The Afterlife of Art Objects and Monuments

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Introduction

"The Past only exists in memories, texts, objects and our ongoing collective activity of reconstruction."[1]

It is safe to assume that monuments and sculptures built in stone were intended to stand the tests of time and not merely perish within the lifespan of its conceiver(s).

Irrespective of the motive behind their conception, it would likely have been the hopes of artists and patrons alike that these monuments and artefacts live on as, perhaps, testimonies of their grandeur, wealth, artistic richness or skill. Needless to say, numerous ancient structures have indeed passed that test owing to a combination of different factors from deliberate preservation measures to more coincidental factors such as escaping human intervention by being buried for decades or even centuries.

Many of these monuments and sculptures have lived 'multiple afterlives', as Debora Stein puts it, undergoing deaths and rebirths in different contexts and by different agents. Although various external factors, actors and agents are at play in the evolution of the perception and reception of said monuments, the process itself is not a consciously orchestrated one. Rather, one that is moulded organically.

It is not only the large, spiritually important structures like the Sanchi Stupa ,that garner a lot of public attention, that are subject to the onslaught of these 'agents' but also lesser known, obscure artefacts such as the two seemingly insignificant *Mithuna* sculptures that went on quite an adventure from their original abode at Atru, Rajasthan[2]. Sometimes, entire artistic cultures being caught in a tug of war of claims over their material culture such as in the case of the 'appropriation' of Hindu cultural and artistic styles in south East Asia.

The Rebirth of these monuments may be in the sense of the context surrounding them changing with time, as in the case of the *Ambika* temple in Jagat or the artefact itself being removed and placed and adapted to a whole different context.

In this paper, I will be focusing on certain specific monuments and sculptures to illustrate the different forms that the 'afterlives' of said monuments and sculptures take and the various factors and agents involved in shaping them as well as why considering them is important for the study of history.

[1] (Davis Richard H., *Lives of Indian Images,* 1999)
[2] (Mankodi, *The case of the Contraband Cargo,* 2016)

Treatment of Historic material:

When piecing together history, there are various conflicts that a historian comes across. Such as, whether to study the historical material within its original context alone, devoid of any context in a neutral setting such as a display at a museum or within its present day context.

Richard Davis, for one, emphasises on the importance of expanding the scope of study of archaeological evidence beyond merely studying their iconographic composition and socio political context within which they were conceived.

As well as how viewing historic objects from a purely academic point of view solely for the 'exhibition value' and studying them in an isolated manner can lead to misinterpretation and a loss of valuable context. This is illustrated particularly well in the case of the '*Didarganj yakshi'* sculpture that was studied by Walsh and Spooner as an isolated specimen of Ancient Indian art.

The '*Didarganj Yakshi'* is in fact a prime example of a sculpture that has lived many lives in the course of its lifetime and is a testimony to the different symbolic meanings that the same object may acquire over a period as the context around it changes.

The *Yakshi*, for instance, goes from being a significant figure representing wealth and abundance in Vedic North India to being a more subordinate figure that brings auspicious powers to guard the Buddhist stupas in 1st century BC to being temporarily worshipped by locals near the banks of the river where it was found centuries late, who integrated her into their current belief system by assigning her an appropriate identity without knowing or bothering to look into her true origin.[3]

Igor Kopytoff, therefore, suggests a "Cultural Biography method" of studying objects within society[4] as objects of ongoing history.

Pillage and Theft

One of the major causes for the displacement and oftentimes re-imagination of certain artefacts in places far away from their original context is pillage.

Although looting and vandalism are far from modern phenomena, the motives behind them in the modern context seems to be quite different from that of the medieval times.

For example, the motive behind the theft of the two *Mithuna* sculptures from Gadgach in Atru in 2009 (contra) was clearly the prospect of economic gain, given its workmanship and value as a rare historic artefact (especially appealing to art collectors).

[3] (Davis, introduction 1999)
[4] (Davis, introduction 1999)

This episode also illustrates how an artefact is misinterpreted when it is devoid of its original context. For instance, Donald M. Stander's false authentication of one of the *Mithuna* statues as being that of Krishna from the narrative of 'Krishna and the hunchback woman' is a result of ignorance of the context of the origin of the sculpture (the Gadgach ruins) as much as it is an ignorance of the iconography of said narrative.[5]

However, in the context of the medieval period, commercial sale would not have been a likely motive. Nor was it an 'expression of aesthetic sensitivity'[6]. Rather, looting, vandalism and appropriation of images were often acts of war. These 'acts of war', according to Davis, would have carried political motives as the images themselves were often closely tied to political orders.[7] Representing prosperity and security of the kingdom, the divine ruling authority bestowed upon the sovereign or representing the sovereign himself. Foundation of new kingdoms, in medieval India, were often marked by the acquisition of significant icons. 'Looting' of important and valuable artefacts was also seen as symbol of military domination by the victorious king over the defeated one and an assertion of authority over the newly annexed territory. And hence, was a subject of proud proclamation, as is evident on numerous inscriptions. Being a routine aspect of war, this kind of forceful extrapolation was not necessarily seen as immoral or even 'theft'.

