washington, D.C. They worry that the excavation was not conducted in accordance with the ethics governing underwater heritage and that the artefacts were excavated by a private company without proper recordings being made.

In 2005, Seabed Explorations, engaged by the Indonesian government in 1998 to conduct the excavation, sold the bulk of the cargo to Singapore for US \$32 million. Subsequently, the Singapore Tourism Board, the National Heritage Board of Singapore and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery collaborated to mount the exhibition 'Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds'. After it opened in February this year at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore, complaints by archaeologists, both within and outside the Smithsonian as well as museum as-

sociations, led to the postponement of the planned exhibition in Washington. They pointed out that the Smithsonian is bound by an ethics statement specifying that members shall "not knowingly acquire or exhibit artefacts which have been stolen, illegally exported from their country of origin, illegally salvaged or removed from commercially exploited archaeological or historic sites."

Prominent among those who objected to the exhibition was Elizabeth Bartman, president of the Archaeological Institute of America, who issued a strongly worded statement saying that while the excavation and disposition of the materials may be technically "legal", involvement by the Smithsonian in the exhibition "will serve to blur the distinction between bona fide archaeology and treasure hunting", putting it "in the indefensible position of aiding those who believe that antiquities are a commodity to be mined for personal or corporate financial gain."

Echoing her concerns, a group of archaeologists and anthropologists from the National Academy of Sciences wrote to Smithsonian Secretary Wayne G. Clough, cautioning that hosting the exhibition would "severely damage the stature and reputation" of the institution. Among the signatories of the letter was Dr. Robert C. McAdams, former Secretary of the Smithsonian. Some critics cited the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, which outlaws trade in marine heritage. However, others were quick to point out that the Convention only came into force in 2009 and that neither the United States nor Indonesia had ratified the Convention.

Not all experts critical of the commercial nature of the Belitung cargo's excavation object to its exhibition. James Delgado, director of the Maritime Heritage Program at the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, is one critic who argues for a thoughtful exhibition that not only highlights the historical value of the exhibits, but also clearly indicates what cannot be learned, interpreted or shared as a result of looting and contrasts what non-commercial excavations have achieved in offering a more scien-

tific approach. "I see such an exhibition as a tremendous opportunity to educate and inspire discussion on the subject," he said. Nevertheless, Delgado thinks that the debate is not simply about the Belitung. He said: "In many ways the questions have more relevance in terms of discussing what happens with new and important shipwreck discoveries in Indonesia. I believe, as do many of my colleagues, that significant shipwrecks should be excavated scientifically, with adequate funding to recover all artefacts and to preserve, study, and interpret them."

Seabed Explorations founder Tilman Walterfang defended the company's work on the Belitung, arguing that immense pressure to save the shipwreck in the face of heavy looting and a volatile political climate dictated the pace and manner in which the artefacts were retrieved. When first approached by the Indonesian government for help, commercial benefit was the last thing on his mind; it became an emergency operation to save as much of the cargo as possible before it fell prey to looters.

Paul Johnston, curator of Maritime History at the Smithsonian questions the reasoning that political, legal or cultural conditions in Southeast Asian countries justify a less than professional approach. He asked those who raised this argument: "Do they suggest that international professional ethics, or the principles of scientific archaeological investigation, should not apply, because somehow things in Southeast Asia relating to culture or money are different?" He also feels that circumstances differed from country to country and case to case, pointing out that Cambodia has signed the UNESCO Convention, and that problems in conducting proper underwater archaeology do not apply to the region as a whole.

Walterfang argues that not all com-

mercial operators should be tarred with the same brush either. "Everything we did you would not expect from greedy treasure hunters," he said. He added that the subsequent conservation work took six years to complete, after which a 750-page research report and another 150-page publication dedicated to the Changsha artefacts were commissioned and financed by his company.

Julian Raby, director of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, found it noteworthy that Walterfang wanted the cargo to be kept as a single entity when scouting for potential buyers. While recognizing the concerns, he dismissed those who simply objected to any commercial involvement and yet were unable to propose feasible alternatives. He said: "I think if nothing had been done, we would have lost a very important historical record. Many archaeologists who complained did not understand the importance of the cargo or the actual circumstances at the location of the shipwreck."

