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TANTRIC BUDDHISM

Uddiyana and Odisha



Foreword by
Lama Tenzin Samphel

Abstract

The Tibetan form of Vajrayana Buddhism is currently popular, but the period of the genesis of this tradition in South Asia hardly attracts the attention of the general public. To contribute to the study of this field, we gather here the clues which tend to show that the privileged area of the development of Vajrayana in South Asia was the region which corresponds to the present Indian State of Odisha. To this end, we resort to archeology, linguistics and philology. Furthermore, the choice is made to take into account the discourses of the Tantric tradition itself, whenever they help making sense out of, at times, puzzling material data. The long impregnation of Northeastern India by Vajrayana explains the survival of Buddhist ideas and practices in local religious traditions to this day, some of them having largely exceeded the frame of Eastern India, or even of India. This local heritage of Tantric Buddhism, in particular in its final form, Vajrayana, is the subject of the last part of our study. This book is resolutely aimed at a large spectrum of readers, which is why an important part of the text is devoted to situating Tantric Buddhism within the history of Buddhism in general, as well as to clarifying its relationships with Hinduism.

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Photo 9 by courtesy of Shechen Archives / Matthieu Ricard.



Lama Tenzin Samphel, of Tibetan descent, grew up in Odisha.

He became a holder of the Dudjom Tersar lineage of the Tibetan Nyingmapa Tantric tradition, founded by Padmasambhava of Oddiyana. Lama Tenzin holds a Postgraduate Degree from the INALCO, Paris. He teaches at Shedup Kunsang Chöling, Septvaux (France).

Foreword by Lama Tenzin Samphel



Namo Shri Jagannath Puri!

In August 2016, with a group of French students, I made a Dharmayatra pilgrimage through India. During that time, we visited Bodhgaya, Varanasi, Ajanta, Ellora, Nagarjunakonda, and Odisha. Such magical places! Especially, when we were in Odisha, we discovered Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitgiri, and other places whose impact was palpable with powerful blessings and vibrations of Buddhist Tantra. Some of these locations had been Buddhist from the 3rd century continuously until the 16th century and we could still feel the presence of that millennium and a half of practice and devotion.

We saw some unbelievable monuments all clearly related to Buddhist Tantra. On the back of one such stone statue of Avalokiteshvara, it mentions the name of Padmasambhava, the founder of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, in a script dating from the 8th century of our era. The Buddha statues are attended only by Mahayana sangha figures, such as Manjushri, Vajrapani and others. While several stupas indicated that they contained the Buddha's relics, all the stupas we saw had written inside them the five great mantras of consecration used even in present times in Tibetan Buddhism [Tib. gzungs chen sde lnga], such as om ye dharma hetu.... Perhaps most astonishing was that under most of the tantric statues, you can see a tripod upon which are triangular offering cakes [Tib. gtor ma] and a conch shell with ablution water inside [Tib. dri'i dung zhal]. Until now, many scholars have argued that these offering cakes are a Tibetan invention and not originating from India. Generally, in India, scholars discuss only the type of offering cake that is made by squeezing the hand around a ball of dough [Tib. chang bu], but not the typical triangular cake found in Tibetan Tantric rituals. These surviving stone images talk clearly about how strongly Tantric Buddhism was flourishing at that time in Odisha.

Because of seeing all those wonderful places, I asked Dr. Frédéric Moronval, who was on the pilgrimage with us, to research more on these sites. I could see that there was a great deal more to understand and learn and it could be very beneficial.

This book represents countless hours of research and work, nonetheless it is still just like a seed for further investigation. Dr. Moronval has created here a lengthy survey of the research and study of countless other scholars, historians, and religious texts. I hope he will continue with a second volume based on fieldwork and

delve deeper into the archeology, society, language and culture, religion, history and so on of the great region of the Diamond Triangle in Odisha, providing even more evidence for his theories. I am so happy of his work, and it is with much encouragement that I am hoping he will continue and go even further in this research.

May Buddhist Tantra reflourish in India and spread throughout the entire world for the benefit of all beings.

Lama Tenzin Samphel

France, Day of Buddha, November 15, 2020

To Lama Tenzin Sampel, who drew my attention to the importance of Odisha in the history of Buddhism, and of Vajrayana in particular.

