

(FROM COL VIII)

Toilet complex, which recalls the arrangement at Paharpur. Its other features are more or less similar to fall such monuments in Bangladesh.

ANTIQUITIES

The collection of antiquities from Sitakot has been rather disappointing. Even potsherds are very rare. The few interesting objects recovered from the excavation, including two bronze images of Bodhisattva Padmapani and Manjusri and a terracotta mould of a fish, are lost from the Dinajpur where were preserved. The paucity of antiquities, lack of cultural debris and absence of

any trace of violent destruction seem to suggest that the site was abandoned after removing all the useful objects sometime before its final collapse.

UNEXCAVATED SITES

Among the unexcavated ancient mounds and ruins in Bangladesh, besides Kotlipada in Faridpur district which we have already discussed, a mention must be made of Halud Bihar an extensive Buddhist site near Paharpur in the Rajshahi district, Patharghata, a group of ancient mounds near Panchbibi in the Bogra district and Ramkot or ancient Ramu near Co's Bazar in the Chittagong district. (SEE COL IV)

THE subject matter portrayed in the reliefs is ours wholly. It includes almost every thing that can be found in the life and imagination of the Bengal country-side: human, divine and semi-divine, mythical and imaginary creatures, birds and animals, flowers and plants and various other objects sacred or profane. The human and divine figures give precise information about contemporary fashions in dress and ornaments and even in hair-styles; they also throw some sidelight upon moral, spiritual, social and economic condition of the people.

PAHARPUR

The excavated remains of the largest known Buddhist monastery of the sub-continent, and for that matter of the ancient world lies at Paharpur in the Rajshahi district, not very far from Mahasthan. It has been identified with the famous 'Sompura Vihara' built by Dharmapala, the great Pala emperor in about 800 A.D. Nearly a thousand feet square, this giant establishment with 177 cells opens on to a great courtyard where stands the brickwork pyramid of the central stupa still 70 feet high. It is a structure of remarkable design and splendour, brought pyramidal in elevation and cruciform in plan, elaborated respectively by receding stages and salient angles. The surviving stages are three in number with ambulatory passages which produce a great diversity of light and shade. The main arms of the cross contain large four-pillared shrines. The deep cella at the centre was presumably intended for relics.

The walls of both the lower stages are decorated by sculptured panels which form the special feature of this building. These are of stone and terracotta. The stone panels are set at irregular intervals in the lower stage, while the terracottas are set two courses higher in the same wall and also in the wall of the second stage. 63 of the stone and 2000 of the terracotta panels (in three rows) one in the lower stage and two in the second) remain 'in situ' and many fallen specimens and fragments were found in the debris. The stone reliefs, datable from the 7th to 8th centuries A.D. include only one Buddhist image, a Bodhisattva. The rest represent Brahmanical and secular figures. They show influence of both the Gupta classicism and the local folk art. It is however, in the extensive series of terracotta panels

that the outstanding importance of the structure lies. They primarily represent the folk art of Bangladesh. Their subject matter includes Buddhist and Hindu iconography, mythology, animal fables, dancers, warriors, acrobats, ploughmen, musicians, women and children, animals, birds, trees and plants, symbols and a variety of other objects in bewildering profusion and confusion. They are set in the building without any coherent sequence. "An examination of the site," says Sir Mortimer Wheeler, "has the excitement of a voyage of discovery". Artistically, they are the same crude but lively and vigorous creations as noticed in Mainamati owing little or nothing to academic tradition. Their features recur in reliefs from Mainamati, Mahasthan, Sabhar, and many other sites lying scattered all over the country and distend approximately from the 9th centuries A.D.

The terracotta plaques of Paharpur, together with those of Mainamati and other places constitute an unusually attractive and distinctive school of Bengal art. It is particularly in these terracotta reliefs that the creative intelligence and personality of Bangladesh has found its finest and fullest expression.

BHASU BIHAR

Tradition handed down by the celebrated Chinese pilgrim Hsuen T'sang, asserts that a stupa in the vicinity of Pundranagar and a nearby magnificent Buddhist establishment with spacious halls and multi-storied chambers, where more than 700 monks used to reside, were established by no other than the great Asoka himself. The extensive Buddhist ruins of Bhasu Bihar near Mahasthan that we are digging up at present is undoubtedly Hsuen T'sang's PO-SHI-PO Vihara where he himself stayed for some time in the middle of the 7th cent. A.D. But the two modest

sized monasteries of the usual type with an attached semi-cruciform shrine that we have uncovered here could not accommodate 700 monks nor could they be dated to the 7th century A.D. Digging is still confined to the upper levels of the site roughly datable to the 10th-11th centuries A.D. Before we have reached the lowest levels and uncovered the earliest remains here and excavated the huge ancient mound at the nearby village of Bihar we will not be able to ascertain if Hsuen T'sang is correct or whether he has exaggerated or not.

