Research Article

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Interpretation for Odisha's 'Buddhist Diamond'

https://doi.org/10.2478/irsr-2019-0007
Received: March 17, 2019; Accepted: March 28, 2019

Abstract: Cultural heritage tourism in India is growing and it is changing. In Odisha, the archaeological sites of four early Buddhist monasteries are being promoted as a set of attractions. Presentation of monuments entails, first, preservation and then interpretation. Effective interpretation has to take account of the visitors. A case study is made of visitor management and interpretation at Lalitagiri. The measures for preservation there are good but there is little provision for interpretation, even in the new museum. It can no longer be assumed that visitors have the background to understand the original contexts of the displays. Without that, they can hardly make adequate sense of what is presented. Options for improving the quality of interpretation are assessed.

Keywords: culture change, tourism management, heritage interpretation, archaeology

Chopped Buddhas

Odisha, in eastern India, was an early hearth of Buddhism. Archaeological discoveries over the past 65 years have shown that the eastern central part of the state, in particular, adopted the new cult strongly. Also developing steadily, in the past three decades, has been promotion and presentation of the archaeological heritage for tourism, including some of the principal Buddhist sites of the eastern district. It is gratifying, then, that upkeep and preparation of the monuments for visitors has improved greatly; and so have the roads. The sites are easier to see now and they are easier to reach.

Inspired, in the late 1980s, by the Indian tourist industry's 'Golden Triangle' of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, Odisha's tourism authorities developed the concept of a 'Buddhist Mini-Golden Triangle' to promote visits to the remains of the early monasteries at Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitagiri (Lalitgiri), which lie within twenty kilometres of each other. Since then, the sites have been promoted as a 'Buddhist Diamond' or 'Diamond Triangle', including the remains, more recently discovered, of shrines and monastic features at Langudi, within twenty kilometres, in turn, of Udayagiri. The 'Diamond' bears comparison with the pattern of larger and more famous Buddhist sites in Bihar, Bodhgaya, Vaishali, Nalanda and Rajgir.

Yet provision of interpretation has lagged behind both the advertising and measures for preserving the remains and managing visitors. The purpose of the present contribution is to assess options for helping the visiting public better to appreciate the archaeology and what it shows of early Buddhism and its followers. The approach may surprise readers in India but it is surely compatible with the critical and progressive spirit that is driving broader programmes of development there today.

For museums, Jyotindra Jain (1993: 4) explained how India "blindly adopted the Western archaeological museum concept" in which "the 'past' and the 'present' are [...] divided": hence "chopped Buddha heads, and architectural fragments [...] with captions that say nothing, isolating the [...] object from any other context". The same approach was taken to archaeological monuments. It is becoming out-dated. It assumes more grounding in cultural history than most literate visitors can bring to monuments now. They need help to understand the contexts of archaeological sites and the artefacts found there.

The following pages review the nature of cultural heritage tourism in Odisha and technical options for interpretive presentation before considering Lalitagiri as a case study: what provision is there there; and could it be improved? Some of the answers suggested here were anticipated in a previous assessment (James 2017). Now, not far away, in Bhubaneswar, there is a new example of how presentation could be developed.

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Tourism

In Odisha, as elsewhere in India, tourism is changing at least as quickly as the archaeological sites. Visitors are developing new forms of curiosity; and the volume of tourism is growing (Orissa [2006]: 1; Odisha 2016: 1). Why do people take the trouble to seek out monuments in comparatively remote rural places such as the World Heritage site of Konark, on the coast, or the Buddhist Diamond Triangle?

It is probably the effect of other cultural and social developments (Census of India 2011a, b). Odisha's population is growing rapidly but now at a rate less than in the neighboring states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The most telling development is urbanization. It is especially striking in eastern central Odisha, where the population of Bhubaneswar, the state capital, has more than doubled since 1990. Conservative estimates put its total at almost a million now. Much of the city's growth has been in the emerging middle class. By the same token, Odisha's literacy rate rose by more than a third in the decade to 2011 and that growth is probably accelerating, especially in Bhubaneswar. At the same time, there is keen concern for proficiency in English. Citizens' relation to tradition has become a common preoccupation in Bhubaneswar. *Pace* Prof. Jain (1993), a generation ago, their view of history may be converging on the Western distinction between present and past.

