

Book Review

**Sunita Dwivedi, *Buddha in Central Asia — A Travelogue*
New Delhi: Rupa Publications, September 2014
Paperback, Pages 451, Price \$ 39.75**

Whoever said travel is never about the destination, it is about the journey that must have once stepped into the shoes of Indian author Sunita Dwivedi whose third historiographical travelogue '*Buddha in Central Asia - A Travelogue*' hit the stands recently. Call it absent-minded coincidence or Buddha's largesse, the author, born a few metres from where Buddha attained parinirvana in Kushinagar (India), quit her full-time job as a newspaper journalist, picked a camera and turned into an intrepid traveller trudging through the Silk Route in Asia and Europe. Not just in search of Buddha but also footprints of invaders and traders; of motifs that took cues from the Buddha's life and incarnations; of rivers that lent their banks for civilisations to prosper; of walls that still resonate with the chants of Buddhist hymns; of kings who bowed to monks.

In her third book, Sunita Dwivedi strings together the threads of India's ancient linkages with Central Asia as an extended neighbourhood. In the paperback book, she explores the Buddhist sites in Central Asia, which spread from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan. This Central Asia first-person travelogue can be dubbed a continuum of her previous two books (*Buddhist Heritage Sites of India* and *In Quest of the Buddha: A Journey on the Silk Road*) that look at the Silk Route not through the ken of an academic but that of a lay traveller whose interests spill beyond the scholarly

footnotes and countless bibliographies. Sunita Dwivedi confesses that she is not a scholar; she calls herself a “lay traveller”. Therein lies the strength of the author and the book.

The journey of Buddhism from India into Central Asia along the Silk Route is a fascinating story. South Asia has been in concourse with Central Asia for several millennia during which they have been historically close neighbours sharing trade and routes. In ancient times, the routes starting from the present North-western region of Pakistan passed by Hadda and Nangarhar (current Jalalabad) and reached Bamyán before cutting across the Hindukush into the Amu and the Syr Darya regions. During the first half of the first millennium CE, Central Asia had grown into an important centre of Buddhist culture. It was a halting place for Indian and Chinese monks where they not only gave their feet a little rest and caught a breath, but also shared new ideas and technology. As such, it became an important dissemination hub for traders, scholars and pilgrims. During her travel through Central Asia, Sunita Dwivedi visited and researched almost all known Buddhist sites. Consequently, her book weaves extensive fact-finding and historical narratives into an easy-to-read contemporary travelogue.

In essence, her journey along the ancient routes through India, China and Central Asia has been a journey with the Buddha. Perhaps she was born with a love for Buddha. Or, she acquired it while watching the parinirvana place from the window of her home in Kushinagar, a remote village of eastern Uttar Pradesh. She wanted to travel but had no definite itinerary. Her quest was definite — to trace the routes which carried the wisdom of Buddha and to decipher the hidden layers of Buddhist past of several modern cities. Words, she knew, can never be enough. So, in her bags she packed a camera to photograph the ruins of Buddha Viharas and the artefacts excavated by archaeologists and displayed in museums around the world.

Her first stop was the northern nation of Nepal. Apart from the metalled roads that ran through the borders at

Bhairahawa and Birdpur, there were rivers and mud tracks that led from the villages of Kakrahawa and Koilabasa along the Buddhamarg into Lumbini — where, on a Vaisakha Purnima, the Great Buddha was born over 2,500 years ago. Surprisingly, the mud tracks and pebbled pathways between India and Nepal still exist and trade of grains and vegetables continues along these border villages. The ancient routes from India to the North-western regions of Pakistan, which originally ran towards Afghanistan and other countries of Central Asia, are, however, shut to common travellers; roads leading to the northern and North-eastern regions of Xinjiang and Tibet (both in China) have either withered, washed away or completely abandoned. History talks of the time when village markets were held in these border regions and inhabitants freely walked into neighbouring lands. However, over time, new countries have emerged accompanied by relatively new obstructions on free and easy travel.

These were the strands of the Silk Road that bound diverse cultural regions. They formed the conduit along which both fresh ideas and faiths travelled as along a two-way street. The intoxicating fragrance of the Dhamma that rose from the land of India spread far and wide along these routes. It was along the southern Silk Road dropping from China and passing through the North-eastern regions of India that the Mauryan emperor Asoka is believed to have travelled to the Yunnan capital Talifu/Tali/Dali in the 3rd century BC. There, it is believed, he married a Chinese princess Chien-meng-Kui whose descendants ruled over Yunnan.