These historic ruins lie in the heart of Varendra, the quasiterrestrial highland of North Bengal and the core of ancient puravardhana-BHUKTI. It is surprising that such a remarkable site could be lost for ages. Sir Alexander Cunningham discovered and identified these jungle-covered brick ruins during his investigations in the area in 1870-80. The site locally called Narapatir Dhap, lies in the midst of a vast undulating plain of cultivated fields about four miles north-west of Mahasthan. A small sluggish river, called

Nagar a branch of the Karatoya flows through this plain about 400 yards to the east of the ruins. The well-known earth work Jungal, also passes through the area very near the site. A concentration of Buddhist ruins, mostly along the Nagar river lies around the site which now measures 800 feet by 700 feet with a height of some 31 feet: it was more extensive and higher even in Cunningham's time. Fortunately, it is the least disturbed site in the area. The exposed monuments: two monasteries 184' X 185' with 30 cells and 169' X 152' with 26 cells respectively and a semi-cruciform shrine, 125' X 88' with decorations of terracotta plaques 'in situ' on the basement walls cover the three larger of the five mounds on the site; the other two remains

yet to excavated.

ANTIQUITIES

The last three seasons' excavation at Bhasu Bihar yielded a very large number of important and valuable antiquities numbering well over 1200 from stratified levels. Mentionable among them are about 60 bronze images and many fragments, over 100 inscribed baked clay sealings, 40 complete and many more broken terracotta plaques with excellently carved bas-reliefs, and a large number of ornamental bricks with floral and geometric patterns. Minor objects include semi-precious stone and terracotta beads, iron nails, few terracotta toys and a large number of earthenware pots, pans, utensils and oil lamps. As all these objects have come from stratified levels of the excavation, they are obviously of considerable importance and significant as dependable evidence for historical development of the site and cultural and chronological studies of the region.

The Bhasu Bihar bronze images, recovered almost exclusively from the cells of the two monasteries of the site, unlike the terracotta plaques which came from the shrine area only are badly corroded and cannot be properly studied before their chemical treatment. Preliminary studies, however, show that in technique, style and workmanship they have clear affinities with the bronze images of Nalanda. Their features are somewhat different from those of Mainamati. But it is the remarkable terracotta plaques, made of finer clay and still excellently preserved, these terracotta plaques that attract most notices as are quite different from the Mainamati-Paharpur series; they are heavy and large in size, mature in form and style, and very well executed. However, the lively expressiveness and crude but vigorous style of the folk art so much in evidence at Mainamati and Paharpur is

missing here. These 10th-11th century reliefs show, paradoxically enough, unmistakable influence of classical Gupta style as does the more remarkable life-size terracotta figures from Mangalkot another newly-discovered Mahasthan site near the fort. The dominant Deva-Pala tradition of the intervening two centuries does not seem to have any influence on this art, and this must be regarded as an extraordinary survival of Gupta tradition in Bengal long after it was thought to have died out.

SITAKOT MONASTERY

The Buddhist Monastery at Sitakot another interesting ancient monument in North Bengal has been recently exposed by archaeological excavation in the Nowabganj police station of the Lying in the midst of a picturesque countryside with small villages and wide open corn fields fringing the SAL forests this large mound prominently visible for miles around was associated with various local legends and Hindu myths. Its discovery and identification is due to Mr A. K. M. Z. Zaria, a retired Secretary to the Government.

Sitakot is not an isolated mound; it belongs to a series

of apparently contemporary cultural mounds of various sizes and importance, about 50 in number spreading over a considerable stretch of the countryside along the Karatoya river. They conceal interesting brick ruins of temples, shrines and probably also monasteries, thus demonstrating the archaeological importance of the area. Unfortunately almost all of them have been ruthlessly damaged and destroyed for brick quarry in very recent times; most of them are now beyond any salvage work.

Large-scale excavation here in 1972 has revealed the plan of a large, 215 feet square Buddhist monastery with 41 cells and two entrances. A 8-foot wide common verandah on the inner side connects these cells which are formally arranged in four wings, round an open courtyard, 139 feet by 135 feet. The eastern wing has not yet been fully uncovered. There is no indication of any central shrine or subsidiary structures in the courtyard which is very much unlike the Paharpur-Mainamati establishments and alike those of Bhasu Bihar. This monastery has another interesting feature, a

(SEE COL I)