

IMPRESSIONS

Borobudur: 'Prayer in Stone'

RAANA HAIDER

“The human task of architecture is not to beautify or to humanize the world of everyday facts, but to open up a view into the second dimension of our consciousness, the reality of images, memories and dreams.” Jubani Pallasmaa

Expansive aerial photographs of the square-based, multi-terraced, pyramid-like monument with detailed decorative features and sculptures culminating in innumerable mini-stupas and crowned by the single soaring stupa are undoubtedly dramatic. Viewed from above, Borobudur appears as a single large stupa that takes the form of a giant tantric Buddhist mandala representing Buddhist cosmology and its divine chart. Dimensions remain perfect. Details enhance the conspicuous structure. It is precise and concise in form and content. Today, we are privy to the top-to-bottom perspective. Every bird’s-eye visual of the Buddhist temple at Borobudur near Yogyakarta on the island of Java in Indonesia is to resort to the cliché ‘immensely impressive.’

The question to ponder is how this ‘jewel of architectural art’, this ‘prayer in stone’, ‘this testament to human creativity’ was implemented in the eighth century? How did the visionaries, the architect, the technicians, the labourers conceive and build this architectural legacy? The Giza pyramids in Egypt then come to mind. One is tempted to believe that the Divine Eye oversaw its creation. Here stands a singular structure - a labour of love in homage to the Enlightened One Lord Buddha. Conceived as a model of the universe, this ‘cosmic mountain’ is regarded as the largest Buddhist temple in the world. Some scholars believe Borobudur to be a gigantic Buddhist textbook in stone whose purpose is to assist believers in following the virtuous path to enlightenment. Borobudur an awe-inspiring temple complex - is a place of Buddhist teaching, training and dedication. Yet there is no written record of who built the Buddhist temple in the Mahayana tradition. These stones of an empire were probably built during the reign of King Samaratunga (792-824 AD) during the Sailendra dynasty. It was built some 300 years before Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Close commercial and religious connections between India and the island of Java had long been in existence. The renowned Buddhist University at Nalanda in India was a focal source of faith. Evidence has been found of Buddhist teachers from Bengal who were present at the consecration of Bodhisattva statues in Java in 782 AD. Here is evidence of the long trail of civilizations that have crossed cultures and crossed the boundaries of time. Innumerable questions bewilder the onlooker; since only the Borobudur temple exists to tantalize us emerging out of green rice fields in the Kedu fertile valley in the Garden of Java. ‘Boro’ has its root in *biara/vihara* and ‘Budur’ is the place. Thus Borobudur is the ‘Monastery of Budur.’ Knowledgeable sources point to the mighty Mount Merapi, the still active mountain volcano that remains omnipresent. The fertility of its alluvial soil --- enriched by monsoon rains and rains of volcanic ash --- produced multi-crops that sustained a dense population. Sources refer to a violent eruption by Mount Merapi sometime in centuries past. Blankets of volcanic ash would have enveloped the community. Famine ensued. The land, unable to support human habitation, resulted in the Pompeii pattern. The combination of layers of volcanic ash, jungle growth and the inexorable passage of time engulfed Borobudur. The sacred site was deserted and links forgotten. As lives were lured to other destinations, Borobudur became lost to civilization --- until 1814. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles rediscovered Borobudur that year. He had joined the East India Company as a clerk at the age of

thirteen. He was Governor of Java from 1811 to 1816 and founded ‘modern’ Singapore in 1819. Fascinated by the immense diversity of animals and plants in the East Indies, he studied and collected specimens of both categories. He transferred numerous consignments to England. Raffles founded the London Zoo and the renowned Zoological Society of London and was appointed its first President. Also a keen student of history, rumours of a hill of exposed stones in the midst of a dense Java jungle reached his ears. Nature had consumed the forgotten remains. It was only in 1835 that the site was cleared. And the rest is history as the saying goes. Or in this case, history was revived since Raffles introduced Borobudur to the modern world. In his words: ‘Borobudur was an open temple mountain that pilgrims ascent.’ The first photograph of Borobudur was taken in 1873 by Isidore van Kusibergen, a Dutch-Flemish engraver. In the same year, the first



