



Remembering a Pioneer in the Bicentenary, Sir Alexander Cunningham and the Study of Indian Temple Art

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Abstract

Alexander Cunningham's pioneering career as Surveyor General of India and subsequently as the first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India is a landmark epoch in defining the discipline of archaeology and its official institutionalization in colonial India. His extensive and meticulous field reports published in twenty three volumes is still the primary source of information for the study of Indian art and archaeology throwing an invaluable light on the history of discovery and the method of documentation of various sites and their findings. His inclusive methodology of documentation illustrates the possibilities of ethnographic explorations with keen attention to incorporate local traditions and individual viewpoints. Cunningham became an institution in his life time by nurturing the talents of a generation of archaeologists and epigraphists who started their careers under the guidance of Cunningham. That material remains of the past alone not only grand monuments but also dilapidated structures and ruins can form an authentic source of reconstructing history was established by Cunningham and his contemporary James Fergusson. Both the approaches received a firm foundation in India in terms of their respective followers and their influence over the subsequent scholarship. Cunningham's almost evolutionary approach of tracing the development of the Indian temple architecture from the relatively simpler flat roof to the more complex developments of superstructure and the temple building has set the tone of the subsequent scholarship. The present article attempts to relook at the contribution of a pioneer in his bicentenary.

Keywords: Archaeology, Indian art, temple, site, ethnography, documentation.

Introduction

The institutional foundation of the study of the oriental languages, culture and religion was laid in 1784 with the establishment of the Asiatic Society at Calcutta by Sir William Jones. The focus of the Society was mainly concentrated on studying and translating religious scriptures and literary works. Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society perceived the architectural remains of India as 'monuments of antiquity' as not as 'specimens of art'. His interest in the Śilpa Śāstra texts or indigenous artistic canons was motivated by fascination about traditional handicrafts and manufacture and was not aimed at understanding the artistic heritage of India in its own terms¹. This prejudiced sentiment finds expression in James Mill's *The History of British India* (1817) where Mill devised a distinction between 'fine arts' and 'applied arts' and credited Indian artists for achievements in the latter like textiles and handicrafts and not in the category of fine arts of architecture and sculpture.

Another more popular European engagement with Indian monuments and built heritage was a combination of artistic observation and romantic imagination culminating into the 'Picturesque' style of visual representation championed by the professional painters like William Hodges (1744-1787) and the famous uncle nephew duo Thomas and William Daniell². These professional artists popularized a technique called 'aquatint' of converting water colour sketches into print illustrations and

created an audience for such depiction of exotic oriental monuments past their primes, fallen into ruins or covered in thick vegetation. The volumes of the *Oriental Scenery* of the Daniells summarize the epitome of 'Picturesque' fascination of the late 18th century³.

At the beginning of 19th century institutional encouragement of systematic enquiry into the study and documentation of Indian architecture was not available and two different trends are noticed propelled by individual enthusiasm. Regional surveys conducted by individual surveyors like Colin Mackenzie, who became the first surveyor – General of India are marked by the broad overview approach of documentation.

The colonial intervention into the conceptualization of the heritage of the colonized was started with the introduction of a new system of knowledge to be operated through 'scientific' western academic disciplines like art historical study, archaeology and museology. It is noteworthy, that while the study of India's ancient past thrived on these disciplines; the very question of the construction of that knowledge has been neglected. A focus is necessary on the concepts, socio-political milieu of the development of these disciplines in juxtaposition to the intellectual position of the practitioners as these can serve as a fascinating entry point to study the very formation of knowledge in a colonial context. Alexander Cunningham was the pioneer of field archaeology, although he heavily relied on

text based sources like the travel accounts of Fa Xian (AD 404-14) and Xuan Zang (AD 630- 44). As the method implied Cunningham was primarily concerned with the archaeology of Buddhism⁴. Besides Cunningham and James Fergusson, their illustrious contemporary Rajendralal Mitra tried to project a comprehensive view of Indian architecture by incorporating art, archeological and textual studies, a method which was initiated by the first architectural scholar Ram Raz, whose approach was largely ignored by western scholars⁵. It would not be irrelevant to point out here that Ananda .K. Coomaraswamy expounded the view of the symbolic meaning of architecture where it ceased to remain an art monument but to a devotional eye the reflection of cosmos. Coomaraswamy's approach was based on a painstaking study of the Sanskrit and the vernacular sources in order to comprehend the inner meaning of art. This line of argument is alien to the western understanding as they conceptualized a monument like Hindu temple as an art monument without paying attention to the symbolic content of it which is defined by the iconographic arrangement of the deities and the ritual performance of the devotees.

