



SON VALLEY

Stone Age Shakti

THAT TRITE phrase 'as old as the hills' has suddenly taken on startling significance in relation to a thread that runs through Hindu beliefs: the cult of mother-worship, a veneration of the *shakti* form that harks back to primeval times. Recently, an Indo-US team of archaeologists working in the Son valley in Madhya Pradesh's Sidhi district stumbled upon evidence that this practice existed in prehistoric, Stone Age India.

Situated near the base of the Kaimur escarpment, 4 km north-east of Medhauli village, the site had been excavated first in 1980 by Professor J. Desmond Clark of the University of California, Berkeley (UCB), and Professor G.R. Sharma of Allahabad University. Last January, the site was reopened by their understudies, UCB's J.M. Kenoyer and Allahabad's J.N. Pal.

ASTOUNDING FIND: Towards the end of this year's excavation, the archaeologists were lifting large numbers of Upper Palaeolithic stone artefacts (between 30,000 and 10,000 years old) when they came upon a rough circular platform of sandstone rubble,

about 85 cm in diameter. In the centre of this platform was a fragment of a natural, ferruginous stone which had concentric triangular striations etched into it. The fragment stood out from the rest of the circle's stones because of its unusual colours, rang-

Front view of the reconstructed stone



A boy worships a modern *Shakti* stone

ing from a light yellowish red to a dark reddish brown, in alternating belts.

Intrigued by these features, the archaeologists cleared more surface debris—and found nine more fragments of the stone. All the fragments joined together to form a triangular stone 15 cm high, 6.5 cm wide, and about 6.5 cm thick.

It seemed as though some Stone Age worshippers had deliberately placed this stone in the circle's centre. The excavators' interest quickened when they found similar stones atop the Kaimur escarpment.

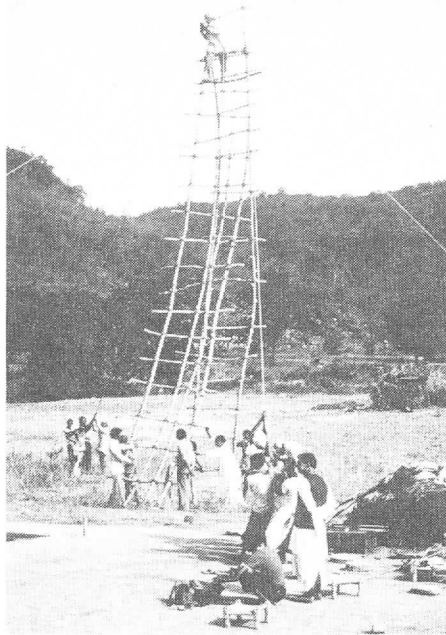
Ancient Origins: The archaeologists have conservatively estimated the stone platform's age to be about 11,000 years. And that—as Sherlock Holmes' Watson would say—is amazing, because Hinduism, as we know it, began to take shape with the compilation of the Rig Veda in the 2nd millennium B.C., and Tantrism, which put worship of the mother-figure on a sublime pedestal, took root even later—around the 5th century A.D.

The Son valley find indicates that the impulses that shaped the religious beliefs of the Indus civilisation must have been echoes of a past that was aeons distant, a time-span that reduces modern man's lifetime to a single sneeze of eternity. But the UCB-

Allahabad team does not tear its hair out over the importance of its find. "Archaeologically," it says cautiously, "we can only say that the platform was built by man and that people had placed a certain unique and colourful stone in its centre."

Clark recalls that soon after the stone circle came to light, a passerby stopped and asked Kenoyer why he had broken the stone, which was 'holy'. And the archaeologists found, to their excitement, that the Kol and Baiga tribals inhabiting the area use the same kind of triangular stone even today as a symbol of their mother goddess, Mai. Thereafter, coincidence after coincidence fell into the archaeologists' laps. Their site watchman, a Kol, had actually set up a rough shrine to Kalika Mai with one large triangular stone and three smaller ones.

