

RETHINKING SANCHI HERITAGE TOURISM

Images: International Institute for the Inclusive Museum



Fine sculptures abound at the site with Jataka stories and scenes from the life of the Buddha. The sculptures are in sandstone unlike in Amaravathi, as otherwise, they could have been carted off to foreign lands during colonial times. Providing access and appreciation of art and history would enrich the experiences. Visitations will then become more than picnic days



Sir John Marshall's House. Buildings such as this yield to interpreting important recent history. But the current trend to only present colonial masters needs to be decolonised. Deep research would help identify the role of Indian co-workers and knowledge people who are often ignored in such narratives

Incredible India tourism campaign has matured over the past two decades. Initially it reflected the orientalist discourse. It was very much about the exotica. The stereotypical India of palaces, elephants, colours and frozen in time images of an imagined land of 'natives'. A colonial legacy. Now, it is going through gradual refinement. I have often said that all tourism is cultural. However, heritage tourism is when non-renewable heritage resources are used. Conservation and safeguarding measures are imperative. It is within this context that the Government of India has begun niche tourism through thematic schemes. Gandhi and Delhi tourism trail along with across the country celebrations of the 150th birth anniversary of the Mahatma is significant. Other initiatives are unfolding.

Buddhist Tourism is a national strategy to attract visitors and hopefully enhance local GDP at sites that are largely reliant on government subsidies. Not that there is anything wrong with it. Given the contingencies of the market forces of tourism, governments expect revenue generation. I am reminded of the UNESCO Youth Participation Handbook that I developed in Vietnam. Young people working with me produced a cartoon underscoring the point that just as we don't look for productivity to look after our grandparents, we need to look after our heritage even if it does not make money.

Abbots at Sarnath and Bodhgaya mentioned during discussions that Buddhist Heritage tourism will work in India where there are footsteps of the Buddha. Visitors and pilgrims will come to immerse themselves in the ambience of places derived from the wisdom that is embedded. Attracting visitors to the ambience of places is considered challenging. The Abbot of Sarnath was particularly critical of the idea of making money out of Buddhism. He wondered whether the essence of Buddhism is understood! Recreational tourism targeting the leisure spectrum of the rising middle classes could complement the pilgrimages as long as it is not to the detriment of the heritage values of the historical cultural landscapes. Ferris wheels, mini Disneyland facilities or selfie tourism statues could diminish the dignity and value of places.

Heritage tourism initiatives include Buddhist Monuments of Sanchi, on the UNESCO World Heritage list, in the heart of the sub-continental ancient trade routes. They are located among clusters of Buddhist remains from 2300 to 800 years Before Present. While rulers of the day contributed to the foundations, agrarian, trading and arts and crafts groups were critical to sustain and further develop the sites. My first visit was with my brother in mid 1970s. We stayed overnight with two Sri Lankan monks in the Vihara.

They warned us of a black panther in the surrounding terrain. I returned to the site with colleagues from Pune Deccan College when we were working on the first excavations under late Professor VN Misra in Bhimbetka, a World Heritage site now. We trekked the hinterland of Sanchi. The richness of archaeological remains, especially Buddhist, was impressive. Subsequent visits revealed deforestation and rapid changes. Environmental and contextual historical cultural landscapes remain to be studied and understood. Scientific impact studies would also help better planning, especially with the an-



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Several sculptures of the Buddha have missing heads. These are mostly due to the illicit traffic in cultural property and the work of antique traders widespread in India. India is a State Party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention to prevent such trafficking. Sculptures such as these could also be used in awareness raising to minimise illicit traffic in cultural property

ticipated tourism growth.

Buddhist Monuments of Sanchi need to be emancipated from site centredness in contemporary heritage discourse. Focus on the marketplace is a new-found challenge in the sleepy historical landscapes. Generous funding to promote Buddhist tourism might help to reanimate the place, if the local knowledge systems, contemporary heritage practices especially respectful and evidence-based interpretation, and collaboration to sustain and improve the historical villages in the hinterland are promoted by the implementing agencies. Walking the talk about local employment would go a long way for the sustainable heritage development through appropri-

ate and ethical capacity building.

