Exploring Odisha’s lost cities

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Explore Buddhist sites hidden away in the hills

The intricately carved head of a Buddha protrudes from the ground — it probably fell from its post during an earthquake, our guide speculates. The rest of the statue is waiting to be discovered. We are at the archaeological site of Ratnagiri in Odisha, stepping off the track of our detailed and planned itinerary to take a look at what most tourists don’t take the time to see.

When we planned a temple tour of the state last year, the idea was to host a series of destination lectures at the sites themselves. On reaching there, however, I was told there were three Buddhist sites we should definitely add to our itinerary.

We had with us an expert who knew all about the temples, but it was local historian and author Manoj Bhoi who was familiar with our new destinations. While there is a Jain site quite close to Bhubaneshwar, we were headed much further away, to Udayagiri, Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri. It takes about 1.5 hours to get to the first two sites and a little over two hours to get to the third.
Known as the Diamond Triangle, the three sites are active archaeological digs, and discoveries are still being made. This is not surprising, considering work on them started in earnest only about three decades ago.

At Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri, we see the remnants of what would have once been beautiful buildings. Most were built with a stone base, brick walls and wooden roofs. (If you notice the Indo-Saracenic architecture in Chennai, you might see similar structures.) The bases and some bricks have survived the test of time; the rest is left to the imagination. The *stupas* that can be found all over, and the skeletons of the *sangha* halls give an idea of what might have been. Udayagiri is the largest Buddhist complex to be unearthed in the state, and is believed to have been active between the 7th and the 12th centuries.

All three sites are vast, and speak of a thriving community of monks who chose to live in seclusion, while also being able to preach and share their way of life with those who sought Buddhism. Our guide says that there is more to come. “It will take at least 20 to 30 years to uncover everything. And when it is done, this will be a more important discovery than Nalanda,” he says.

I believe that we need to claim and own our Indian heritage. And rather than simply buying a sculpture, it is better to visit sites like these and appreciate them. Find out how we can help, in spreading awareness. Most of all, let us see how we can spread respect for our monuments — perhaps then there will be historic sites that will not be defaced.