Finally, spurred on by their discovery, the team began to search for more evidence, and at a place called Karai, a kilometre north-east of the site, found a stone shrine to Karai Mai. A rough circular platform made up of sandstone and limestone rubble blocks, the shrine centred around a headless, seated stone figurine of what the locals call 'Angari Devi'. Also placed on the shrine were six natural pieces of sandstone, all with concentric triangles or ellipses—with the same colourings as the fragments at the dig.



The excavation site

The tribal worshippers of Angari Devi had daubed the stones with rough *sindoor*.

Unbroken Link: What is astounding in itself is the fact that the tribals of the region practise a pagan animism that has remained unchanged for 11,000 years. But the Medhaulti stone fragments suggest that wor-

ship of the symbolic *yonis*, or *shakti*, the manifestation of female energy, had beginnings in a misty past when bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers roamed the peninsula in quest of food and shelter.

The latest find may be a reiteration of the woman's pivotal position in those ancient groups. The mother was then truly a goddess: she looked after the family, gave birth to progeny that increased the tribe's numbers, and protected her offspring. Later, in more recent centuries, she took on other forms—the demoniac ruler of natural forces, the creative half of the supreme deity, or the bloodthirsty Kali who demands sacrifices in order to strengthen her creativity.

That is not all. The Son valley shrine could well turn out to be the oldest ever found in the world. Neolithic mother-goddess shrines from the late Stone Age (around 3,000 years ago) have been found near Jericho; but they are modern compared to the Medhaulti find. For now, says Clark, he and his team-mates are going to investigate ancient and modern literature concerning the worship of the mother goddess, and Sharma will embark on a study of the oral traditions of the local people to find out whether folk memory retains a glimmer of the cult's primeval origins.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG

BUDDHISM

The Icon Age

ARCHAEOLOGISTS, as diggers, are constantly at the mercy of the vicissitudes of fortune. A team of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) demonstrated this by its recent discovery of a unique Buddhist icon in Andhra Pradesh.

As construction workers dug the foundation pits for the renovation of the Moksharamalingesvara temple at Ramathirtham in Prakasam district they unwittingly peeled away a layer of history. From beneath the dust of centuries they unearthed an exquisite limestone sculpture, red polished ware sprinklers and bowls and some large-sized bricks. Stumbling upon these the ASI team led by Dr K. Krishna Murthy, superintending archaeologist, identified the sculpture during the course of an exploratory trip to the area in March.

An excited Murthy explained that the iconographic traits, the idiom of the sculpture and nature of the stone were studied and compared with those in the texts to identify and date the icon. Useful pointers were provided by the

headgear, the countenance, the attire and information in the Tibetan historical work *Manikambum* and other texts glorifying the *Bodhisattva* as the first God to issue out of the primordial Buddha.

It has thus been dated conclusively to the early second century A.D. as the earliest extant form of *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*. The first mention of the *Bodhisattva* is in the *Sukha Vati Vyuha*, a work dated 100 A.D. Murthy says that

Bodhisattva: idol worship



"its worship in this and other forms was later adopted elsewhere. A common feature of all is the presence of a lotus in one hand." Found in an area rich in Mahayana treasures, "the icon suggests the Mahayana school existed even in the early second century and the Ramathirtham temple is possibly standing over the mound of an early Buddhist centre".

The Mahayana philosophy and precepts introduced Buddhists to idol worship including the image of Buddha and the transition from the Hinayana to the Mahayana school began with the worship of *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*. Buddhists believe the *Avalokitesvara* takes numerous forms to lead people to *nirvana* and a legend refers to 333 incarnations. Paintings of as many as 108 forms are at the Machhindra Vahal monastery in Nepal.

Meanwhile Murthy and other archaeologists are in search of Pothalaka where the worship of *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* is believed to have begun. Some scholars tend to identify Pothalaka with Potharlanka in the Divi area of Krishna district. Says Murthy: "We have to dig deep and wide and with incredible luck we could stumble upon it."

—AMARNATH K. MENON