

Documenting the Tangible through the Intangible A Case Study of West Champaran, Bihar.

Supriya Sinha
Asst. Professor, University of Delhi
supriya.sinha9@gmail.com

Archaeological sites, historical buildings, objects and symbols all over India have been discovered, excavated, probed and documented meticulously by Archaeological Survey of India, State archaeology departments, Universities and National Mission on Monuments and Antiquity. On the other hand ethnographic studies, cultural studies, documentation and inventory of oral traditions, ritualistic & cultural practices and belief systems are being done by other institutions and organizations such as Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, Sanskriti Museum, Craft Museum, Indira Gandhi Rashtra Manav Sanghralay, are just few to name.

However, we do not find too many well articulated programs and formats by any of these institutions where there has been an attempt to understand and document these tangible evidences of the past, which have validated and established histories, from a local and colloquial point of view through the intangible traditions. In this regard there is no place or platform that can be identified as a point of convergence or acceptance of one another. It is important to note that often monumental legacies are appropriated by the communities inhabiting the area around, who either include them into their already existing histories, myths, stories and practices or create one around them probably to justify and adopt its existence in their vicinity and their lives. Therefore, what may be enlisted as an Archaeological site, can at the same time be a traditional cultural property. A traditional cultural property can be defined as a property that has association with cultural practices or belief of a living community or communities that are rooted in that community's history and are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of that community.¹ Though, such practises have been attempted under the purview of public and critical archaeology but often been subjected to disagreements and criticism.

In the area under probe a number of ancient archaeological remains such as Ashokan pillars, stupas, forts and mounds have been discovered but none are known by their real name or purpose to the community and at the same time have well developed stories and practices around them. Also, there are

¹ Thomas F. King, *Places That Count: Traditional Cultural Properties in Cultural Resource Management*, Altamira, USA& UK, 2003. P3

instances where more than one or two sites and monuments, located kilometres apart, have been threaded in single story and a sort of an imagined territory has been created in the popular memory by joining these dots. Even though it is hard to establish the coherence and relation between these sites bases on the time periods and architectural style (allotted to each by the archaeologists), the popular myths have been able to create a relation. Such practices and believe systems create new channels and avenues for researchers. Thus it is the responsibility of our fraternity to create such documented resources that enable the study of these cultural resources in totality and contribute to the development of the region at large.

In the light of this theme this paper is an attempt to look at the stories, myths and believes associated to already established historical and archaeological symbols, monuments and sites in the region of west Champaran in Bihar, which are often absent in our institutionalised documentation format. The purpose of this exercise is to analyse that how local and colloquial understanding of elements of past often create another parallel history related to it, both in isolation and collectively. They are more profound and intimate to communal memories and sentiments, making it imperative to formulate documentation systems which can substantially include this subaltern perspective along with other criterions and parameters.

There are many instances to elucidate this point, but the author will limit to two specific cases, from the region of western Champaran. The northernmost fringe of the Gangetic plain running along the foothills of the great Himalayas is endowed with great wealth of cultural and natural heritage. The cultural wealth dates back from the times of the Buddha at least, and the natural heritage to the time immemorial. These assets of the region are comparable with the best in the country as much in their value as in variety. Apart from the historical monuments, the region is full of forests, rivers and huge freshwater lakes, sustaining endless variety of flora and fauna. The social groups of the region and their ethnicity are equally colourful and varied. The past and present of the local society may be of interest for any one. For, it was here that the dacoit-turned poet, Balmiki is said to have lived and written the great epic *Ramayana*; Lord Buddha has closely been associated with the region, where Emperor Asoka erected his Pillars to convey the message of love and peace (proclamation of *Dhamma*). In our own times, Mahatma Gandhi started his *satyagraha* experiment in Champaran. This illustrious history and the great

natural and cultural wealth of the region make it one of the most interesting places in the country.²

In the western district of Champaran heritage of great significance are scattered at different places. At about 2 kms. from the main site of Nanadangarh, there is an Asokan Pillar with a Lion capital at Lauria. This monolithic pillar of polished sand stone is 32'-9.5" in height with a diameter of 35.5" at base and 26.2" at the top. It is over 2000 years old yet in excellent condition.³ Named after the pillar (*laur means phallus in local language*), this place is called Lauria. It carries Asokan inscription together with inscriptions in Persian (AD. 1660-61), Nagari(AD 1509) and English(1972).⁴