It appears that the western scholarship has always differentiated between aesthetic and functional which becomes more apparent in the case of conservation policy of the 19th and 20th century where the ethos was quite evident that archaeological heritage should be separated from the monument of worship. The art and archaeological research in the 19th century was grounded in a colonial context and henceforth the interplay of prevailing Orientalist perceptions cannot be ignored. But it needs to be pointed out that colonial perception is not a monolithic category and belief of racial superiority which manifested itself in the form racist presupposition coexisted with the admiration for the cultural achievement of the 'other' and sincere attempts to study the art heritage of Orient in a balanced way. It is therefore necessary to reevaluate this rather unproblematic category of colonial gaze and to conceptualize the complexities of the research characterized by diverse strands and contradictory impulses. It is interesting to note that the most of the western scholars who contributed significantly to the study of the history of architecture of early India were not academic experts of the field. A brief sketch of the writings of two Englishmen James Fergusson (1808-1886), his contemporary Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893) along with the foremost representative of Indian scholarship in the field and the first 'native' director of the Asiatic Society of Bengal Rajendralal Mitra (1824-1891) represents three different methodological concerns governing the thinking process of three more or less contemporary scholars. With due risk of drawing up a simplified picture, the views of these three scholars can be loosely categorized as art-architectural, archaeological and religio-philosophical respectively. Of the three though only Cunningham devoted substantial attention to trace the growth and maturation of the temple structure in north India with particular focus on the emergence of what he termed as, 'Gupta temples'.

Cunningham and the Beginning of Archaeological Survey of India

Alexander Cunningham, the nineteen years old Englishman of Scottish descent who arrived at Calcutta in the year 1833 as a lieutenant with the Bengal Engineers was destined to make a legendary contribution towards the beginning and growth of archaeological research in India. Major General Alexander Cunningham's memorandum submitted to Viceroy Lord Canning in November 1861 where he urged the British government to assume the responsibility to explore, document and conserve monumental heritage of India materialized in the birth of Archaeological Survey of India and the appointment of Cunningham as the Archaeological Surveyor and subsequently its first Director General.

This memorandum reads as following: During the one hundred years of British dominion in India the Government has done little or nothing towards the preservation of its ancient monuments, which in the almost total absence of any written history, form the only reliable sources of information as to the early condition of the country. Some of these monuments have already endured for ages, and are likely to last for ages still to come; but there are many others which are daily suffering from the effects of time, and which must soon disappear altogether, unless preserved by the accurate drawings and faithful descriptions of the archaeologist⁶.

Cunningham outlined a blue print about how he wants to proceed to materialize his plan: I would attach to the description of each place a general survey of the site, showing clearly the positions of all existing remains, with a ground plan of every building or ruin of special note, accompanied by drawings and sections of all objects of interest. It would be desirable also to have sculpture; but to obtain these it would be necessary to have the services of a photographer. Careful facsimiles of all inscriptions would of course be made, ancient coins would also be collected on each site, and all the local traditions would be noted down and compared. The description of each place with its accompanying drawings and illustrations would be complete in itself, and the whole, when finished, would furnish a detailed and accurate account of the archaeological remains of Upper India⁷.

This memorandum received an enthusiastic response from the viceroy Lord Canning as it was well tuned with the necessity of the post 1857 British regime in India to project an image of benevolent authority⁸. Cunningham in his distinguished career first as the *Archaeological Surveyor* to the Government of India from 1861 to 1866 and then as the first *Director General* of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1871 to 1885 produced an astonishingly vast twenty three volumes of Archaeological Survey reports. The first two volumes of this series published in 1871 contain the four reports of the surveys made by Cunningham between 1861 and 1865 when he was entrusted with the charge of *Archaeological Surveyor*. The introduction of

the volumes of 1871 is of crucial importance as it is here that Cunningham discussed the contributions of his predecessors and contemporaries in the field of the understanding of India's ancient past.