To my friend Ilkka, a Finnish Buddhist, whose wish to understand my French essay prompted me to write an English version.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Lama Tenzin Samphel, who kindly wrote the foreword; he inspired this book and provided encouragements and help at every step.

Dr. Umakanta Mishra (PhD) is a leading scholar in the fields of the history and archeology of Odisha; following in the footsteps of late Dr. N.K. Sahu, he regularly publishes very informative and painstaking research papers to which I am indebted; I thank him for his kindness and friendship.

My thanks also go to my friends Dr. Venerable Matthieu Ricard (ScD) and Dr. Martine Poumeyrol (ScD) for courteously providing photographs to illustrate this book, and to Mr. Kishor Manandhar (MA), for his precious support and longlasting friendship.

The encouragements and support of my relatives were, needless to say, essential.

Finally, I would like to pay homage to my university professors, especially Prof. Dr. Gérard Toffin (PhD) and Dr. Salih Akin (PhD), whose teachings and advices will remain life-long guidelines.

Preface

In spite of the current popularity of Tibetan Vajrayana, the period of the genesis of Tantric Buddhism in South Asia seldom attracts the attention of the general public. On the other hand, researchers are now more active in the field of the Tantric branch of what is called Indian Buddhism. David Snellgrove's masterpiece *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (1987) is an unrivaled reference to date. Since then, translations of Tantric texts written in Indian languages, mainly Sanskrit, have multiplied, but synthesis are rare and necessarily tend to "explain" Tantric Buddhism by resorting to analytical grids familiar to the Moderns, as did Ronald Davidson for Vajrayana in his *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (2002). We are still awaiting a presentation of Buddhism, particularly Tantric Buddhism, which would bring to light its inner logic without reductionism, in the vein of Mircea Eliade's *Chamanisme: techniques archaïques de l'extase* (1950).

Our approach here is both geographic and historical. It consists in collecting the clues that tend to show that the privileged area of the development of the Vajrayana form of Tantric Buddhism in South Asia was the region which corresponds to the present Indian State of Odisha. To this end, we resort to archeology, linguistics and philology. Furthermore, the choice is made to take into account the discourses of the Tantric tradition itself, whenever they help making sense out of at times puzzling material data. In so doing, we are somehow transposing to the history of Buddhism the idea of Durkheim (1912: 604), according to