More than half of Odisha's tourists are from the state itself (Mishra 2017: 78). Bhubaneswar is now little more than ninety minutes away from the Buddhist Diamond Triangle by road. The main source from further afield is West Bengal, where the social and cultural trends observed in Odisha are even stronger (Odisha 2016: 1; Census of India 2011a, b).

Mishra (2017: 78) has compiled data on the Diamond's visitors. While Ratnagiri's total increased by some 175% from 2007 to 2015, Lalitagiri's rose more than fourfold. By 2015, both sites were receiving about 32000 visitors. Compare Konark. There, the number of visitors doubled in that time (to about 2·7 million). The Buddhist Diamond is rapidly becoming busier and it is becoming relatively more popular.

Tourism depends, most basically, on visitors' decisions to travel. The middle class has greater resources for leisure than previous generations could enjoy; and these people tend to have new ideas about how to use their leisure in ways that they consider edifying, such as heritage tourism. Having arrived, their behavior at attractions is equally purposeful — whatever their purposes, in fact, are. The benefits that they gain by visiting depend, then, not only on management and presentation of the attractions but also on their own energy.

How, then, left to themselves, do visitors make sense of the archaeology? In as much as it represents worlds remote from their own, they must depend on imagination. Since imagination is conditioned by what they know and how they have learned to recognize and evaluate what they do not know, visitors must rely on analogy from their own experiences to construe an ancient place and the finds discovered there. Effective interpretation, in turn, adapts to that (Tilden 1977).

There lies the problem. In Odisha, as in most of the rest of India, current techniques of interpretive presentation for archaeology are not very helpful for making sense of the remains of remoter periods or ways of life. Led by the Archaeological Survey of India, the prevailing paradigm has always been historical and, more specifically, art historical. The Survey's guide books and its signs on sites have been devoted to two principles: terse technical description of the evidence to be admired; and some mention of the regional historical background. They make little allowance for limited experience of academic exposition. Relatively few readers are now familiar with the former canon of learned topics such as art history. It was striking, in Odisha, that the interpretive signs put up by the Survey to celebrate its own sesquicentenary, in 2011, just repeated texts written decades before. Was that simply on account of lack of resources for composing new text or was it also that the Survey is falling out of date?

The mid-twentieth century discourse in which the Survey's principles formed is different from today's literacy, whether Odiya (Odisha's leading language), Hindi or English. Indeed, many in Bhubaneswar, if not elsewhere in Odisha, do worry that awareness of continuity between "the 'past' and the 'present'" (Jain 1993: 4) is declining and, with it, awareness of traditional precepts and lore. Today's tourists need more extensive interpretation of ancient sites.

Preserve and explain

Archaeological sites and finds are resources that cannot be renewed. They can deteriorate through exposure, demolition or unintentional wear & tear. So the first function of management for archaeological remains on the ground or in a museum is to protect the evidence from exposure, encroachment or, indeed, trampling and handling by visitors. A museum's display cases and the restrictive footpaths or barriers across a heavily visited site are designed to preserve the resources (Patnaik 2015:

74-5; Dikshit 2017).Indeed, the Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH) has declared that Langudi and three other sites in the district are suffering from inadequate protection (Times 2018).

The second function of management is to explain or interpret the evidence. Rarely do any but the most mundane features of the ancient world ('drains' and the like) explain themselves to the modern visitor. Presentation in the Buddhist Diamond could help visitors to ask themselves about what religion was, what it was for and how it related to everyday social, political and economic life. Those questions imply comparable issues for our lives today. Thus, interpretation can encourage respect for the evidence as a contemporary resource (Tilden 1977).

Presentation certainly must depend on the twin principles of describing an archaeological site or find and explaining its setting but it should also explain how the place or the artefact had been inhabited or used and it should reveal something of its history.

Interpretation can be provided as either statements or questions. Questions are far more fruitful. For active visitors can create their own explanations. So as not to baffle them, however, interpretive questions must allow for their experience and expectations.

Descriptions of what there is to see can be used not just to provide admirers with the 'facts & figures' but also to analyse or 'parse' the archaeological remains, distinguishing stupas, for example, or monastic cells. Especially in pursuing questions, the principle of context can help visitors to trace how complementary features were used: how, for instance, did a monastery's cells relate to the prayer hall?