At this site extensive excavation and documentation work has been carried out right from the days of Alexander Cunningham followed by his successors. Large number of antiquities have also been excavated from the vicinity and this site clearly has a well defined line of historical explanation. But an interesting aspect to this historically and archaeologically validated site is the fair that is organized in every ninth month –*aghan* (usually co-insides roughly with the month of November) of the Indian calendar starting on its 13th day of the *krishna pakh* (dark lunar fortnight). This fair continues for a month and is very popular event in this region. When enquired no one had any idea since when this fair is being organized as the elders also recalled their grandparents recollection of this fair, as well. Considering the fact that Lauria Nandangardh was an important religious site (Buddhist) and a commercial site, placed on the trading route of the Mauryan territory and even after, there is a possibility that these fair and festivals have an ancient connection. Even more fascinating about this event is the worship of the Lauria Nandangardh Pillar itself as a *Laur Baba*. It is believed that the pillar is possessed by the spirit of a saint who is surmounted by a Lion. Thus, *purohits* from neighbouring village assemble here to conduct puja, yagya and kathas around the pillar. Men and women of tribal communities (tharu, dhangar etc) and some castes of the Hindu brahmanical order (yadav, kurmis, dussad etc) exclusively prepare *lappusi* a preparation prepared out of jaggery and whole wheat flour baked in a flat earthen pot like utensil (terracotta *kardhai*) and offered to the *Laur baba* and later consumed by themselves and their family ,only.

This fair is organized all around the pillar especially in the southern part of the open grounds. *Nautanki* (theatre), circus, games and shops- selling all kind items ranging from furniture, jewellery, garments and cosmetics, utensils and

² *District Gazetteer of Champaran*, Patna: Govt. of Bihar, 1960.

³ *District Gazetteer of Champaran*, pp. 566-7.

⁴ Patil, D.R., *The Antiquarian Remains of Bihar*, Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research institute, Patna, 1963

metal objects, saplings and seeds are available here. Now some locals explain this fair as no co-incidence or a random affair. There is a social implication to it. The period starting from *aghan* to *phagun* is the time when the young brides who had stayed back after their wedding at her parents place will finally be sent off to her marital home. This is called *duragman* or *gauna*. At this occasion an elaborate bride's trousseau and all the things to be included in a dowry which will accompany the bride, such as furniture- *khattia*, *machiya*, table; drapes, utensils etc are bought. It is vital to observe that all the products required for this occasion are the main selling commodities in this fair. The entire western section of this ground is dedicated to furniture and other wood works produced by local carpenters. On the other hand in the south, clothes, *bherdhahua kambal*- blanket made of sheep wool produced in local handloom, cosmetics, jewellery and grocery are sold.⁵ Therefore, one can interpret that incorporation of the pillar worship is a way to provide a purpose to the fair in order to regulate and ensure its periodic occurrence. Also, it is important to note that phallus worship is not a recent phenomenon; it is can be dated back to many years before Buddhism came into existence. Thus perceiving the pillar as a *laur* and therefore as *laur baba* by the locals will be the most logical and organic process which can be easily accepted and assimilated in the local religious and cultural practices. Or another interpretation can be, that the pillar was strategically built at this location which was a busy route and such fair and festivals were regular, drawing large crowd from the hinterland. It was an ideal location to install an edict to maximise its viewership. Therefore, a local practice could have determined the location of this monument.

Another important example to be discussed here is in the context of, the sense of place or territory that is imagined and instilled in the collective memory. The main site of Lauria Nandangardh is a prime location of the Buddhist cultural heritage of the region. There is a huge, 82ft high mound made of bricks. Until not long ago, it was full of wild growth except the platform it stood at. But its excavation has yielded the ruins of a colossal *stupa* that had a circumference of about 1500 ft near the base. This mound was known as Nandangarh. Externally, the *stupa* rises in terraces, the basement and the lower two terraces above the basement having a polygonal plan and the upper being circular. The base and the two terraces above it evidently form the platform and the so-called circular terraces or the *pradakhshina* path. The facades of these polygonal terraces are relieved with plain molded string courses.⁶ There were no relics

⁵ Interviewed Dr. Devilal Prasad Yadav, Mathia Village, Bettiah, Champaran 01. 08. 2015.

⁶ *District Gazetteer of Champaran, Patna: Govt. of Bihar, 1960*, pp. 566-71; Patil, D.R., *The Antiquarian Remains of Bihar*, Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research institute, Patna, 1963. Balarak Batabyal, *Architectural and Sculptural Imagery of Lauriya Nandangarh*, Bharatya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2003, provides very useful details and a good bibliography.

found inside but it had a tiny copper casket containing a long strip of a birch bark manuscript of about fourth century AD. The few words which could be deciphered show that the manuscript represented a Buddhist text. Probably the *Pratitya Samutpada* Sutra was written on the thin birch leaf having been squeezed into a tiny copper vessel with a lid fastened to it by a wire. The *stupa* is believed to have contained ashes of Buddha's funeral pyre.⁷ Also, in the larger premise there are three rows of 15 mounds rising from 20' to 50' on the horizon, about a mile apart from Nandangarh. The *ASI Annual Report* of 1904-05 mentions that several of the mounds had already been dug. These mounds attracted attention of the European explorers in the early part of the 19th century and were subsequently reported on by Cunningham⁸ and his assistants Garrick⁹ and Carlleyle.¹⁰ But it was Dr Theodor Bloch of the Archaeological Survey of India who for the first time made a systematic attempt in 1904-5 to study these mounds by excavation. Bloch assigned these mounds to the Pre-Mauryan period. However, many historians and archaeologists refrain from considering these mound as *vedic* burial mounds.

