

INDIA

Hazaribagh and the North Karanpura Valley

The Heritage at Risk Report 2001/2002 for India discussed the threat from coal mining and a thermal power station that is faced by Hazaribagh and the North Karanpura Valley. Our 2002/2003 report looks more closely at the impacts this will have on the cultural heritage of the region.

The Hazaribagh District originally covered the entire North Chotanagpur Division, or the entire plateau of Hazaribagh, which is the northern tract of the massif divided by the Damodar River from east to west, with the Ranchi plateau lying to the south. Today the region is part of the new tribal state of Jharkhand (meaning Forest Land). This is an area rich in archaeological deposits, megaliths and dolmens, and rivers that are considered sacred such as the Damodar River, and hundreds of sacred groves (*sarna*).

Traditional vernacular architecture and cultural landscapes

The traditional vernacular architecture of the North Karanpura Valley is represented by mud buildings. There are usually around 200 houses in a village, generally single-storey, or with a loft for storage of grain, and having a square quadrangle surrounded by rooms with an inner courtyard, called *angan*, where all domestic duties such as drying of grain is done by the women of the house. The houses have sloping, tiled roofs and the tiles are handmade in the village itself, usually by the potter tribe, although other tribes such as the Kurmi (farmer) and Oraon (Dravidian Tribe) often make large, flat tiles by hand that are fired. These houses follow age-old traditions of building that vary from tribe to tribe. This is an artistic genius of the artisan builders that is threatened in the vernacular village houses and it is '...unprotected historic heritage that is not recorded in any monument list' (Michael Petzet, Introduction, ICOMOS World Report 2001/2002). The villages of the North Karanpura valley are villages of artisan craftsmen such as potters, oil extractors, ironsmiths, metal casters, weavers, basket makers, carpenters, and other semi-Hinduized tribes, and their buildings reflect their amazing creative talent. Once the mining destroys these villages this heritage will disappear forever, along with the great Khovar marriage art and Sohrai harvest art of the women artists. The village houses have evolved out of a cultural ecology adapted to the landscape as it is. Once this landscape is destroyed and replaced by opencast coal mines and industry this architecture and way of life must disappear and it can never be recreated at any cost ever again, and even the model is in danger of being lost forever.

It is important to note that the archaeology of India has been unprotected from destructive development: no obligatory archaeological assessment and archaeological clearance was mandatory within the environment impact assessment (EIA) which, after a long battle, the Hazaribagh Chapter of INTACH managed to get reinstated in 1996. How much archaeological heritage must have been destroyed in river-valley industrialisation projects is anybody's guess! The entire heritage of the lower Damodar, cultural, social, ecological, archaeological, and built heritage was destroyed by the Damodar Valley project started in 1947 with big dams, coal mines, coal washeries, thermal power stations, and industries.

Generally in the villages of the Adivasi artisan communities



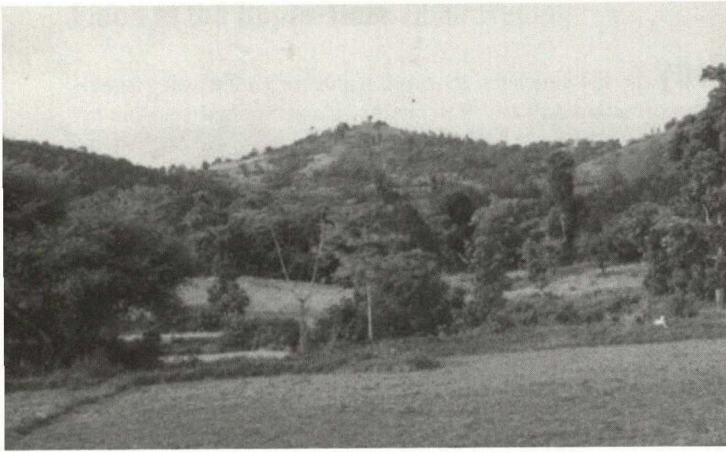
Vernacular architecture in the North Karanpura Valley



