

## Monuments of Dharma

*Unseen Presence, the Buddha and Sanchi* Edited by Vidya Dehejia  
Marg Publications, 1996, Rs 1550

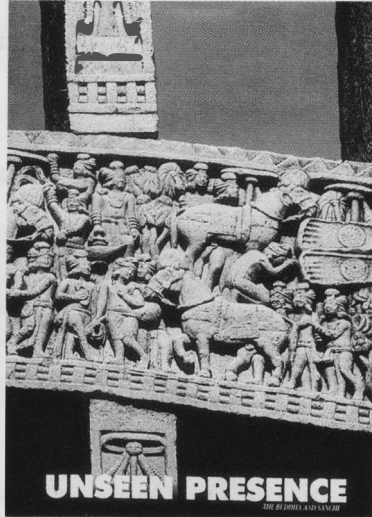
*Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa*  
By Robert Knox  
British Museum Press, London, £40

*Borobudur: Prayer in Stone*  
Edited by Peter Schoppert  
Thames & Hudson, London, £40

Reviewed by Pratap Rughani

**T**he Buddhist monuments of Sanchi, Borobudur and Amaravati are among the most significant flowerings of devotional art of any age, culture or country anywhere. Recorded in the World Heritage list of monuments of outstanding artistic and architectural value, the Sanchi and Borobudur complexes are once again principal centres of Buddhism spanning two millennia of Buddhism in Asia through its Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana avatars. Today, since their rediscovery and restoration, Sanchi and Borobudur are alive once more as pilgrimage centres for Buddhists, tourists and art lovers. With the completion of the British Museum's gallery housing the bulk of its collection from Amaravati there has never been a better time to see and compare the Buddhist traditions that gave rise to these epic monuments.

Three recent publications on three different Buddhist stupas mark the growing international interest in Buddhist art and architecture from its genesis in north and central India from the third century B.C.



Marg's contribution, *Unseen Presence, the Buddha and Sanchi*, edited by Vidya Dehejia with photographs by K.B. Agrawala, is an innovative collection of short essays presented in a handsome volume that brings a contemporary feel to what has been traditionally an academic preserve. Its eight essays pick up themes at the contemporary end of art history and archaeology. The collection includes glances at Sanchi from perspectives informed by post-modernism, as with Laura Scanlon's essay "Moving through Time: Layering Stories at Sanchi," through to contemporary history in Gary Tartakov's discussion of the New Buddhists or Navayana approaches to Buddhism at Sanchi. Tartakov draws out some of the devotional implications of the great 'untouchable' hero Dr Ambedkar's interpretation of the middle way. It's a fascinating choice, since the rebirth of Indian Buddhism is headed by Ambedkar's followers, but Tartakov's reading of Buddhist practice in these communities is an idealised view. Rather than a keen awareness of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddh-

ism in his classic *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, many Ambedkarite groups (with the conspicuous exception of the TBMSG) have yet to escape a kind of 'political Buddhism' still tainted by the internecine caste politics which Ambedkar aimed to eschew. With this in mind, however, the essay gives a clue as to how future Navayana Buddhists may view Sanchi.

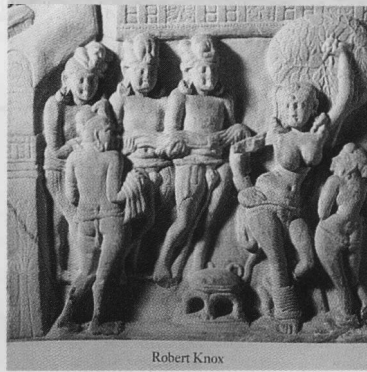
For those new to Sanchi these essays are leavened with a detailed tour through the celebrated *toranas* (gateways) of Stupa No. 1 from Vidya Dehejia and by Debala Mitra's summary of the discovery and restoration of the monuments. Mitra, formerly Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, has been closely connected with Sanchi for five decades. Mitra's excellent brief guide, *Sanchi*, first published forty years ago, is in its sixth impression. It costs Rs 12 and remains one of the most effective distillations of archaeological scholarship for the lay reader.

For those who do not make the journey to Sanchi, Marg's book gives a catholic introduction and offers a range of ways to engage with the monument.

It's a creative collection that achieves moments of fresh perspective by embracing an interdisciplinary approach. "It is not what we see but the way we see that is empowering," Scanlon writes. "We can experience the sights at this site and within these panels as multiple, interconnected, simultaneously linked in and layered over time, just as the text upon these pages links and layers a present model of causality with a past one to construct this

## AMARAVATI

Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa



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contingent reading of metaphor."

