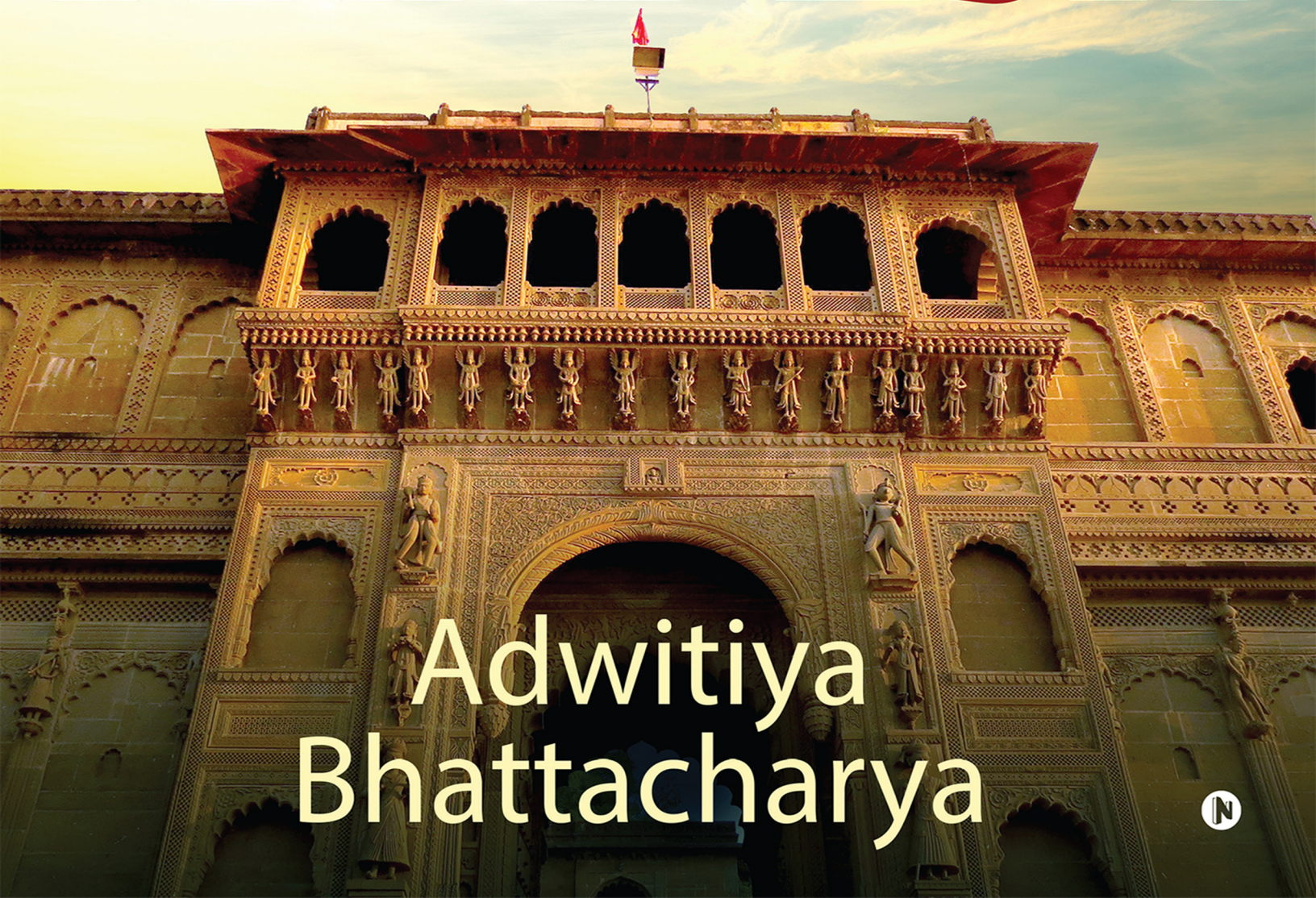


THE HEART OF INDIA

MADHYA

PRADESH



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Bhattacharya





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Bhojpur Temple

8th October 2014

Wednesday



Some miles away from Bhopal, there is a temple in Bhojpur.

Bhojpur is situated on the River Betwa; it is about 28 km away from Bhopal. According to a myth, it is believed that Kunti, the mother of the Panchapandavas and Karna, abandoned Karna in this river.