Cultural landscape in the North Karanpura Valley

Agricultural landscape of the North Karanpura Valley before open-cast coal mining



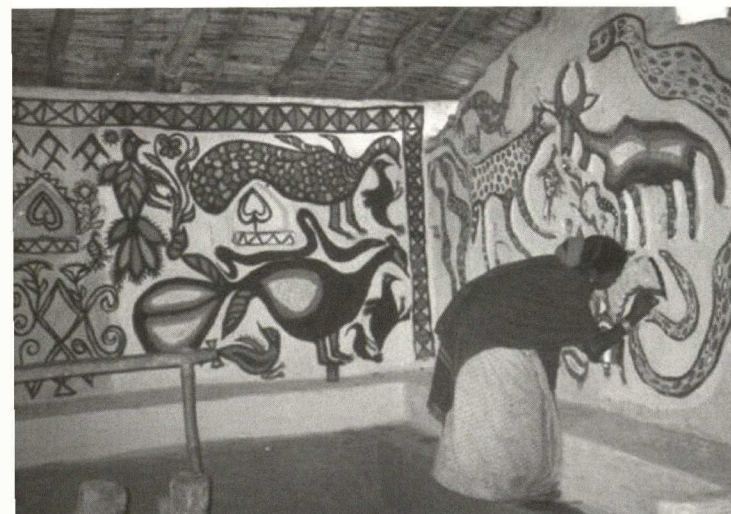


Forested landscape in the Satpahar range before open-cast coal mining



Putli, an artist of the Ganju tribe, painting a Sohrai mural in the Ganju style

Chamni, an artist of the Ganju tribe, painting a Sohrai mural in the Ganju style



such as Prajapati (potter), Kurmi (farmer), Rana (carpenter), Teli (oil-extractor) and others, make their houses along the well laid-out village roads that, along with the houses, reflect an ancient tradition that I have compared to the Indus Valley housing. The courtyards have excellent underground drainage in stone channels and these drains run from the central courtyard, under the rooms, to the vegetable garden at the rear of the house; they thus collect rain water from the roofs sloping towards the courtyard and carry the water to the vegetable plot, in the middle of which the well is situated. The cattle are kept in the shed within the inner quadrangle and as their dung is washed out of the courtyard through the drains it forms an excellent source of organic fertilizer for the vegetable patch. A typical village will thus have several hundred such houses with attached vegetable plots in the immediate village area. The roadside area may be used for parking bullock carts. The loft area is sometimes open on one side for storage of firewood from the forest, and additional stalls from the outside in which cattle and goats may also be accommodated. Though the general appearance is regular, both on the ground as well as from the air, these villages display an individual character and charm, and scenic views are found to blend in such a way to inform the cultural landscape. The fields of the village are sometimes adjacent to and generally not far from the village house plots, so an atmosphere of farm life lends a rural agricultural ambience to the landscape. They clearly follow an informed tradition of cultural landscape in the great ancient agricultural tradition common to farming communities in other parts of the world. In the Tribal Oraon, Munda and Santal hamlets we notice a little change both in the vernacular housing and cultural landscape, since these great forest tribes generally situate their sloping tile-roof mud houses in a corner of the agricultural estate, so that the forest is never far away. By virtue of this, there is no village in the traditional sense, and rather the cultural landscape presents these large agricultural estates of 10 to 50 acres each with the farmer's house and outbuildings in one corner, or in the middle, with wide spaces between through which one can glimpse the hills in the background. The tribes generally choose hilly forests and open valleys for their habitation and farming, being partly hunters and partly farmers. This would give a good general view of the vernacular housing and cultural landscape of the North Karanpura Valley, and of the upper valley of the Damodar River surrounded by a heavily forested watershed.