The essays themselves are of an intermediate length — not long enough for a detailed investigation nor so lightweight as to be ignored by Buddhist historians, critics and artists. In this sense the book is a kind of bridge to a wider audience. It may not persuade some purists but the overall project is laudable and Marg deserves success in aiming to bring the glories of Sanchi to a wider audience while seeking lively perspectives on these timeless themes.

If there is a way to improve the book then for me it would be to correct the variable quality of the photographic reproduction on the curiously shiny paper. Though there are several striking images, colour appears to be washed out, at times producing some overly flat images which are blown up to a size that their resolution cannot sustain. Unfortunately, these are concentrated in the first chapter, making it difficult to forget this impression entirely despite stronger work as the book progresses.

Introducing the book, Dehejia recalls how the Begum of Bhopal actually contemplated presenting one of the *toranas* to the British Museum in London (with another to be presented to Emperor Napoleon III in 1868 to be erected in Paris) but was persuaded to have casts of the *toranas* taken instead.

The British Museum, meanwhile, was already growing fat on the treasures of other parts of the Indian subcontinent and a welcome record of the surviving fragments of the Amaravati Stupa 'marbles' is now available in a museum publication by Robert Knox, Keeper of Oriental Antiquities and a key figure in achieving the current display of the collection now on public show after thirty years in the BM's broom cup-

board. Though hidden, at least here they were safe and no one has felt more keenly the wanton neglect of the collection than Knox, who has now helped secure a gracious home for them.

*Amaravati, Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa* was published to coincide with the opening of the new Amaravati display in a dehumidified and air-filtered gallery at the British Museum financed by the Japanese newspaper company Asahi Shimbun. It's a scholarly work aimed at those with an informed interest and marks the latest turn in a complicated journey that had seen the stupa fragments spirited from their home for two millennia in Amaravati, near present-day Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, to the cold heart of the Empire.

What was taken by curators is

about all that we have access to; much of the original sculpture was either raided by European bounty hunters or burned for lime or building materials used by Indians in the construction of the Amaresvara temple. Of the pieces sent to London (where they lay unclaimed in the docks for a year) two of the finest were then mounted on the outside walls of the India Museum in Whitehall, where Victorian smog damaged the stone structure. Others were set in concrete so that only one side of their sculpted surfaces was on view and by the end of the 1950s parts of the railing on display in the Front Hall were also found to be damaged by exposure to varying humidity and air pollution. Worried by the decaying patina, the museum authorities dismantled the display and for the next thirty years the sculpture lay largely forgotten back in the British Museum basement.

Knox's aim with the new display is a "reconstruction rather than an interpretation," creating the conditions for a response that could parallel the way people may have originally viewed the stupa. His researches were helped by the discovery of Elliot's 1845 sketches of Amaravati that give some further clues to the arrangements of the stupa's railing. "This is more than 'Art for Art's sake'. I see art history as only one element in understanding its political and social statement," Knox says.

The book's primary function is as a careful museum catalogue of the collection but Knox does venture a useful discussion of the principles of stupa architecture and includes a history of the sometimes spectacular story of Amaravati — by turns one of criminal neglect, greed and inspiration. He includes the attempts of the acquisitive curator Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks to snaffle "a load

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of the new marbles" out of India for the British Museum despite impending legislation to outlaw the wholesale removal of large parts of the great monuments from India.

The story of desecration, preservation and celebration does not divide neatly on national lines. Indian and British protagonists both secured the destruction of the Amaravati Stupa and have enabled the remaining collection to be enjoyed today. In time, Knox anticipates, the sculpture of Amaravati will be seen to be comparable to that of the Parthenon's 'Elgin Marbles,' also located under the British Museum's substantial roof. Unlike the Greek sculpture, the Amaravati Stupa has excited no demands for repatriation. "We have never had any claims to objects from India. The riches of India largely remain in India," Knox adds.

Certainly the thoughtful and elegant display gives a valuable opportunity for the gallery-going public to experience something of the scale of the aesthetic and spiritual achievements of ancient India. It is an achievement too to recover something of this from the few surviving fragments.

The book is well illustrated with archive photographs of the monument from 1880 supplemented with the Elliot sketches in addition to a new and complete catalogue in colour and black and white of the displayed collection, precisely photographed by John Williams of the British Museum Photographic Section.

