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In Praise of Hands

The Miracle in Ajanta & Ellora Caves in India



Those who wield their hands with dexterity and imagination- a surgeon, a pianist, a sculptor, a painter - seem to be using the hands of the creator itself; sometimes there is such magic in them that one wonders if those hands are not imbued with a very special intelligence of their own.

When such hands have laboured to create such magic not for a day or two, not even for a month or a year, but for centuries, and over many generations, their focused collective vision and their commitment are nothing short of the miraculous.

Visiting the ancient caves at Ajanta and Ellora in India recently with my daughter Ankita, for three awe-immersed days, we experienced a deeply profound sense of the magic that some hands can create.

The 29 Buddhist caves at Ajanta, many cut more than a hundred feet deep in a horse-shoe shaped mountain, were first created in 2nd century BCE, more than two thousand years ago, for over 150 years. The second phase continued later from 600 AD for some 200 years. And then for over a thousand years, covered by dense forestation, these caves were lost to the world until a chance discovery by a hunting party on April 21, 1819.

It was the grandest archaeological discovery of all times.

In every cave, around every column, in front of every image, in every corner, again and again, in a state of awe, one asks: how could these grand caves - as vast shrines, as learning centres, as monasteries, as places of worship - be built, with what tools? With what skills and social organization? With what inspiration and vision, and so long ago?

There are grand images of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas carved in exquisite detail; there are majestic columns, with

intricate carvings, supporting huge cantilevered ceilings that rise more than seventy feet high and seem to defy all principles of structural engineering. And there are walls and walls of paintings of Jataka tales from the lives of Buddha in vivid colours, in intricate compositions, with enchanting women, frolicking, dancing, celebrating.

Deep down in the caves where no ray of sunlight penetrates, how did they make such exquisite paintings? Where did they learn to do them? Who were these artists?

A hundred kilometers away are 34 more caves at Ellora, spanning a period of more than 600 years, from the 5th to the 11th century A.D. These caves are not only Buddhist in their iconography and imagery, but also Hindu and Jain.

The most magnificent of these is the Kailasa Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva of the Hindu pantheon. What makes this massive temple - measuring 164 feet in

length and 108 feet in width, and rising to 100 feet over four levels - utterly unique in the world is that it was excavated from the top down, starting in the 8th century over the next 150 years, requiring removal of 150,000 to 200,000 tons of solid rock.

It is magnificent; its architecture and sculptural imagery are mesmerising, and its vision and structural innovations are breath-taking.

The world over, inspired by the visions of the seen and the unseen, of the earthly and the transcendent, in celebration of beauty and the divine, in search of the sacred and the great mystery, for millennia, it has always been the human hands which have endeavoured to make the invisible visible.

As world-wide inheritors of those precious gifts, we have hardly sung enough in praise of these hands; in fact, often, the art historians and the philosophers, and the chroniclers of civilizations have scarcely acknowledged those hands, to say nothing of the bruises and the calluses that have invariably marked them.

Time and again, those hands have chiselled a soft sacred face in the hard granite; they have installed grand lotuses in marble in the ceilings of the temples. They have turned a piece of bamboo into a flute, and cut stained a glass to let the light of the divine shine through.

It is time to sing in praise of those hands!