According to Nia Naelul Hasanah Ridwan, a maritime archaeology researcher with the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries in Indonesia, the National Committee for Salvage and Utilisation of Valuable Objects from Sunken Ships (PANNAS BMKT) was formed in the late 1980s to deal with the issue of salvaging sunken treasures. Due to the rampant looting of unprotected shipwrecks and difficulties at government level to manage the salvaged artefacts, regulations were established to allow private companies to survey, explore and remove shipwreck artefacts. To complicate matters, management of PANNAS BMKT changed hands from the Minister Coordinator of Politics, Law, and Defence to the Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries around the same time the Belitung was salvaged, leading to changes in views as to whether the artefacts should in fact have been sold. According

*From the Belitung shipwreck – Opposite page: A magnificent ewer with an incised design that originated in West Asia.*

*Above left: One of the three earliest known intact examples of blue-and-white ware*

*Above centre: An octagonal gold cup, adorned with Central Asian figures.*

*Above right: A Changsha bowl with the Chinese characters for "tea bowl" inscribed.*

*All images*

*© John Tsantes & Robb Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*

**The realities of Southeast Asia are harsh. With a dearth of public funds available for maritime archaeology, wrecks discovered have either to be left to looters or excavated in conjunction with commercial interests. There seems to be no other option at the present.**



to Walterfang, the Indonesian government decided on a one time payment of US\$2.5million and the return of the cargo excavated from the Intan (another 10th century shipwreck found in the Java Sea), as a final settlement for its share.

However according to Nia, there were also different opinions in Indonesia as to whether private companies should be allowed to survey, salvage, remove and sell anything from shipwrecks found in Indonesian waters. Although a law was passed in 1992 to mandate the protection of cultural heritage objects, earlier regulations allowing private companies to explore shipwrecks remain in force. Looting continues to be a serious problem for Indonesia's underwater cultural heritage, and culprits are not just private companies, but also local fishermen who hunt for artefacts and even iron from old ships to supplement meagre incomes. "We always try to raise public awareness through workshops, focus group discussions, seminars and training whenever we go to the field ... Our audiences are the local government and local people such as villagers, local representatives, religious figures, divers, fishermen, youths, NGOs etc," she said.

While seemingly irreconcilable differences remain, some feel that the ongoing debate is nonetheless a positive development and important for the future of maritime archaeology. Former Foreign Minister of Singapore George Yeo, who played a pivotal role in obtaining the Belitung cargo for Singapore, sees it as necessary for the development of greater international supervision of the salvage of old shipwrecks. "Singapore is all in favour of greater international oversight of the excavation of old ships. Even if international agreements cannot be forged or enforced, moral pressure should be brought to bear. It is a good thing that the Tang (Belitung) Cargo should be the subject of discussion about the ethics of maritime archaeology," he said.

John Miksic, an expert on Southeast Asian archaeology, feels that regional collaboration could help overcome problems of a lack of resources and expertise. He notes that "there is a duplication of effort right now and Southeast Asian countries should cooperate", suggesting that they could have one coherent policy which takes note of the UNESCO Convention, and possibly joint

underwater research teams rather than separate teams for each country.

Pamelia Lee, a former senior consultant of the Singapore Tourism Board who also played a major role in bringing the artefacts to Singapore, feels that all those who believe in the protection of underwater heritage must find more realistic and workable solutions. She asked: "It begs the question: could Tilman Walterfang, the explorer salvager, be following equally high conservation and documentation standards, but carrying out the operation in accordance with the circumstances?" One suggestion she made is to grade commercial companies for professionalism, which separates treasure hunters merely in the game for profit from those who are more responsible and who fulfil the objectives of UNESCO and the scientific community. She said: "In my view, it is not the 'hat' that is worn, UNESCO or non-UNESCO, that is important. What is important is the integrity of the individuals leading the excavation as well as the depth of thinking and patience of the financial backers."

The realities of Southeast Asia are harsh. With a dearth of public funds available for maritime archaeology, wrecks discovered have either to be left to looters or excavated in conjunction with commercial interests. There seems to be no other option at the present. However, the degree to which a scientific element is stressed during the excavation can distinguish what is desirable from what should be condemned. The excavation of the Belitung has been acknowledged as an admirable example of what can be achieved under difficult conditions in Southeast Asia. What distinguished the company that carried out the Belitung project from some other commercial operators is that the ship structure itself was properly recorded, the cargo was kept together rather than dispersed, and the finds were well conserved, studied, catalogued, and published. A global exhibition was created and a reconstructed dhow based on information gleaned from the excavation sailed across the Indian Ocean. Few non-commercial excavations have achieved comparable results with a project of this scale and complexity. It is difficult to imagine how this particular project could have been financed or organized without commercial involvement.

