

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anila Verghese. *Hampi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. xiii + 95 pp.
\$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-565433-2.

Reviewed by Shobita Punja (Executive and Governing Council, INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage))

Published on H-Asia (May, 2004)

India has twenty-four World Heritage sites that have been nominated under the UNESCO World Heritage Sites program. Italy has over thirty-six UNESCO nominated sites and even that seems too meager for a country with heritage buildings “considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.” The idea behind the Oxford University Press Monumental Legacy series was to produce “brief books” on each of the Indian World Heritage sites, says the series editor. A worthy motive but inadequate on many accounts. The World Heritage sites in India are under the protection of the ASI (the Archaeological Survey of India set up by the British in colonial times). ASI produces little booklets that are sold at their sites; these are dry and boring to read but academic and accurate. They are not reader-friendly but are very adequate, if you want to know the facts and figures.

Now the “intelligent reader” who is not an “academic” needs a more reader-friendly packaging that provides information on where to stay, maps, plans, diagrams, stories and legends, information on the geography and what to see in the neighborhood, and lots of information on why and how to see the sites.

The range of guide books that one finds in India start with the expensive DK Eyewitness or Eicher guides that are glossy and have content that is brisk and light with excessive tourist information and advice on carrying your own water bottle and that sort of stuff.

Then there are the “coffee table books” that no sane traveler would take along on a trek to see the sites. The OUP series is not cheap by Indian standards. They also seem to fall between two stools. The writers and the series editor in this case are all knowledgeable academics,

deeply immersed in their field of study, who find it very difficult, if not occasionally outrageous, to write a mere paragraph on a building that they believe to be of “outstanding value to humanity.” Anila Verghese’s brief book on Hampi is very competently written. She has spent several years (since 1985) as a scholar working on Hampi and this book seems too brief and leaves you asking for more. The book is sparsely illustrated with black-and-white pictures and inset with a few glossy pages of color photographs, maps, and architectural plans of major temples and buildings. The book begins with an overview and a chapter discussing the historic context of the site followed by description of the various zones and the monuments within each, and ends with an outline of Hampi as an archaeological site and some practical tips for the visitor on where to stay and how to get there. A welcome glossary and bibliography serve to bring you up date with the latest research.

Verghese has kept her style balanced and serious, with no special attention to any one building. She stays within her publisher’s brief but provides a short bibliography of books and academic treatises on Hampi, should any visitor want to know more. It is heartwarming to know that so much work has been done on Hampi, for it is truly one of the most extraordinary sites of the world.

Nothing can quite prepare you for the surreal landscape of Hampi. The village is situated on the southern bank of the Tungabhadra River, in Bellary district of the southern state of Karnataka in India. It was the capital of the Vijayanagara kingdom from the mid-fourteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century. As you enter the site great mountains of granite rock burst out of the earth and gargantuan boulders stand precariously on each other—as

if frozen in the act of tumbling for centuries.

From this topsy-turvy landscape the organic forms of the temples and palaces can barely be discerned; they play hide-and-seek behind the boulders, sometimes eclipsed by low hills from which the buildings appear to grow. It is here that one witnesses a moment of perfect synthesis—of buildings and the landscape, the rock and the carving. Hampi is enormous and the landscape of rolling rocks, boulders, and the heritage site spreads over 25 square kilometers.

Even in its heyday when the temples were brightly painted with mineral colors the magic of the boulders and the emerging buildings made of the same material, in many cases in-situ, must have created a vision of a world in harmony with its surroundings. Today the paint has gone and the hand of nature and that of the artist-architect blend in an artistic mirage.

Most art lovers enjoy the unveiling of layers of history and meaning and discovering the mysteries of art appreciation. At Hampi there are several historic layers that add to its fascination. Before the powerful Vijayanagara kings chose it as a capital, Hampi was steeped in myth and legend. Even today the local boys will tell you quite convincingly, pointing to an exact point on the ground or tank or hill, that this is where the gods descended to marry, to bathe and meditate.