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All these are a few instances which reflect the basic honesty of Cunningham whose vision was not so overwhelmingly coloured by the racial prejudices like Fergusson who tried to minimize and ridicule the attempts of the audacious 'natives' as 'Babu' Rajendralala Mitra. In spite of having difference of opinions on several issues with Rajendralala Mitra, when asked for his opinion Cunningham strongly supported the prospects of the publication of Mitra's *Antiquities of Orissa* on subsidized rate by the government of India. As Upinder Singh puts it, "What is also notable in Cunningham's Introduction is the tone of warm and generous recognition of work by others, even those with whom he had differences of approach and opinion⁹."

Sir Alexander Cunningham, the founder of the Indian Archaeological Survey on the basis his extensive survey had delineated some hard and first criterion of the style of the development of the Indian temple architecture in general and the features of structures of the Gupta period among them in particular. But his labelling of a certain stage of Indian temple architecture not by a chronological but a dynastic bracket seems

to set the mood of the future scholarship in this field. Dynastic and chronological labelling became interchangeable when Cunningham designated some temple structures as Gupta temple or Gupta period temples and it needs to be remembered in this context that his rendering of the Gupta Era has also proved erroneous.

Cunningham's extensive and meticulous field reports are still the primary source of information for the study of 'Gupta temples' and throw an invaluable light on the history of discovery and the method of documentation of various sites and their findings¹⁰. Cunningham has been criticized for certain drawbacks in his approach for example his over reliance on inscriptional and numismatic evidences and his evolutionary hypothesis of tracing developments of temple architecture from flat roofed to the one with a spire or *sikhara*. But it cannot be denied that his inclusive methodology of documentation illustrates the possibilities of ethnographic explorations. Cunningham gave a broad outline of the development of the Indian Temple architecture almost in an evolutionary process progressing from a relatively simpler to a gradually complex form

The characteristic features of the Gupta Temples as identified by Cunningham are: i. Flat roof, without spire of any kind as in the case of cave temples. ii. Prolongation of the head of the doorway beyond the jambs as in Egyptian temples. iii. Statues of the rivers Ganges and Jumna guarding the entrance door. iv. Pillars, with massive square capitals, ornamented with two lions back to back, with a tree between them. v. Bosses on the capitals and friezes of a very peculiar form like Buddhist Stupas, or beehives with projecting horns. vi. Continuation of the architrave of the portico as a moulding all around the building. vii. Deviation in plan from the cardinal points¹¹.

Cunningham underlined these essential features of the temple art of the Gupta period on the basis of the Gupta period temple at Tigawa of the Katni district of Madhya Pradesh. Cunningham's over emphasis on inscriptions induces him to skip the documentation of the temples which seemed unimportant to his scheme of priorities because they lacked in inscriptional evidence. The classic example of this myopic vision of Cunningham was his overlooking the temple at Marhia because it does not have any inscriptional records although he knew about the existence of a temple structure. Much after Cunningham scholars like Pramod Chandra and Michael W. Meister have surveyed the Gupta period temple at Marhia and discussed its features¹². The evolutionary framework devised by Cunningham in order to conceptualize the development of the structural temples and the exclusivity of the flat roof structure in the Gupta period induced him to assign the *Pataini Devi temple* of 11th century to the Gupta Period which appeared to him flat roofed although traces of a fallen *sikhara* is discovered.

Alexander Cunningham noted the presence of the female figures occurring in pairs on the temple doorways which was initially

identified by him as a queen paying a visit to a temple – a fancy of the artistic imagination repeated as architectural custom¹³. But Cunningham revised this opinion during his survey to the Central Provinces in 1873-74. In his tour report of that year he identified the female figures on the doorway of the modest shrine of the Tigowa village (Katni Dist, Madhya Pradesh) as the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna guarding the entrance of the temple riding on their distinct aquatic vehicles (*vahanas*), Ganga on crocodile (Makara) and Yamuna on turtle (Kurma). Moreover Cunningham included the positioning of the river goddesses on the entrance among the seven ‘characteristic features’ of what he designated as ‘Gupta temples’¹⁴.

