

1. The relics of Ratnagiri**Introduction**

Recent excavations at the Ratnagiri site in Odisha's Jajpur district have unveiled significant Buddhist relics, shedding light on the region's rich historical and cultural heritage.

Buddha Sculpture

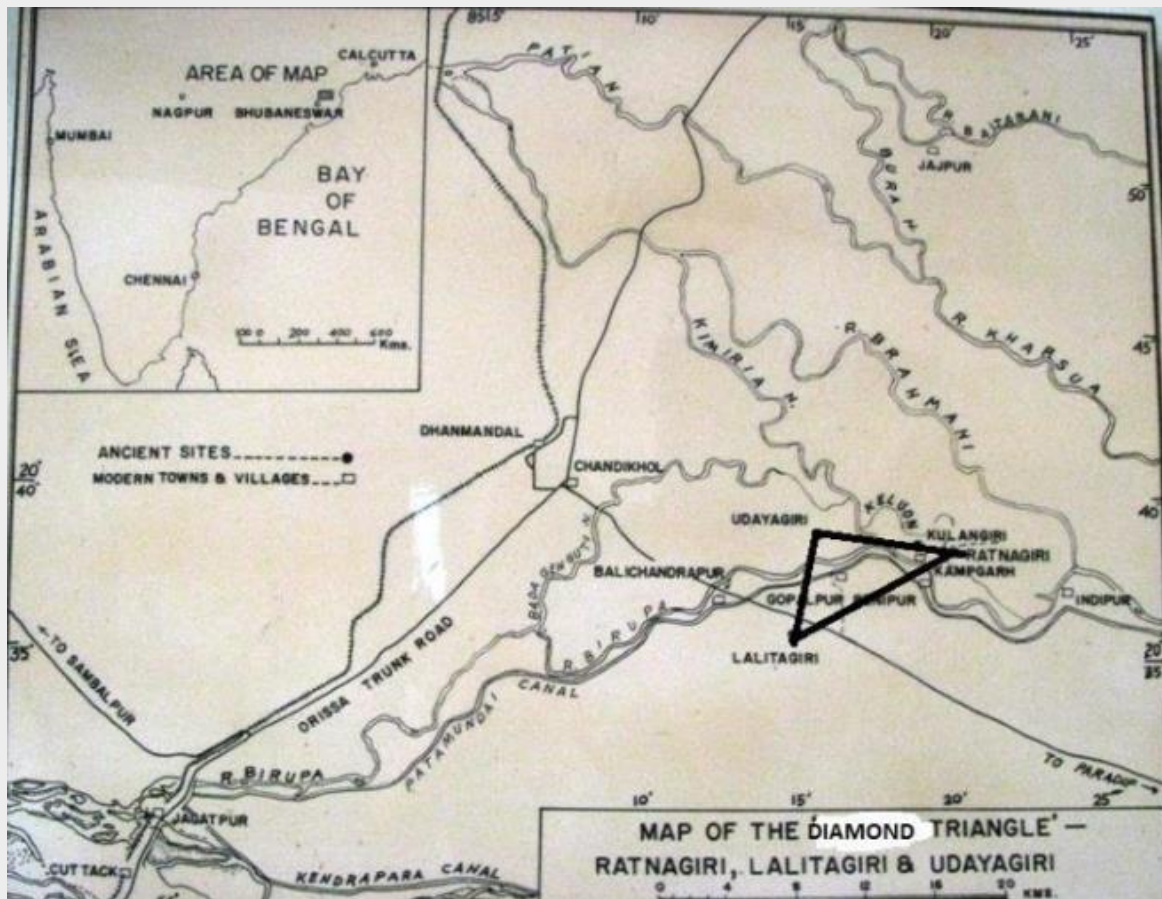
The Buddha sculptures found at Ratnagiri are made of Khondalite stone. Massive Buddha head, 1.4 metres tall (around 4 feet), is the largest ever discovered in Odisha.

Subsequently more stone-carved parts were found, including palms and fingers, which, along with the head, are believed to belong to a huge sculpture of Buddha in a meditating posture.