Dr Michael Flecker, maritime archaeolo-

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gist and supervisor on the Belitung excavation, sums up the situation thus: "In an environment where most wreck-sites are threatened with looting or outright destruction, the priority must be to document those sites and the artefacts recovered from them before too much information is lost. The disposition of the artefacts after thorough documentation, while of great importance, should not dictate policy, for if commercial transactions are banned outright, the finders will be driven underground, and there will be no hope of archaeological intervention. Archaeologists, governments and salvors must co-operate. Archaeologists must be more tolerant, more flexible, for there is so much to lose. Governments and salvors must be made aware of the importance of good archaeological documentation. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint, the cargo from a properly documented wreck-site is worth more financially than the cargo from a looted site. Until cultural awareness gains the upper hand over profits and politics, this may be the best argument to ensure that irreparable damage is not done to the non-renewable resource of historic shipwrecks in Southeast Asia."

*Excerpted from an article that appeared in the International Institute of Asian Studies' Autumn 2011 Newsletter. The full article is available online at <http://www.iias.nl/the-newsletter/newsletter-58-autumn-2011>*



Archaeology team conducting ground penetrating radar survey in Singapore. Photo by Lim Chen Sian.

## NSC Field School of Archaeology draws interest from around the world

The first session of the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Field School of Archaeology has kicked off this year with students from ten countries participating in an almost month-long programme. Aimed to contribute to an increased understanding of the ancient and intimate links that have long connected Asian countries, and to emphasize the history of intra-Asian interactions over the past 2,000 years, the programme will also help create a community of scholars from the East Asia Summit (EAS) region.

With a curriculum packed with field trips, lectures and laboratory training, the programme started in Siem Reap on 9 January and will conclude in Singapore on 4 February 2012. The field school aims to bring together scholars from the East Asia Summit countries. The 18 East Asia Summit countries are: Australia, Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Russia,

Singapore, South Korea, New Zealand, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States.

This year, ten participants have been chosen from the EAS countries, and five additional Cambodian students will be participating in the Cambodian segment of the training project.

Teaching staff include Cambodians, Australians, and Singaporeans. Other institutions within the EAS that are collaborating in this project include the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), APSARA, the University of Sydney, and the Australian National University.

The lectures incorporate broad topics that cover the historical, economic, and cultural impact of intra-Asian

interactions, as well as specific instructions on the analysis and interpretation of Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramics, one of the most important sources of data for any study in this field.

In Cambodia, students will work in the Christie Centre, a laboratory built in Siem Reap by the University of Sydney, on Chinese and Khmer ceramics collected from recent field work conducted in the Angkor area by a Cambodian-Australian team. In Singapore, students will visit local museums and help analyze Chinese and local ceramics excavated from 14th-century sites.

For details see: <http://bit.ly/fieldschool>

Ban Chiang excavation pit, Thailand. Photo by Foo Shu Tieng



Boddhisatva Figurine, National Art Gallery Site, Singapore. Photo by Lim Chen Sian





# Buddhist Revival in Asia

BY SONALI DHINGRA

The International conference on 'Buddhist revival in Asia' held at ISEAS on 15th and 16th December, 2011 brought together scholars to discuss diverse issues on the resurgence of Buddhism manifested across a vast geographical area stretching from India and Sri Lanka and Nepal, across Myanmar and Thailand, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The papers and discussions that emerged from this conference are a significant addition to the debates and research on the modern revitalization of Buddhism – one of the most striking cultural phenomena of today's times.

Papers were presented on many themes including the political dimension of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, China and India (Anuruddha Pradeep Perera, Birendra Nath Prasad); the role of individuals such as Anagarika Dharmapala, Kripasaran Mahathera, B.R. Ambedkar and D.D. Kosambi as revivers of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka (Gitanjali Surendran, Meera Kosambi and H.L. Seneviratne).

Buddhist links between India and China during the first half of the 20th century in the context of the larger pan-Asian movement to restore Buddhism were the subject of Tansen Sen's paper while Dan Smyer Yu talked about the re-shaping of Buddhism in a secular garment as the fundamental source of morality and spirituality for the imagined new Chinese republic.

