

Heritage Matters

View from one of the thousands of monastic cells dotting the cliffs of the Bamiyan Valley.

BUDDHISM & BAMMIYAN

ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Andhra Pradesh and Afghanistan have one thing in common. Rich Buddhist heritage. The faith or the Way of the Buddha itself remains a thing of the past in both the places. Recent decades have seen a revitalization and spread of Buddhism in many parts of the world. In Australia it is the fastest growing faith, especially among women. In Afghanistan, it has become a means to nation building in the war-torn country. Lessons learnt from post-war reconstruction in rebuilding nations in Japan and Korea are helping in Afghanistan. Buddhism is also the focus for tourism growth and associated infrastructure development in Andhra and Afghanistan.

Countries supporting peace and reconciliation and major donors to low economic indicator countries such as Japan, India and Korea have become key partners in Afghanistan. In addition to promoting counter terrorism strategies and rebuilding the war-torn country through infrastructure development, these Asian countries are joining other global partners assisting projects such as the rebuilding of the National Museum in Kabul, conservation and rehabilitation of Buddhist sites across the country and the Bamiyan Cultural Centre and Museum in the Bamiyan Valley.

The Bamiyan Valley is one of the main routes in the maze of the networked Silk Road. It is over 2.5 kilometres above sea level and watered by many beautiful streams joining the Bamiyan River in the central highlands of Afghanistan. Hindu Kush ranges of the Himalayas - Temples of Snow - overlook the winding Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in 2003.

Bamiyan Valley is an ecomuseum with layers of significance evident through tangible archaeological remains and intangible heritage elements. It was a major religious centre for Buddhism, Islam and other faiths. Buddhism was introduced here during the time of the famous Mauryan Emperor Asoka. He championed peace and compassion in the 3rd Century BC through the precepts of Buddhism beyond what is now India. The Kushan Bactrian kings further promoted Buddhism in this region. To the northern side of

the Valley, the Bamiyan Cliffs include the two colossal niches that once contained the large standing Buddha figures. People all over the world recall with sadness the destruction of the giant Bamiyan Buddhas, murals and grottoes by the Taliban in 2001. Since then research has yielded evidence of outstanding artistic skills and craftsmanship in building the two massive statues that were 55 and 38 meters in height, dating from 3rd to 5th century AD. Carved out of the cliffs from the soft friable rock, they were covered in clay garments fashioned almost like porcelain.

About 12,000 caves formed a large ensemble of Buddhist monasteries, chapels and sanctuaries along the foothills of the Valley. Remains of ancient roads and wall structures have been mapped. The statues, architectural remains and the murals in the caves are a representation of the Gandharan School of Buddhist art. This Valley was a Buddhist centre on the Silk Road for the fusion of Indian, Hellenistic, Roman and Sasanian aesthetics. There are also layers of heritage with Islamic influence from a later period that

communities as a concerted effort of UNESCO to demonstrate the added value of preservation efforts to raise awareness of heritage issues with local communities as well as to provide employment. Hundreds of people from Bamiyan, skilled and unskilled labour, as well site managers and guards have been employed locally through interventions at the site.

The first female Governor of Afghanistan, Dr. Habiba Sarobi, was responsible for the province until recently. She emphasized that ownership by the local, provincial and central government authorities and most importantly residents and communities in Bamiyan is critical for the promotion of responsible heritage tourism for the sustainable development and management of the Valley.

The Bamiyan Valley is the most monumental expression of Buddhism in Central Asia. It was an important centre of pilgrimage over many centuries. Heritage tourism is the new form of pilgrimage being made by visitors from different parts of the world. Donor partnership is of great value to the Bamiyan Valley, especially for capacity building and infrastructure development. Twinning with other World Heritage sites such as the Gyeongju Historic Areas in Korea, sometimes known as one of the largest outdoor museums in the world, could be useful.

Security concerns are a reality in Afghanistan. However due to the peaceful situation and the recently sealed tarmac at the airport by New Zealand, the World Heritage property in Bamiyan (currently funded by the Government of Japan) is attracting visitation from domestic and international tourists, foreign and national government dignitaries, developmental workers and journalists in Afghanistan. The new Cultural Centre and Museum in the Bamiyan Valley will consolidate the experience of heritage conservation and development from the past decade since the destruction of the colossal Buddhas. The project is an invaluable means to promoting peace, knowledge generation and cross-cultural understanding in Afghanistan for the Afghan people.

Bamiyan Culture Centre and Museum and Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum have several things in common. They both interpret historical cultural landscapes. They both aspire to UNESCO Standards, especially promoting landscape values. They reanimate heritage places through the revitalization of intangible heritage. They are both championing ecomuseology as a methodology for bringing people and their heritage together. Bamiyan Heritage Walks and Drives lead to various sites including Shahr-i Ghulghulah, fortified citadel associated with the Mongolian Genghis Khan who massacred local people and destroyed the Bamiyan valley in late 12th Century AD. In Amaravathi Heritage Town, the Heritage Walk unravels layers of history and heritage across 300 acres of built environment. Both the places are struggling with the plague of encroachments. Minimising resulting damage will determine how best both the places will succeed in benefiting from responsible tourism.



AMARESWAR GALLA

director@inclusivemuseum.org

(Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an unhyphenated Indo Danish Australian, worked in Afghanistan as an expert of UNESCO and the International Council of Museums after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. He now lives in the ancient Amaravathi Heritage Town.)

For silk lovers of Andhra, next week's Heritage Matters will be written from Suzhou, the birth place of silk and the heart of the silk route in China.

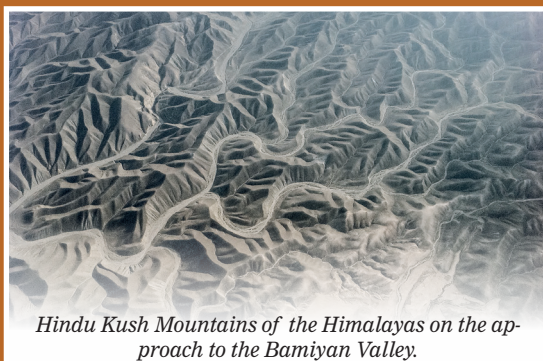
needs equal attention. Eleven Sufi shrines have been restored by UNESCO.

About 75 kilometres to the north-west of the ancient urban centre of Bamiyan is the Band-e-Amir Village. It is surrounded by six blue crystalline clear lakes that are spectacular against the stark mountainous landscape. It is often referred to as the Grand Canyon of Central Asia. It is the first National Park in Afghanistan. It reminded me of Gandikota in Andhra Pradesh. Bamiyan Town and Band-e-Amir Village celebrate the culture and heritage of the region through the annual Silk Road Festival. It is organized by the Bamiyan Ecotourism Program - a collaboration of the Provincial Government, Aga Khan Foundation, non-government organizations and local community groups.

UNESCO and implementing partners have been working in Bamiyan Valley on the documentation of heritage, stabilization of the Buddha niches, conservation of mural paintings and historical buildings damaged by conflict. This has necessarily involved significant employment for local com-



The niche of the taller colossal Buddha, before and after destruction. Composition. Chaturanga Sampath.



Hindu Kush Mountains of the Himalayas on the approach to the Bamiyan Valley.



Buzkashi, goat grabbing - ancestor of the horse polo popularized across central Asia by Mongolians and Genghis Khan, a national sport of Afghanistan - is popular in Bamiyan Valley.