Some of the fundamental questions for the future would centre on the contextual historical landscapes. The gaze is from tourist and other visitor perspectives so far. Rethinking this paradigm so that it also includes looking at and understanding the surrounding historical cultural landscapes and villages would assist developing a more inclusive and holistic safeguarding of the heritage landscapes.

After all, the monks and pilgrims in the old days would have spent most of their time looking out at these landscapes. This would require empathetic developments and understanding the broader historical context.

What were the agrarian transformations that enabled the growth of villages and capital towns like Vidisha? Is it the introduction of the iron ploughshare and agrarian calendar and a whole knowledge system of intensive agriculture? What is the significance of trade routes that supported Buddhism? More than towns as artefacts, urbanism characterised by regal ritual, commercial, administrative, spiritual and other cultural roles need to be researched, understood and interpreted. Historical research evidences that there was minimal state formation in Central and Peninsular India as different from the Gangetic Valley under the Mauryans. It was segmentary with pyramidal structures of hierarchical relations of power among local rulers.

How well the development of tourism around Sanchi succeeds is based on how well-grounded research informs the interventions. Discussions with tourist guides and authorities reveal that the present situation of visitation needs to be improved through collaborative marketing with other Buddhist sites of significance. Interventions are critical as long as they are based on detailed research and front-end evaluations. The current light and sound shows have not proved to be productive as most of the visitors coming from Bhopal do not stay until dusk. Archaeological Survey of India is doing a quality job in conservation.

The simple question as with many other heritage places that are close to main population clusters is how does one create appropriate infrastructure for overnight stays or bed nights resulting in income generation for the local stakeholder communities. In order to do this the local experiences and narratives need to be diversified. Buddhism never was the only faith. It coexisted with others. Colonial legacies and stereotypes of watertight faith groups need to be overcome.

Studying and understanding, in a comparative context, case studies from around the world on how engagement with local communities help to sustain heritage places through tourism. Benefit analysis is a must inclusive of all the stakeholders. Even if the place does not have the footprints of the Buddha, the art and architectural heritage, surrounding landscapes and especially inscription of the World Heritage list with the UNESCO imprimatur could be catalytic for sustainable development of the place.

Quality historical research will build depth of experiences. Integrated local area planning will bring in an interdisciplinary approach. A quality tourism research, planning and development faculty of studies in the state would help improve the current situation. There will be lessons for others where there are no footprints of the Buddha.



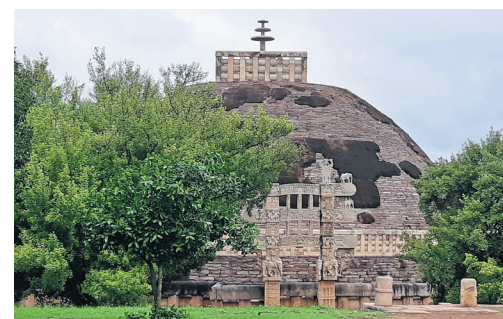
Layers of history at the Sanchi Monuments could be better presented so that visitors understand and respect the site through awareness and appropriate heritage consciousness



Remains have an outstanding backdrop of agrarian landscapes, hills and forests. Imagine being in this place as a monk and pilgrim and spending most of your time looking out along with looking in for meditation and reflection on the knowledge received. Stupa 3 contained the remains of Sariputta, one of the most well-known disciples of the Shakyamuni



An understanding of water management, monastic life with the backdrop of the historical and environmental landscapes would enhance the experience of the place. One of the best-preserved Monastic establishments in India could be educative about Monastic ambience and life. Knowledge about water management in and around the historical cultural landscapes could contribute to environmental consciousness and climate change in India where water scarcity is reaching alarming proportions



One of the best-preserved stupa complexes in India, built during the time of Asoka about 2300 Before Present and subsequently further enhanced during the rule of Sungas, Satavahanas, Guptas and so on, could be better understood if there is well researched historical context and interpretation. From the early diggings, scientific excavations and rehabilitation of the place have been undertaken by Archaeological Survey of India. There is a wealth of information that is rarely communicated to the public

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will focus on Y.G. Srivati, one of the forgotten female Indian artists

Past Columns of Heritage Matters can now be downloaded at the new website: <http://inclusivemuseums.org/index.php/heritage-matters/>