Gareth Fisher explored the role of merit (*gongde*) in the revival of Buddhism in mainland China today. Other paper presenters discussed specific doctrines or manuals of Buddhism in detail and their links to Buddhist revival in the context of different countries. While Kitsiri Malalagoda discussed two 19th century manuals produced in Sri Lanka and their heterogeneous readership to understand an aspect of Buddhist revival, Chien-Te Lin's paper asked if there was a causal relation between the doctrine of the tathāgatarāgha and the decline of Buddhism in China and India. Expanding Buddhist networks and engaged Buddhism as an important aspect of the resurgence of Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan and Korea was also explored (Weishan Huang and Santosh K. Gupta).

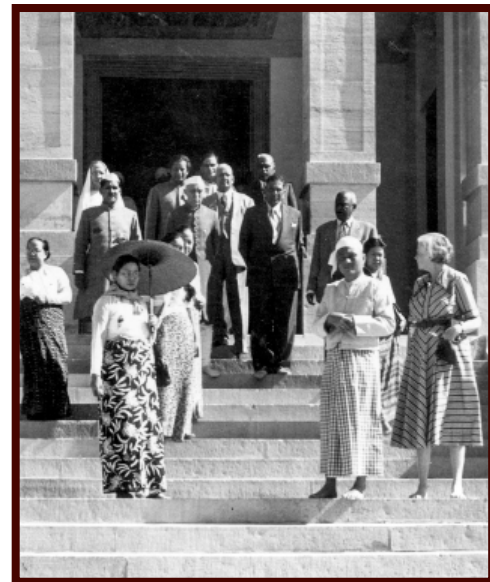
The resurgence of Theravāda Buddhism was discussed in the context of 19th-20th century Nepal (Milan Shaky Ratna); the connections of Theravada Buddhism with the early Buddhist revival in India (Gitanjali Surendran) and more recently, Theravāda Buddhism as part of the Buddhist Revival in mainland China and Hong Kong in the past two decades (Bill M. Mak).

The role that Buddhist archaeology, conservation

and restoration has played in the resurrection of ancient Buddhist sites and the resurgence of Buddhism in India, the land of its birth, was also scrutinized. The linkages between modern revival and local patrons, through the study of the impressive archaeological and architectural conservation programme at Sanchi, were brought out by Nayanjot Lahiri in her paper. Sraman Mukherjee discussed the rediscovery of Buddhist relics, their subsequent enshrinement in Viharas and the politics of Buddhist religious revivalism, secularization of archaeological heritage, and configurations of sacred space in colonial India. The importance of Buddhist symbolism for Indian nationalist leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and the subsequent conflict between the preservation of the ancient Buddhist and historical heritage of India and the development concerns of the new Indian nation was researched in a paper by Upinder Singh. In my paper, I explored another dimension in the study of sacred Buddhist sites by connecting ancient Buddhist archaeological remains with the larger multi-religious context, as centres of pilgrimage, heritage and tourism in India today. Finally, a paper by M. K. Edwards Leese investigated ways in which Buddhist sites could be revived in the future.

In concluding discussions, many compelling questions were raised – is the term 'revival' really appropriate to describe the developments in modern Buddhism? Due to its remarkable malleability, Buddhism has re-emerged in vastly different forms from what is termed as 'original' Buddhism. In this re-shaped form, it was discussed that perhaps 'reinvention' is a term that better captures the character of modern Buddhism. The process of revival would also be better understood by taking into account the nature of continuities and discontinuities in pre-modern and modern Buddhism.

As the research papers showed, a great deal of diversity in the trajectories of modern Buddhism in different countries and regions and even within nations can be discerned. A comparative perspective, for instance of the differing roles played by the state in the revival of Buddhism as in India and China can also be explored. The variety of contributors and patrons to the modern revival of Buddhism, the diversity at the level of doctrine and practice in different regions, as well as the pan-Asian linkages were some of the other important themes that came to light from the panel discussions. Lastly, the concept of "World Buddhism" suggested in Peter Van Der Veer's paper was discussed as being appropriate to describe the global form of Buddhism today.



Top: Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, and U Nu, Prime Minister of Burma, are shown in this rare photograph taken at the International Buddhist Conference in Sanchi, India, on 29 November 1952. Photo: Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

Facing page: New ideas, discussion and debate emerged from the Buddhist Revival Conference in Singapore in December 2011. Top right photograph of Keynote Speaker Dr T.C.A. Raghavan, High Commissioner of India, taken by Rahim M. Amin. All other photographs by Joyce Iris Zaide.



