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Kumarajiva's Passage

Dunhuang's majestic Buddhist murals ought to be known better here

MANOHAR SINGH GILL



ILLUSTRATION BY SANDEEP ADHWARYU

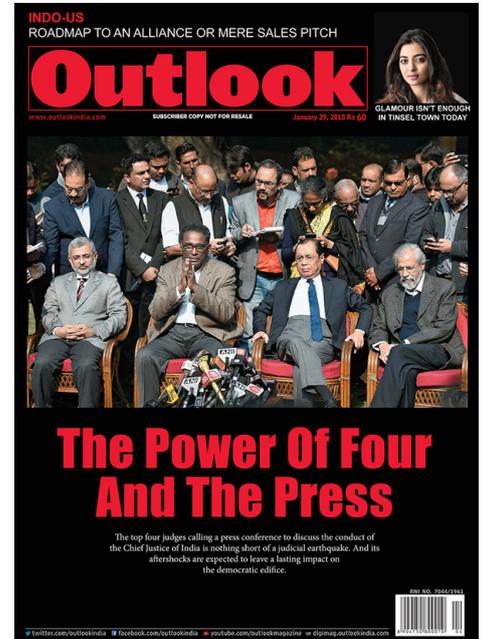
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Recently, I spent two days in Shanghai, and felt like doing something different, seeing some unknown part of this vast country. Buddhism was taken long ago to China, by Chinese monks, and it flourished and expanded there, and beyond, with regular sustenance from the monks of Nalanda university and other great teachers from India. In Tibet and China, they watered the plant of this great faith, with the teachings and scriptures



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which the monks had brought from India. I had read of a famous set of Buddhist caves, much like those in Ajanta, deep in the Gobi desert, far west of Beijing, in a place called Dunhuang.

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From Shanghai, I flew for many hours, glued to the window, to see the great desert. The dunes were mountainous.

Occasionally, there was a green valley sandwiched between the dunes.

Eventually, I came over flat lands, flew over some irrigated squares of agriculture, with summer

crops, and landed at a huge airfield. The China of Shanghai and Beijing was very far away.

The next day, I went to see the grottoes. A wide and straight highway ran from the town to the sand dunes, located five km away. The sand mountains enclosed a small oasis lake, called the 'Moon lake'. Tourists from around the world were climbing the sand dunes and sand-skating down. Others were riding Central Asian double-humped camels. Dunhuang and the Moon lake comprise the oasis, for which the caravans from Kashgar and Khotan steered themselves across the great desert, navigating by the stars. From there, they carried on eastwards to Lanzhou, Xian and beyond to the coast. It was but natural that Dunhuang became a centre of Buddhist culture.

In the gravelly sand-packed hills, caves were carved from about 400 AD, over centuries, and a Buddhist establishment came up. The Mogao grottoes are said to be dated from around 366 AD, when the first of the caves was carved by the monk Le Zun. There are many more nearby, in other hills of the Mingsha mountains. The surviving caves today can be traced back to 430 AD, and originated from the Indian Chaitya caves. Three of these have large sculptures of the Buddha, the largest being 34.5 metres. This is second only to the great Buddha of Leshan, 71 m tall. In one cave in an oblong chamber rests a sculpture of the Sakyamuni in nirvana.

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The paintings are amazing; most of them are so carefully preserved that you get complete scenes of the life of the monks, the Buddhist Jataka stories, even pictures of rich donors.

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Indian monks and
princes, who over the
centuries came and
taught and watered the
plant of Buddhism, are all
there in the murals, and
the curators are proud to
point them out to me. The
monk Kumarajiva is there,
with his Indian features,
Indian dress, and seated

on a horse. All these testify to the region's links with India. To
paint on the less stable surface in Dunhuang, quite unlike the
granite caves of Ajanta, and for these to be somehow sustained
over centuries is a miracle of the dry Gobi desert.

In May 1900, Wang Yuanlu, a monk, accidentally discovered the
Library Cave, No. 17. It was packed with manuscripts and silk
paintings, and preserved for centuries. In March 1907 Aurel Stein,
the famous Hungarian explorer, came on an expedition,
persuaded the monk, and took away 24 boxes of manuscripts, and
five boxes of silk paintings and textiles. He came again in 1914,
and bought another 570 scrolls. In 1908, the Frenchman Paul
Pelliot visited the caves and numbered all the accessible caves,
copied inscriptions and took photos. He also took away part of the
treasure. In 1910-11, Tachibana and Koichiro, from the Japanese
Otani expedition, took away cartloads of manuscripts, and even
two sculptures. In 1914-15, the Russian explorer Sergei Oldenburg
collected 18,000 manuscripts and 100 silk paintings. He also cut
off more than 10 pieces of murals, and took 10 sculptures. In 1924,
American Landon Warner removed and took away 26 pieces of
murals as well as two sculptures. Finally, in 1943, the
establishment of a National Research Institute for Dunhuang
ended the vandalism. About two-thirds of the manuscripts and
paintings are in western countries, China has the rest, and today
they are guarded and cared for with dedication.

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I spent a whole day in the
desert heat, going from
cave to cave. It came as
an eye-opener, and I want
to say this to all Indians:
Do not stick to the soft,
urban Shanghai comforts.
Our people must visit
Dunhuang, and make it
known in the Buddha's
own land.

(The author is the Union minister of sports)

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COMMENTS (4)

Guess a sporting changeover to Tourism Ministry may be lurking in a corner...

PS for the editor:

maybe shri gill is averse to tweeting etc and so you kindly offer him a column here (mixing business and pleasure seems to be the author's forte - which you pander to fully?)

NOV 17, 2010 11:57 AM | ,,

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Thanks Mr. Gill. Sounds like a must visit whenever a China trip happens.

NOV 15, 2010 08:14 PM | ,,

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I have actually two comments to make, one on writer, another on writing.

First on the writer;

Gill sahab, all is well, the monks, the desert, the beauty. But how about doing your own work first, and yes remembering names of sports persons, for a change.

Second;

I really feel great learning that, some monk accidentally discovered the Library Cave. That is a treasure, no matter who wrote and what was written.

Lucky us that few people took that knowledge/wisdom/art to safe place (To be noted that Mao burnt down most of the libraries and institutions later).

Alas, we in India might not have that luck to have such discovery. It was all destroyed, I suppose.

NOV 14, 2010 03:40 PM | ,,

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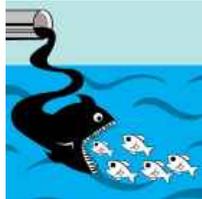
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My Spot Of Green
 I'll miss the birds in my garden, but will they miss me?



LAST PAGE
Delhi Diary
 The sky is brassy, the trees, the birds and even the monkeys from Raisina Hill who regularly traipse through my garden, long for water to moisten their parched throats



OPINION
Joy, And The River Of Sorrow
 Rural Punjab retains its spirit and inventiveness; the Sutlej is another story

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