Amaravati has now to be re-evaluated. "This is one of the most magical collections in the world. It's like seeing Greek sculpture for the first time," Knox says. The new display gallery and this publication

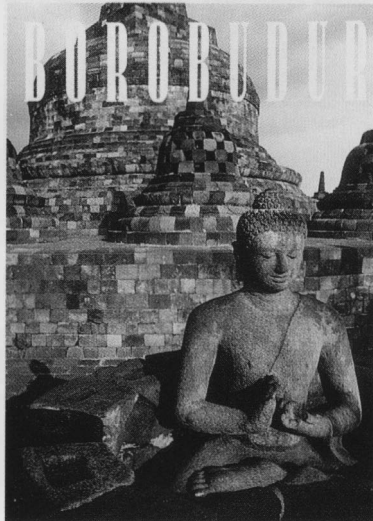


exhibit the most important collection of early Buddhist sculpture outside the subcontinent. For those who want to see this aesthetic alive once more, Amaravati is invaluable. The sculpture is hardly known yet ranks alongside the Elgin Marbles and the Assyrian reliefs as perhaps the greatest treasures of the British Museum. As consciousness of this dawns we can anticipate a clearer appreciation of the contribution of Indian art to global heritage. Paradoxically, deported to the British Museum, Amaravati is ideally placed to cast its influence anew.

If *Amaravati* is at heart a record, *Borobudur; Prayer in Stone* is an exploration as well as a documentary of the largest Buddhist monument in the world. Originally commissioned and published by UNESCO, now by Thames and Hudson, *Borobudur* is a rare work of photographic flexibility and imagination aimed to deliver an understanding of the great monument grounded in the experience of eleven leading photographers and their interpretations of the space in its living as well as its historical worlds. The photographers are some of the most respected names in the

business: Rene Burri, Bruno Barbey, Louis Frederic, Hiroshi Suga, Raghu Rai, Michelangelo Durazzo, Paul Chesley, Rio Helmi, Bernard Hermann, Ping Amranand and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni. This is a truly impressive book that excels even Thames and Hudson's very high standards. It may cost more than the coffee table, but as books go it's hard to imagine one that will give more pleasure.

Professor Soekmono is Indonesia's most widely respected archaeologist. For two decades he led the campaign that eventually resulted in the restoration of Borobudur. He notes the myth of orientalist scholars that the monument was 'lost' from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries till its 'discovery' by Raffles in 1814, when in fact indigenous writings make clear reference to it. Soekmono describes Borobudur as a *pusaka* for Indonesia, "an object which is an expression of cultural heritage and which has a strong mysterious and magical flavour. A *pusaka* is a sort of sacred heirloom, which lends strength to a family, or in this case the Indonesian people."

Indonesia is a largely Muslim country but Borobudur bears testimony to the influence of Indian Buddhism. Unfortunately, its fame has led to terrorist attacks; several *dagobas* were blown up as part of an anti-government protest. The restoration, however, is immaculate. Borobudur now holds 504 life-size seated Buddha statues all sculpted out of single stone blocks and 72 princes "kept in cages" at Borobudur, according to Japanese tradition.

*Borobudur; Prayer in Stone* is a celebration as well as a historical documentary of perhaps the most ambi-

tious art restoration projects this century. It was Prof. Soekmono's life work and his abiding inspiration: "An excellent training programme, either for the pilgrim-devotee or for the field technician, is always based on a wish.... For the ardent Buddhist it is the highest wisdom that leads to the Ultimate Salvation, and for the technician the highest degree of expertise that leads to the appropriate fulfilment of his duty. In both cases Candi Borobudur is the embodiment of such a deeply felt wish. It is the manifestation in stone of a prayer. It is a prayer in stone."

In terms of Buddhist cosmology Borobudur is a pilgrimage point *par excellence*. The three spheres begin with the *kamadhatu*, where a person is largely governed by desires. Through practice of meditation, gradually the *rupadhatu* is attained, a middle section where desires are weakened and wither but "name and form" still bind the pilgrim. Borobudur then opens out onto its upper section, where the individual has broken through all bonds to the mundane world. This is the *arupadhatu*. This journey is described in the narrative reliefs starting with "the law of karma at the base, the search for perfection from the first

to the fourth gallery terminating in the attainment of the Ultimate Truth."


It's a sublime journey for many who have travelled far, yet the central photographic interpretations in the section called "A Divine Inspiration" manage to combine it with a feel for the juxtaposition of local lives. These images capture and interpret the monument through close observation of its visitors. From tourists to pilgrims, schoolchildren and local people there is a particular energy that communicates itself in their connection with the monument. It is no mean feat to achieve, but having brought such a photographic cast list to play at Borobudur anything less would be disappointing.

The penultimate section marked 'The Reliefs' presents a judicious selection from a series of panels for *bas reliefs* describing the Karmavibhanga, the Lalitavistara, the Jataka/Avadana and the Gandavyuha. In all, over 1,500 panels from which perhaps a hundred are presented in a creative tension of soft (often lateral), late afternoon light held in sharp and close focus. It's a combination of qualities suggested by the sculpture itself, hewn from

hard rock to yield a supple, plastic form of Buddha bodies. Ananda Coomaraswamy's description of Borobudur "like a ripe fruit matured in breathless air" is one of several perspectives that finds its echo in the portraits here.