Hampi is also linked with the epic Ramayana, which describes the life of Ram, believed to be an avatar (manifestation) of Vishnu. When Ravan, the king of Lanka kidnapped Ram's wife Sita from the forest where they were living in exile he took the beautiful exiled queen to Lanka. Ram with his brother went in search of Sita and it is believed that at various locations in the Hampi region he encountered the monkey king and the much-loved Hanuman, who became his faithful ally and finally found Sita in captivity in Lanka. The neighboring town of Anegondi is reputed to be the birthplace of Hanuman or Anjaneya; the Malyavanta hill marks the place where Ram and Lakshman stayed and therefore is crowned by the large Raghunatha Temple.

This mythical landscape comes briefly into the purview of the book and is captivating, for it speaks of an Indian ability (though sometimes dangerous) to create a microcosm out of the wider universe. So a little hill called Hemakunta refers to the high Himalayas many miles away and the entire story of one episode of the myth of Shiva is enacted here on a diminutive scale. The Hemakunta hill leads to the great Virupaksha tem-

ple where each year the marriage of Shiva and the local goddess Pampa is conducted in the very same way as a human wedding, following every detail of ancient Vedic rites. In fact the whole landscape in and around Hampi is dotted with sites where many communities perform rituals, for this to them is a sacred landscape from time immemorial.

Much of this does not concern the academic art historian but local legends do have validity and enable us to understand the "living significance" of a site. While royal temples and palaces and audience halls lie broken and ruined, the passage of time does not seem to erase the mythological significance of a site and that part outlives the rest by far.

The dangerous side of this frail line between myth and history or fact and legend is that the two have for political reasons been mixed and often confused. In 1992 when Hindu fanatics broke down the historic Muslim mosque in Ayodhya, they did so in the belief that it stood on the very place where the legendary Ram had been born, and politicians claimed that the myth was a historical fact.

However, for us in the field of heritage conservation, the very demarcation of the World Heritage Site is inappropriate at Hampi. The UNESCO declaration of what constitutes the site for protection encompasses merely the heritage buildings and known historic structures rather than the whole living fabric of this strange and mythical landscape where every rock appears to have some meaning for some nearby community. A heritage site needs to embrace high art and the "little traditions" that still give soul and meaning to the place, long after the historic significance of the site has disappeared.

The city of Vijayanagara, meaning the city of victory, affectionately also called Hampi, has been divided into four uninspiring "functional zones" by archaeologists to "facilitate documentation": the "sacred center," the "intermediate irrigated valley," the "urban core," and the "suburban centers."

The sacred center lies to the south of the Tungabhadra River. The highest concentration of small and large temples is found here. These include the Virupaksha temple, the gigantic 6.7-meter-high monolithic statue of Narasimha, the half-lion, half-man avatar of Vishnu, the Krishna temple that lies beside the two sacred hillocks of the Hemakunta and the Matanga Hill. Verghese writes in a clear and easy style about these sites and briefly mentions architectural details, giving stylistic references and

iconographic information.

The remains of the Hampi bazaar that leads up to the Virupaksha temple continue to be used, as this is where pilgrims buy offerings of flowers, incense, and mementoes before entering the temple.

The Islamic quarter, as she calls it, lies on the slope of the Malyavanta hill and marks the northern boundary of the urban core where one can see the magnificent fort walls in dressed stone, the elephant stables and the strange buildings now called the Lotus Mahal, and others whose exact function remains a mystery. There are the impressive stone bases of several grand public buildings whose wooden superstructures have long since disap-

peared. It is buildings like the Mahanavami Platform that give Hampi the air of grandeur. While there are several contemporary forts and palaces contemporary to Hampi and built by Islamic rulers, Hampi is one of the rare examples of a Hindu royal fort and capital with palaces and temples, streets and bazaars, and where much of the sacred and urban centers still lie intact.

This informative book is by a very competent author and the series are useful guides but so much still needs to be done to make Indian art history come alive. One looks forward to a day when the poetry of Indian architecture is translated through image and text not into prose, but into some form of poetry, so that none of the magic or layers of meaning get lost in translation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Shobita Punja. Review of Verghese, Anila, *Hampi*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9338>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.