Including the Hazaribagh plateau, the overall watershed covers nearly 20,000 square kilometres. Bounded on either side by the plateaus of Ranchi and Hazaribagh surmounting the ancient rift valley formation, this gentle valley is entirely filled with the greenery of all forms of agriculture. The ranges of the Mahadeva and Satpahar hills run through the length of the valley, with forests containing tigers and elephants. The valley has a high water table and the streams descending from the plateaux on either side carry loads of fertile silt and good irrigation of the loamy soil. Unfortunately, at a depth of only a few dozen feet from the surface lies a solid carboniferous deposit of sunken fossilized trees that is the source of the coal which the developers are eyeing as an economic prize.

Indigenous Heritage

The endangered heritage of the Indigenous peoples of the North Karanpura Valley has been recognised by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UNWGIP), High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva. For the past two years Tribal women artists from INTACH's Hazaribagh Chapter, who

are members of the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative, have attended and highlighted the threats to the upper Damodar Valley (North Karanpura) region through unprecedented destructive development, cutting of thousands of trees for roads, railways, and exploitation of new opencast coal-mines, and displacement of people from over a dozen Adivasi villages that have disappeared in coal mines. The plan to destroy a further 190 villages by coalmining activities has been noted in the international forum of the UNWGIP. The World Bank, which intended to give a loan of US\$480 million, withdrew the loan in 2000 due to the protests of wildlife and social activists in India and the USA. It was determined that there was inadequate environmental and social rehabilitation plans by the coal company Central Coalfields Limited. Further, the Bank has initiated a policy for identifying Indigenous peoples and this now includes Tribals, and Adivasis, with provision for Scheduled Castes (Operational Directive 4.20). It is hoped that the displacement of tribal villages and the destruction of their heritage will stop, but in view of India's policy of using thermal power there is very little hope for this as the coal deposits invariably follow the river courses in which the oldest agricultural Adivasi communities have developed, in tune with their environment.

The living prehistoric mural traditions of Khovar and Sohrai art of the North Karanpura Valley

In this verdant setting are the villages I have described, with every house painted with breath-taking murals by the Adivasi women on all walls, inside and out. It is a great ancient mural painting tradition directly carrying on the rock-art tradition found in the surrounding hills. Like the painted rock shelters called *Khovar*, the marriage wall and room paintings are made during the marriage season (Spring-Summer) which are called *Khovar* after the cave (*Kho*) and bridegroom (*Var*). These beautiful paintings are made in a sgraffito technique in which the mud house walls are first coated with manganese black, after which a light coating of creamy kaolin earth is applied and cut while wet with the comb, creating stark black patterns of the black manganese undercoat.

In the 200 villages of the North Karanpura Valley we today find thousands of mud-built homes adorned all through the year with these beautiful marriage and harvest murals. The Tribal Women Artists Cooperation for the last two years has sent our Adivasi women artists to participate in the 19th (July 2001) and 20th Sessions (July 2002) of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, meeting in Geneva, to read out our statement that this entire tradition and its peoples are threatened through the North Karanpura Coalfields Project. The coal mines will completely destroy the hundreds of villages and displace their populations, replacing them with vast open pits hundreds of feet deep and several miles across. The art of Khovar and Sohrai unique to the North Karanpura Valley will die forever with the villages and villagers, as has happened in the lower Damodar Valley, to which we have again and again drawn attention but nobody in the government has as yet heeded or advised against.

Cultural lifestyle and the basis for the preservation of cultural heritage tradition

For the past 55 years, India, as with other Third World Countries, has been following a progressive western style of development model that has clearly produced further proof of the destruction.