The material acquired as part of the spoils of victory were often distributed as a means of either conveying a political message (as a gift) or as payment for the military.

By means of this form of repeated appropriation and redistribution as a result of repeated annexation in an imperial context, many a aartefacts, inscriptions, chronicles etc have travelled far and wide. Like the 'Chalukyan dwarapala' acquired by Rajadhiraja, the 'Golden Buddha' seized by the Pandayas and the 'Udaigiri Balakrishna' to name a few.[8]

Despite the violent, antagonistic context in which the artefacts were acquired, in majority of the cases, they were treated with respect and not vandalized or defaced for the sake of it. Oftentimes, these objects were re-appropriated and replenished in the domain of the 'plunderer'.

Although, vandalism and destruction with underlying political motive of exerting authority was not by any means uncommon.

Perhaps this was the reason why, with the exception of the Kushanas, no other dynasty in ancient and medieval India commissioned the construction of large sculptures of kings, who chose to display their power and authority in other ways such as inscriptions,

[5] (Mankodi 2016)
[6] (Davis, Chpt 2 1999)
[7] (Davis, Chpt 2 1999)
[8] (Davis, Chpt 2 1999)

commissioning temples, Buddhist Stupa and habitation complexes, and in the case of Asoka, rock edicts.[9]

Research Material

Another historic monument that stood the test of time, enduring a long line of consecration and desecration before it was ultimately repaired by John Marshal in 1912, is the Sanchi Stupa. Having been constructed during the reign of Asoka, it say subsequently destroyed after the decline of the Mauryan empire, rebuild during the Sungha period, additions were made during the Satavahana period and went through more expansion and embellishment until its abandonment and later discovery during the colonial period. Although, in the case of the Sanchi Stupa, one of the greater causes for its destruction and subsequent rebirth, according to Guha, was 'archaeological prodding'.[10] Faulty and undeveloped excavation techniques leaving the structure irrevocably damaged in various parts.

The Sanchi Stupa has garnered a lot of attention from the public as well as historians from the time of its discovery and salvaging by sir John Marshall.

However,the treatment of the Sanchi Stupa during the early modern period of colonial rule in India by the British historians, researchers and scholars alike is a clinical one, devoid of any sentimental attachment. This is reflected in their 'ends justify means' approach while attempting to excavate the relics and scriptures housed within the Stupa (for research) without much regard for the structure itself.

There was also a push by some of the empire's archaeologists, including Cunningham, for two of the gates to be dismantled and transported to London for its 'safekeeping' and availability for further research.

Due to various circumstantial reasons, this did not end up happening and instead, plaster cast models were commissioned, including a grand full size plaster cast model of the Stupa made by E. Gateway. This was displayed in the British museum and carried its own symbolic meaning (of a distant Indian empire and custodianship of its architectural heritage.[11]) tying the ancient Buddhist site to imperial history.

This instance also brings up a larger issue of the extent of liberties that can be allowed in the name of research, especially in the case of monuments and sites that are held sacred and still in use. And, the struggle between the 'academic Value' and the 'cult value' of a historical monument or site.[12]

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[9] (Dhar, *Of Political Icons and Vandalis: a View from History*, 2018)
[10] (Thakurta, *The production and Reproduction of a Monument: The Many lives of Sanchi Stupa,* 2013)
[11] (Thakurta 2013)
[12] (Davis, Chpt 2 1999)

A prime example of this is the Ambika temple in Jagat, which is still in use, as indicated by the red flag on its shikhara.[13]

The temple is witness to a fierce competition between religious use and historic preservation and sparks debates regarding whether renovations such as white washing and modern constructions are a 'theft from history' and deformation of the historic sites or an organic evolution of a site in use as it is believed by the worshippers to be a 'form of religious duty to instil merit in the patron.'[14]

The perspective, in reality, depends on who is looking. On the one hand, while it might seem like 'destruction of archaeological records' to a historian or an art historian, on the other hand, the act of 'refreshing the deity's home' might hold a sentimental and spiritual value for the worshippers.

Debora stein in her 'Hegemony of Heritage...' gives a detailed description of the tension between the desire to preserve the historical monuments in their original form and the process of reconstruction of historically sacred places, still in use.

She also talks about a third approach of a diachronic model of study that involves widening the field of historic study to include the present context and puts forth Julien Prown's suggestion to include "the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions of a society/community at a given time"[15] in order to produce a more holistic research.