monograph of the detailed study of Borobudur was published and its French translation followed a year later. At about the same time, in another part of the world, other rediscoveries were underway. The Swiss explorer Jean Louis Burckhardt was the first European to enter Petra in 1812. In *Desert Traveller: The Life of Jean Louis Burckhardt*, Katharine Sim writes: “The Siq (rock-cut gorge) is one-and-a-quarter miles long, but perhaps because of its narrowness and strangeness it seems interminable. Louis took twenty-five minutes to traverse it. Then, as the rock walls twisted and parted revealing the first hint of rosy beauty, a carved façade ahead, he paused in stunned amazement: el Kaneh glowed in the towering sunlit cliff above a sea of red oleanders, so close it seemed that he could not see it all, unbelievably lovely as it was. He emerged from the Siq and stood gazing up at the wonderful spectacle. No one can look at this work unmoved: (Burckhardt gushes “the situation and beauty of which are calculated to make an extraordinary impression upon the traveler, after having transverse...such a gloomy and almost subterranean passage...it is one of the most elegant remains of antiquities existing in Syria).” (Today it lies in Jordan). Jean Louis Burckhardt also rediscovered the colossal figures of Pharaoh Ramses II and Queen Nefertari at Abu Simbel in Upper Egypt in 1813. He notes: I fell in with what is yet visible of four immense colossal statues cut out of the rock...they stand in a deep recess excavated in the mountain; but it is greatly to be regretted that they are almost entirely buried beneath the sands, which are blown down here in torrents...” The nineteenth century was the Age of Rediscovery of what had been lost pages in history. Some 170 years following its rediscovery, mankind yet found it fit to target the ‘cosmic

mountain of the Perfect Buddha’ in a bomb attack. The temple suffered minor damage as a result in 1985. In 1991, Borobudur was honoured with the declaration by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. While the temple at Borobudur has been brought to light, yet it withholds its soul and mystery all the while revealing nothing about the master builders who created it or those pilgrims who worshipped here. Perhaps, it is the lingering element of shrouded mystery and the sense of unknown that so adds to the allure of Borobudur. Here stands an unmistakable testimony to the indefatigable power of human creativity. “The plateau on which stands Borobudur like a crown of a hill is some 15m. above the surrounding plain; its openness offering a magnificent view...the marvelous expanse under the dome of the sky melts into the mountain ranges in the distance. The green and rice fields below create a sense of

extraordinary peace, the flow of infinity” is the description provided in the huge tome *Borobudur: Prayer in Stone* (1991) that lay on the bed in the Manohara Guesthouse room. What a treat to able to read about one’s destination in the context of time and place. Many a hotel provides pamphlets or brochures some form of write-up on the major attraction in the neighbourhood and city. I have yet to come across anywhere a multi-kilogram ‘dining table’ (not coffee-table) book placed for the perusal of room occupants. This heavy-duty literary gem is a fine blend of information and pictorial delight. Given its voluminous size no one would be able to walk away with it either. And with this literary taster, we ventured out of our Javanese-styled hotel within the Borobudur archaeological park into the late afternoon mellowing sunshine. Manohara Guesthouse and the accompanying Center of Borobudur Study is a sanctuary of serenity set amidst lush tropical verdant landscape; in which brilliantly accentuated colours of hibiscus flowers in dazzling red and yellow and magenta aflame bougainvillea boughs and inter-twining creepers nestle inside wooden roof-frames. Bamboo wind chimes along the open walkway corridors linking buildings add a soothing tone to the moment and the mind. Having done my homework, I knew that our destination lay just 200 metres away/a 5 minute walk away. Walking through the archaeological park, tree-tops formed a curtain in the near distant horizon. Whilst craning my neck and squinting my eyes, I scanned the mid-horizon for a view of our target-sighting. All of a sudden, the tree-tops were interspersed with what looked like spires. And another two steps and we were in sight of one of the world’s wonders. A magnificently humbling moment...And I could only recall that my sighting of the ‘Khazaneh Treasury

Palace in Petra, Jordan and the colossal carvings at Abu Simbel in Egypt imbibed in me a similar sentiment. In the words of Paul Theroux in his current bestseller book *The Tao of Travel: Enlightenments from Lives on the Road*, “No one has ever described the place where I have just arrived: this is the emotion that makes me want to travel. It is one of the greatest reasons to go anywhere.” He adds: “In any case, travel is frequently a matter of seizing the moment. And it is personal. Even if I were travelling with you, your trip would not be mine.” Can anyone improve on this philosophy or on these wordings? Nothing prepares one for the sheer scale and vitality of the man-made marvel. Built both as a shrine to the Lord Buddha and as a Buddhist pilgrimage site, it is quite simply staggering to behold its beauty and scale. Built on a bedrock hill, some 55,000 cubic metres of stone from neighbouring rivers were cut to size, transported and laid in situ without mortar to bind. A vision solid as stone yet it appears ever so delicate and fragile entirely ephemeral. According to some experts, here is the largest ensemble of Buddhist reliefs in the world. In addition, 504 stupas, each containing a statue of the Buddha adorn the temple. Yet on closer examinations, the carvings appear pock-marked by centuries of elements. What appears from a distance as a uniform creation the statues now reveal differing patinas of flecks of green and orange and, black and grey nuances. Then again, amongst the scores of manifestations of the Lord Buddha, we come across an armless Buddha, a headless Buddha, a Buddha with cracks in its sculpted torso...Whether an accident of time or nature or human intervention; the mystery continues to intrigue us.