Though representation of river goddesses became standardized on the entrance of the temples in the 5th century CE, the beginning of the river goddess symbolism can certainly be traced much earlier in time rooted in the Buddhist context of the worship of the *yakshas* and *yakshis*. The cult of the *yakshas* and *yakshis* was conceived as auspicious diverse anthropomorphic images of magical deities who bestow protection, fertility and benevolence to the visitor and devotee¹⁵. Both the approach of Cunningham and Fergusson received a firm foundation in India in terms of their respective followers and their influence over the subsequent scholarship. With due respect to the laudable task they have accomplished with scattered and scanty materials available then, it should be pointed out that they never attempted to understand a religious architecture like temple as religious. Their concern was mainly confined to trace the origin and development of stylistic variations of monuments without paying enough focus on the fact they were not conceived as art objects but has a religious purpose for the communities who worship in the monument. Cunningham’s almost evolutionary approach of tracing the development of the Indian temple architecture from the relatively simpler flat roof to the more complex developments of superstructure and the temple building has set the tone of the subsequent scholarship where basic parameters of Cunningham’s assumption has percolated in to the deep. The ‘image’ of temple architecture in India of which the Gupta period (4th -6th centuries AD) provides the earliest edifices should be looked into the way these structures were discovered and documented in the 19th century with an emphasis on the ‘politics’ of discovery in order to comprehend and delineate the perceptions which went into the generation of certain stereotypes. So far the Temples are studied from the angle of pure art historical consideration where it has been perceived as a monument of art. But the complexities of the dynamism of temples cannot be conceptualized if the essential assumption is strictly aesthetic. Temples as religious places are primarily symbolic embodiment. This symbolic quality of religious enclosure is not only inherent but dynamic as well, depending on the horizontal and vertical structural expansion of the temple complex, the performance of rituals on daily basis and on certain important occasions, the additions and alterations into the iconographic programme in a complex or in reference to a particular deity in a complex, arrangement of images and inscriptions and their overall distribution in a temple site. It

needs to be emphasized that temples are not conceptualized as monument of art which as the basic thrust of the official approach of the art historical studies in the late 19th and early 20th century tend us to believe. On the contrary temples have a symbolic purpose to invoke an image of divine in the eyes of the devotees who perform ritual functions at the temple on certain auspicious occasions. The essential function of temples is not aesthetic but ritual “to web individuals and communities into a complicated and inconsistent social fabric through time¹⁶.” The symbolic meaning which a temple structure was conceived to connote is not static or inherent but shows its adaptability to a vibrant dynamism of change and the interaction with multiple audiences requires flexibility to adjust and relocate itself. A shift is much needed from the stereotypical issues of legitimization and state formation and a focus is awaited on the reasons for the sustenance of particular temple or religious centre over a period of time. As a logical progression comes the necessity of problematizing the very label ‘Gupta’ based on a dynastic parameter and its applicability in conceptualizing art idioms. The correlation between political climate and the development of art awaits a critical focus along with a serious reconsideration of the assumption that dynasty directly conditions the works of art.

Cunningham’s enthusiasm for epigraphic and numismatic research is well known. Besides suggesting the name of a five volume compilation of Indian inscriptions and editing the first volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, his lasting contribution in the field of epigraphy lies in his enthusiastic perseverance which resulted in the appointment of John Faithful Fleet as the epigraphist to the Government of India. The third volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* edited by Fleet containing the text and the translation of the inscriptions of the imperial Guptas and their contemporaries first appeared in 1887 and is till date an authentic source material for the study of the history of the period. History writing at this crucial juncture of power dynamics was obviously involves a scheme of propaganda. Like every colonized nation in India as well it was the British antiquarians and agencies who as the ruling authority or patrons decided the criteria of selection, classification, preservation and exhibition of antiquities and monuments on their own terms¹⁷.

Cunningham was fascinated by the idea of the identification of the places, particularly Buddhist remains rigorously following the description of the routes underlined by Chinese pilgrims Fa Xian (AD 404-14) and Xuan Zang (AD 630- 44). Cunningham’s emphasis on archaeological explorations, survey and documentation of sites proved beneficial for the study of the geographical location of a large number of ancient sites. Curiously enough Cunningham’s argument for undertaking such a kind of task unveils an echo of imperialist thought. Cunningham believed that such an attempt will not only demonstrate the lack of political unity of India as it was always divided into ‘numerous petty chiefships’ but will also disapprove the myth of the unchanging orthodoxy of Indian

