



BREATHTAKING works of Indian art can be found in the oddest of places. One of the country's many ironies, Khajuraho is such an example. Though a



Visitors come from distant countries to visit temples.

Erotic Poetry in Sandstone

poor, non-descript village in an empty countryside some 600 kms to the south of New Delhi. It is nevertheless home to the finest sculptured sandstone temples in central India.

There are two sets of temples. The Western Group, the largest and that containing the finest architecture, abuts on the village itself.

Robin Davies

while the Eastern Group cluster, mainly comprising Jain temples, is to the southeast on the edge of the outlying houses.

Though built nearly 1,000 years ago these treasures remained forgotten by outsiders until visited by a Victorian officer in the Bengal Engineers, Captain T S Burt. His journal, when published in 1839, first brought their glories to the attention of the Western world.

And what glories! Located within the village perimeter, the twenty remaining biscuit coloured temples raise their sun-burnt pinnacles to the sky. All, despite there being no use of masonry, erect and remarkably well-preserved on their separate supporting high platforms. Each one a stone carved tribute to the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and their respective consorts. Every surrounding outside wall or upper balcony contains a riot of sculptured figures, whether of the Hindu pantheon's multitude of gods and goddesses and animals or of scenes of every day life and warfare. Each one a triumph to the minutiae of the Hindu sculptor's art. Like an elegant cartoon strip petrified in a time warp.

Most of the panels that run around the base of the temples depict images of the celestial universe with all its rituals in meticulous detail. Profusely decorated, not a niche nor a lintel is left uncovered until the roof work leads steeply up to each central inverted cone. The intricacy of the carvings and the degree of artistry make it hard to believe they have been fashioned out of blocks of stone with only the simple implements of a thousand years ago.

It is these lissome figures of stone that are Khajuraho's real claim to fame. Especially, the sinuous so-called erotic sculptures although they make up only ten percent of all the carvings.

They are superbly crafted and of extraordinary beauty. Especially the female form, each one of which shows the body in a series of graceful poses with or without her consort. Their overall impact suggests not just sexual love

but conjugal harmony. However, although clearly honouring love they have aroused mixed feelings over time among Westerners. Captain Burt's journal published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal mirrored 19th century Victorian upper-class hypocrisy. While acknowledging the exquisite workmanship he notes "the sculptor had at times allowed his subject to grow rather warmer than the re was any absolute necessity... some were extremely indecent and offensive".

Today, unless someone was excessively prudish, they would be seen rather in their historical context as an example of religious sensual phantasy. Phantasy, because even for those at the time who believed that sex was necessary to spiritual development, the depiction of many of the sexual positions would demand the agility of a boneless contortionist. Or, they could be viewed as an unusual series of stone illustrations of the Kama Sutra. Itself less a treatise on sex than a code of conduct whose strict requirements would win the approval of even a militant feminist.

As most of the temples face east they are best seen in the morning when the sun's rays highlight the supple curves of the female bodies, either performing their toilette or entwined gracefully with their lover. Sunset brings about a colour change as the russet gold of the sandstone grows pink before the night.

The grounds are equally full of colour. Flowering trees dot the landscape and give shade. Bright green parakeets, elegant hoopoes with their long curved beaks and, especially, the beautiful Indian Roller with its iridescent turquoise underwing flitter around. A mongoose will casually cross your path while pale grey langurs - like stretched-out squirrels - can be seen scuttling along the ancient temple balconies. In the neighbourhood, if lucky, your rickshaw man will take you to where a long haired performing brown bear shuffles along awaiting its master's pleasure and yours.

Although an airstrip was

built 25 years ago Khajuraho is still well off the world's T-shirt souvenir track. Despite its growing renown - the whole complex has been declared a World Heritage Site

by UNESCO - getting there is complicated, especially as flights are frequently cancelled. Hence the relatively few tourists and the virtually traffic-free village. Nevertheless,

it is worth making the effort. Thousand year old sculptures in a pristine state in little visited romantic monuments are, today, an exciting rarity!



Exquisite figures of deities and nymphs carved on the Devi Jagadamba Temple.

Sonargaon-As I Visited

by S M Mizanur Rahman

SONARGAON is situated on the bank of the river Meghna, 26 kilometers away from Dhaka city and 5 kilometers from Narayanganj. The former name of Sonargaon was Subarnagram. The place was named Sonargaon after the name of Sona Bibi, the wife of the independent ruler of Bengal Isa Khan.

During the reign of Isa Khan, the most prominent of "Baro Bhuiyan", the glory and heritage of Sonargaon was excellent. But the glory is not present now due to many ups and downs. Instead of the old capital Sonargaon, we can observe some villages there. In the ruins of the buildings, large Dighi, Heap of soil and fort is present there. The existence of many buildings of the past can be seen everywhere, particularly in Panam areas.