**Hills of jewels**

Ratnagiri, which means 'Hills of jewels' in Odia, is located on a hillock in the Assia hill range in Jajpur and encircled by the rivers Brahmani, Kimiria, and Birupa and their tributaries. The village is situated around 100 km from Bhubaneswar and is part of the 'Diamond Triangle', a collection of three Buddhist sites — Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri — located in a 10-km radius.

Archaeologists believe this landscape was strategically chosen for Buddhist establishments. Its once-secluded nature made it ideal for spiritual and scholarly pursuits.



Ratnagiri's Past

Based on the findings from sculptural and epigraphic remains, the earliest Buddhist settlement at Ratnagiri has been dated to the 5th century AD. It flourished until the 13th century. Over time, its significance declined, leading to its eventual abandonment. However, Buddhist activities in the area continued till the 16th century. Ratnagiri's historical importance is well-documented through various sources, including historical records, inscriptions, and literary evidence.

A copper plate charter of Somavamsi King Karna, unearthed during excavations, confirmed that it was once a major centre for Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism). The place was identified as Ratnagiri based on seals bearing the legend of 'Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihara Arya Bhikshu Sangha'.

Notable findings

The notable discoveries include a lion pedestal (Buddha's Simhasana) and votive sculptures of Buddhist deities, such as Amoghasiddhi, one of the five wisdom Buddhas of the Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition; Ratnasambhava, one of the five meditating Buddhas; Akshobhya, another wisdom Buddha; Amitabha, one of the most widely worshipped Buddhist figures in Mahayana Buddhism; Tara, a female Buddha who is a consort of Amoghasiddhi Buddha; Marici, a popular goddess in Buddhism; Padmapani, a Bodhisattva; and Cunda, the smith who gave Gautama Buddha his last meal.

Ratnagiri consists of two monasteries where Buddhist followers once lived, meditated, and studied. It also includes a massive stupa, which symbolises veneration.

A 'chaitya griha', of the kind seen in the two nearby archaeological sites namely Udayagiri and Lalitgiri, has not been found in Ratnagiri so far.

Other findings

The excavation has uncovered three sculpted heads of varying sizes, a monolithic elephant sculpture, and hundreds of votive stupas, ranging from simple to highly ornamented. Brick and stone masonry structures have also been discovered during the excavation.

Smaller votives — stone-carved pieces depicting divinities — have been found arranged in a line, reflecting the Vajrayana practice of making offerings upon the fulfilment of wishes. The abundance of votives suggests that the site attracted a large number of visitors.

Stone tablets of different sizes, inscribed in Sanskrit using the Kutila script (Siddhamatrika), have also been found at the site.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Culture

Source: The Hindu

2. LNG's centrality in India-Qatar Trade

Introduction

The India-Qatar trade relationship has predominantly been fueled by New Delhi's heavy imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG), of which Doha is India's largest supplier. LNG, or super-chilled gas, is likely to play a pivotal role in future bilateral trade as well.



The reason: India's LNG imports are expected to surge over the next five years as the country's natural gas consumption is set to grow significantly. The expected growth in imports would coincide with Qatar expanding its LNG export capacity. In fact, Qatar and the US are the two key geographies that are likely to see notable expansion in LNG export capacity over the coming years, and Indian oil and gas companies are understood to be eyeing both countries to meet the incremental gas demand.

LNG: Energy that drives India-Qatar trade

The balance of trade between the two countries is heavily skewed in Qatar's favour, with LNG topping the list of New Delhi's imports from Doha.

LNG imports accounted for 50 per cent of India's overall imports from Qatar, which totalled \$11.49 billion in the first 11 months of 2024. Notably, other major imports were also fossil fuel-linked commodities and products like liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), crude oil, plastics, and other petrochemicals. By contrast, India's exports to Qatar during the 11-month period totalled just \$1.61 billion.