# “No More Nonsense from Men!”

## A Workshop on Women Who Weren’t Afraid to Speak Out



From left: Dr Theresa Devasahayam, Gender Studies Programme Coordinator; Aparajita Basu, Visiting Research Fellow, ISEAS; Arunima Datta, PhD Candidate National University of Singapore; Dr Jayati Bhattacharya, Visiting Research Fellow, ISEAS; and Meira Chand, Author.

BY JAYATI BHATTACHARYA & APARAJITA BASU

On 7 December 2011, the Gender Studies Programme and the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at ISEAS organized a day-long workshop entitled, **Past and Present: Voices of South Asian Women in Malaysia and Singapore**. Taking as its subject, the fiery and the feisty – such as Singapore-based women’s rights activist, Shirin Fozdar (quoted above, battling Singaporean polygamy), struggling coolie women on colonial Malayan plantations, or the Indian National Army’s female warriors – the event was designed to capture the dynamism and agency of women who took part in transnational migrations from the Indian sub-continent to the Malayan peninsula during and after the colonial period. This flew in the face of popular understandings of history which accord diasporic women the status of mere footnotes to the contributions of men in the region.

The aim was to note the different roles women played at different levels of diaspora, from the anglicized and upper crust to the blue collar and overworked. The presentations and discussions at the workshop were conducted by students, writers and scholars from Singapore and Malaysia as well as the United States, and turned out to be eye-opening, to

say the least.

Acclaimed writer, Meira Chand spoke of her upcoming novel, *Brave Sisters*, based on the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of Subhas Chandra Bose in Malaya. The conventions and history of the Bohra business community women in Singapore was presented by Rosy Nakhooda, whose family has been in Singapore for more than three generations now. The stories and struggles of the subaltern Indian coolie women in plantations as well as the efforts for liberation and empowerment by travelling Indian feminists, represented by the activities of Shirin Fozdar in Singapore for example, were discussed at length. The unusual phenomenon of Chinese girls being adopted by Indian families and brought up as Indian women naturally sparked many questions and much interest. Many of the papers usefully addressed the principal theme raised in Professor Barbara Andaya’s keynote lecture, the role of women in world religions.

All in all, the workshop successfully demonstrated how important living in Southeast Asia was for changing certain cultural and social norms, and how South Asian women rather than South Asian men alone, were instrumental in

the rich cross-cultural exchanges and encounters that occurred.

What was the purpose of a workshop such as this one? It was an attempt to analyze the place of women in the diaspora within the paradoxes of gender and how it has come to be played out beyond the South Asian subcontinent. The papers presented at the workshop touched on a range of topics: activism for women’s rights, women’s role in commercial undertakings, women’s role in maintaining ethnic and religious identities, and women as movers of change for themselves and society at large. Examining the role of women is particularly important especially since studies on Indian diasporas seemed to have overlooked the presence, concerns and contributions of women and instead focused on the colonial project and travels between metropole and colony, as if dominated only by men. The purpose of this workshop was to reveal women’s stories, histories and voices of their own passage and for that matter that of their foremothers in the new settlement of Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia as in South Asia, often women are associated with the private sphere where images of the “good mother” and “steadfast woman” are perpetuated. South Asian imageries in Indian literature to religious art are

rife with these stereotypes. While these stereotypes of women’s character and role in the family may have shades of truth, it must be recognized that women have inextricably made a mark beyond the private sphere.

As South Asian women migrated to Singapore and Malaysia, they also brought along with them ideas about women’s empowerment and gender equity. Such is the example of Shirin Fozdar, the personality pioneering the fight for women’s rights in Singapore from 1951 to 1952. Unique to Mrs Fozdar was her ambition to propagate a pan-Asian women’s ideology. For her, “Asian Womanhood” encompassed details of the marriage and divorce practices of societies across Asia.

While at the level of larger society, efforts to fight for gender equality were underway, nevertheless day-to-day exploitation of women’s labour remained. Women’s rights were trampled upon when they worked in plantations and as they sought out employment in order to better their lives. While they might have been criminalized and victimized, they did not accept their fate without resistance. For example, women who had suffered abuse under their husbands were found not to be hesitant to start their lives again with other men.

The lack of education among women was not synonymous with complete

disempowerment. As brave warriors in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, many illiterate women fought against British colonial oppression alongside their more educated sisters as well as men.

