



# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

IT'S A JOURNEY UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN BIHAR—ONE THAT RETRACES THE BUDDHA'S LIFE, THROUGH VAISHALI, KESARIA AND PATNA, TO NALANDA, RAJGIR AND FINALLY, THE PLACE WHERE HE ATTAINED ENLIGHTENMENT, BODHGAYA. **BY SHANTUM SETH**



*The 80-foot Buddha in Bodhgaya*

SUPROTIK CHATTERJEE

**A**BOUT 2,600 YEARS AGO, a man named Siddhartha Gautama walked away from his family and kingdom to a land we now know as Bihar. It was here that he attained enlightenment. He discovered the truth—how to overcome suffering and bring happiness to the individual, family and society—and before his death, he suggested that those interested in his teachings should make a pilgrimage to the places associated with him.

Retracing his footsteps might interest the curious, but it's really a journey for the seeker; a pilgrimage that can transform. We take the flight from Delhi to Patna. On a

clear day you can see the Himalayas to the north, so I try to get a window seat on the left. As the plane begins its descent, the dramatic scenery unfolds before my eyes—the beautiful Ganga with its wide sand banks, the banana plantations to the north, the city to the south, and the buffaloes grazing in the fields, adjacent to the runway.

I know that I will be retracing the steps of the Buddha, but its real significance hits me only when I see the Ganga at close quarters. For it was here that the Buddha crossed over to Vaishali. Rains came the moment he set foot in the city, ending a long, severe famine. That spot on the banks came to be known as Buddha Ghat or Gautama Dwar.



PRASHANT BAVI

FROM ABOVE Kesaria has one of the biggest stupas; Rajgir, former capital of Magadha; Monks from all over come to Bihar

I walk away from the wooden posts that act as a barricade to the Ganga that may swell and drown the city. According to a prophecy made by the Buddha, only three things could wipe out the city—fire, flood and internal feuding. During excavations, archaeologists have actually discovered layers of habitation interspersed with ash. There's evidence of destruction by flooding too. As for internal strife, politics provides ample scope for it.

**P**atna was the seat of the Mauryan dynasty to which the Buddhist king Ashoka belonged. Remnants of the Mauryan parliament can still be seen in Kumrahar, the original capital of the city. The Patna Museum has several articles of Buddhist interest: a casket of the Buddha's relics from Vaishali, tangkhas of Vajrayana Buddhism and, exquisite statues of Avalokiteshwar, Maitreya and other icons.

The itinerary I have worked out traces the last journey of the Buddha as told in the Mahaparinirvana sutra. We shall first travel north, crossing the river to Vaishali and then to Kesaria. We touch base at Patna and then move to the south, going eastward along the Ganga till Bhaktiyarpur, and then further south to Nalanda and Rajgir. Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment, marks the end.

We are on our way to Vaishali in a coach and the group, comprising mainly of foreigners, has its first taste of 'real' India. Only the ruins of a stupa now mark the spot where the Buddha's relics were discovered. We visit a monastery with a tank where, according to a legend, monkeys fed

the Buddha honey. A few kilometres from Vaishali is a pillar dedicated to him with the lion on it facing north, the direction that the Buddha took when he left Vaishali.

A spectacular Ashoka Pillar stands in Lauriya Nandangarh where we stop before proceeding to the mango grove that the courtesan Amrapali offered to the Buddha, when she became a nun. It's a pleasant stop for a picnic, after which we go further north to Kesaria. It is said that the people of Vaishali followed the Buddha to this town, as they knew that he would soon pass away. The Buddha gave them his begging bowl and asked them to turn back. According to another legend, however, he created a wide stream between himself and the Licchavis, leaving them no option but to return. One of the biggest stupas in India is located here.

The Buddha continued on to Kushinagar (present day Uttar Pradesh) from Kesaria but we double back to Patna from where we leave for Bhaktiyarpur. I see a dead body, an old man, a sick man and a monk—sights that led the Buddha on his quest for Truth. Next on the itinerary is Nalanda, home to the international university that flourished between the 5th and 12th centuries.

As we wander around the ruins, we see the stupa of Shariputra, named after one of the Buddha's foremost disciples. The simple monastic cells with their little niches for lamps and books and their stone beds evoke images of life long ago in this celebrated university. Nalanda's aura of dignity is unmistakable but its burnt bricks are a sad reminder of its destruction by Bakhtiar Khilji in 1193. It is believed that the library—with over 9 million manuscripts—took six months to burn down!

