BUDDHIST TRAIL IN ODISHA

Buddhism in Odisha is as old as the religion itself. Pali texts refer to Buddha's association with Tapasu and Bhallika, two businessmen from Odisha. Besides, the literary reference, legends, historical facts testify the advent of the religion in most popular form after the Kalinga War in 261 B.C. It was Ashoka who sent missionaries to those countries for propagation of the religion. Hiuen Tsang's account of Buddhism in Odisha, the existence of Ashokan and Post Ashokan Stupas, bell capitals, copper plates, discovery of Buddhist figures and images speak about the state of Buddhism in Odisha.

It was during the reign of Bhaumakara dynasty in Odisha during 8th to 10th century, A.D. Buddhism reached its zenith.

Though important Buddhist sites lay scattered all over the state, yet the most important among those constitute the Buddhist Circuit of Odisha. The rich treasure of Buddhist sculptures, monuments excavated from Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri, Udayagiri and nearby Langudi hills give a clear picture of the Buddhist traditions in Odisha. There is not a single district in the state where a Buddhist image or remains of Buddhism have not been found. Of all the places, Kuruma and Chaurasi in Prachi Valley, Banpur in Khurda district, Biswanath hills in Puri district, Choudwar in Cuttack district, Tarapur, Vajragiri, Kayama in Jajpur district and Ayodhya and Balasore in Balasore district, Jaugarh and Buddhakhol in Ganjam district, Khichhing and Baripada in Mayurbhanj district, Ganiapalli and Melchhamunda in Sambalpur district, Boudh in Boudha district etc. have remained great centres of Buddhism.

By the river Birupa, about 100 km. away from Bhubaneswar, Ratnagiri has a rich concentration of Buddhist antiquities. A large scale excavation has unearthed Buddhist shrine, large monasteries, big *stupa* and a number of votive stupas about 8 km from Bhubaneswar carry the message to the masses. Close to the diamond triangle of Lalitgiri-Ratnagiri-Udayagiri, Langudi is another important Buddhist heritage site.