The same principle applies to the setting of a site or an artefact in both place and time. First there is the surrounding district and its ancient way of life: other monasteries, for instance, and the villages of the time, farms and quarries, palaces and forts or temples. Thus, Patnaik (2017: 79), for instance, explains Langudi as part of a 'complex' of places. Secondly, the significance of the site or a find can be explained by drawing connections with places further afield or with buildings, artefacts or traditions of different periods. Then too, the Buddhist Diamond Triangle could be helpfully compared to the Buddhist monuments of Bihar. It could also be pointed out that certain small communities in Odisha have maintained Buddhist tradition to this day, mainly in the eastern part of the state (Tripathy 2017).

In a word, the key to interpretation is context (Jain 1993:4). Patnaik (2012), for example, depends on it for describing the archaeology of Buddhism in Odisha by opening with an 'overview' before accounting for, first, sites and their settings, then the architecture and, lastly, the 'art & iconography' that people used amongst their buildings.

In Odisha, as elsewhere, the most familiar means of interpretation is signs. An alternative, ever more appropriate as literacy advances, is to provide leaflets for visitors to guide themselves. A new option is to provide information from the Worldwide Web by mobile telephone.

Mishra (2017: 82) points out that tour guides could help to make sense of the attractions. Guiding is an intensive technique of presentation which can be highly effective. Few guides work yet in the Buddhist Diamond, however (and the work of many at Konark shows that the training recommended by Mishra certainly is needed (James 2009: 445-6)).

The most expensive method of presentation at archaeological sites is to provide a museum or interpretation centre. Both Ratnagiri and Lalitagiri have one. Neither does provide much interpretation; but, in principle, both could be developed.

Lalitagiri

The Diamond's four monuments range in date from the 200s BCE to the 1400s CE (Patnaik 2012: 76-141). Each features monastic cells gathered around courtyards. Lalitagiri, Udayagiri and Langudi have stupas and Lalitagiri and Udayagiri preserve the footings of prayer halls (*chaityas*) as well. Lalitagiri, Udayagiri and Ratnagiri are noted for finds of devotional sculpture and Ratnagiri features a setting of votive stupas. Langudi is remarkable for rock-cut models of stupas and other devotional images and for terracotta images of the Buddha. Ratnagiri attracted a later Hindu shrine and there are small ones at Lalitagiri too.

All four sites are in the custody of the Archaeological Survey. The techniques of management and presentation are, broadly, similar at Udayagiri, Ratnagiri and Lalitagiri. Langudi remains less developed. Ratnagiri and Lalitagiri have site museums. Lalitagiri has a new one, opened in 2018. Let us consider provision for visitors at Lalitagiri in particular but with an eye to implications for the other sites of the Diamond and further afield.

Lalitagiri occupies a hill with fine views over an extensive plain. Atop the hill sits a stupa. On the gentler slope below lie exposed and consolidated the walls of four small monasteries. In places, there are spreads of broken brick and pottery.

Lalitagiri's most striking feature of visitor management is the provision for access. Two footpaths are set out in

red brick. The main one leads, past the prayer hall and Monasteries 1, 4 and 3, to the former site museum, where it bends round to the restored stone steps that climb up to the stupa. The other path leads to Monastery 2. Signs ask visitors to keep to the paths. Although the parapets are slightly damaged in places, the paths make it quite clear as to what they are expected to notice. That is particularly helpful since the top of the hill is covered in trees that conceal the stupa from view until they reach the stone steps. Management for preservation is effective, thus, with some immediate benefit for visitors.

In contrast, provision for interpretation is minimal. The new museum lies at the edge of the protected zone, below Monastery 2. The only facilities among the ruins are signs (in Odiya and English) to distinguish the monastic complexes (marked simply "Monastery-1" to "Monastery-4"), the prayer hall and the stupa. The signs provide no other information whatever. Two other interesting features are not even mentioned.

Firstly, Monasteries 1, 3 and 4 and the prayer hall are set out on terraces cut, one above the other, into the slope of the hill. There are four other terraces, three below Monastery 4 and one above it, on which no buildings are exposed. What were they cut for and are the remains of other buildings yet to be exposed there? What, for that matter, do the scatters of brick and pottery indicate?

Second, a repaved path leads down from near the prayer hall's outer corner into the trees on the steep slope. The paving stops after a few yards but the path continues. By implication, either there were more monastic features down there or else the path connected the monks to people in the valley. Was the monastery not related, after all, to lay communities supporting the monks with both supplies and labour for tasks including building (Patnaik 2017: 112)?