Further contributions from academics Jacques Dumarcaey and J.G. De Casparis introduce and interpret aspects of the monument and its cosmology.

In its own way *Borobudur; Prayer in Stone* finds inspiration from the Ratu Boko inscription (792 A.D.) quoted on the inside cover, which is seen as a kind of blueprint for Borobudur's sculpted galleries:

*I pay homage to the Cosmic Mountain of the perfect Buddhas... endowed with the awe-inspiring power of wisdom — whose profound caves are knowledge, whose rock is excellent tradition, whose brilliance is owing to its relic; the Good Word whose streams are love, whose forests are meditation, — truly the Mount of Few Desires which is not shaken by the eight horrible winds; the world qualities.* 

## Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts

By P. Sainath  
*Penguin India, 1996, Rs 295*

Reviewed by Amita Baviskar

**P**overty is unpleasant. Most of us *India Magazine*-reading people only know it at second hand. When we do encounter other people's poverty, we are much more comfortable

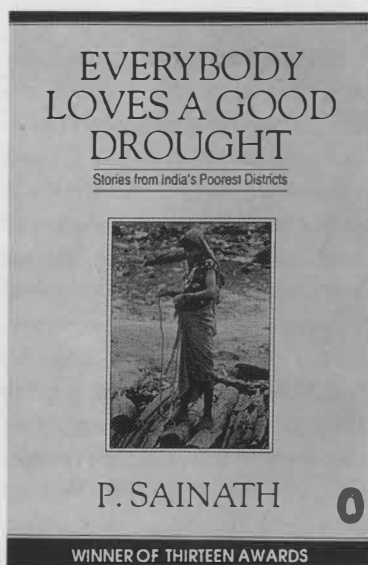
ignoring it. So why should we read Sainath's books on the topic? For one, this is a very unusual work. It takes a grim subject and illuminates it with wit, warmth and clarity. No dreary statistics on the poor here, no breast-beating, nor soft-focus pretty pictures of distress. The stories in this book are about real people who are battling against the odds to survive, yet who speak out with reason

and passion about their lives. Such a representation achieves a commendable balance between the two primary modes of viewing the poor: either as hapless victims or as heroes. From the 69 stories that make up *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* emerges the complex reality of poverty as it is experienced: the suffering as well as the struggle, the anger as well as the numbness, the

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absurdity as well as the relentless logic, with humour as well as with cunning.

Sainath's book is the outcome of an intensive research project spent studying India's ten poorest districts. Most of the stories were originally published in *The Times of India* and did a lot to shore up the eroding credibility of a newspaper increasingly devoted to covering fashion and beauty contests. In book form, the stories retain their journalistic crispness and brevity, but have been organised into sections such as health, education, displacement, drought and debt. Each section



he or she remains trapped within an institution that is fundamentally skewed against the interests of the poor.

The rest of Sainath's stories strongly suggest that social change is ultimately wrought by the poor themselves through their collective action. While I support this argument unreservedly as a basis for political practice, I also feel a sense of disquiet. Inherent in it is a tendency, common in Leftist and populist writing, to lay the entire burden of history, whether revolution or reform, on the shoulders of the masses. What about the social trans-

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begins with an introductory essay that draws on considerable statistical data to provide a well-argued overview of the subject. Taken together, the essays and the stories construct a powerful account of a difficult subject.

No document about the poor can remain silent about their oppressors — moneylenders, the labour contractors, the large landowners. Yet their deeds are minor misdemeanours compared to the vast inequities perpetrated by the market and the state. Markets do not respect anything other than money, so it would be natural to expect the poor to be shortchanged there. But the role of the state —

that defender of the poor, purveyor of development — comes under special scrutiny. Sainath shows colossal corruption of the state, its feeble attempts at doing good, its cynicism and vacuity. Yet every now and then, there is mention of a sensitive and dynamic bureaucrat, usually an IAS officer, who succeeds in doing good. This is a weak point in Sainath's analysis. Not because there are no good bureaucrats — such wonders can surely be found — but because exceptional individuals make little difference to the working of the system as a whole. The enlightened District Collector may manage to mitigate some of the harsher features of oppression, but

formations engineered by technology, one wonders. Is there any place in this narrative for unintended consequences? These are larger questions about theories of social change and it would be grossly unfair to expect Sainath's book to offer definitive answers to them. The fact that *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* brings such issues to the fore is a reflection of its sophistication. Besides being intelligent and well informed, the book is outstandingly well written. It will help enormously in removing stereotype images of the poor that infect the popular mind. 🌿