The three ascending physical and spiritual levels engage the pilgrim through ‘Kamadhatu’, the world of desire; ‘Rupadhatu’ ‘the world of forms’ and finally ‘Arupadhatu’, ‘the world of formlessness’ or Nirvana. And all along are symbols, tokens, leads signposts for the pilgrim for those who can read them. The Karma of cause and effect is depicted in 1460 sculpted bas-reliefs that encircle the rising sublime structure. Here we find detailed depictions of reincarnated animals and birds; people at work and play and tradesmen and wise men that have come to seek salvation at Borobudur. One of the friezes depicts in fine detail an Indianocean-going vessel arriving in Java. And all the while, the devotee is circumambulating clockwise the ancient path of pilgrimage. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist scholar, ‘The circular form represents an eternity without beginning and without end a superlative, eternal, tranquil and pure state of the formless world.’ It is worth remembering the words of Saint Catherine of Sienna who spent three years in silent meditation: ‘All the way to Heaven is Heaven.’ At the upper levels, the walls are blank. Dan Cruickshank in his book *Around the World in 80 Treasures* elaborates: “The walls here are plain clearly in this rarified spiritual world there is no need for images to tell and teach stories.” The last three circular uppermost terraces are graced by 72 stupas which encircle the towering central single stupa. All 72 bell stupas have openings. All 72 stupas contain a kneeling image of the Lord Buddha or used to for today some are empty and some remain broken or damaged. In this world of symbolism, some of the bell stupas have diagonal openings and some have square openings on the surface. Why? I found an answer in *Around the World in 80 Treasures*. Dan Cruickshank quotes his Buddhist monk/guide: “...the diamond shape is a square standing on one corner good but unstable, unsure, still able to lean one way or the other, towards the good or back towards,

evil. On the other hand, the square standing on one of its sides represents stability, the goal achieved and no backsliding In *Borobudur: Prayer in Stone*, we read that: “Lord of the Zenith retires in the domes of the upper terraces, which only barely permits his presence to be discerned. The half-darkness inside the dome enhances a feeling of abstraction.” The emptiness of the principal stupa symbolizes ‘realm without form.’ The attainment of finite calmness is reached at the climax of the physical and spiritual journey. It is *de rigueur* to catch the sunrise at Borobudur. The dawn of yet another day rising over the ‘cosmic mountain’ is a sight to behold so declare one and all. “In the early dawn light, the magic mountain rises like a pink lotus blossom rising from the sea of green” is the heavenly description provided in *Borobudur: Prayer in Stone*. And I overslept and missed the 4:30am appointed time - another once-in-a-lifetime missed opportunity. Time does not repeat itself. I ventured out at 6:30am with still remnants of the spreading golden glow of the ascending sun. I consoled myself; for I had still caught Borobudur bathed in shades of seemingly pink sunlight touching the grey stone statues of the Lord Buddha. In plays of shade and light; features, crevices, platforms and smooth surfaces brought alive the entire vision. It was both a communion with history and one with spirituality In the words of Virginia Woolf: “I was conscious of experiencing moments of being intense sensations that stand apart from the cotton wool of daily life.’

RAANA HAIDER IS A LITERARY TRAVEL WRITER.

POETRY

How many Buddhas can they destroy?

KAISER HAQ

When you cling to things you have
Or crave a little you don't have
And a voice whispers
Let go
For everything is impermanent
It's the Buddha speaking

When your mind is a medley
Of wayward thoughts
And a voice whispers
Get a grip on yourself
It's the Buddha speaking

When your vocal cords are taut and
ready
To hurl a volley of abuse
Your fists are itching to fly
And a voice whispers
Take it easy
It's the Buddha speaking

When your hand reaches
Under the table
For a wad of banknotes
And you hear a cautionary voice
It's the Buddha speaking

When you are panting around the
maze
Of the rat race
And you hear an amused voice tell
you
What a waste of energy it is
It's the Buddha speaking

When you have given up all hope for
the world
And place a fantasy finger
On a nuclear button to blow it up
And a gentle voice
Counsels love for all there is
It's the Buddha speaking

Who can tell
How many Buddhas there must be
In our overpopulated world
For us to hear the voice so often
every day?

