

BOOK REVIEW

Munazah Shah *

BOOK: ON THE BUDDHA'S TRAIL IN BANGLADESH

AUTHOR: Sunita Dwivedi

PUBLISHER: Rupa: 2026. pp. 320

ISBN: 978-93-5352-214-8, **Format:** Hardback

PRICE: 995 INR

Sunita Dwivedi's latest book, *On the Buddha's Trail in Bangladesh* explores the chapters of the history that many have forgotten long ago. This is her fourth book in the series of 'On the Buddha's Trail', which takes readers from Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Tarim Basin and Tibet to the ancient Buddhist sites of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a country of rivers and lush landscapes; it also has a rich Buddhist history and heritage, of which people are less aware. This book is well documented and scholarly. Dwivedi does not just visit ancient sites and describe what she sees. She digs into old texts, archaeological discoveries and historical records, to bring forgotten stories back to life. The writings of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, the Tibetan historian Taranath, explorer Sarat Chandra Das and other archeological reports are collected by Dwivedi, in order to provide all the layers of the past related to Buddhism in Bangladesh. A meticulous and in-depth book like this demands attention and proper focus and should not be read in a rush. The reader needs to be patient to travel through Bogra, Dinajpur, Paharpur, Bikrampur, Mainamati and Chittagong; each of these places has their own stories from the past. By the end of the book, the reader realizes that Bangladesh is more than its rivers and landscapes; it has been a great center of Buddhist learning in South Asia. The book identifies Vanga/Pundravardhana, located in present day Bangladesh, as one of the important places in the history of Buddhism, alongside Magadha (Bihar). Its monasteries were not any less important than those in Magadha, but for several centuries, those monasteries were among the largest and most influential ones in Asia. Dwivedi writes that just as Nalanda and Vikramshila in Magadha, Bangladesh also had great Mahaviharas (Buddhist universities). Dwivedi writes about the Pala dynasty, which ruled Bengal from the 8th to 12th centuries CE. The Pala dynasty was the last Indian dynasty that officially supported Buddhism at the critical time. Under Pala rulers, Tantric Buddhism flourished and monasteries in Bengal (Somapura, Jagaddala) rose alongside Vikramshila in Magadha to become the important centers of Buddhist learning in Asia.

***Munazah Shah** is co-author of "Pathways to Global Transformation Conversations with BAPU" and "The Joyful Talisman: Conversations on Human Values for a Joyful World" She has also worked as a TV journalist and news anchor.

The book narrates the story of Guru Atisha Dipankara, who had traveled to Tibet and played a crucial role in reviving Buddhism at a time when it was in decline. Guru Atisha Dipankara was born in 982 CE at Vajrayogini village, Bikrampur, which is near present-day Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dwivedi visits his birthplace and recalls verses written by one of his disciples about the city he came from, Bikrampur (Dhaka). The story of Dipankara is not only about reading a place, but it is also about reading the people who made these places historical. Dwivedi documents history and in-between she also gives readers little moments of her own journey. An earthquake on the night before she leaves for Bogra, makes her wonder what kind of omen it is. That said, it is majorly a thoroughly researched book and readers looking for a lighter read may find it a bit difficult to keep up with all the citations and references given in it.

Further, this book traces ancient trade and pilgrimage routes. Dwivedi writes about the mountain passes and communities like Chakmas and Marmas. Both the tribes, Chakmas and Marmas, reside in Bangladesh as well as in the Northeast India. The book mentions Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Sikkim repeatedly. Be it the Bengal-Assam-Burma Route, Siliguri Corridor or Bengal Route into Tibet via present Arunachal Pradesh, the book repeatedly documents historical corridors that ran directly through or connected to North East India, even though the book is centered on Bangladesh.

The book closes with Dwivedi reflecting on the present, shifting focus from the past, in order to bring the attention of the reader towards the uncertainty that several Buddhist heritage sites face in the wake of Bangladesh's political changes in 2024. She highlights the suspension of excavation work, a legal dispute regarding the site, delays in establishing the proposed Buddhist University recreating Pandita University of yore presided over by the Siddha master, Tilopa, and growing concerns about the country's Buddhist heritage and the future of the minority community. Finally, Dwivedi goes beyond documenting history and even beyond sharing stories, she writes her personal reflections; she voices her concerns and appeals for the preservation of historical heritage sites. The final chapter of this book shows Dwivedi's unwavering commitment towards the rich history of Buddhism in South Asia. This is a must read book to understand the history and geography of late Tantric Buddhism in the Bay of Bengal and around.