

News from Faraway Places

A travelogue recounting her adventures in China in the late 1950s offers insight into the early years of historian Romila Thapar's career and life

Tansen Sen

THE BUDDHIST grottoes in Dunhuang and Maijishan in present-day Gansu Province, People's Republic of China (PRC), are remnants of centuries-long religious and commercial interactions along the so-called "Silk Routes". The Indian sinologist PC Bagchi and KM Panikkar, the first Indian ambassador to the PRC, visited these sites in 1948 and 1951 respectively and emphasised the need for Indian scholars to study them. Romila Thapar's remarkable travelogue *Gazing Eastwards* on her visit to these two sites in 1957 owes much to these two earlier visits, and especially to Panikkar's intervention.

Thapar is one of the most renowned scholars of Indian history and an influential intellectual in India. However, her trip to China as a doctoral student at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London is less well-known. *Gazing Eastwards* offers insights into Thapar's early academic career and her experiences beyond the study of Indian history. Based on the diary she kept during the four-month trip, the book recounts her experiences and encounters at sites very few foreigners (or even Chinese citizens) visited during the 1950s. It also includes a particularly useful Introduction that outlines the "Silk Routes" exchanges and the role of Dunhuang and Maijishan in these long-distance interactions.

Together with the Paris-based art historian Anil de Silva and the photographer Dominique Darbois, Thapar travelled as a research assistant in China between July and October 1957. The trip resulted in the publication of two important studies: *The Art of Chinese Landscape in the Caves of Tun-huang* (1964) by de Silva, and *The Cave Temples of Maichishan* (1969) by Michael Sullivan. Both volumes contain stunning images by Darbois. In the latter work, de Silva provides a short account of the visit (erroneously mentioning that it took place in 1958), in which Thapar credits the trip to Panikkar and his "personal contact" with Premier Chou En-lai "made while he was Indian Ambassador in Peking."

The result of this "personal contact" is evident through the book. The Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries hosted the trip; several renowned Chinese scholars, including the leading archaeologist Xia Nai and the Indologist Ji Xianlin, met with them; provincial and local officials arranged for travel and stay; the team was invited to official events, including at a state reception for the visiting Indian president, S Radhakrishnan. Despite such official support, their travels deviated significantly from the scripted tours of foreign delegations common during the '50s.

The researchers first travelled to Beijing from Paris via Prague and Moscow. After a few days in Beijing and dining at the obligatory Peking Duck Restaurant, they began their jour-



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

IN OTHER PLACES, OTHER WONDERS

Maijishan hill caves, grottoes and stairways



GAZING EASTWARDS: OF BUDDHIST MONKS AND REVOLUTIONARIES IN CHINA, 1957
BY ROMILA THAPAR
Aleph Book Company
340 pages
₹10

ney, accompanied by an interpreter, by train to Xi'an, the ancient Chinese capital, and to Lanzhou, the gateway to Central Asia. From Lanzhou they went by a bumpy road to Maijishan, their first research site. After a productive stay, they journeyed further west to the historical frontier towns of Tianshui and Jiuquan before arriving in Dunhuang, the "high point" of their trip. Visits to Zhengzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai and Hangzhou later, they returned to Beijing. Their final stop was in Guangzhou/Canton, where their hosts organised a "spectacular" farewell and toasted "the enduring friendship" between India and China with glasses of Maotai, a potent Chinese liquor.

The book contains valuable insights into the lives of people in urban and rural China, the state of museums and educational institutions in major cities, interactions with Chinese academics, and the feeling of being an Indian, especially a sari-clad woman, in a foreign land. Perhaps, the most remarkable part of the travelogue is the description of Thapar's stay at a Buddhist monastery in Maijishan. Here she lost a table tennis game to a monk, learned to play the two-stringed Chinese instrument erhu, and listened to locals sing, including a Chinese rendition of *Awaara hoon* from the Hindi film *Awara* (1951).

The homeland always lurks in travel narratives in foreign regions. India appears in various contexts (but unfortunately, not in the book's index) in *Gazing Eastwards*, including in discussions about the Buddhist influences on China, the comparisons of cultural practices and states of development. Here Thapar's lamentations about the fundamental difference between Chinese and Indian traditions of record-keeping is most noteworthy. Several times, she bemoans that, while Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and historians have left behind accounts of foreign lands, including India, "pre-modern Indians... remained uninterested in commenting on the world beyond their immediate own.... It is such a stunning contrast to the Chinese avidly wanting to know about the wider world and writing about it," she writes.

It is in this context of a dearth of Indian writings on China that the value of Thapar's travelogue must be considered. The first Indian travel writings on China appeared only in the late-19th century and increased in numbers during the first half of the 20th century. However, accounts by Indian women visiting China are rare. Activist Gita Bandyopadhyay's *From Moscow to China* (1952), which describes her visit in 1949-50 to attend the Asian Women's Conference, may have been the first such work. Thapar's book belongs to this rare category. In both cases, insights into the role and status of women in China, often with reflections about gender issues in India, and the experiences of female travellers in a foreign land appear in great detail.

Yet, while Bandyopadhyay's narrative is overwhelmingly sympathetic towards the new Communist government in the PRC, Thapar is more introspective about its contemporary conditions and the country's future prospects. The combination of academic explorations and adventures of foreign travel makes the book immensely enlightening and enjoyable and a worthwhile relief from the focus on nation-state relations that dominates Indian publications on China.

Sen is director of the Center for Global Asia and professor of History, New York University, Shanghai