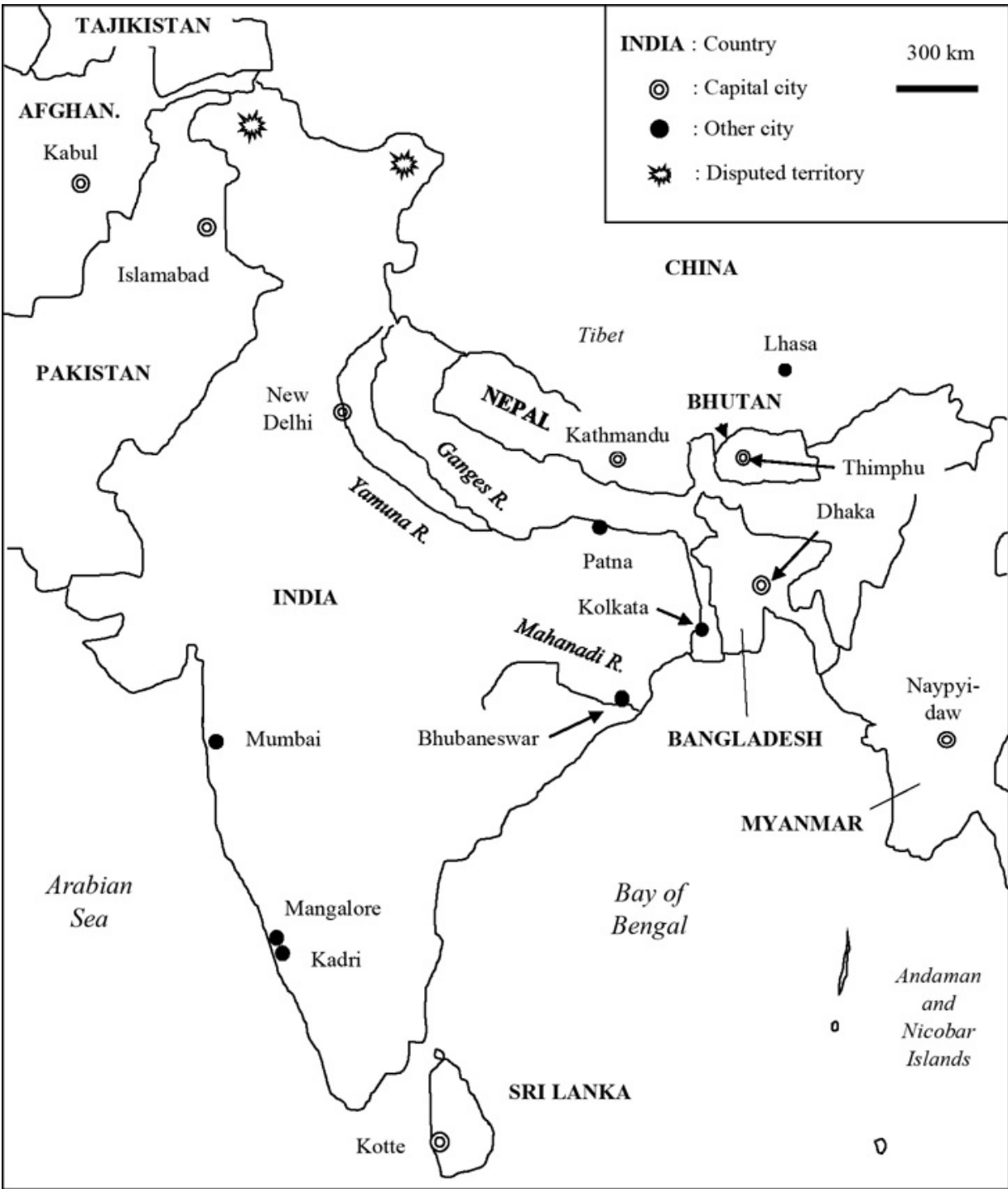
whom “a society [is constituted], before anything else, by the idea that she has of herself.” The long impregnation of Northeastern India by Vajrayana explains the survival of Buddhist ideas and practices in local religious traditions to this day, some of them having largely exceeded the frame of Eastern India, or even of India proper. This local heritage of Tantric Buddhism forms the subject of the last part of our study.

Finally, this book is resolutely aimed at a wide audience, ranging from students and specialists of Asian cultures to any interested readers. The latter might include some of our contemporaries who have adopted a form of Tantric Buddhism as their personal spiritual practice, most of time Tibetan Vajrayana, but also Japanese Shingon Buddhism. For this reason, an important part of our text is devoted to situating Vajrayana within the history of Buddhism in general, as well as to clarifying the relationships between Buddhism and Hinduism, in the light of the findings of Johannes Bronkhorst in particular¹. For various reasons, research works seldom reach the general audience. We hope studies like the present one can contribute to filling the gap.

¹ I would like to thank here my professor Dr. Philippe Cornu (PhD), from whom I heard about the work of J. Bronkhorst for the first time.