To be sure, although both the terraces and the path would be clear were they pointed out, most people need a little experience in observing topography before noticing such details, let alone considering a place's context in its landscape. So they need some guidance. The new museum, then, would be a good opportunity to explain both what has been exposed for visitors to see and what has not, both on the hill and in the surrounding valley.

The museum's entry hall has wall texts to explain the site's history, including the archaeological research, and to describe the main features. Also mentioned are the Diamond's other sites and then too related sites near Lalitagiri, "Kolanagiri, Vajragire, Langudi, Turapur, Deuli etc." (Patnaik 2015: 70-3). Turapur (Tarapur), for one, could take visitors (Patnaik 2015: 72). The surrounding neighborhood is not explained, however.

The museum has six galleries. Five of them display a total of 41 devotional sculptures from the site itself and certain other places nearby. Mounted on plinths, spaced generously and gently top-lit beneath high ceilings, they are easy to study. They are grouped, from gallery to gallery, in chronological order. Each gallery has a brief wall text of description and simple analysis and each exhibit is labelled (in Odiya and English) with terse notes on date and, where it applies, the statue's devotional posture (*mudra*). The remaining gallery is devoted to the three caskets and two inner boxes that archaeologists were thrilled to discover in the stupa. A wall text of about 200 words describes the finds. They are presented as the core of the museum. Visitors are kept about three metres back from the little exhibits.

Assessment

Insulated there behind glass, Lalitagiri's most famous finds certainly look archaeologically precious; but, removed from the stupa up the hill, it is difficult to assess their original spiritual value. As a compromise between preservation and interpretive presentation, it would have made more sense to display them in the former museum, below the stupa. It would be interesting to know what Odisha's contemporary Buddhists think of the display.

The paths across Lalitagiri do serve the function of preservation admirably. Yet, again, there is no explicit suggestion about directions for visitors to follow around, across and among the remains. In view of its simpler topography, that matters comparatively little at Lalitagiri; but Ratnagiri and Udayagiri are more difficult to understand without guidance, let alone the features dispersed at the extensive site of Langudi.

Thus, visitors are left to guess about functional and symbolic connections between the monasteries' open spaces, chambers and buildings. Nor, of course, is there anything to explain how the monks related to the surrounding villages or even to point out where those sites were relative to Lalitagiri. As for other religious sites, the text at the museum's entry, "Langudi, Turapur, Deuli etc.", reads like a mere after-thought, even though some of the sculptures in the galleries come from such places.

The new museum is far more secure than the first one but it does little more to explain its exhibits. The indifference to context must be largely accounted for by Jain's critique of the tradition of presentation, quoted above. The galleries give no effective explanation of the postures and gestures illustrated by the statues. Nor do they describe where the statues had stood and how they

were they used among some of the very buildings that visitors can explore right outside the museum. In that regard, Ratnagiri is better off in that some striking carvings remain in place among its buildings. The galleries of the State Museum in Bhubaneswar are the same, preserving the state of the art in the 1950s, when that great institution was opened, "chopped Buddha heads" and all. The problem is generic.

It is high time to start dealing with it. As well as learning about how the exhibits explain monastic life and how Lalitagiri, in turn, related to its surroundings, visitors should be told how the district as a whole related to the rest of the region, to the royal and religious centres at Jajpur, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and even beyond, at the great eclectic pilgrimage centre of Puri (now, indeed, a major tourist attraction as well). How, for that matter, did the Buddhist Diamond Triangle's sites compare with Nalanda?

There are prospects for improvement. In 2007, INTACH distributed temporary notice boards to explain a selection of the many Medieval Hindu temples in the Old Town of Bhubaneswar that give the place its touristic moniker, 'Temple City'. The texts described local lore about the temples and some of their connections with each other. The contrast with the Survey's worthy but staid notices was stark (James 2015: 164-5). Then, as the city prepared to host the 2018 Men's Hockey World tournament, the authorities set out new signs in anticipation of thousands of spectators. Along with a rash of the 'brown tourism signs' now conventional around the world, notices were carved on stone and put up at temples to explain, in Odiya and English, not only the buildings' dates but also something of their symbolic significance.

Outside the 'Kedar-Gouri' site, for example, we now learn that

> a devotee [who] does Bhavapita (standing meditation) before the lingam for 13 days and nights will attain alignment [*sic*]. The lingam is named Dakshina Murti and believed to have been installed by Giriray Himalaya. Built in panchayatana style, the temple has both vimana and pyramidal jagamohana.