I visited the cemetery of Sultan Gias Uddin Azam Shah. The monument is situated at a distance of 2.4 kilometer from Damdama. I also visited the "Panch Pirer Mazar". To the south of the Sultan Gias Uddin Azam Shah's cemetery, a road has passed to the west. The village Bhagopur is situated at a distance of 450 meter where the "Panch Pirer Mazar" is located. At the rear of the mosque, there is a place surrounded by wall. There are five graves adjacent to one another. The enclosed place is square-shaped and each wall is 18 meter long. The graves are erected on the same platform and of equal size and shape. It is said that during fighting against Mogh robbers, five heroes were put to death as a martyr and the graves of the five brothers are known as "Panch Pirer Mazar". The graves were erected during the seventeenth century no doubt. During the reign of Sultan Gias Uddin Azam Shah (1389-1411), a civilization was evolved.

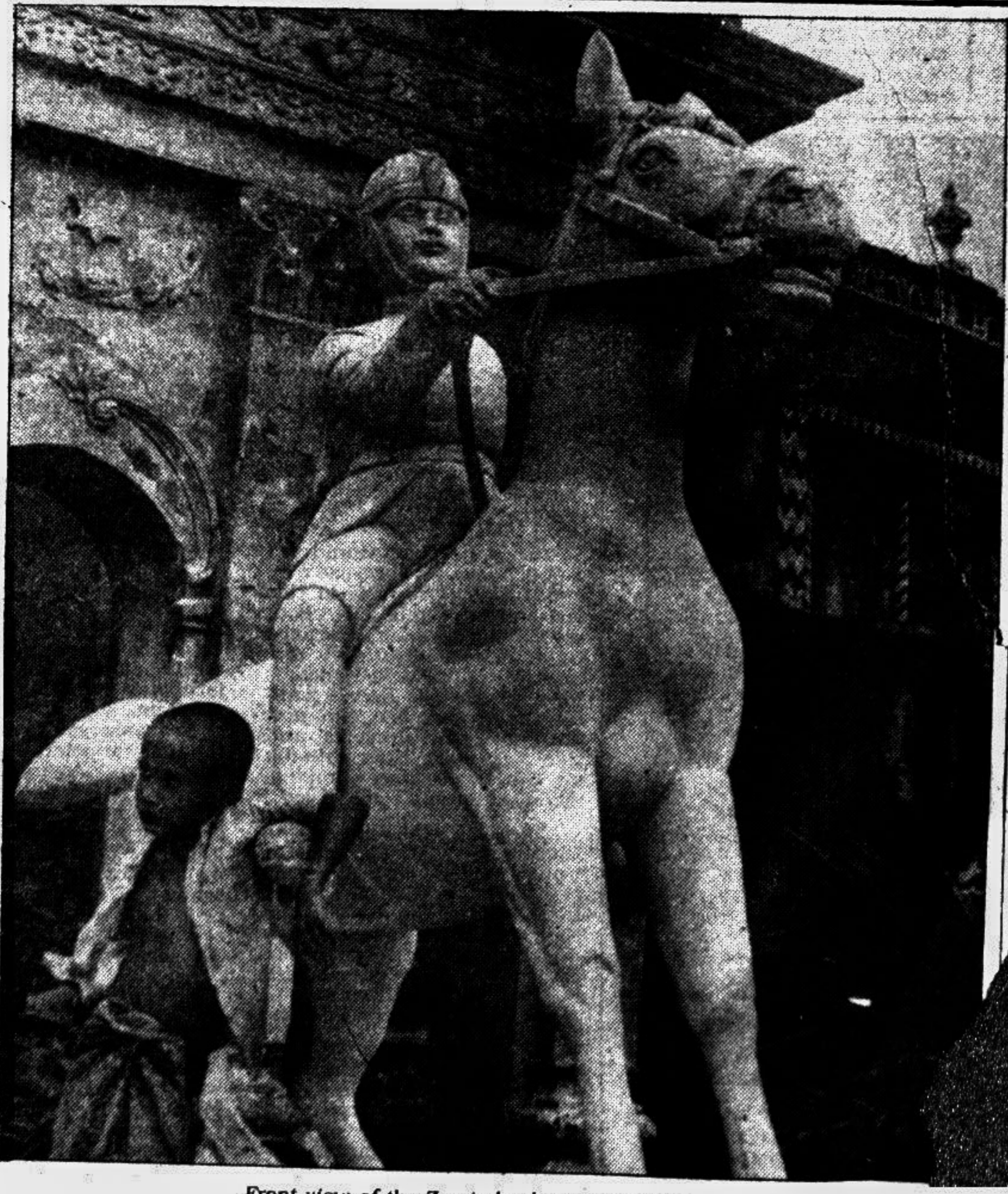
A Folklore Museum has been established at Sonargaon recently on a nineteenth century Zamindar house. The scientific study of customs of the nation is being pursued here. The museum is the reflection of our nation's civilization, culture and heritage.

I made a tour to Murapara, 6 kilometer away from Rupsi, Rupganj. There is a Zamindar House where the Murapara Degree College is standing now. The name of the Zamindar was Sonatan Banerjee, and his son Bijoy Banerjee. The building was supposed to

be established in the Bengali year 1282. There is a pond with staircase in front of this Zamindar house which was encompassed with grill. This was fenced in the year 1304 (Bengali).

