Vandalism in the Name of Religion

Karnataka, which includes a greater part of the former princely state of Mysore, is a land of great scenic beauty. It can be broadly divided into the Malnad, the hilly forested country to the west, and the more open low-lying land watered by Krishna and Cauvery with its tributaries to the east. The Maidan or the plain land is comparatively flat but here and there are hills often in the form of continuous chains. One such chain extends from the Biligirirangan hills in the south past Shivaganga, Madhugiri, Midigesi, Pavagada, Kalyandurg to the hills around Hampi. A traveller passing out of Bangalore on the road to Mysore crosses the range near Ramanagaram (originally called Closepet) and will at once be impressed by the grandeur of the cluster of bell-shaped bare granite hills with steep precipitous slopes, around which are strewn boulders of all shapes and sizes. These hills are at once eye-catching and attractive and each one has a legend narrated with patriotic fervour. The low-lying hills and adjacent valleys have provided ideal sites for erecting bunds for storing water in the form of lakes of various shapes and sizes providing water for cultivation of a variety of crops and drinking water for the numerous villages and the picturesque landscape is a delight to the beholders eyes.

The hills are mainly made of gigantic blocks of granite of a pleasing pink colour of great beauty and durability, occurring in huge dome-like structures which provided relatively
safe sites for the building of old fortresses as at Sivaganga, Sawandurga and numerous others as hill sides are nearly vertical and the top can be reached with difficulty at only few points. These giant hills are magnificent landforms of great natural beauty which match similar occurrences in any part of the world. An Englishman who mapped the area in the early years of a survey was so struck with the grandeur of the hills that it prompted him to say: '.... this decay of lofty granite masses produces some of the picturesque features of an Indian landscape; the strong columnar piles, tress and logging stones which far exceed those of Dartmoor in grandeur and in the fantastic forms these assume.'

The hills around Ramanagaram are therefore some of the most picturesque landforms which strike the eye of young and old as they cross this belt. They are our precious heritage and require to be protected and guarded with all possible vigilance and care against any possible desecration. The rocks are not like any other rocks but are of great geological and aesthetic value, having been formed more than 2400 million years ago by nature’s gigantic forces. The proposed puny works of man can provide no comparison.

Aesthetic sense and feeling for the environment have been somewhat suppressed/blunted in our rural folk oppressed by poverty in their daily struggle for food and shelter. While enlightened governments both at the Centre and State have enacted laws for the preservation of environment, their attention so far has been confined to the protection and upkeep of historical structures and monuments, reminiscent of our past history. But they are also responsible for protecting the green wealth clothing our mountains and protect.
their bio-diversity. Any major enterprise which has the effect of marring or destroying the beauty of the landscape or of polluting of rivers are supposed to come under their severe scrutiny. The persons appointed for policing the country and punishing those who indulge in such vandalism, however, are too few to enforce strict obedience of the law and ensure punishment of the culprits. The result is that rivers continue to be polluted, hill slopes continue to be scarred or denuded and ugly man-made structures continue to rear themselves up, ruining the landscape. Luckily for us, a few enlightened and service oriented people have banded themselves together to see that such wanton acts of disfigurement do not take place. Their voice, however, is weak and the building of public awareness against such acts of vandalism is conspicuous by its absence.

The reason for this lengthy preamble is provoked by the news, which has appeared recently, that one 'Sanghamitra Foundation' has launched an ambitious project of carving a statue of Buddha, 712 feet high, out of the prominent monolithic granite hill facing the town of Ramanagaram.

The evil eye of the 'developers' seem to have fallen on the rock due to the spectacular scenes portrayed in a popular film, 'Sholay', shot among the picturesque mountains surrounding Ramanagaram. The wonder of wonders is that the sharks in charge of the project have already secured the approval of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and also of the State government. What is more distressing is the fact that the State government appears to have cleared the project without the knowledge of the Director of Mines and Geology, who is the direct custodian of matters pertaining to rocks, stones and minerals in the State and all hurdles appear to have been removed in putting the project into execution.

From what we gather, the plan consists of carving a statue of a standing Buddha (similar to the one destroyed by Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan) in the 1050 ft high 'Handigandi':rock of Gopalapura near Ramanagaram. A team of no less than 500 stone cutters are stated to be on their way to take up the work and as a sop to the people, they are told stone busts of Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar are also to be carved and set-up in addition to the figure of the Buddha. Monasteries, meditation centres and libraries and ofcourse programmes to attract the elite of the growing city of Bangalore have all been planned. The project is estimated to cost Rs. 30 crores and is expected to be completed in six years. The State government would provide 2000 acres of land to create a buffer zone around the site.

Money for the project is expected to come from organising shows like 'Temptation 2005' but on grander scales in the Palace grounds with many Bollywood and local stars.
exhibiting their attractive forms to advantage, thrilling the large audiences as a reward for parting with their money. What a way of commemorating the great Buddha!

A group of environmentalists have raised their feeble voice of protest pointing to the geological antiquity of the rock and the mountain providing a training ground for rock climbers, an environmentally friendly sport. What avails these poor protests when the juggernaut of influence moves on with the full support of the State and Central governments. Something more has to be done. Yet the intelligentsia of Bangalore, the media and the numerous local leaders and environmentalist groups, who could be expected to raise their voices in protest remain silent at what can be termed as vandalism of the worst kind.

We have largely destroyed our forest wealth, we have polluted our water resources and our rich agricultural soils have become lifeless incapable of sustained development and the greedy eyes of the exploiters have now turned to despoiling even the natural beauty of stones. Are we to remain silent spectators of such environmental mutilation in the name of religion? For heavens sake, all of you who have a say in the matter make haste and take action to prevent this type of vandalism, which will destroy the very few natural monuments which remain, to remind us of the great architect who fashioned this world and made it worth living in. Let us not forget that we are the inheritors of the past and have the tremendous obligation of being the trustees of the future. The impressive natural majesty of this mountain landscape should be preserved and not allowed to be spoiled in any manner whatsoever.

Crass disfigurement or commercialisation of our natural endowments like this picturesque landscape around Ramanagaram is tantamount to sheer vandalism and should be strongly opposed by all right thinking people. It is one more opportunity for Earth Scientists to do something of societal relevance and public good by registering their unequivocal protest.

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