Deciphering the past

Noted art historian Benoy Behl shares how sculptures and artworks at Hazaribagh highlight the area's deep connection with Buddha

S. RAVI

In an attempt to further the cause of Indian history and heritage, well known art historian and documentary filmmaker Benoy Behl recently teamed up with Bulu Imam, Convener of Hazaribagh Chapter of Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. Studying together the various sculptures and artworks unearthed at Itkori, Hazaribagh, the two expect the area to become an important part of Buddhist tourism circuit. Highlighting the significance of the place and findings, Behl provides details of the sculptures and how they help in understanding the past.

Excerpts:

How do the findings at Itkori add to Bulu Imam’s research in the Hazaribagh area?

Bulu Imam, has been re-searching the prehistoric and Buddhist art of Hazaribagh for the last 30 years. He has also spent considerable time conserving the traditions of tribal painting in the Hazaribagh region. I was invited as an art historian by him. My re-search associate Sujata Chatterji and I were guests of Jharkhand Government and INTACH. The visit was remarkable. We discovered a treasure of Buddhist and Hindu sculpture hidden in the middle of extremely remote fields near Bihari village, close to Itkori in Hazaribagh district. These include the Vishnu sandstone of Pala period and other sculptures.

This is a major find, especially as it is in the region of Itkori, from where it is believed that Gautama Siddhartha travelled to Bodh Gaya, before he gained Enlightenment. This is also very close to Kaulshwari where it is believed that the Buddha had his hair shaved. With this rich treasure being unearthed, Hazaribagh is poised to become an important Buddhist destination.

When I arrived with Imam in the Itkori region, we got some fresh leads which we decided to follow up. This led to the discoveries in the fields near the Bihari Village. In Kanuniya Mai Temple, I discovered the very early Sati Stone in the dark interior of the sanctum.

How important are these latest findings in archaeological terms?

The recent findings and what they signify are extremely important. In fact, I have to study these much more and in deep detail. I would say that a new importance has come to the Jharkhand chapter of the history of Indian art.

The range of sculptures found in the Hazaribagh region is fascinating in its blend of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina art. The Reliefs and sculptures are carved out of yellow sandstone, as well as black stone and they span many centuries. All this indicates the range and rich variety of the art of India. The sandstone Buddha of Pala period and votive stupas and reliefs standstone housed in Bhadra-kali Mandir Museum, Itkori are examples of the art.

In our exploration of the Itkori region, we found many other sculptures in the village of the area. These sculptures have mainly been found in deep, old wells like the Vishnu in black stone. They date from the 2nd century BCE till the 12th century CE and indicate continuous habitation and places of worship over the centuries.

Many Vishnu sculptures and those of Uma-Maheshwari have been found in this region. Many votive stupas and Buddha representations have also been found, as well as Tirthankaras.

Tell us about your role in the exploration of Buddhist heritage in Hazaribagh area

My role is to analyse and study the remains of the Buddhist heritage of Jharkhand as well as to explore and find sculptures. Another role is to develop and highlight this region in the Buddhist Circuit as being related to the journey of Gautama Siddhartha.

How did you and Bulu Imam figure out the importance of this place... tell us about the role played by the poem “Buddha Light Of Asia”?

Gautama Siddhartha attained enlightenment and became a Buddha at Bodh Gaya. According to a tradition, his last journey as a Bodhisattva, while he was seeking the Truth, was from Itkori in Hazaribagh district to Bodh Gaya. This journey would most probably have been along the banks of the Mahana river, which flows down about 30 kilometres from Itkori, meeting the Niranjana river and going on to Bodh Gaya.

Bulu Imam and I were alerted about this ‘Last Journey of the Bodhisattva’ by the long poem about the Buddha ‘Light of Asia’, written by Sir Edwin Arnold and published in 1879. We were discussing the local tradition about Gautama Siddhartha’s journey over dinner in Hazaribagh, when we remembered that his last journey before enlightenment was mentioned by Arnold in his book. So we pulled out the book and checked it.

In the 6th book of the poem, Arnold writes: “Thou, who would see when dawned the Light at last/ North-westwards (this is the direction from Itkori to Bodh Gaya) from the ‘Thou-sand Gardens’ (Hazaribagh) go...On the green hills where the streams are glistening/ Nilajan and Mohana; follow them,/Winding beneath broad-leaved mahua-trees,/ Till on the plain the shining sisters (rivers) meet/In Phalgun’s bed, flowing by rocky banks/To Gaya and the red Barabar hills.../Uruvela (old name of Bodh Gaya site)/ named in ancient days”

Tradition has it that Gautama’s maasi (mother’s sister) Prajapati Gautami came looking for him during his period of meditation. When she could not find him, she said “Iti khoi”, in Pali, meaning “I have lost him”. It is said that Iti khoi became Itkori. Many hundreds of sculptures have been found here and 700 such pieces are kept in a simple site museum which has been made.

The Kaulshwari temple, which is deeply revered till today has many Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina come here to have their ‘mundan’, or ritual head shaving. This is on account of the tradition that the Buddha had his head shaved at this site, before he meditated at Itkori.

Tell us about the importance Sati Stone and stele

We found a very early Sati Stone under worship in the dark sanctum of the Kanuniya Mai Temple, about two kilometres from Itkori. It is unknown to the outside world and is not previously documented. Sati Stones are normally made to commemorate the ultimate sacrifice of a ‘Sati’, or woman who immolates herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. This is a stele, or a vertical, carved stone slab. The simple yet graceful style of the art, as well as a prominent depiction of the kalah in which a mark of the Formless Eternal. It is being worshiped by a male and a female figure, made in a very simple style.

The Sati Stone is the Linga (the symbol, or ‘mark’ of the Formless Eternal). It is being shown by the Moon and the Sun. Above that is the ‘hand of blessing’ of the Sati, which is common in such Sati Stones. On the top, the ‘Kalasha’ or ‘vase of plenty’ or ‘Purna-bhata’, which is an unusual depiction in steles like this. In ancient Indian art, this is the vessel from which spring forth the numerous forms of the world, including all living beings. The Sati Stone stele here combines the symbols of early Indian philosophy in a beautiful and remarkable depiction.

How will these discoveries impact the Buddhist tourist circuit?

I believe this will add to the charm and attraction of the Buddhist tourist circuit. It may also add a unique dimension of promoting the 30 km journey, down the river, from Itkori to Bodh Gaya, as the last journey of the Bodhisattva Gautama Siddhartha.