Travelling by car, it took approximately one-and-a-half hours. King Bhoj, a ruler from the Paramar Dynasty (1000–1055 ce), built the temple. The temple is next to a deep gorge, through which the River Betwa flows.





Two dams were built at Bhojpur using massive hammer-dressed stone to divert the Betwa in the 11th century. The architectural beauty of the Bhojpur temple is the stone-carved statues. The surroundings were a thick forest, and a gentle breeze was blowing. It could be said that the weather was on point that day. Being a temple of Lord Shiva, there is a huge statue of the Shiva-lingam inside it.

After experiencing the reign of King Bhoj, we now continued our journey towards the Bhimbetka Caves. On our way, we passed through the Tropic of Cancer. For years, I have only studied about it in books. But now, I can hold my head high and say that I have stood on it.



Bhimbetka



Bhimbetka or Bhim-Baithaka is located about 45 km south of Bhopal on the edge of the Vindhya hills. It is said that Bheema, the second eldest of the Panchapandavas of Mahabharata, sat in the rock shelters. During their 12 years stay in the forest, the Pandavas travelled many parts of India. They took shelter in these caves, thus the name.



A guide took us, instead of us taking him. But you know! No regrets, when an actual 'guide' guides you. To be honest, I valued the way he uncoiled the history to us; he struck me as being a lover of the subject.



The Bhimbetka rock shelters are archaeological sites from the Palaeolithic Age. These caves are surrounded by dense forest. Thousands and thousands of years ago they were underwater. Some rock shelters are 100,000 years old, and some rock paintings found in the caves are 30,000 years old. UNESCO declared it a World Heritage site in the year 2003.



The caves are well maintained; they exhibit early traces of human life on the Indian subcontinent.

Entering the caves and learning about the ancient times was indeed a pleasant feeling and an experience as well. The evolution of the style of the cave paintings evolved along with the humans. It can be discerned easily.

Let me include here, as a historian once stated, ‘Physics is to Science, Theatre is to History.’ In our case, photography is to my father. He climbed a huge mass of rock, and literally stood on the edge for a shot. He always says, “There is no shortcut.” Truly, there is none to anything. Anything.

Coming back to the point, there are thousands of rock shelters, but only 12 are exhibited to travellers as the other shelters are deep inside the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary. Ferocious carnivores roam there, so tourists are not allowed inside.

After visiting these 2, we were charged with energy and positivity and headed to our next destination.



Raisen Fort



The massive impregnable fort of Raisen in Madhya Pradesh stood as the gateway to the Malwa region. The origin of this fort goes back to 1200 AD. Up to the 15th century, it was under the rule of many Hindu rulers, including the Rajputs.

In the year 1543, Sher Shah Suri invaded it and captured it from Puranmal. Later in 1760, the rule was in the hands of Fiaz Mohammad Khan, the third Nawab of Bhopal. The fort witnessed a series of

rise and falls of empires. Many great sultans, like Iltutmish and Alauddin Khilji, tried to break in; such was the importance of this fort.





It is situated almost on a crest of a hill, quiet and soaring. We clambered up all the way, and it was worth it. Completely! There were a few people other than us. I can bet that not many know about this hidden splendour away from the crowd and turmoil, still bearing its air of pride. It seemed like I was on top of the world. The scenic beauty lassoed my heart like a rodeo.



Sanchi

9th October 2014

Thursday



As we set out for Sanchi, which happens to be one of the finest examples of Buddhist art and architecture. A question struck my mind, in the midst of nowhere, why was this stupa, such a massive structure, constructed?

As I know from my research work, after the Pari-nirban of Gautam Buddha, his disciples decided to construct 8 stupas through the length and breadth of the land Buddha traversed and preached in during his lifetime. Those are mainly located in modern day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the Mahajanapadas of Koshalas, Kashi, Magadh and the Lichchhavis of Vaishali.

Then why did Ashoka construct this magnificent work of art at Sanchi? As I was pondering the reason, suddenly I remembered that Ashoka was born in the state of Ujjain and one of his wives was a native of this place. As we reached Sanchi, we got hold of a guide and entered the premises.



Stupa #1 was initially built during the reign of Ashoka, and later extended and refurbished under the Sungas. It was built between the 2nd and 4th century BCE. Sanchi was the birthplace as well as the marriage destination of Ashoka's wife, Devi who supervised the construction of the stupas. Her father was a merchant from Vidisa, where the first ever stupa was built.



