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THE LIFE & TIMES OF THE BUDDHA

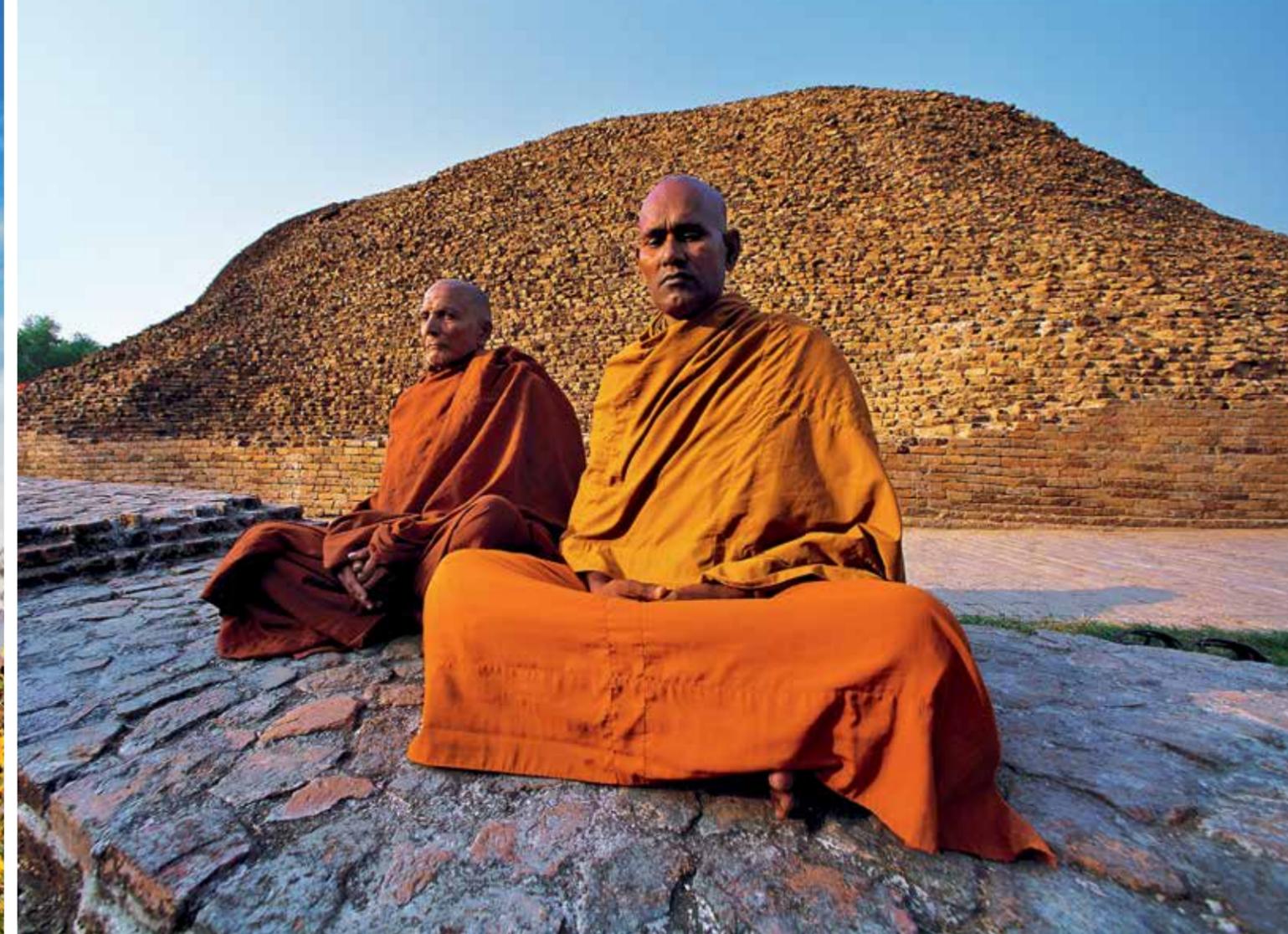
April and May are important months for Buddhists as this is when Buddha Pournima and Vesak or Buddha Day are celebrated.

Here is a look at some of the most important sites in India where the Buddha lived 2,500-plus years ago as well as those that have come into prominence after his life.