Maps

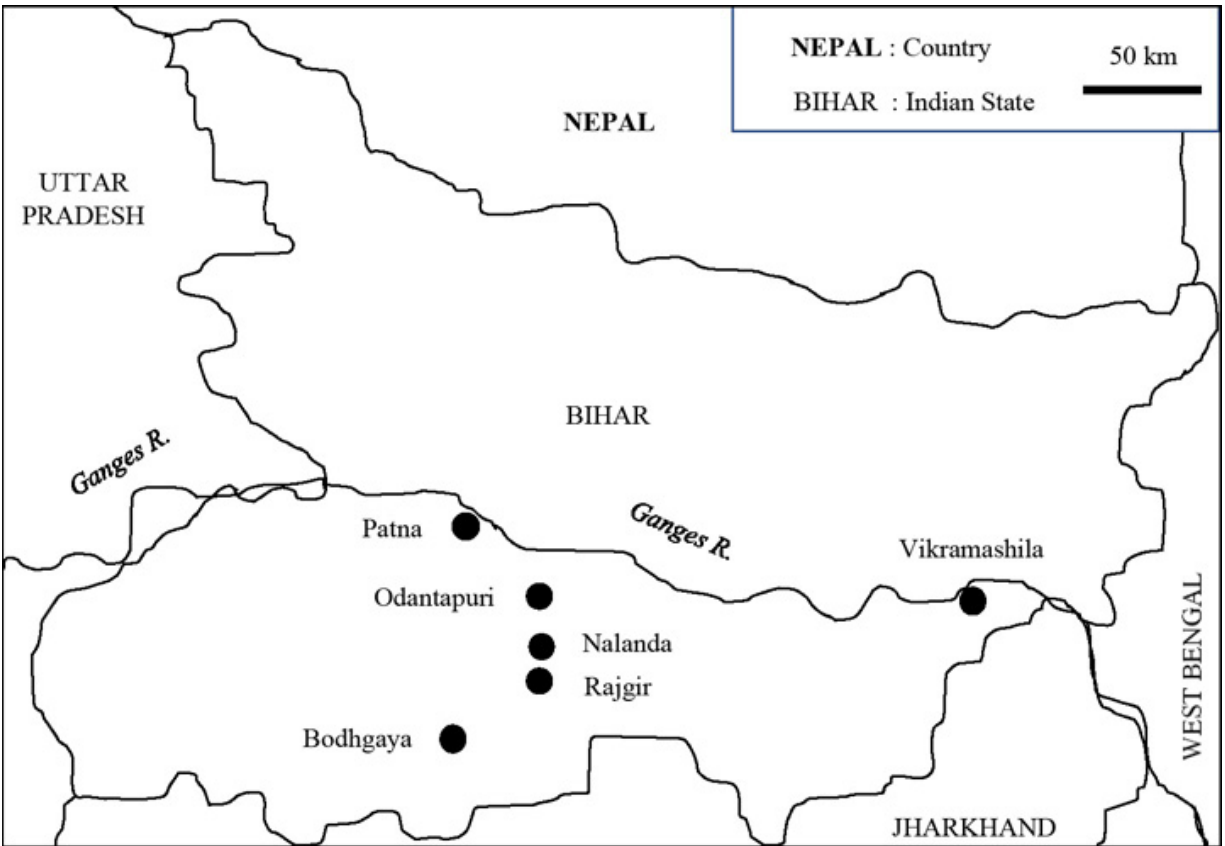
The maps given below aim solely at helping to locate the places mentioned in the book. They show some cities, archeological sites and rivers, as well as capital cities, either of countries or of States of the Indian Union. Line drawings are simplified and don't claim geographical or political accuracy. Maps are followed by comments underlying the importance of certain places in relation to our topic.



