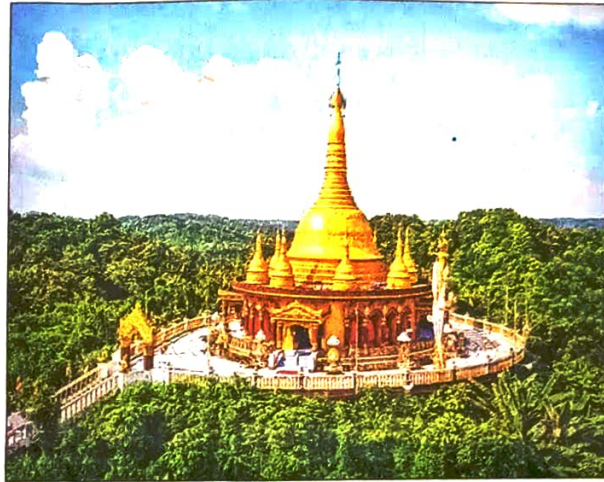


Enlightened discovery

ON THE BUDDHA'S TRAIL IN BANGLADESH

By Sunita Dwivedi,
Rupa, ₹995



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Sunita Dwivedi's apprehensions about political turmoil are quite palpable as she explores and charts Bangladesh through such archaeological evidences as ancient Buddhist relics: "During the years 2016 and 2022, while scouring Bangladesh from Dinajpur to Cox's Bazaar, and travelling by ferry along the Bay of Bengal, I had not anticipated the political changes that would soon engulf the country in barely two years." These political developments, as Dwivedi asserts, culminated in August 2024, with the dismissal of the then prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, generating obvious repercussions: "This led me to re-evaluate and update the ongoing excavations at the Buddhist sites of Bikrampur, Dalijhara and Vishwamura. I found out that excavations had been halted."

Dwivedi's concern, though triggered by the onset of political turmoil in Bangladesh, is justified given the unsettling examples from various other parts of the world. In early 2001, the annihilation of the ancient Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan had generated spontaneous global outrage and criticism. Venerated as ancient relics of Gandharan Buddhism, the wrecked statues, carved on massive cliffs, were situated on the ancient Silk Route, the site of multiple Buddhist monasteries and sanctuaries. The demolition of the Bamiyan statues is still fresh in public memory. But other heritage Buddhist relics have also been hapless targets of vandalism and plunder elsewhere in the world in different epochs. Notable instances of such pillaging include the vandalism of leading Buddhist educational centres in eastern India (Nalanda, Vikramshila, Odanta-

puri, Telhara and Somapura) by Turkish invaders; the decimation of Buddhist temples (Jokhang temple, White Horse temple, Tolin monastery among others) unleashed by the Red Guards in China and in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong; the horrors perpetrated during the reign of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia that demolished multiple Buddhist shrines and heritage sites (Tuol Sleng, Angkorian complexes among others); the destruction of stupas, rock carvings (the Jehanabad Buddha, the Manglawar rock carvings, the Butkara stupa, Amluk-Dara stupa and Gilgit-Baltistan rock art) perpetrated by radical militants in Pakistan's Swat Valley — to mention just a few occurrences from the past. Given the vulnerable past of Buddhist heritage sites, one empathises with Dwivedi's unease. Her formidable list of well-researched travelogues includes *Buddhist Heritage Sites of India*, *In Quest of the Buddha: A Journey of the Silk Road*, *Buddha in Central Asia* and *Buddha in Gandhara*. Largely based on her journeys and explorations of old Buddhist routes, traversing through countries like China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics; these erstwhile volumes have paved the way for the current one that is broadly divided into eight sections: "Bogra", "Dinajpur", "Rajshahi", "Dhaka", "Comilla", "Chittagong", "Cox's Bazaar" and "Jessore-Khulna". Each of these sections in this well-researched book validates her

first-hand field study in each region.

A close dissection of the archaeological vestiges of certain sites makes way for interesting revelations. For instance, the Dharamrajika Bauddha Vihara, as discussed in the section titled "Dhaka", reveals the distinctive honour of housing the consecrated ash relics of the prodigious Buddhist researcher, Atisha Dipankara: they were retrieved from China in 1978. "Bogra", to cite another example, divulges the strategic significance of Bogra in the context of trade: "Bogra owed its wealth to its strategic position on the southern Silk Road to China." The route "went across the Karatoya River through Kamarupa, whose territory was contiguous with the Sichuan province of South-western China".

The uncovering of new Buddhist sites in Bangladesh, a recurrent feature in the volume, reveals the extent of the expansion of the faith in that country. In "Jessore-Khulna", Dwivedi draws readers' attention to one such site: "According to the site

museum at Bharat Bhayana, archaeological excavations at the Dalijhara mound in Kashimpur village had uncovered the remains of a Buddhist vihara temple complex." Through resourceful accounts of her findings across thoroughfares, embankments, abandoned hermitages and various mounds,

the author vindicates her observation in the Prologue: "While these sites are but a fraction of the many Buddhist sites identified by archaeologists, they suffice to give an idea of the once flourishing state of Buddhism in Bangladesh and the magnificent statuary art that today fill the galleries of the National Museum, and the numerous site museums."

On the Buddha's Trail in Bangladesh amalgamates history, travel accounts, archaeological findings with skill and lucidity to underscore the challenges confronting the preservation of heritage sites of minority faiths. The accompanying photographs of various excavated sites and relics further enhance the visual spectrum of the readers' imagination. It is bound to serve as an enriching volume not only for historians, archaeologists, explorers and Buddhist scholars but also for lay readers as well.

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