Prajapati comb Khovar art, Kharati village, North Karanpura Valley



Kurmi Sohrai painting in Hazaribagh

Trees along National Highway #33 shortly to be clear-felled for over 300 kilometres



There has been increased displacement and poverty at the Fourth World level of the village, where the rural spirit and traditional cultural heritage of India resides, and consequent benefits to the urban, city-based Third World Culture found in the cities – the political and administrative centres of power. The massive displacement of village and forest societies throughout India, especially in the river valleys are due to destructive development projects like big dams, which have displaced over 40 million Tribal or Adivasi people, and to coal and other mines, which have displaced over 30 million Adivasis. Left without any agricultural or forest-based production they drifted to the big cities where they form, with others, the 60% of the city of Bombay who are living in inhuman and degraded slum tenements, and the 40% of the city of Delhi, living in slums. The dignity and pride of these once-proud, great indigenous rural and forest societies, has been inhumanly abused by the lending and spending of First World Countries who are still greedily eyeing the south as targets of ever greater lending and spending and this has been endorsed by the recent World Summit on Development in Johannesburg.

Archaeological Heritage of the Upper Damodar Valley

The palaeolithic archaeological heritage of the lower Damodar Valley, embracing the valleys of Bokaro, Konar, Damodar and Kamsavati, forms the fabled western Rarh palaeolithic region brought to light in 1947 by the Bengali savant and visionary P.K. Sarkar, who also started the Ananda Marga. His research was suppressed, although his stone-tool collection was housed in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, and a small museum near Bokaro. Further to this we have S.C Roy's excavations in 1915 of chalcolithic *Asura* sites in the Chotanagpur plateau. The coal mining of the lower Damodar valley from Jharkhand to West Bengal completely destroyed the evidence of a continuous cultural tradition in the built heritage and arts of the region.

It was left to me in 1991 to bring to light the Palaeolithic tradition in the upper Damodar Valley (also called the Barkagaon valley or the North Karanpura Valley). My work showed the journey of a lower river-valley agricultural culture in the Damodar exposing Palaeolithic ancestry, and evidence in the upper river-valley for a great forest-based hunting society during the Palaeolithic and middle-Palaeolithic periods, and its continuance into an upper-valley Neolithic culture similar to the cataract cultures of the upper Nile in Ethiopia. This is complemented by the more recent contemporary village-culture, manifesting folk painting traditions clearly connected with the region's prehistoric rock-art, spanning a period from the Palaeolithic, through to the chalcolithic. A vibrant micro-lithic culture and Neolithic culture and the remains of a great Iron-Age *Asura* civilisation lie scattered on the floor of the North Karanpura valley and its surrounding areas, now once more threatened by indiscriminate mining.

Forest Heritage at Risk in the Damodar Valley

In 1947, the Damodar Valley became the scene of the Damodar Valley hydro-electricity and irrigation project. It was India's first big industrialisation project in an area already destroyed by vast coal mining since the early 20th century. Enormous tracts of forest lands, much of it belonging to Tribals, was clear-felled to make way for big dams. The entire history of deforestation in India has

followed colonisation models. 'Backward' Tribal areas are destroyed in order to civilise Tribes, at the same time forested environments are cut down. As the hydro-electricity potential of the Damodar Valley project failed, new thermal power-stations were built, requiring more and more coal and the entire forested area of the lower Damodar Valley was destroyed and the Tribals displaced. Today hugely polluting thermal power-stations, coal washeries and industries release dangerous levels of toxic effluents into the river Damodar and its tributaries. If we look at North India we find that in the pre-Vedic times it was heavily forested, but with the advance of so called civilisation the Tribes were wiped out and the forests of the Ganges Valley completely destroyed. Today this process of deforestation has climbed from the valley into the Jharkhand hills and plateau which includes the valley of the Damodar River whose upper portion is threatened in the North Karanpura valley.

