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A visit to Borobudur, the Living Monument of Lord Buddha

Aju Mukhopadhyay, India



Jogyakarta or Jogya or joga Jakarta is considered as the cultural capital of Java. Borobudur fits in as the extended part of this cultural capital. A hill is turned to this famous Buddhist monument by cutting, chiseling and etching on the body of the hill, gradually rising from broader areas to narrow tops. Sitting on a bedrock hill, 265 metre (869 ft.), above sea level its structure has been compared to a pyramid and at the same time it resembles Buddhist chaitya (shrine). It has been referred as Vihar also. The whole area is divided with many openings containing Buddha and other statues depicting Jataka tales and tales from Hindu scriptures and Puranas including the statues of Kinnara and Kinnari. The entire area contains 504 statues of Buddha and 2672 relief panels depicting lives of Buddha and other stories.

Both Borobudur and Prambanam, the great Hindu temple complex, were constructed on the fertile plain of Sarayu river in central Java. One must remember mention of Sarayu in the epic, Ramayana. Borobudur was constructed between 780 and 833 A.D. Beginning during the rule of king Sailendra it was mostly done during the time of his son, king Samaratunga (792-824). The kings were from the local area. Hindu king Sanjay, in acceptance of their sovereignty, contributed for the construction of the monument.



This happened during the period when Mahayana Buddhism was spreading. King Sailendra had good relationship with Nalanda in Bihar and the Pal dynasty of Bengal and Bihar in India. They founded a monastery in Bihar in 860 A.D. A Buddhist teacher from Bengal came during the consecration of Bodhisattva statue in 782 A.D. Wise monks from Sri Lanka came there ten years later at the inauguration of a monastery. The making of Borobudur was the result of regular relations among the Buddhist countries in South Asia.



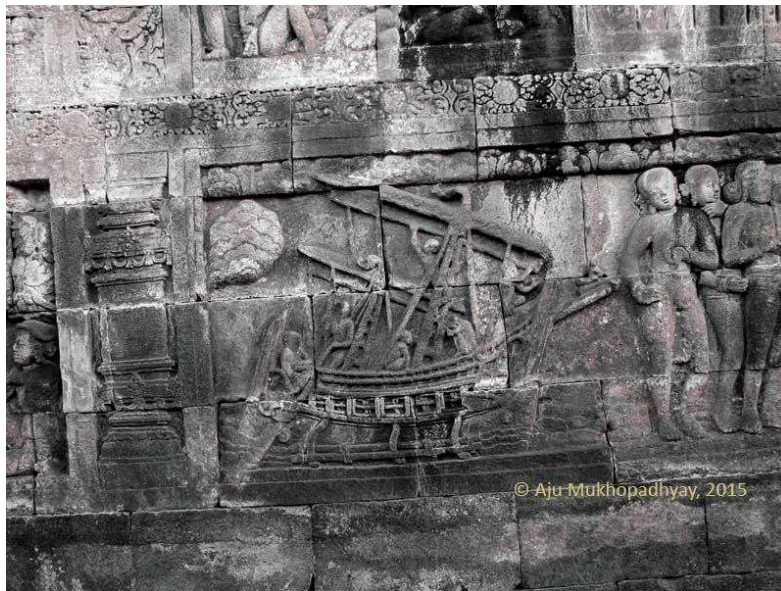
Dharma determined a certain order of society. Labourers were engaged by the king as they were obliged to give labour for the construction of the monument; unskilled labour hands, craftsmen and artisans for making 160000 andesitic blocks for 500 Buddha statues and 1500 relief panels.



Rabindranath Tagore visited Indonesia in 1927 in the company of a great savant, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and others. In two separate letters to Pratima Devi, his daughter-in-law, and Mira Devi, his daughter, the poet wrote,

“Within these few days I have comprehended how much the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata have occupied their life . . . So much emotion of the heart cannot rest without expressing itself in arts. The joy of that expression was felt in the conception of the images in Borobudur. Men and women of this place are expressing the characters of the epics in the dance of their bodies. Those stories are waving in their blood in dance movements.” (Tagore 537-538)

“I liked much the Jatak-images etched in stones-representatives of the daily flow of life, but there is nothing base, indecent or obscene In this temple we see everyone—from king to beggar. Reverence for people has been profusely expressed by the influence of Buddhist religion; not only of men but of the other animals. There is a great message through the Jatak stories; it says that throughout the ages Buddha is expressed through the masses. The best ideal of Dharma is expressed in Buddha following the path of dichotomy between good and bad that continues in the world of living beings Through the innumerable ordinary things the extraordinary is admitted in the Jataka Tales. In this the ordinary has become so great. So are the tales of the trifle lives etched so simply with so much reverence in the walls of this great temple. The history of all living beings reaches its glory by the light and influence of Buddhist religion.” (Tagore 545)





Respecting the comments of the great thinker and poet, after twice visiting the monument and coming out of it in the evening, I was contemplating about the relationship of Lord Buddha with the great bodhi or bo trees (*Ficus religiosa*) under which he achieved his siddhi or bodhi. All around Borobudur this tree has been planted and hundreds of years old very tall and large trees together make a scene surpassing all other trees present. Perhaps that was desired while planting them but the light of the outgoing Sun seemed to greet them for the last time and ornate trees seemed to respond, thereby glorifying the Sun and Lord Buddha as well as themselves. The last rays seemed to enhance the beauties of the trees. And I felt a strong idea of getting a photographic image of the fiery tree but my camera? I suddenly remembered that Mili, who has all the

pleas to possess whatever I consider valuable, sometime on the way possessed it and was snapping at random.



It was time out. The guards took their positions and were seeing off all the visitors whoever was coming out of the open gates; there were no doors as such but it isn't easy to enter and climb the hilly steps at will. And at the closing hours the guards for security reasons see that nobody is left out. Finally they go up and check all the nooks and corners and come out after ascertaining that none was left inside. As everyone was going out and I alone was waiting, one of them came and asked my intention. As I said that I was waiting for the other members of my family who were yet to come out they asked me to come down and wait. But I was trying to dodge them somehow, telling them that I wished to take the last snap of the day. They became suspicious and were keeping keen eyes on me, discussing this among themselves. Even their chief came and warned that I should not stay there for long. At that moment I found them coming out, one of the last batches. As the guards came to us to finally bid good bye I became resistant, afraid that Mili will not like to give the camera back to me. As her mother was trying to get the camera from her I told the guards, "See, the Suns are greeting these trees for the last time today and tomorrow we shall not be here. How can I go before taking a snap at least?" I don't know if they smelt a rat but now they looked quite serious as the dusk was surrounding us and visitors almost deserted the area. At that moment my camera came to my hand. And with immense joy I took some snaps of the trees aglow with fire, in the name of the great Buddha.

Work Cited

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Aju Mukhopadhyay, a bilingual award winning poet, author and critic, writes fictions and essays too. He has authored 32 books including eight books of poems in English and received several poetry awards from India and USA besides other honours. Recently he has received Albert Camus Centenary Writing Award, 2013 from Canada / Cyprus. He is a regular contributor to various magazines and e-zines in India and abroad. He is in the editorial and advisory board of some important literary journals. His poems and short stories have been widely anthologised and translated. He has travelled across some important countries of Asia, Europe, America and Africa.