Social scientists might find it an
interesting exercise
To conduct a worldwide survey
They needn't bother
I can give you the answer straight-
away
It's over six billion

There are over six billion of us
Each with a living Buddha
In a tiny yet immeasurable space
Within the heart

Now tell me
What can they do to so many
Those merchants of calculated
hated
Those engineers of irrationality
Tell me
What can they do against six billion
Buddhas
Tell me
How many Buddhas can they
destroy?

PROFESSOR KAISER HAQ --- POET, CRITIC,
ACADEMIC --- TEACHES ENGLISH LITERATURE
AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY.

HAPPENINGS

The clairvoyant's tale

SUNANDA KABIR

When my granny married my grandpa, she brought a maid with her, from her parental house. Eventually she became a family member. This lady had a peculiar ability to see into the future. Her inborn power of clairvoyance benefited us in many ways. I can still remember one incident.

We used to live in Comilla. I was a very small child at the time, but I can remember every bit of the incident. My third uncle was a banker and served in Calcutta (Kolkata). He came to Comilla during the Puja holidays and wanted to go back after the vacation was over. He was supposed to go by train to Chandpur, then by steamer to Goalondo and again by train to SealDAH. This was the route at that time. The night before the very day he was supposed to leave for Chandpur, the maid had a dream. She dreamt of a train accident that killed many.

Next morning she made quite a fuss about it which ultimately barred my uncle from leaving for Calcutta. And what a tragic surprise! The train bound for Chandpur met with a severe accident which left many passengers dead and

fatally wounded. There was then little doubt that the maid was clairvoyant.

Everybody experiences dreams, but a clairvoyant dreams images, or experiences sounds or voices and foresees some sort of danger. Clairvoyance is the ability to see into the future. A clairvoyant can also see things that others cannot, like auras, spirits and energies. By consulting with these spirits the clairvoyant can find all kinds of answers which are not otherwise available. Sometimes clairvoyants are used to help investigations in solving crimes or get clues to crimes committed.

It was an amazing incident that took place in August 1970. Sirens were screaming, four petrol cars roared through the coast road leading off the Pacific highway alongside the Spanish-style beach house of Leon Harris. Inside the house blood was splattered all over the floor and walls, furniture had been overturned and smashed. The battered bodies of Leon Harris, his wife and their two daughters lay in the pool of blood on the floor. A box containing 2,000 dollars was missing. Possibly the killer had been looking for money,

and, strangely enough, he left no clues. The homicidal scene was uncannily bereft of clues.

Days passed, and the detectives felt helpless and baffled. Eventually Los Angeles police thought of taking help from a clairvoyant. In fact, at the time the police department had a panel of 15 psychics to help investigations from time to time. “I was beginning to come to the conclusion that a good psychic and a good detective were often an unbeatable combination,” said detective Ray Gros, who helped psychic investigations in Los Angeles. So Dutch-born Jan Steers was called in. At forty-five, Steers was a renowned psychic investigator in America.

Two nights later, Steers rang Gros with some uncanny news. “I have discovered the clue that will give you a major lead. There is a small room next to the living room in which the killing took place,” he told Gros.

“Go into this room and you will find the murderer’s finger prints. They are on the right hand side of the door jamb, five feet four and a half inches from the floor.” They were exactly there, only at a quarter inch difference!

“Come down to the station and we’ll throw

you in jail. There’s no way you could know this unless you are the murderer,” Gros told the clairvoyant.

But actually Steers had been in San Francisco on the day of the murder. Moreover, he had no access into the house where the murder had taken place. He also knew the details of the killing..... that the killer was a labourer, worked with metal, probably in a foundry. Meanwhile, the fingerprints were checked and they were found to be of a Mexican with a previous record of violence, but who had never been in police custody over the years. After extensive enquiries a month later, the killer was located in a foundry in Detroit. It was proved that he had not been at work in August 1970. Eventually he admitted committing the murder and was awarded life imprisonment.

“Jan was 100 per cent right in his predictions. Everything he said was true!” said Ray Gros.

“It’s not the first time a baffling case has been solved by a clairvoyant. We treat them seriously and it’s paid off”

SUNANDA KABIR WRITES FICTION AND IS A POET.