Cutting down of Heritage Trees

Recently the World Bank has funded a huge project for widening national and State highways all over India. Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Jessore Road, Barrackpore Trunk Road, National Highway#4 are being clear-felled in West Bengal. Bombay-Pune Highway has been clear-felled in Maharashtra. The entire Grand Trunk Road NH#2 roadside trees planted by Sher Shah four centuries ago are being clear-felled from West Bengal to Uttar Pradesh. State highways are also being clear-felled. These trees are the dozens of species of finest, oldest, most mature specimens of fruiting, shade, indigenous sacred heritage trees such as Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and Banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*), which are worshipped in thousands of roadside villages by the Adivasi women tying red thread around their bases. But even this worship it seems has failed to save these ancient trees. The loss to biodiversity is incalculable. The tree protection organisation Kalpavriksh filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Bombay High Court to try and stop the clear-felling of the roadside trees on the Bombay-Pune highway but they lost. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF-I) filed a PIL at Ranchi High Court in Jharkhand and lost. The highways throughout Jharkhand and West Bengal are having age-old indigenous trees clear-felled. The Grand Trunk Road NH#2 has been clear-felled for several hundred kilometres from West Bengal, through Jharkhand to Uttar Pradesh. The consequences of this to biodiversity, birds, insect life, and small animals such as squirrels is incalculable. INTACH, Sanctuary, and Kalpavriksh, have petitioned the Prime Minister. So far no action has been taken and it is reported similar felling of mature old roadside trees is being planned and implemented across India, which will result in the destruction of India's oldest, most sacred indigenous trees.

Trees were protected during the Buddhist period. The Emperor Ashoka ordered special Edicts to save trees. The Pipal tree (under which the Buddha gained his great realisation or Nirvana) was especially sacred. At present in India the entire rural and forested Tribal regions, including Jharkhand and Chattisgarh and other places, are facing massive deforestation. The destruction of roadside trees for widening of highways will completely destroy the cultural ecology of the roadside villages and change forever the cultural landscape in which the heart of rural India beats. In a country like India, which is largely rural and agricultural with densely forested Tribal tracts, the destruction of agricultural and forest lands for mining and industry has led to a crisis of subsistence and the filling-up of urban slums with displaced villagers. Starvation deaths are becoming common. The further destruction

of trees will have an adverse impact on the rural areas and is a wrong prioritisation of borrowed economic resources.

The Birhor leaf-house 'Kumba'

One of the most threatened objects of material heritage in Jharkhand – the only state in India having the nomadic Birhor Tribe – is the temporary leaf-shelter known as the *Kumba*, constructed from the branches and leaves of the Saal tree (*Shorea robusta*). For the last twenty-odd years the government has been trying to make this shy tribe sedentary, housed in cement houses with concrete roofs. However, the Birhor have attributed every ill attacking the tribe to these cement houses and have left one settlement after another to revert to their traditional leaf housing. It is even today not an uncommon sight to find a Birhor living in a leaf *Kumba* adjacent to, or even inside a cement building! The word *Kumbha* means earthen pot, and was used traditionally in Indian scripture for the burial urn, and being made of earth was believed to contain the female principle (Satapata Brahmana, vi.3.I.39). It is obvious that the term was borrowed by Sanskritic cultures from prehistoric cultures like the Birhor.

The major problem of the *Kumba* is that it is a flimsy construction of leaves and twigs, it does not have a long life and requires a regular renewal tradition to keep it going, and this is a very real problem if it is taken out of the socio-economic context of the tribe's hunting and gathering economy – which the sedentarisation of the Birhor will destroy. The only way in which such a tradition may be kept alive is by fostering in the Birhor pride for their cultural heritage. We must not make them feel their old way of life



The Birhor leaf house called Kumba

was inappropriate, because indeed it has sustained them for so many thousands of years. Even a post-agricultural society needs agriculture and a post hunter-gatherer society requires the genius of the hunter-gatherer.

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Threatened Sites in Hazaribagh Plateau

Sitagarha Hill

Aligned to dolmen and megalith sites in a north-south and east-west axis, the sacred hill Marang Buru of the Birhor tribals, also called Juljul, forms the Recumbent Landscape Figure (RLF) of a reclining mother goddess. On the south face is a sixty-five-foot-long stone face called Mahadeva (Great God) by the Birhors. Mahadeva is a term used alternately for Shiva and Buddha.