Words BINDU GOPAL RAO



There are many young monks at the famous Hemis Monastery in Ladakh which has the majestic Himalaya in the backdrop



(Facing page) Shravasti, a revered Buddhist site in Uttar Pradesh, has many ancient *stupas* and temples, including the Thai Temple; Ramabhar Stupa at Kushinagar is said to be the place where the Buddha was cremated

The Life Of The Buddha

Gautam Buddha was born in Lumbini, located near the Nepal-India border, in a royal family in 556 BCE. After a sheltered upbringing, Siddhartha (as he was then called) accidentally discovered illness and death, which convinced him to give up worldly pleasures. After the Buddha began meditating, the Buddha attained enlightenment when he was 29 under a Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya in Bihar. Said to be one of the holiest pilgrimage sites, Bodh Gaya is home to the Maha Bodhi Temple or Vishal Buddha Mandir that has a mammoth statue of the Buddha in deep meditation.

Emperor Ashoka built the first temple near the Bodhi tree in the third century BC. In fact, this is the place where Siddhartha—the restless, became the Buddha—the enlightened. Located about 100 km away from Bihar’s capital, Patna, Bodh Gaya has several monasteries built by foreign Buddhist centres and the Bodhi or peepal tree on a big platform is believed to be an off-shoot of the actual tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. The Bodhi

Sarovar here is believed to be the pond where the Buddha bathed before he began meditating. It is also said that the Durgeshwari Cave Temples located about 12 km away is the place where the Buddha meditated for a long time during this period. The Chaukramama or the Jewel Walk here is the place where the Buddha used to walk. The Barabar Caves, a collection of four caves, Karan Chaupar, Lomas Rishi, Sudama and Visva Zopri, are the oldest rock-cut caves in India dating to the third century BC, 24 km from Bodh Gaya and with inscriptions and elaborate sculptures.

Sarnath, about 12 km from Varanasi, is another important site in the Buddha’s life as this is the place where he gave his first sermon to five disciples. Taking centre stage here is the magnificent *stupa* built by Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC. The Chaukhandi Stupa was also constructed during Ashoka’s reign and there is the Dhamek Stupa, a conical structure where the Buddha delivered his Four Noble Truths. Mulagandha Kuti Vihar and Sarnath Museum are other must-see attractions here. In fact, when you walk along

the ruins of Sarnath, it will surely take you back to another era. Nalanda and Rajgir are home to an ancient renowned monastic university and also believed to be the place where the Buddha preached. This is the location where the Buddha’s chief disciples, Sariputra (known for his great intelligence) and Maudgalyayana (known for his power of miracles) were converted to Buddhism.

Shravasti in Uttar Pradesh is where the Buddha lived for the longest period of time and preached for close to 24 years. It has several ancient *stupas* and temples and the major Buddhist attraction here is Sahet where the Buddha is believed to have stayed. Shravasti is a revered site because it is believed to be the place where the Buddha performed several miracles. Sankasia, located 47 km from Farrukhabad, in Uttar Pradesh is the place where the Buddha descended from Tushita Heaven. It is believed that when the Buddha was 41, he went to Tushita Heaven to teach *dharma* to his mother and to date, this is the only Buddhist pilgrimage site where there are no temples or monasteries but you can still

see the ruins. The other important site is at Kushinagar, the place where the Buddha attained *parinirvana* or the highest stage of salvation. The Parinirvana Stupa here has a little over six-metre-long, monolith red sandstone reclining statue of the Buddha that represents the dying the Buddha and the Ramabhar Stupa here is said to be the place where Buddha was cremated.

After The Buddha

After the life and times of the Buddha (he lived till he was 80), Buddhism spread throughout the country. Many of his relics have been unearthed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) across the country and monasteries propagating his teachings have also been built. These sites are spread across Andhra Pradesh, the Northeast, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana.

The rock-cut temples that have been carved into the cliff at Ajanta near Aurangabad in Maharashtra are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Said to have been built between the

second and sixth centuries BC, the paintings and sculptures are an ode to Buddhism. At Ellora, 100 km from Ajanta, the first 12 caves are Buddhist caves, and have living and sleeping rooms, kitchens and other rooms, many of which have statues of the Buddha. Caves 11 and 12 here are the Mahayana monastery caves belonging to the Vajrayana School of Buddhism.

