



Dr Binoy Kumar Sahay

1962–2021

SUSAN WHITFIELD 

NEWS

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ABSTRACT

A obituary of Dr Sahay.

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It was with great sadness that I learned of the untimely death of Dr Binoy Kumar Sahay in May 2021. He was still in post at the National Museum of India in New Delhi and was busy with preparing for the opening of the galleries to exhibit many of the Central Asian paintings and other material from the expeditions of Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943).

Dr Sahay joined the National Museum in November 1989, having completed his MA in Ancient Indian History and Archaeology at Patna University. He started at the Museum in the the Numismatics and Epigraphy and Jewellery Collection. In 1992 he completed his PhD, also at Patna University. In 1998 he was given additional charge of the Central Asian Antiquities Collection and in 2018 became Deputy Curator.

This collections originate from the first three Central Asian expeditions of Stein, divided between the British Museum and the Government of India according to their respective funding contributions. The many murals in India were conserved and then displayed in three rooms in the Archaeological Survey of India building from 1937. They remained there until 1991. In 1949 it was decided to create a National Museum and this was inaugurated on August 15, 1949, and opened in 1961 with some of the Stein collection displayed in its Central Asian galleries. After 1991 the murals were also moved into galleries there intended for their display. But these remained closed, the murals awaiting conservation and occasionally shown to scholarly visitors.

I met Dr Sahay on the first of many visits after his appointment, and saw him became more familiar with the Stein collection, numbering and preparing listings of objects, organising conservation, carrying out his own research on the terracottas and stuccos and publishing numerous papers. In 2003 he received a Nehru Trust Small Study and Research Grants to study the Stein

Central Asian collections from Dunhuang at the British Museum and the V&A museum and we were pleased to welcome him to London.

In March 2008 he participated in the final symposium of an IDP project to bring together scholars from India, China and Russia, funded by the Ford Foundation. Here he met Professor Zhao Feng, Director of the Silk Museum, Hangzhou and Dr Wang Le, of Donghua University, Shanghai. He showed them some of the Dunhuang textiles and they discussed future collaboration and a visit to Hangzhou. His visit to London in 2009/10 as a Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow, was specifically to study the textiles at the V&A and was further supported by the Nehru Trust for Indian Collections. When the Textiles and Clothing Centre at the National Museum was established in 2017, he was a founder member recognizing the importance of textiles in the Stein collections, and co-edited of *Splendours of Pahari Embroidery*, published in 2018.

He had developed further international contacts and friendships during his visit to the British Museum in 2012 on their Leadership Training Programme for India, and then in Berlin in 2016 as part of an official delegation funded by the German Foreign Office to encourage China—India—Germany dialogue, where he participated in the international conference on Kocho and conservation.

Throughout, Dr Sahay continued work on the Stein collections to make them more accessible. In March 2015 he presented a paper at a conference on Aurel Stein at the IGNCA in New Delhi outlining the history of and future plans for the Stein collection, including the planned opening of galleries displaying the murals. On that visit he also introduced me and my colleagues to the team working on the JATAN Digitisation Programme of the collection for access on the National Digital Repository for the Museums of India (<https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/national-digital-repository-museums-india>): almost 1000 objects were online. Today, thanks in large part to Dr Sahay's efforts, almost 4000 objects can be found under Central Asian Antiquities at the National Museum (https://museumsfindia.gov.in/repository/museum/nat_del).

Over the past few years Dr Sahay was working with other colleagues to ensure the conservation of the murals ready for them to be displayed again, along with other paintings and artefacts, in four Central Asian Galleries in the National Museum. Work continued during the COVID lockdown on writing labels and preparing the catalogue. His by now deep knowledge of the collection, enthusiasm for this work and excitement at the planned opening is evident in an online presentation he gave in March 2021 to FACES Patna (The Foundation for Art, Culture, Ethics and Science) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-QrbhidBXI>). His presentation also showed the renovation of the 1940s Archaeological Survey of

India building next to the Museum and the plans for a new display there of seven galleries of over 250 artefacts on Buddhism, including some more of the Central Asian pieces (now open).

So sadly, he died only two months after this, on May 8, 2021, and thus missed the culmination of his work with the opening of the Central Asian Galleries a year later.

Although not his original field of study, through his hard work and enthusiasm, Dr Sahay became an extremely knowledgeable curator of these collections and a valued colleague to many of us worldwide: he is greatly missed. As editors of the inaugural issue of this journal, Helen Wang and myself dedicate this volume to his memory.

Susan Whitfield

NOTE: A detailed and illustrated report on the Central Asian Galleries will be given in the next issue of this journal.

Selected Publications

'Identification of five unique paintings from Central Asia preserved in the National Museum, New Delhi.' In

Naval Krishna and Manu Krishna (eds.), *The Ananda-Vana of Indian Art: Dr. Anand Krishna Felicitation Volume*, Varanasi: Indica Books, 2004.

With Anamika Pathak (ed.), *Splendours of Pahāri Embroidery*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2018.

'Technical Studies of Central Asian Collections (With Emphasis on Astana and Lou-lan Sites).' In B.R. Mani and Anamika Pathak (eds.), *Textiles: Binding Threads Between Cultures from National Museum Collections*, pp.74–91. New Delhi: National Museum of India, 2019.

With Bhushan Dighe, M. R. Singh, and B. R. Mani. 'Oryza sativa L. (Rice) in the Ancient Earthen Plasters of Painted Fragments from Bezeklik', China, *Studies in Conservation*, 64:5 (2019), 273–283, DOI: 10.1080/00393630.2018.1508956

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