Next, we leave for Rajgir, the capital of Magadha. A 44 km-long wall from



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## FYI

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

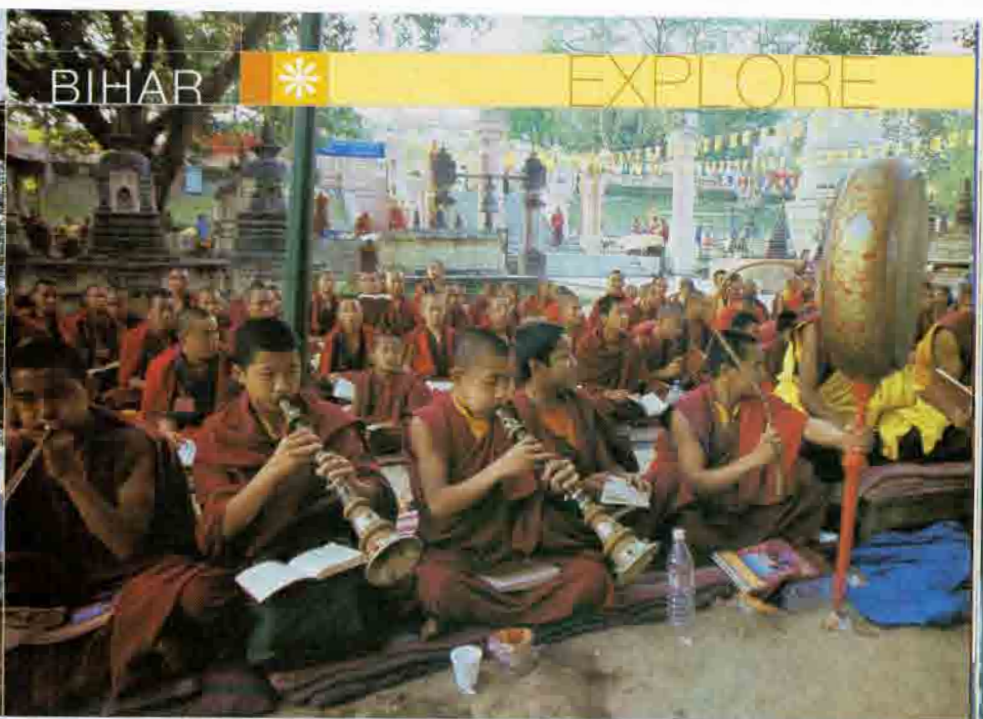
► The Jatakas (legends on the Buddha's previous lives) mention that the Buddha was offered preparations of rice cooked with milk and honey.

► He was also offered pua (a mixture of powdered rice, milk, sugar, ghee, and honey), pitta (rice cake), khajjaka (a preparation of wheat flour and sugar), palala (modern-day tilkuta made from pounded til, or sesame seeds)

► The finest Khajjaka is sold at Sillao near Rajgir; Gaya is famous for tilkuta.



SUPROTIK CHATTERJEE



SARVESH

the time of the Buddha segregates it from the new town. The Buddha's mark can be found here too: in the bamboo grove donated to the Sangha by King Bimbisara, the Karandaka tank where the Buddha took his daily bath, and Vulture Peak, his favourite meditation spot.

We walk to Vulture Peak along the stone path that hasn't changed in 2,600 years. As I watch the sun rise, I realise that the Buddha must have witnessed the same scene centuries ago. Later we visit Sat Dhara (hot water springs) and the Saptaparni Cave that was the venue of the first Buddhist council after the Buddha's death.

In Bodhgaya, we first walk to the Dungeshwari caves atop a mountain by the Niranjana river. The Buddha apparently retreated to these caves to practice asceticism. The Dungeshwari Ma temple here is maintained by Tibetan monks but also presided over by Hindu priests. We enjoy the half-day walk across the nearly dry riverbed and through fields of yellow mustard.

**W**e soon cross the river into Bakroul. It was here that the Buddha emerged after observing a long period of asceticism. The first thing he ate was kheer given to him by a 13-year-old girl named Sujata and the first cushion he used was woven from kusa grass offered to him by a young boy called Swastik.

The main city of Bodhgaya seems like a microcosm of the entire Buddhist world. There are Tibetan, Indian, Thai, Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, Japanese, Korean, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese and even Chinese monasteries. We meditate and listen to chants in one temple, then converse with monks and fellow pilgrims in another. All of us seem to be trying to discover what the Buddha means to each of us.

Our final destination is the Bodhi tree. In its shade, the Buddha gained enlightenment—so should our journey in the physical world lead to change within. The tree that we see now is not the tree under which the Buddha sat—it has been grown from a shoot of a sapling of the original tree. And like the original Bodhi tree, Buddha Dharma died in India but has now sprouted branches all over the world.

And so in the twilight, I sit under the tree and

contemplate whether the leaf is the child of the tree or the parent of the tree (as compost). I wonder at how the leaf is more than just a leaf—it contains sunshine, rain... the entire cosmos. I realise that there is no beginning and no end. I know that I am blessed to receive these teachings and to make this journey every year. Children chase the falling leaves of the tree and I see the Buddha walking along the sandy shore of the Niranjana river.

—As told to Sunalini Mathew

## FACTFILE

### GETTING THERE

Jet, Air Deccan and Indian Airlines operate daily flights from Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Ranchi to Patna.

### STAY OPTIONS

► **Hotel Maurya**, South Gandhi Maidan, Patna; tel: (0612) 220 3040-57; [www.maurya.com](http://www.maurya.com)

► **Hotel Chanakya**, Beer Chand Patel Path, Patna; tel: (0612) 223 141-42; [www.hotelchanakypatna.com](http://www.hotelchanakypatna.com)

► **Kautilya Vihar**, BSTDC, Beer Chand Patel Path, Patna; tel: (0612) 222 5411, 212 2119

► **Tourist Bungalow Tathagat Vihar**, BSTDC, Rajgir; tel: (06112) 255 176

► **Tourist Bungalow Siddhartha Vihar**, BSTDC, Bodhgaya; tel: (0631) 220 0127

### TRAVEL ASSISTANCE AND ARRANGEMENTS

► **Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation** (A Govt of Bihar undertaking), Tourist Bhavan, Beer Chand Patel Path, Patna; tel: (0612) 222 2622, 222 5411, 221 0219

### USEFUL WEBSITE

[www.buddhath.com](http://www.buddhath.com)