Other notable Buddhist sites in Maharashtra are the Aurangabad Caves, the Bedse Caves near Pune, the Bhaja Caves near Lonavala, the Pitalkhora Caves near the Satamala hills of the Western Ghats, the Ghorawadi or Ghorawadeshwar Caves near Pune, the Jogeshwari Caves off the Western Express Highway, the Kanheri Caves within the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai, the Karla Caves near Lonavala, the Mahakali Caves in Andheri, Mumbai, and the Pandavleni Caves near Nashik, an example of Hinayana Buddhist architecture.

In Andhra Pradesh, there are several Buddhist monuments around Vijayawada and Visakhapatnam. Amaravati is home

to the Great Buddhist Stupa, one of the largest in India, and has Buddhist settlement relics. About 99 low mounds with remnants of Buddhist *stupas* can be seen at Gudiwada near Vijayawada and Chandavaram in Guntur district is also an ancient Buddhist heritage site. Bhattiprolu in Guntur district is known for its ancient *stupa*.

Ghantasala town in Krishna district has Buddhist monastic establishments and Adurru near Ghantasala is home to a *mahastupa*. Near Visakhapatnam, Sankaram has ancient relics of rock *stupas* and Bojjannakonda has rock carvings on the façade of the caves. Another Buddhist heritage site, Bavikonda Hill, has seen excavations that have unearthed structures which show that the Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana branches of Buddhism flourished here.

Bojjannakonda near Visakhapatnam is a 2,000-year-old Buddhist site that has a rock-cut Buddha statue. Located on the top of Mangamaripeta Hill, Thotlakonda nearby has a Hinayana monastery, a *mahastupa*, votive *stupas*, Brahmi inscriptions, sculpted panels and a serene statue

of the Buddha in a meditative pose. Buddhist excavations at Salihundam near Srikakulam have revealed a large number of Buddhist *stupas* and a huge monastery complex. Nagarjunakonda, also known as Sriparvata, is a restored Buddhist site 145 km from Guntur and is home to a stunning monolithic statue of the Buddha.

Odisha, which was part of Kalinga when Emperor Ashoka decided to convert to Buddhism, has the Shanti Stupa at Dhauli Hills, a testament to this important decision of the great king. Incidentally, the Buddhist text *Anguttara Nikaya* says that the Buddha's first disciples, Tapusa and Bhallika, were from Ukkala, Kalinga.

