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## On the trail of Ashoka



STORIES FROM THE PAST Renuka Narayanan and Charles Allen Photo: R. Ragu

### **British historian Charles Allen and columnist Renuka Narayanan discuss the life and times of the Mauryan emperor**

Charles Allen calls himself a writer of history, not a historian. “History is a minefield... it always will be. You’ve got to challenge it, look at it with an open mind,” he said wryly at the discussion on his book, *Ashoka: The Search for India’s Lost Emperor*, with Renuka Narayanan, commentator and columnist on religion and culture.

Charles has been besotted with all things Indian since his birth in Cawnpore in 1940, in a family whose roots here trace back to the Revolt of 1857.

Author of 23 books, he is a well-known commentator on the Raj.

“I am thrilled to see so many young faces — this sense of enquiry is important. Often, change comes from external influences. For Britain, it was the invasion in 1066 by William the Conqueror... it brought in Latin and the rule of Lex Romana. The discovery of India’s classical past lies largely in the hands of the Orientalists, in particular, William Jones, James Prinsep and Alexander Cunningham,” said Charles.

To which Renuka added that the grandeur of Ashoka came after “a difficult and sustained search by British Orientalists” who dusted off the layers of neglect.

Charles spoke of Ashoka's greatness — his empire was larger than that of any Indian ruler; he found his peace in Buddhism and did much to spread its tenets — and how he slipped through the cracks in time to stay forgotten till the British proclaimed his genius. Charles travelled across the country, mastering the few surviving Buddhist texts and Prakrit, the language of most Ashokan edicts.

The search for the emperor began with the journey to Calcutta of Sir William Jones, a hyperpolyglot, who instituted the Asiatic Society of Bengal with 30 Indophiles. Charles said that Jones was staggered by the richness of India's poetry and myth when he learnt Sanskrit.

He translated the *Mudrarakshasa* and made a breakthrough, linking Sandrocottus to Chandragupta; that gives us the first date to match European and Indian history.

James Prinsep, in his years as assay master at the Calcutta Mint, was drawn to the dynasties behind the ancient coins he catalogued. He went on to decipher the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts that "broke the silence surrounding Ashoka".

"Later, Alexander Cunningham, the first director of the Archaeological Survey of India, built on that work."

The talk then travelled to the Bhimbetka caves where rock edicts describe Ashoka's visit; to Sanchi, where Ashoka's "missionary programme began"; and to the first rock edict which Renuka described as "Ashoka's love letter to his people".

It also delineated the discovery of classical India's cultural richness, and why, of all its many kings, Ashoka was referred to as 'Samraat Chakravartin' — the emperor of emperors.