Map 1: South Asia

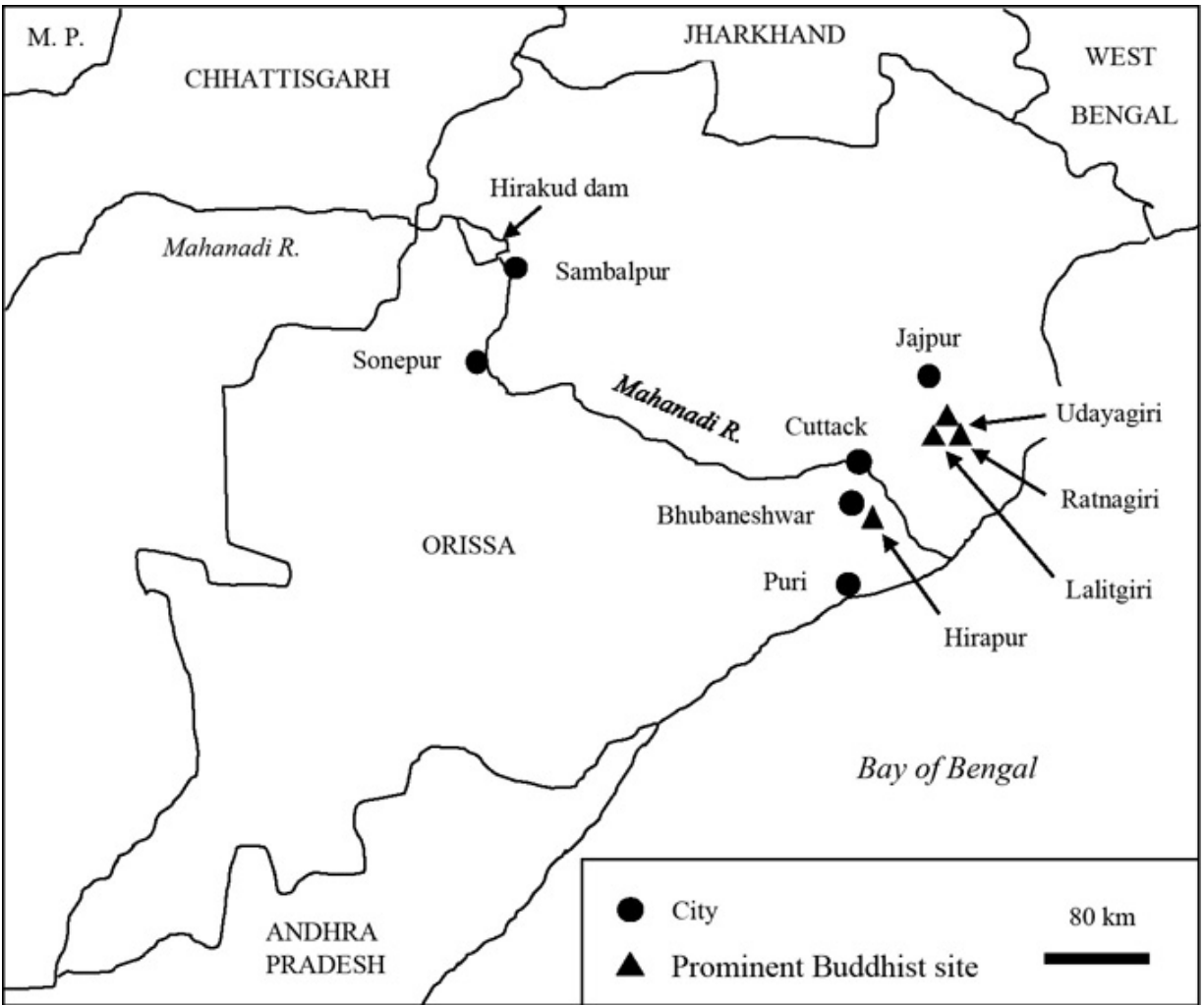
On this map of South Asia (above) is indicated Patna, capital city of the State of Bihar in the Gangetic plain. Under the name of Pataliputra, it was the capital city of Magadha in the 5th century BCE, and thereafter became the capital city of the Maurya Empire till circa 150 BCE. Bhubaneshwar is the capital city of Odisha. West Bengal (capital: Kolkata) and Bangladesh (capital: Dhaka) correspond to the ancient Bengal. The area constituted by Bihar, Odisha and Bengal witnessed the most intense activity of Tantric Buddhism in India.

The locality of Kadri, in Karnataka on the South-Western coast of India, hosts an ancient Buddhist monastery eventually appropriated by the Shaiva² Nath Yogis, and today administrated by Vaishnava Sadhus. There, the temple of Manjunath still contains statues of Buddhist deities, now known with Hindu names.



Map 2: Bihar (India)

On this map of the State of Bihar, traversed by the Ganges River, six cities are indicated. First Bodhgaya, the place where the Buddha gained Enlightenment. Then Rajgir which, under the name of Rajagriha, was the capital city of the kingdom of Magadha at the time of the Buddha. That is where the Enlightened One delivered the teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom, the Prajnaparamita Sutra. Patna, under the name of Pataliputra, had been the capital city of the Maurya Empire (4th- 2nd century BCE). The Greek ambassador Megasthenes sojourned there around 303 BCE. Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikramashila had been major centers of study and teaching of Buddhism as well as of other subjects until they were destroyed at the very beginning of the 13th century CE.