religions, particularly Brahmanism indicating the possibility of Christianity to succeed in Indian soil¹⁸. But probably such a comment was purely accidental as it needs to be remembered in this context that behind writing such a letter Cunningham's motive was to persuade the East India Company to aid and finance the publication of his research work¹⁹. Cunningham was flexible enough to change his views with the passage of time and with the coming up of new readings and understandings. Interestingly, indeed Cunningham who blatantly brushed aside the credibility of the *Puranic* corpuses to understand the early history of India and forcefully argued for archaeological investigation, mellowed down with time and acknowledge the contribution of literally and textual studies. Cunningham wrote in 1948, "The discovery and publication of all the existing remains of architecture and sculpture, with coins and inscriptions, would throw more light on the ancient history of India, both public and domestic, than the printing of all the rubbish contained in the eighteen *Puranas*²⁰." James Burgess (1832-1916) who succeeded Cunningham to the chair of the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India was curiously not a disciple of him either in terms of method or philosophy. Burgess carried the mantle of Fergusson's scholarship and throughout his career exhibited a phenomenal loyalty to his mentor Fergusson. In comparison to Cunningham's fourteen years long tenure as the Director General, Burgess occupied the post only for a period of three years from 1886 to 1889. But the definitive shift is noticeable during his Director Generalship was the alteration of the focus of the Survey from archaeological documentation to architectural studies. It was through his initiative to guarantee a quick publication of the newly discovered inscriptions that the idea of publishing a journal like *Epigraphia Indica* has taken shape, the first volume of which was published in 1892.

Conclusion

From the previous discussion of the writings of the European scholars like Fergusson, Cunningham and Burgess, it becomes clear that none of them bothered to pursue the line of thought initiated by Ram Raz, though they all know about the existence of Raz's work. Fergusson's explicit bias regarding the quality and reliability of the 'native' scholarships played a dominant role in marginalizing the approach initiated by Raz. Fergusson's pivotal reputation as an architectural historian resulted in his framework of study having a well accepted and politically correct viewpoint for studying the art of India. As an ardent follower of Fergusson, Burgess strictly adhered to the stand of Fergusson and never tried to attempt the method of consulting the artist communities practicing their age old custom of building art and incorporating their insight in understanding the architecture. At least for once Burgess had a scope of following this approach of Ram Raz when he worked on the architecture of Satrunjaya, which was famous for its community of traditional architects.

Burgess not only ignored the approach of Raz but also disapproved its attempted adaptation by his assistant Henry Cousens. Fergusson was a tireless exponent of the architectural documentation and cataloguing of monuments scattered throughout India by involving modern techniques like photography. It is needless to say that Fergusson's emphasis on photography is one point whose importance was realized by both his follower Burgess and a contemporary like Cunningham who pursued a different approach altogether from Fergusson. Fergusson believed in the derivative nature of Indian architecture. According to him, Indians learnt the process of stone architecture from their contacts with the Greeks at the time of the *Macedonian invasion*. Cunningham although refuses this view of Fergusson and expressed the existence of the stone architecture before the contact with the Greeks, however expresses indebtedness of the Indians to Greeks in terms of the art of sculpturing. Fergusson's point derivative nature Indian architecture from of Graeco-Roman idioms was vehemently opposed by Rajendralal Mitra which made him to face the wrath of Fergusson's bitter criticism on his credibility as a scholar. Mitra's views can hardly be taken as a manifestation of his nationalist sentiment as we often try to visualize the Indian critic of western assumption. Mitra tried to contextualize the temple in its social milieu to gauge the dynamic nature of a religious site.

Fergusson and Cunningham in spite of having mutual differences operated within the greater currents of the 19th century western thought structuring the Orient. Both of them accepted the process of linear development of architecture from that of Buddhist to Hindu and in terms of religious formulations also this framework of linear development was extended. Both the approach of Cunningham and Fergusson received a firm foundation in India in terms of their respective followers and their influence over the subsequent scholarship. With due respect to the laudable tusk they have accomplished with scattered and scanty materials available then, it should be pointed out that they never attempted to understand a religious architecture like temple as religious. Their concern was mainly confined to trace the origin and development of stylistic variations of monuments without paying enough focus on the fact they were not conceived as art objects but has a religious purpose for the communities who worship in the monument.

With the official efforts to study and preserve the architectural heritage of India the princely states also demonstrated enough interest in documentation and conservation of the monuments lying in their domain. This endeavour on the part of the Princely states was particularly noticeable from the late 19th century onwards. This trend is more marked in the 20th century when several states took active interest in conservation and almost form a parallel agency to the official body like the Archaeological Survey of India. Princely states like Bhopal, Gwalior, Mysore, Hyderabad, Travancore, Baroda, Jaipur and Kashmir have established their own state archaeological department to study and conserve the monuments falling within their jurisdiction.

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