These women should be lauded for not only being courageous but for challenging the proscribed traditional views of womanhood and producing alternative identities for themselves.

South Asian women in the diaspora were movers of change in religious matters as well – a sphere traditionally dominated by men. As Asian diasporas expanded, women have become ever more critical in maintaining and supporting religious traditions and have influenced changes in how the world religions have operated in this region.

In the plural societies of Malaysia and Singapore, the role of the Indian woman has been critical especially in the maintenance of ethnic boundaries. Among the Dawoodi Bohra, it was women who upheld the culture of the homeland both in the home and the mosque. Moreover, Indians who adopted children of Chinese origin perpetuated “things Indian” and the Indian identity as they socialized these Chinese adoptive girls into “Indian daughters” where the role of women had been paramount. Yet in both cases, these women were making specific choices in how they wanted their families and communities to be received by the rest of society.

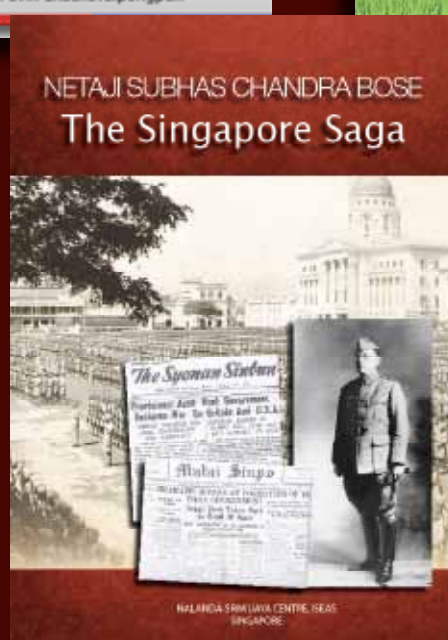
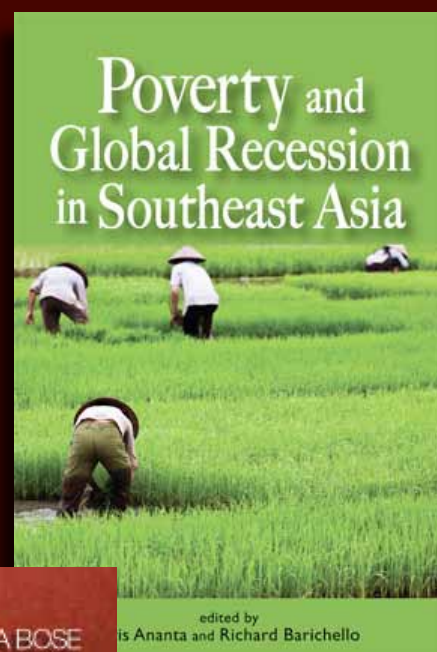
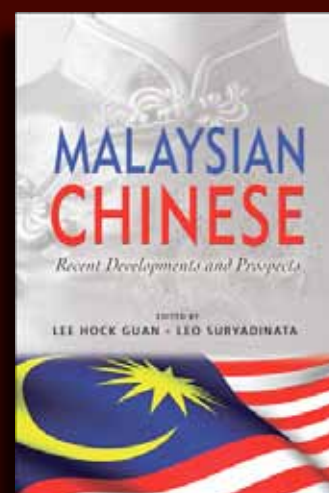
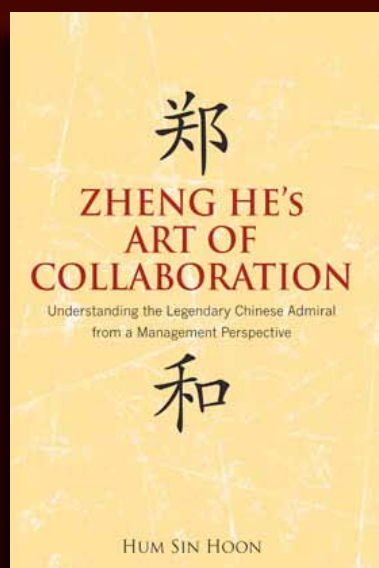
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From left: Mrs Khoo Salma, President of the Penang Heritage Trust; Dr Maznah Mohammad, Associate Prof, Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore; Mrs Rosy M. Nakhooda; Dr Theresa Devasahayam, Fellow, ISEAS.



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