India's largest LNG importer Petronet LNG has a long-term contract with Qatar for 7.5 million tonnes per annum (mtpa) of LNG, which only last year was extended till 2048. Apart from the LNG volumes that are imported under this term contract, Qatar also has a sizable share in India's LNG purchases from the spot market. In December, public sector major GAIL inked a five-year contract with QatarEnergy for additional LNG imports.

Growth in India's LNG imports, Qatar's export capacity

The Indian government has set an ambitious target to increase the share of natural gas in the country's primary energy mix to 15 per cent by 2030 from a little over 6 per cent at present, which is bound to result in a rapid increase in LNG imports over the next few years. India is already a major LNG importer, with domestic natural gas being able to meet just about half of the country's demand.

The US factor

Over the coming years, the US is expected to be Qatar's biggest competitor for LNG market share in India. The US, which is the world's largest LNG exporter, is currently India's second-largest source of super-chilled gas. In January-November 2024, India imported 5.12 million tonnes of LNG from the US, accounting for 20.2 per cent of the LNG imports during the period. India's LNG imports from the US for the 11-month period were valued at nearly \$2.5 billion.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

3. Established as 'antidote' to 'linguistic hostility and bitterness: what are zonal councils?

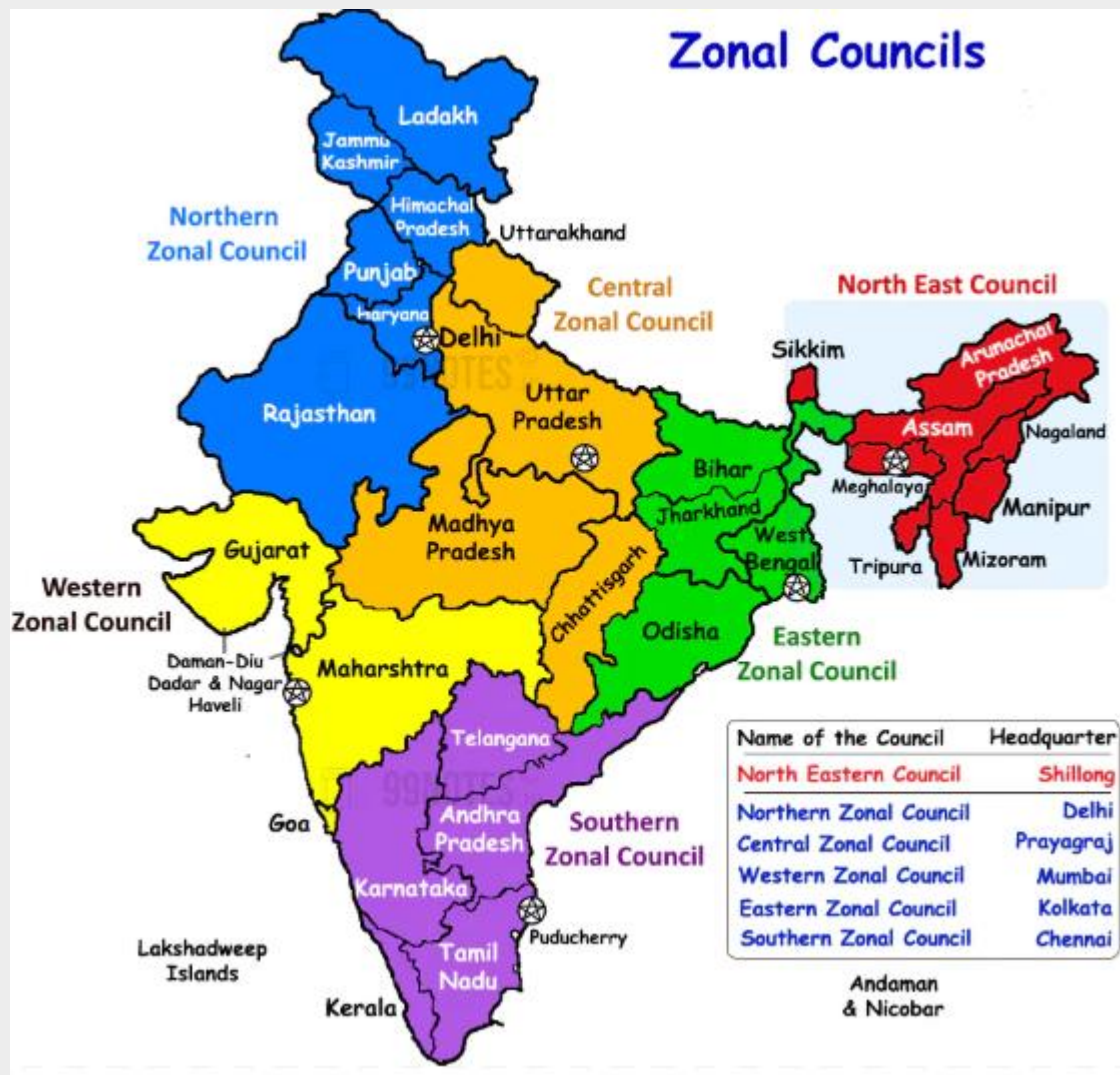
Introduction

As Union Home Minister Amit Shah chaired the 27th meeting of the Western Zonal Council in Pune recently, a look at the formation of these Zonal Councils in the 1950s as an 'antidote' for the linguistic hostilities and bitterness from the re-organisation of the states on linguistic pattern and what are their functions.

Idea mooted by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru

The idea of creation of Zonal Councils was mooted by the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1956 when during the course of debate on the report of the States Reorganisation Commission, he suggested that the states proposed to be reorganised may be grouped into four or five zones having an Advisory Council "to develop the habit of cooperative working" among these states, say the records of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

This suggestion was made by Pandit Nehru at a time when linguistic hostilities and bitterness as a result of re-organisation of the states on linguistic patterns were threatening the very fabric of our nation. As an antidote to this situation, it was suggested that a high-level advisory forum should be set up to minimise the impact of these hostilities and to create healthy inter-state and Centre-State environment with a view to solving inter-state problems and fostering balanced socio economic development of the respective zones. In the light of the vision of Pandit Nehru, five Zonal Councils were set up as per the States Reorganisation Act, 1956.