Claims of Ownership

Another interesting dynamic in regards to the Ambika temple is the power struggle between various groups attempting to stake claims over the site.

The Ambika temple in Jagat has well and truly, lived multiple 'after lives' with various deities being worshiped at different points in time. Having, predominantly, had affinities with various goddesses such as the *Matrika* and *Siva Sakti* cult*, Chamunda devi*, evident through inscriptions and Scultpures on the walls, being associated with Tantricism around 10th c (ambikapd) as well as housing a statue of *Harihara.*[16]

over the years, it has also been commodified to the point of being caught in a clash for hegemony between not only kings, local worshipers and historians, but also other smaller groups of tailors, gardeners, Adivasis, Rajput men and women, each of whom carry their own imagined past and futures in relation the site.[17]

[13] (P. P. Dhar, *Ambika Temple At Jagat* 2001)
[14] (Stein, *The Hegemony Of Heritage: Ritual and the Record in Stone,* 2018)
[15] (Stein 2018)
[16] (Agrawala, *Khajuraho of Rajasthan: The Temple of Ambika at Jagat*, 1964)
[17] (Stein 2018)

Such a claim to ownership is not restricted to a certain sculpture like in the case of the Mithuna figurines or parts and wholes of monument such as the Sanchi Stupa (between ASI and the begum of Bhopal) and the Ambika temple but can extend over whole cultures.

Transmigration of Cultural artistic styles

Maritime Trade relations, in particular, aided the transmigration of cultural ideas and artistic styles that were localized and reimagined to suit their new contexts.[18]

An example of this is *Champa* in Vietnam that thrived in a network of local and trans-regional relationships between India and south east Asia This is evident in that it houses numerous Buddhist as well as Hindu temples, inscriptions using Indian temple terms as well as sculptures depicting narratives from Brahmanical tradition.[19]

Angkor Wat in Cambodia is another example of transmigration and localization of aspects of Indian artistic culture in South East Asia. It is a symbol of cross-culturalism and how "Cambodian artists localized and adopted the Indian Meru temple concept to fit into that of Cambodian myths, beliefs and ritualistic requirements."[20]

It is also an example of how the cultural idea (of the myth of Meru) transmitted verbally in India gains a new form of visual representation in the form of Cambodian Temple Mountains.[21]

The temple that manifested from the Indian concept of the Meru mountain goes on to acquire an entirely different meaning as it overtime comes to represent a free Cambodian nation.

At the same time, in the backdrop of the freedom struggle, monuments such as Angkor Wat and Borobudur (Indonesia) became symbols of India's inverse cultural domination in Asia, essentially disregarding any south East Asian agency in the transfer and localization of Indian culture and artistic styles.

Furthermore, the decision to recreate a 'grander' '*Virat Angkor Wat Ram Mandir'* in Bihar and the subsequent request by the Cambodian government to stop it on grounds of postmodern copy right laws is indicative of the role of such monuments as political symbols and its commercial value. Moreover, this episode is an example of "selective appropriation of shared pre-modern cultural histories strategically reworked to suit current motives and religio-political aspirations of numerous believers in India, contrasting with the reception of Angkor wat as a site of Buddhist worship in Cambodia." [22]

[18] (Dhar P.P., *Monuments, Motifs, Myths: Architecture and its Transformations in Early India and Southeast Asia*, 2018)
[19] (Dhar P. P., *The Lives of Temples in Champa,* 2018)
[20] (Dhar P.P., *The Many Lives of an Iconic Monument: Angkor Wat In Crosscultural Imagination*, 2018)
[21] (Dhar P. P., *The Many Lives of an Iconic Monument*: *Angkor Wat In Crosscultural Imagination* 2018)
[22] (P. P. Dhar, The Many Lives of an Iconic Monument: Angkor Wat In Crosscultural Imagination 2018)

Conclusion

Like Debora stein said, one history does not naturally lead to another.[23] The direction of it depends on various actors and agents and how they perceive, represent and choose to treat the objects in any given period of time.

Art forms are reinvented through the act of being reinterpreted years, decades and even centuries later in contemporary life. Like the adaptation of Indian artistic culture in south east Asia or the iconification of the Sanchi stupa, the design of which, inspired many important buildings in modern India.[24]

As is illustrated by the example of the '*Didarganj Yakshi'* and the Ambika temple, Hindu religious images, in particular, may carry different meanings in different periods/eras. It is necessary to understand that the past embodied in an object is not fixed and to read the context it is currently situated in to fully understand the object, as not just a historical object stagnant in the past (time of its conception) but as a dynamic object that acquires multiple lives in a history that is constantly being created.

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[23] (Stein 2018)
[24] (Thakurta 2013)

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