The Border Security Force has been bombing the belly of the hill with artillery fire for over the past decade. INTACH took up the issue to stop the bombing of the sacred site in view of the discovery of a Buddhist Vihara and Stupa at the eastern end of the hill several years back. The matter was taken to the Union Minister for Defence and dismissed by him. It is a matter of importance to all

who believe in Vision Quest sites to take up the issue with the Government of India.

For archaeologists and Buddhist devotees it is essential to note that an important Buddhist site exists in the Marwateri basin of Sitagarha hill from which stone carved stupa, statuary, and iron relics have been excavated along with stone pillars and heavily engraved blocks. A mound seems to present the aspect of a village, beside which there is a stupa mound. Painted Grey Ware has been recovered from the site, dated at around 300 BC. Also excavated is a black schist fragment of an Apsara dated to Harshvardhana period (6th century AD), and some statuary attributed to around the

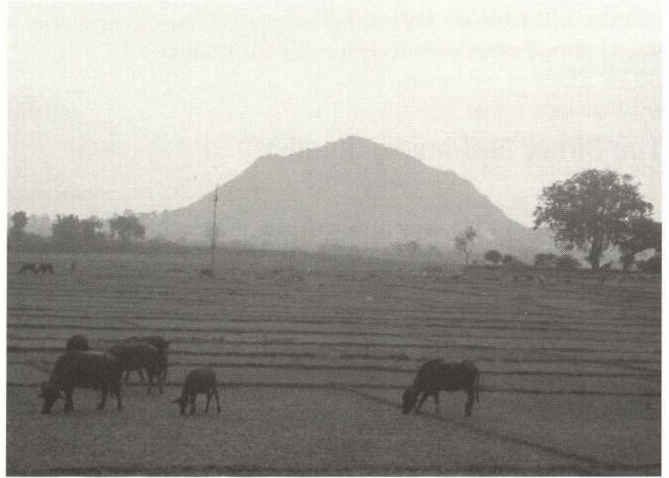
Kushan period (1st century AD) by the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India).

Banadag Megaliths

The Banadag megaliths stand demurely on the northern outskirts of the Banadag village, 7 kilometres west of Hazaribagh, a small town in northern Jharkhand State. Thirty metres west of the megaliths is the sacred Banadag hill, which is presently being ruthlessly quarried, undermining the age-old religious beliefs of the villagers. The standing megaliths of this ancient burial site now number about fifty, with an average height of 4.5 feet. The stones have been erected facing east towards a Recumbent Mother Goddess hill, 4 kilometres away on the horizon and have a north-south orientation. These megaliths are relics of the Kolarian tribes who have now left, erecting these sepulchral stones in the memory of their departed. The dynamite blasting often shake boulders with such great impact that many megaliths now lie prostrate on the ground, destroyed. A brick kiln now operates 40 metres away from this site and their earth-cutting for making bricks is gradually advancing towards the megalithic site. Black ware pottery was recovered, the urn contained ash, arrow heads and even 12 silver



The standing megaliths of Banadag



Bawandai Hill as seen from the North

coins. The amazing bird dolmen on this doomed hill, a remarkable example of unique and stunning aboriginal craftsmanship which has no known parallel, could be gone any day now.

Bawanbai Hill

Bawanbai Hill, five kilometres south of Hazaribagh Town, has been claimed by some researchers to be man-made, being pyramidal (E-W) and tridental (N-W). It follows the lines of sacred geometry, connecting with the megaliths of the region, falling on the latitude of the Ley Lines (Gita Lines). For several decades pervasive stone mining has eaten into the south side of the hill, up to 250 feet. The north face showing the man-made tridental architecture of the hill is still preserved. This hill immediately requires protection as a national movement.