Royal princes abdicated their throne to follow the 'Noble Precepts' of the Buddha. Great scholars thronged monastic centres of India and Central Asia to study the Buddhist texts. They became the *dharmadutas* and *mahamatras* of the Buddhist ideology. Even great emperors bowed before the Buddhist monks and scholars from the 'Western Regions'. It is said that whenever Kumarjiva, the great Central Asian scholar of Indian descent, delivered a religious discourse,

kings knelt down beside his seat, so that he could step on their knees to reach his seat.

Lokottama or An Shih Kao, a Parthian prince, abdicated the Arsacid royal throne and the luxuries of palace life to don the orange robes of a monk. The famous scholar Ghosaka, born in Tokharistan, played a prominent part at the fourth Buddhist Council at Purushapura. Likewise, there were many Parthian, Tokharian and Sogdian monks who preached the Buddha's message.

The geographical spread of Buddhism went far beyond the borders of India. It spread against the wind, across the mountains, over the seas and across all the known horizons. It went along the craggy Uttarapath and followed the gigantic network of the Silk Routes, reaching the desert and oases settlements of Central Asia and to the faraway lands in China. It travelled across the giant Himalayas, over the heights of the Pamirs and the Tien Shan as far as the valleys of the Ili, Lepsi, Karatal, Talas, Talgar and Sumbe rivers in Kazakhstan and the Chuy river valley and around Lake Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan. Renowned Buddhist centres arose not only in the green valleys of Ferghana, along the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) in Uzbekistan and along the banks of the Oxus and its tributaries in Tajikistan but also in the hot deserts of the Karakum and the Taklamakan.

Central Asia showed the way to the world. It provided the first disciples of the Buddha who, on returning to their lands, built the first stupas on the Buddha's relics. Many of the first missionaries carrying the message of the Buddha were 'unrivalled' native scholars of Central Asia. Great kings like Devmitra (Demetrius), Milind (Menander) and Kanishka, who favoured Buddhism, belonged to Central Asia.

The Dhamma of the Buddha changed the hearts of kings and conquerors. Like, the mighty Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great, and the Mongol leader, Genghis Khan. Following his foray into India in fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great reportedly took away a great treasure—a *sramana*—the meditating monk Kalanos, who preached nirvana. Genghis Khan is said to have halted in the land of

the Indus, which he had reached in pursuit of Jalaluddin, son of the ruler of Khwarzam, Sultan Mohammad, in the 13th century. After seeing a 'Bodhi deer', Genghis Khan was convinced that India was a sacred land and could not be conquered. He retraced his steps taking with him two Buddhist monks to his capital Karakoram.

Some of the biggest institutions of Buddhist learning existed in Central Asia. There was a time when pilgrims, instead of coming straight into India, halted at the Central Asian monastic centres for special studies in Buddhism. At the monastic centre of Naubahar in Balkh, the Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang, stayed for a month. Other renowned Buddhist centres lay in the deserts of the Karakum at Merv, in the lap of the Hindukush at Bamyān, and on the road to India at Kapisa and Gandhara.

Most Buddhist centres of Central Asia were made of rammed earth and unbaked bricks. As such, for centuries they have been exposed to the vagaries of Nature and have either crumbled or are completely in a shambles now. For example, when Sunita Dwivedi, the author, reached the site of Dalverzin Tepe near Termez, she found it submerged several feet in water following torrential rain. Similarly, in 2007, when Dwivedi arrived at the Friendship Bridge at Termez, she was shown a completely furrowed land in place of the Buddhist temple.

At Merv, nobody has reportedly seen the Gyaur Kala monastery in recent times. Some believe that the hill on which the monastery was built has been levelled. Neither has the giant Buddha head, part of a colossal statue, been seen in the museums of Ashgabat or Mary. The famed Ajina Tepe and the Kafirnigan monastic centres, built of clay, are braving the fury of nature in the valleys of the Vakhsh and the Kafirnihon. Almost nothing is left of a monastery at Ushtur Mullo. The author had to cancel her trip to the grand monastic centre of Khisht Tepe in Tajikistan, whose outlines (according to reports in Dushanbe) could barely be traced over the ground. The Buddhist centres of Bukhara (whose name itself is believed to have been derived from Vihara)

and Samarkand, exist only in the pages of al-Narshakhi's *History of Bukhara* and Hiuen Tsang's memoirs *Si Yu Ki—Records of the Western Regions*.

The monastic sites that once reverberated with chants of the monks have fallen silent. The walls are gradually crumbling into dust and soon they will become a thing of the past. Just debris, or as forgotten stories in books of yore. Thankfully, there are peripatetic travellers like Sunita Dwivedi, who are on a mission to keep history alive through their keen eye, relentless travel and an incredible passion for all things ancient. That is why her book, *Buddha in Central Asia - A Travelogue*, is a must for everyone's bookshelf. In simple and lucid English, she takes the reader along with the crumbling ruins and painted caves where the past still lingers. And the Buddha still lives.

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