Members of the Zonal Councils

The present composition of the Zonal Councils is as follows: The Northern Zonal Council, comprising the States of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, National Capital Territory of Delhi and Union Territory of Chandigarh.

The Central Zonal Council, comprising the States of Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The Eastern Zonal Council, comprising the States of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal. The Western Zonal Council, comprising the States of Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra and the Union Territories of Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli.

The Southern Zonal Council, comprising the States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry.

North Eastern Council was set up under the North Eastern Council Act, 1972 with Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland as its members. The state of Sikkim which was earlier in the Eastern Zonal Council was included in the North Eastern Council in 2002.

Composition of Zonal Councils

Each Zonal Council has a Standing Committee consisting of Chief Secretaries of the member states. These Standing Committees meet from time to time to resolve the issues or to do necessary groundwork for further meetings of the Zonal Councils.

The composition of each council is as follows: The Union Home Minister is the chairman of each of these council. The Chief Ministers of the states included in each zone act as Vice-Chairman of the Zonal Council for that zone by rotation, each holding office for a period of one year at a time. Chief Minister and two other ministers as nominated by the Governor from each of the states and two members from Union Territories included in the zone. One person nominated by the planning commission for each of the Zonal Councils, Chief Secretaries and another officer nominated by each of the states included in the Zone.

In 2018, the Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the nomination of the Union Home Minister as ex-officio chairman of North Eastern Council and the Minister Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) to serve as Vice Chairman of the Council.

Role of Zonal Councils

The MHA has said that the Zonal Councils provide an excellent forum where irritants between Centre and States and among states can be resolved through free and frank discussions and consultations. The councils act as regional forums of cooperative endeavour for states linked with each other economically, politically and culturally.

The zonal councils can discuss matters of common interest in the field of economic and social planning, matters concerning border disputes, linguistic minorities or inter-state transport and matters connected with the reorganization of the states under the States Reorganisation Act.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

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