From the numerous mounds that are present at this site it is obvious that the site was regarded as a sacred place. The site of Lauria Nandangardh was selected by king Asoka probably because it was the site of royal cemetery.¹¹

Nearly twenty kilometres away from Nandangardh is Chankigarh. There is a very tall rectangular structure rising over 90 feet high and spread over several acres. Despite the wild growth all over it, the tall red brick wall is clearly visible from the southwest direction and brick flooring at the top. From east to west, it is about 250 feet, with remains of two round elevations on the top on both ends. The bricks used are exactly of 14" square and 2.5" thick. A sloping terraced path on the southeast connects it with the ground level. There appears to be ditch or mote like depression around the main structure, some portion filled with water. The mound is known locally as Janakigarh or Jankot, and local tradition asserts that it was a fort of king Janak or his subsidiary.¹² Another tradition is that a Buddhist raja built this fort for his favourite priest named Tantik. It was probably a fort and remains of some fortification can still be seen. This indicates that once it must have been a palace or some sort of fortification, though possibility of its being a stupa cannot be ruled out.¹³ Local people

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Archaeological Survey Report*, vol. I, pp. 68-74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XVI, pp. 104-09.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XXII, pp. 36-50.

¹¹ *Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India*, 1935-36. P55

¹² Cunningham, A., *ASI, Cunningham report Vol. XVI*

¹³ *District Gazetteer of Champaran*, Patna: Govt. of Bihar, 1960.

believe that it was the fort of Chanakya. In order to substantiate this understanding it is believed that Chanakya's father was from the Devaraj Village which is close to this site and Chadragupta was born in Sitapur another village located in this part of Champaran. There are many stories, big and small, around these villages and events.

It is in this context that it is strongly believed that the site of Nanadangardh was a *gardh* or a fort belonging to Ghananada/Dhananada last king of the Nanda dynasty- *Ghananand ka killa*. According to the local understanding the fort was destroyed and over it the present Stupa of Nandangardh has been erected, where as the smaller mounds which are there in the vicinity belongs to this period. There are other evidences that corroborates the fact that Chanakya was contemporary to Ghanananda. Therefore, even though we have clear archaeological and historical evidences for establishing that the site of Lauria Nanadangardh - pillar and the stupa - belonged to Asoka, the mythic history engrained in the local memory compels us to again enquire into the dates allotted by our colonial masters. Also, a good number of population that inhabits this area had migrated in from neighbouring and far flung areas, especially during the medieval and modern times. Thus, it is worth a probe that, have these newer communities assimilated this historical understanding from the people who already lived here or they have carried it along from their place of origin. Special referents are common in myths, legend and collective memory. While oral traditions are imagined, they are also anchored in mythical and historical landscape and often within architectural space. Therefore, such points of reference are directly amenable to archaeological considerations.¹⁴

Myths and legends are shaped by experiences of people and communities, this makes it difficult to precisely date and establish the antiquity of these practices. At the same time these tradition in no way can be considered as manuals to interpret these archaeological evidences. It is with this understanding it is usually argued that traditions recorded now cannot be applied to remains belonging to centuries in the past. Also, there are other limitations in applying oral traditions as an interpretive framework, such as people remember myths and legends differently, tell them in different settings, and use words and phrases that are usually difficult to translate with its real import.¹⁵ The interest,

¹⁴ Christopher B. Rodning, *Center Places and Cherokee Towns: Archaeological Perspectives on Native American Architecture and Landscape in the Southern Appalachians*, University of Alabama Press, USA, 2015 . pp60-61.

¹⁵ *ibid*

life experiences and agenda in people involved in recalling and recording oral traditions effect what is remembered. As these practices are transferred from one generation to the other where each have their own set of experiences and understanding; layers of material and meaning tend to get accumulated.

Despite of these limitations there are some compelling reasons to adopt a study of these intangible traditions with the purview of archaeology and also the other way round. As these traditions bring us closer to people directly associated with sites and artefacts of archaeological relevance, as it helps us contextualize these material findings and our interpretation of them. Setting aside consideration of historical veracity oral tradition is embedded within a cultural logic and world view and details of myths and legend illustrate understanding about the world as it is and has been experienced by people living in it.¹⁶

Therefore, when an archaeological site, monument or an object is being documented where its physical character, material composition, location, condition report, historical relevance is being recorded by various means-(written, photography, illustration and videos) in the process of preparing an inventory a section in it must be dedicated to the myths, legends or practices related to them. So as when an archaeologist, historian, museologist, conservator, sociologist or an anthropologist looks into these documented material, they immediately draw a holistic idea along with different aspects and experiences allied to these evidences of the past, which may constitute a vital part of any research and understanding.

¹⁶ *ibid*