

## Review

*Phanigiri: Interpreting an Ancient Buddhist Site in Telangana*, edited by Naman P. Ahuja. Mumbai: The Marg Foundation, 2021. 228pp. £17.48. ISBN 978-9-383243-32-7.

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Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the study of history of art in the Indian subcontinent today is its over-credence of inherited grand narratives. In post-Independence India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, with their record of poor archaeological research in universities and the fund-and-skill-crunched Archaeological Surveys of the three countries, and with an equally dismal situation of the museum as a public institution, a stagnation has visibly emerged in the fostering of new research on antiquities. While the famed relief panels from Amravati in southern India, held in the British Museum, have become a focal point of contemporary discussions on cultural propriety and ‘patrimony’ in the public domain, equally important and lesser-known sites throughout the length and breadth of the subcontinent are systematically ignored and remain *recherché* in the narratives of history.

Not far from Amravati, the site of Phanigiri in the Indian state of Telangana ‘en route to the grand emporia of Amaravati, Dharanikota, Nagapattinam and Arikamedu in the south, and Kalinga, Tamluk and Chandraketugarh further northeast’ (p. 10) is one such example. Largely remaining in obscurity till the 1940s, it is only recently that this site, which had trade links and connections with ‘the wider Roman world on one side, and Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia on the other’ (p. 16) has come into the spotlight owing to a new spurt in independent research. The artworks of Phanigiri illustrate ‘a sharing of ideas between these major centres of Buddhism—Amaravati, Mathura and Gandhara’. Many large limestone sculptures of Buddha and Bodhisattva figures have been excavated at the site, a majority of them being damaged—‘even deliberately smashed, which indicates that the monastery suffered a violent attack at some point, before or after it was abandoned’ (p. 25). Some artefacts from the site are now housed at the State Museum Hyderabad and the Heritage Department of Telangana.

The name Phanigiri, as pointed out by Ahuja in the last chapter, can be read at various metaphoric levels. *Phaṇa* means a snake's hood in many Indian languages, and in the Buddhist context suggests the *uṣṇiṣa*, a multivalent Sanskrit word meaning a turban, crown or the cranial protuberance of the Buddha. The *Lalitavistara* and the *Buddhacarita* are replete with elaborate descriptions of the moment prince Siddhartha sacrificed his turban—which asseverates identity through lineage, caste, region and inheritance—which was a symbolic act 'in an age of empires, when ideas of kingship were based on the assertion of power'. Prince Siddhartha's renunciation as epitomized by the jettisoning of his royal turban 'reveals a parallel concept from Indian philosophy that endorses the reverse view—of not holding on to power' (p. 201). The 'metaphors of a turban and crowning were powerfully embedded' (p. 188) in the name of the site, and in a late-second-century or third-century CE limestone sculpture, known as the 'turban relief of Phanigiri', which stands out for its 'quality of carving, clarity of composition and the deeply symbolic story it has to tell'. The sculpture, which was once broken, was 'specially conserved and prominently displayed' at a 2017 exhibition *India and the World: A History In Nine Stories*, a neoteric 'major-loan' exhibition which was a collaboration between the British Museum and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS, formerly The Prince of Wales Museum of Western India). Elaborating on many important issues regarding heritage-management in the Indian subcontinent, the chapter also draws attention to miscellaneous issues, such as the Dalai Lama's 2006 Kālacakra ceremony at Amravati which was a centre of public attention, the permanent transformation of sites like Sarnath and Bodh Gaya owing to tourism practices, the role of modern pilgrimage-circuits like the Indian Railways' Mahaparinirvan Express, the popularity of the Soka Gakkai International among the urban Indian middle class, and the fate of some stone reliefs from Amravati which are housed at the Madras Museum—which were till recently firmly attached to its damp walls with concrete (a practice which continues to be practised in museums across India), thereby also sealing their fate from being lent to exhibitions and other museums; it required 'decades of complaints, petitions from specialists and shaming in the press for new refurbished galleries' (p. 207). Their compeers in the British Museum have been kept accessible and well-maintained in an arid climate to be a source of marvel and aesthetic enjoyment of their nonpareil beauty for a vast number of twenty-first-century viewers. At the same time, the author points towards the urgency for narratives of 'decolonisation' in the Western museums—which have the responsibility to share non-partisan knowledge on these artefacts 'with countries that were colonized, or are at the other end of the iniquitous racial, economic and global power dynamics' (p. 203).

The essays included in this book span from a study of stupa-architecture, through iconographic study of the relief-panels, to the role of Buddhism from the ancient till the medieval period in the artistic and religious milieu

of Andhradeśa. N. R. Visalatchy provides a first detailed archaeological study of this site, and John Guy provides new insights into Buddhist narratives in art through iconographic appraisal of some stone reliefs from Phanigiri.

Phanigiri is surrounded by megalithic burial sites at nearby Bhongir, which were in existence before Buddhism was practised in the region—alongside forests which once ‘were controlled and the polities that spread within them used religious apparatuses’ (p. 10), water-reservoirs and small-scale agrarian activities, mainly the cultivation of paddy. These coexisted with the rise to prominence of the site in Buddhist geography during the ancient and medieval periods. A geo-anthropological and ethnographic survey has the potential to reveal more on the complex nature of the symbiotic relationship with the landscape that was maintained here by monks as well as the semi-urban laity. Buddhist texts such as the *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛccha-sūtra*, which ‘is likely to have been composed in the very period when Phanigiri was being constructed’ (p. 202), throw light on how the forest was the locus of different *śramaṇa* traditions. However, today, situated in a fragile environment beside a motor-highway and threatened by the expansion of the city of Hyderabad, mining activities and rampant despoiling, the site of Phanigiri is one among many which have extremely thin chances of any succour, and which need urgent conservation.