There are many Shit-temples around the Zamindar building which attracts the visitors. In spite of many ups and downs in its history, Sonargaon is still bearing the glory and historical evidence of heroic ruler Isa Khan and inspires us about the glorious achievements of the past. So, it is an important historical place to visit to be acquainted with the history of Bengal.

The writer is at present working on Historical Geography.



Front view of the Zamindar house at Sonargaon.

Travel Briefs

Summit buys private ICD: The countries first private sector internal container depot (ICD) in Chittagong has been purchased by SUMMIT Group of Companies.

OCL, a public limited company has already been handling empty containers since 1987.

Discussions are underway with a Singapore company to provide latest management techniques including fully computerised cargo handling and tracking system. -BD Shipping Times

More 53' Boxes for APL: The US Mega Shipping Line American President Lines (APL) recently introduced 53' domestic containers in its intermodal North-South double stack container service from New York to Atlanta due to increased demand.

APL operates a total of some 1200 domestic boxes, and an additional 150 units are currently being delivered. -BD Shipping Times

The Travel Guide that Recommends You Don't Go

Peter Moszynski Uganda-Sudan border and north London

SOME places in the world are probably best avoided. One of them is the road between Uganda and Sudan. In recent years, scores of different groups of rebels, defeated and victorious armies and plain old-fashioned brigands have preyed on passing travellers.

Along this short stretch of road, I have been attacked by bandits, robbed by soldiers, arrested by Sudanese rebels and narrowly missed kidnapping by members of the Lord's Resistance Army, a bizarre Christian fundamentalist sect in Uganda financed by the Islamic regime in Khartoum.

The first time I went to Uganda, I had just escaped an ambush and four-hour chase by ousted dictator Idi Amin's former troops, and was much relieved to come upon a government border checkpoint.

The greeting I received surprised me. The first soldier calmly and ostentatiously cocked his assault rifle before pressing his muzzle into my nose. "And what have you got for me, muzungu (foreigner)?" he inquired menacingly.

Forewarned is forearmed, and I had taken a colleague's advice to "take soap for the soldiers". I had grave doubts about this strategy, so it was with some hesitation that I announced, gently pushing the AK-47 out of face

"For you, my friend, I have a

piece of soap."

I was greatly relieved, although still somewhat surprised, when the guy walked off quite happily with his ill-gotten gains.

Good advice and intelligence goes a long way in mitigating possible problems in all trouble spots. Now, a guidebook has appeared to help with the hazard zones - *The World's Most Dangerous Places*.

Billed as "the book your mother doesn't want you to read", it is like no other guidebook. The two authors - a travel writer and a war correspondent - have produced a guide to "high adventure, forbidden lands, nasty things, psychologically questionable activities and all those low-down dirty places, you're dying to visit."

Co-author Robert Young Pelton says "I have always wanted to write this book for people who either end up in these hellish places because of their work or for the daring who want to push the limit of adventure travel. After all, does the world really need another travel guide to Disneyland?"

"It helps to know who kidnaps, murders, scams and deceives in these places. In some places a terrorist could be your best friend, and the local cop your worst enemy."

Pelton argues that details such as the number of landmines in the ground in par-

ticular countries, or where and how drugs are smuggled, or the inside tip on unsafe airlines, can go a long way towards keeping the traveller healthy.

This book is about opening doors for hardcore travellers who seek excitement, knowledge and truth. What's more, it's a hell of a read for armchair adventurers," he says.

The guide gives a detailed background and history to trouble spots, together with witnesses' accounts of 29 war zones.

Dangerous Places explains how to anticipate and avoid specific hazards, and provides information on how to set up an expedition, work overseas, become a mercenary and obtain survival skills for war correspondents.

Appendices give tourism contacts, United States State Department travel tips, and visa requirements for all countries, while pointing out that many of the most dangerous places do not require a passport or air ticket, and advising against visiting most of the places it describes.

It also lists addresses and background details of selected relief, rescue, ecological, intelligence and political organisations.

Although US citizens tend to view the world outside as fraught with peril, statistically the most dangerous country is their own. Visitors

to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics should be aware of police figures showing the city to have the highest crime rate in North America.

Big cities can be trouble - no matter where they are.

I was once visited in London by my mother on my return from war-torn southern Sudan. She had heard of the recent deaths of several journalists and aid workers in the region, and, like all mothers, asked why I had to go to such dangerous places. I gave the stock response of any inner-city dweller with exaggerated centrifugal tendencies: "Nonsense. It's much more dangerous around here."

My sentiments were immediately vindicated by the sound of a huge explosion.

"What was that?"

"Don't worry," I said nonchalantly. "It's just a bomb in the next street."

Before the 1994 ceasefire, my part of London used to be a popular target for the Irish Republican Army - on a previous occasion I was almost shot by anti-terrorist police who mistook me for an IRA gunman.

Gemini News
The writer is a British freelance journalist who has travelled widely in Africa.

"The World's Most Dangerous Places" by Robert Young Pelton and Coskun Aral (Fielding Worldwide, US, \$19.95).

US crime wave