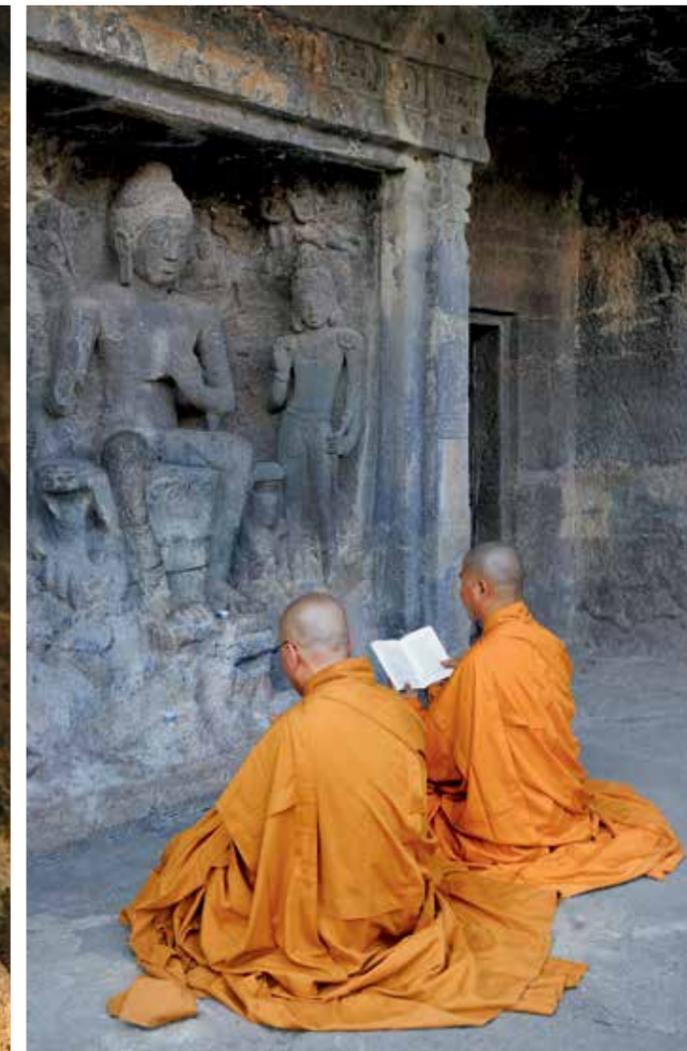
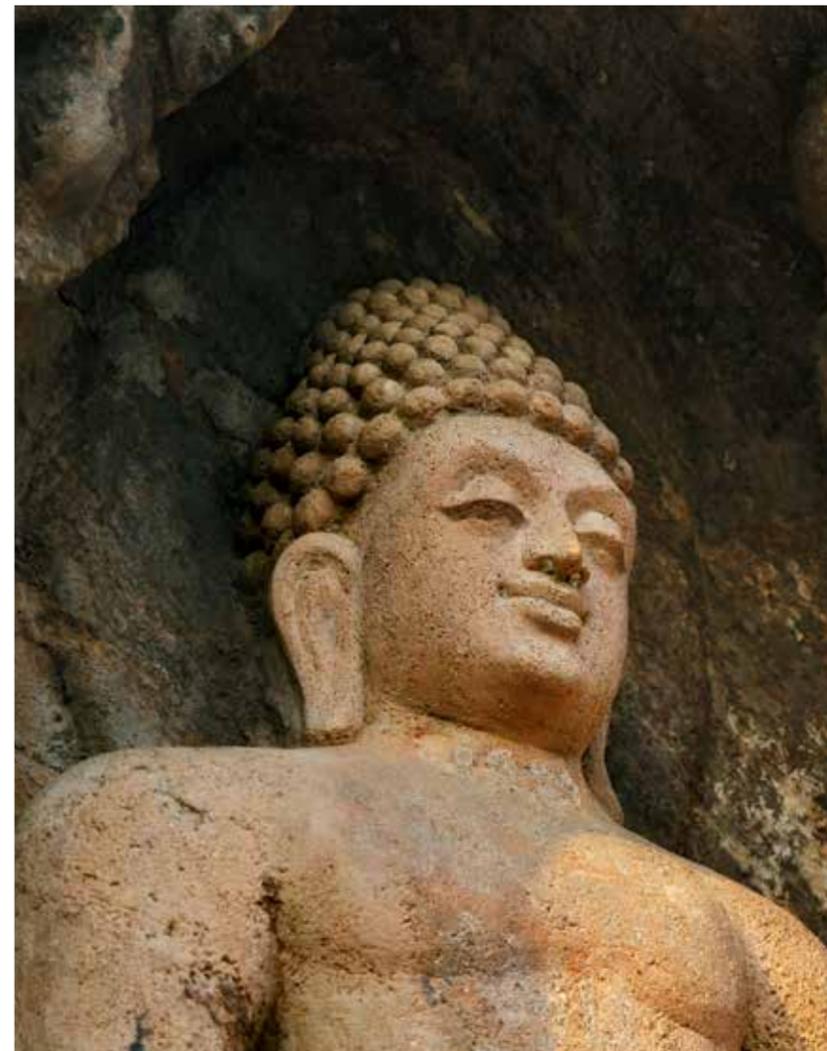
The Padmasambhava Mahavihara monastery at Chandragiri is home to the largest Buddhist monastery in South Asia. Ratnagiri, located 100 km from Bhubaneswar, has unearthed Buddhist shrines, votive *stupas*, large monasteries and a big *stupa*, and also has an ASI museum. Udayagiri has a bell-shaped *stupa*, an indication that the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism was followed here. About 12 km from Ratnagiri,

Lalitgiri has one of the earliest Buddhist complexes from the first century and has a huge brick monastery and the excavated images show various forms of Buddhist art. Odisha also has a prominent Buddhist seat of learning at Langudi hill where the ruins of a brick *stupa* and monastery still exist.

Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh is centred at McLeodganj, Dharamsala, which has earned the sobriquet 'Little Lhasa' due to the large population of Tibetans and the monastery here is the Dalai Lama's home in India. The Tabo Monastery in Tabo village of Spiti Valley also has a monastery dating back to the 10th century. The Key Monastery in Lahaul, the Guru Ghantal Monastery in Lahaul, the Dhankar Monastery 25 km from Kaza in Spiti, the Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala and the Kardang Gompa in Kardang village in Lahaul are other places of Buddhist significance.

Buddhism's influence is also seen in the Ladakh region of Jammu & Kashmir and the stunningly beautiful monasteries here are Shey, Hemis, Spituk, Alchi, Phyang, Thikse, Diskit, Lamayuru, and Rangdum. Incidentally,

(This page) The bell-shaped *mahastupa* at Udayagiri in Odisha represents the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism; (facing page) the 2,000-year-old site of Bojjannakonda in Andhra Pradesh features a rock-cut Buddha statue; Ajanta in Maharashtra, with 12 Buddhist caves, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site





(Facing page) Monks can be seen performing the traditional mask dance at the annual Hemis Festival held every June; (this page) the wheel seen here is the most common symbol of prayer in Buddhism

Ladakh is influenced by Tibetan Buddhism that follows the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools and the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Ladakh is the premier institute to study Buddhism in Ladakh.

The Hemis Monastery in Ladakh is known for the copper statue of the Buddha and has sacred *thangkas*, gold and silver *stupas*, murals and many artefacts. The annual Hemis Festival in honour of Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche who was instrumental in taking Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century is held here in early June.

In northeast India, the Rumtek Buddhist Monastery is the largest one in Sikkim and the monks here follow the Karma Kagyu lineage. Sikkim is a popular Buddhist destination and has close to 200 monasteries that belong to the Nyingma and Kagyu order. Among the popular monasteries here are Pemayangtse, Sanga Chelling Enchey, Labrang, Tashiding, Phensang, Phodang, Pal Zurmang Kagyud, Tsuk-La-Khang, Ralong and Dubdi. The Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh, the largest monastery in India, built in the 17th century, is also called Galden Namgye Lhatse which translates

to 'celestial paradise on a clear night.' The Buddha Temple at Polo Ground in Shillong is also among the oldest Buddha shrines here.

Buddhism Now

In a bid to promote Buddhism and the sites associated with the Buddha, the tourism ministry is in talks with the Japanese government as well as the World Bank to develop and promote the Buddhist Circuit and trails in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Incidentally, the Buddhist Circuit is a key pilgrimage destination for 450 million practising Buddhists and the ministry will also move towards promoting other Buddhist sites in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The Indian Railways also has a special tourist train, the Mahaparinirvan Express, that takes passengers through the Buddhist pilgrimage sites of Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, Varanasi, Sarnath, Lumbini, Kushinagar and Sravasti in an 8 Nights/9 Days tour that starts at Delhi. So, if you want to heed the call of the Buddha, simply hop on to the train and trace the path the Buddha did 2,500 years ago. ♦



An ancient structure, the Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh is a marvel of Buddhist art and architecture and dates back to the early Mauryan period

Buddhist Stupas

There are several Buddhist *stupas* in India, which are hemispherical structures that are places of meditation and house Buddhist relics:

- Sanchi Stupa, Madhya Pradesh
- Dhamekh Stupa, Sarnath
- Chaukhandi Stupa, Sarnath
- Amaravati Stupa, Andhra Pradesh
- Shanti Stupa, Leh

The Buddhist Calendar

The Buddhist calendar has many important dates that mainly mark the monthly full moon or *Poornima*.

- The Buddhist New Year is celebrated from the first full moon day in April for three days.
- Vesak or Buddha Day celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha and is usually on the full moon day in May.
- Magha Puja Day happens on the full moon day of March and commemorates an important event that occurred early in the Buddha's teaching life when four of his chief disciples assembled to meet him.
- The Asalha Puja Day or Dhamma Day, on the full moon day in July, marks the Buddha's first teaching.
- *Uposatha* or Observance Day happens four times a month on the new moon, full moon and quarter moon days.
- Abhidhamma Day marks the day when the Buddha went to Tushita Heaven and is celebrated on the full moon day in October.

Upcoming Buddhist Holidays

- May 29, 2018—Vesak—Buddha Day
- July 13, 2018—Obon
- July 27, 2018—Asala—Dharma Day
- Dec 8, 2018—Bodhi Day

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