

ANCIENT SHELTERS, INSCRIPTIONS AND SHRINES ARE NOW BEING DISCOVERED DEEP WITHIN FORESTS, FROM BANDHAVGARH TO THE ARAVALLIS

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Rock-cut sculpture of Sheshashayi Vishnu inside Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh | Photo Credit: Ashoka University

In the 1930s, a constable in the Rewa Kingdom in present-day Madhya Pradesh set out on foot into the forests of [Bandhavgarh](#). In his lonely endeavour, lasting some two months, he traversed through the land of tigers, leopards, bears, deer, bamboo and sal trees. Once he reached the caves carved into the hills, he made 'eye-copies' of the strange script that was carved on its walls. His observations confirmed the presence of an ancient settlement that once thrived deep in these forests.

Nearly 80 years later, Nayanjot Lahiri, professor of history from Ashoka University, set about looking for these sites. Over the decades, she had built a reputation for her seminal work that covered the grand narratives of Indian history: from the hidden cities of the Indus valley to life in the Brahmaputra plains under the Ahom kings. The caves in the middle of Bandhavgarh National Park seemed like an odd choice.

For Lahiri, journeying into forests was a way to bring out oft-neglected historical narratives. "Settlements in forests preceded those in domestic lands. In ancient India, much of the subcontinent was covered in forests. But a large part of our history is told from those in agrarian plains and urban centres," she says.

The focus on the plains is perhaps seen in the sites protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI): a negligible number of some 3,600 protected sites are within forested tracts or in hills.

Inside Kotumsar caves in Kanger Valley | Photo Credit: Getty Images

While protected forest areas prevent encroachment and the destruction of the monuments, they also hinder research into these sites. Take, for instance, caves within the Kanger Valley National

Park in Chhattisgarh, which date back to nearly 7,000 years, and could reveal the ancient roots of indigenous tribals in the region; or the 2nd century artefacts in Dhonchi islands within Sundarbans Tiger Reserve that have not been explored by historians. Remoteness adds to the neglect, as is the case with Naksa Parbat, a 14th century fortified settlement in Arunachal Pradesh, which had been last excavated a few decades ago.

“Historians have often focused on powerful kingdoms or grand and magnificent sites. Or, sites that are easily accessible,” says Manjil Hazarika, assistant professor, department of archaeology, Cotton University, Assam.

“When historians study the kingdoms of the plains, they assume that these powerful cultures influenced the hills. But, often it is the other way around too; where the extraction of timber, stones and metals found primarily in the hills have led to exchange of culture and technologies with the plains. The hills and forests contributed significantly to the prosperity of larger kingdoms,” he says.

The Tirathgarh waterfall in Kanger Valley National Park, Chhattisgarh. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

In 2021, Ashoka University’s Centre for Interdisciplinary Archaeological Research sought to shine a spotlight through a project that looked at forests as the protectors of heritage.

In four phases, between March 2021 and June 2022, Lahiri and her team went into the jungle in jeeps and on foot: coming across elephants, gaurs and even the occasional tiger. What they ended up documenting were not just settlements frozen in time, but a thriving settlement catering to travellers and merchants dating to nearly 1,800 years ago.

The team, which published their findings in *Current Science* earlier this year, described 81 rock shelters in the region. As many as 26 had inscriptions, revealing names of donors, ministers and kings. Some caves were small, acting as places of rest for travellers or as shrines. There was a gymnasium, and large gathering halls. One cave was larger, with six rooms and a small pond in the middle. Some caves at higher reaches of the hills were perhaps made to house permanent residents there. The caves showed the relationship between man and jungle: they were designed to keep wilderness at bay.

The caves could also tell tales of the changes in the forests around them. “It was only in the last 4,000 years or so that changing rainfall patterns brought a proliferation of sal trees. Soil cores in the reservoirs can reveal how the forests were at the time when the caves were made,” says Lahiri.

Ashoka University’s forays into forest archaeology joins a sparse list of projects that aims to uncover the histories of the marginalised. The Nilgiri Archaeological Project, which was founded by Ghent University in the Netherlands, will, between 2021 and 2026, use an inter-disciplinary approach that includes excavations in forests to detail the pre-colonial history of tribal communities.

A decade ago, Hazarika followed up on a mention of megaliths in a century-old British monograph. His explorations into the Garbhanga reserve forest on the Assam-Meghalaya border shed light on the histories of the Karbi tribal communities. Road cutting had exposed megalith sites and remnants of sizeable settlements within forests that showed the earliest signs of rudimentary shifting cultivation, a practice that continues in the hills today.

The exploration of narratives of the marginalised may not be historical curiosities. It may reveal

insights into the contemporary debates of identity and belonging. Assam has been the centre of a resurgence of the Assamese identity: a debate on who is local and who is an outsider ignited by the implementation of the National Citizens Register (NRC).

““The Assamese identity is not as simple as it is being claimed. The Assamese identity once enveloped Meghalaya and neighbouring States. There has been so much exchange and admixtures of populations. The diversity in this region is largely due to the continuous movement of people and cultures. The understanding of histories of the marginalised will lead to a broader understanding of these identities,” says Hazarika.

In 2018, Priyank Talesara, a Ph.D student at the Ancient Indian History, Culture & Archaeology department at Madhav University, a private university in Sirohi town of Rajasthan, decided to follow up on a hunch. He had found a nearly-1,000-year-old inscription that described the presence of 999 Shiva temples and 444 Jain temples in the high ridge forests of the Aravallis.

The fortification wall at Bandiyagarh, which was, until recently, unknown to historical research | Photo Credit: Priyank Talesara

For days, he walked around the forest, scaling ridges and crossing streams, finding little success along the way. A chance encounter with local Bhil and Garasia tribesmen gave him another clue: a description of seemingly man-made stone structures in a remote corner of the dense forest. What he found were the remnants of a sprawling, nearly 1 sq.km. fort complex.

“There was no historical document that mentioned this fort. Even the Survey of India noted the area only as forest land,” says Talesara.

The study, published in 2019 and 2020, suggests that the site was a hide-out fortress, capable of housing a large army and civilian populations during conflict and warfare. The terrain of the forests and the thick three-metre stone walls were intended to act as a site of safety, giving a critical insight into the incessant warfare of 11th century Rajasthan between the local Paramara dynasty, other Rajput clans and invading Persians. “While the fort was abandoned, it was rediscovered by Bhil and Garasia tribesmen nearly 500 years ago. They had then installed their own idols within the fort.”

Historians hope that as more universities offer courses in archaeology in smaller towns and areas close to forests, critical aspects of local history can be studied; and that history hidden in India’s forests can slowly, but surely, be unearthed.

The writer is an independent journalist based in Bengaluru.

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