Again, in front of the Parasuramesvara temple, we read that it is "one of the earliest intact temples", lavishly decorated and comprising two principal architectural components (mentioned in that order). The sign goes on to explain the temple's name and to list its most prominent sculpted images of gods and musicians, adding that

> the episodes of Shiva occur in three different places [...] The first [...] just above the jagamohana shows the scene of Ravana raising Mount Kailash. The second is [...] Annapurna offering alms to Shiva and the third is of Shiva's marriage

In assuming certain prior knowledge (jagamohana, for instance), these didactic texts may be imperfect but the implication for the Buddhist Diamond must be clear.

Lalitagiri's interpretive shortcomings could also be alleviated with some of the techniques of presentation reviewed above. Consider signs, leaflets and telephone.

On archaeological sites in India, most signs are mounted on large iron stands. They have proved difficult to protect against sun and damp. Bhubaneswar's new signs are an improvement but the design is already proving fragile. In Mexico, sturdy ceramic signs are placed at ground level with text in three languages and tilted upward for easy reading. They take simple plans for sites or buildings. They are comparatively easy to clean.

A difficulty with signs is to work out how many to put up. Distributed too thinly, they are inadequate to explain particular buildings or sequences of construction but proliferation can spoil a site's appearance. An easy solution is, in effect, to let visitors carry signs themselves, on leaflets. The technique is now used in some galleries. The Archaeological Survey's booklets are of academic value but, with few convenient plans, they are not easy to follow on the ground and, for most visitors, they are much more detailed than necessary. (Nor are they easy to obtain these days.)

To hand visitors leaflets is to invite exploration. The technique is not common but growing literacy favours it. So much of Lalitagiri could be explained on a single folded sheet with succinct text and a map and, or, plans. With the simplest information about the complementary functions of distinct buildings, visitors could begin to work out for themselves how the monasteries were inhabited. To be sure, experience elsewhere shows that leaflets may be left behind, creating litter; but it would be a long time before the cost of printing and then collecting the paper exceeded that of the signs; and, if printed well on durable paper, more would be kept as souvenirs. That could prompt return visits.

Now that mobile telephones are so common, visitors can be provided with information from the Worldwide Web. This method usually entails signs at intervals to indicate the information available and to provide the codes to find it; but the signs can be unobtrusive. An extensive scheme of this kind in Mexico did prove too ambitious but, appropriately designed, the technique could work simply and economically for any particular site or for the Buddhist Diamond as a circuit.

Site museums can provide interpretation by explaining just where the exhibits were found. Accounts in the gallery lack the immediacy of signs on site but it can be easier to present detailed background information

indoors. Lalitagiri's new museum is fine on its own merits but hardly more sophisticated than the old one. The same goes for Ratnagiri's museum. Nor would it be difficult to adapt the labels for providing more information about the exhibits' original contexts or to elaborate on the hint in the entry hall about Lalitagiri's surroundings. Equally, leaflets could be provided or the Worldwide Web could be used through visitors' telephones, techniques that would respect the sense of space in the galleries and obviate a clutter of additional texts.

Prospects for context

The distribution, design and content of interpretive presentation for the Diamond Triangle could take better account of visitors' capacities and expectations; and it should take more systematic account of the remains of such complicated and engrossing archaeological sites by explaining, in order, the setting, the buildings, finds such as pottery, and the sculptures or ornamentation. Archaeology can be brought to life by relating the functions, associations and histories of the remains and the finds to each other both on the ground and in a site museum. Sites can be related to each other, as the very concept of the Diamond implies.

The basic principles of description and context are familiar but they should be developed more systematically. Leaflets could be provided to use both on site and in the museums. It would be timely too to invest in experiments with providing information by telephone.

Failing better information about context and how they were used in ancient times, to most visitors, the monuments and archaeological finds must seem mysterious at best. Their efforts to explore the Buddhist Diamond Triangle deserve to be reciprocated by stimulating interpretation. Prompting visitors to formulate and pursue their own questions would help to explain the Buddhist tradition and to encourage a sympathetic understanding of the archaeology of the Diamond and, by extension, other places too.

Acknowledgements: I am most grateful to Dr Patnaik for his encouragement and to Gameplan Sports for help with my observations.

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