Sanchi has 3 main stupas. Many small stupas and buildings are also present. Stupa #1 is the largest among them and carries the most significance as well. The monuments are built like Buddha's Vikshyapatra (begging bowl) placed upside down. To his followers and disciples, Buddha was the king of kings. And they wanted to create something, which would impact the minds of the people.

Stupa #1 signifies Buddha, the Lord. It was constructed on such a huge scale that it created an impact of a Universal Monarch. Also, Sanchi falls on a major trade route between Magadha and Ujjain.

Sanchi caused my sister to feel very enthusiastic, being a student of Fine Arts. Yes! I have a sister too, and she is wonderful.

The panels on the gateways carry a story of Lord Buddha from the Jataka tales that show how he became such an inspirational character from an ordinary prince, Gautama. In these sculptures and reliefs, Buddha is not presented in human form. He is symbolised as a Bodhi tree, footprint,

Chhatra and horse (riding which he left his house and never returned). The builders considered representing Buddha in human form as 'to confining.' Sanchi is a declared World Heritage site.



The great stupa of Sanchi is one of the oldest stone structures in India. The local population donated money for the embellishment of the stupa to attain spirituality. There was no direct royal patronage. Devotees, both men and women, who donated money towards the sculpture, would often choose their favourite scene from the life of the Buddha and have their names inscribed on it. This accounts for the random repetition of particular episodes on the stupa, like Dehej. These were Bramhi inscriptions.



Stupa #1 is 91 metres in height, and thus, it can be seen from a distance. The stupas of Sanchi are the most perfect and well-preserved stupas anywhere in India.

The original brick stupa was later covered with stone during the Sunga period. On the basis of Ashokavandana, it is presumed that the stupa may have been vandalised at one point, sometime in the 2nd century BCE, an event some have related, to the rise of the Sunga emperor Pushyamitra Sunga, who overtook the Mauryan Empire as an Army General. It has been suggested that Pushyamitramay have destroyed the original stupa, and his son, Agnimitra rebuilt it.



During the later rule of the Sunga, the stupa was expanded with stone slabs to almost twice its original size. The dome was flattened near the top and crowned by 3 superimposed parasols within a square railing. With its many tiers, it was a symbol of Dharma, the Wheel of the Law. The dome was set on a high circular drum meant for circumambulation, which could be accessed via a double staircase.

A second stone pathway at the ground level was enclosed by a stone balustrade with 4 gateways (toranas) that faced the cardinal directions. The buildings, which seem to have been commissioned during the rule of the Sungas, are the second and third stupas, and the ground balustrade and stone casing of the great stupa.

I got to the circular dome through the stairways and saw a train travelling by, far away. It moved me that there is still so much beauty in this world that we miss every day, every minute of our lives, running after something that we do not know yet. Instead, at times we should lay back, relax and enjoy every second of our existence—what I did. I was too greedy for a shot, but could not move and let myself miss the grandeur.

Stupa #2 stands on an artificial terrace built against a ledge in the rock, about 320 metres down the slope of the hill. It does not have any gateway. It contains remnants of the 20 most eminent Buddhist scholars.

Stupa #3 is situated about 45 metres to the northeast of stupa #1. Its diameter is 15 metres and height is 8.23 metres, excluding the crowning members. It is smaller in dimension than the other 2 stupas.

Two chief disciples of Gautama Buddha, Sariputta and Mahamoggallana, who died within 2 weeks of one another, were cremated and their relics kept at stupa #3.

Some pillars of the monuments are broken; they are kept in the museum nearby. There were 4 Buddha statues at each gate, but they were destroyed by vandals and looters. The archaeologists found one head during excavation and attached it to the body.



An inscription records the gift of the southern gateway by the artisans of the Satavahana king, Satakarni:

“Gift of Ananda, the son of Vasithi, the foreman of the artisans of RajanSiriSatakarni.”

Stupas originally had a funerary association, being mounds containing the ashes and charred remains of the dead disciples of Buddha. Some of the friezes of Sanchi also show devotees in Greek attire celebrating the stupa.

We saw Sanchi, but could anybody push aside visiting Vidisa after tasting Sanchi? Well, I could not. That is why we turned our car towards Vidisa, though that was not in the plan.

It really gets tiring, when you are inside a car and cannot find a place that you really want to see. That is what happened to us. Vidisa kept us going and going and going.

Then, at last we found her.



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