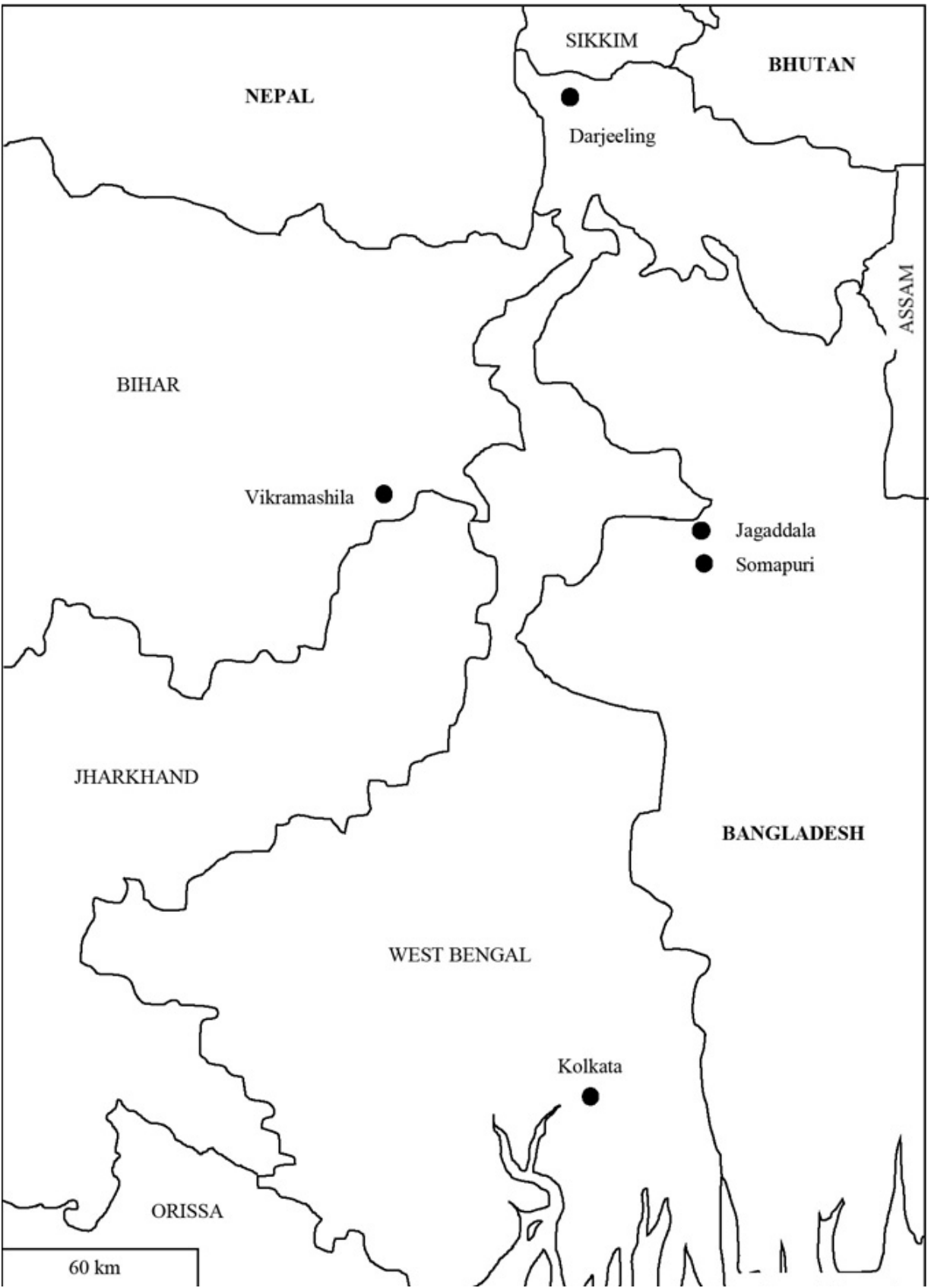


Map 3: Odisha (India)

On this map of Odisha (above) are shown two towns located upstream of the Mahanadi River, viz. Sambalpur, the possible capital city of Indrabodhi, king of Uddiyana in the 8th century CE, and Lanka, today Sonepur, the capital city of a neighboring kingdom. In the East, on the coast of the Bay of Bengal, we find two cities: Puri with its famous Jagannath temple, and Cuttack, which could be the ancient Dhanyakataka, the place where the Buddha revealed the Kalacakra Tantra. The sites of Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri, rich with stupas and statues, were important centers of study and practice of Tantras. Jajpur, under the

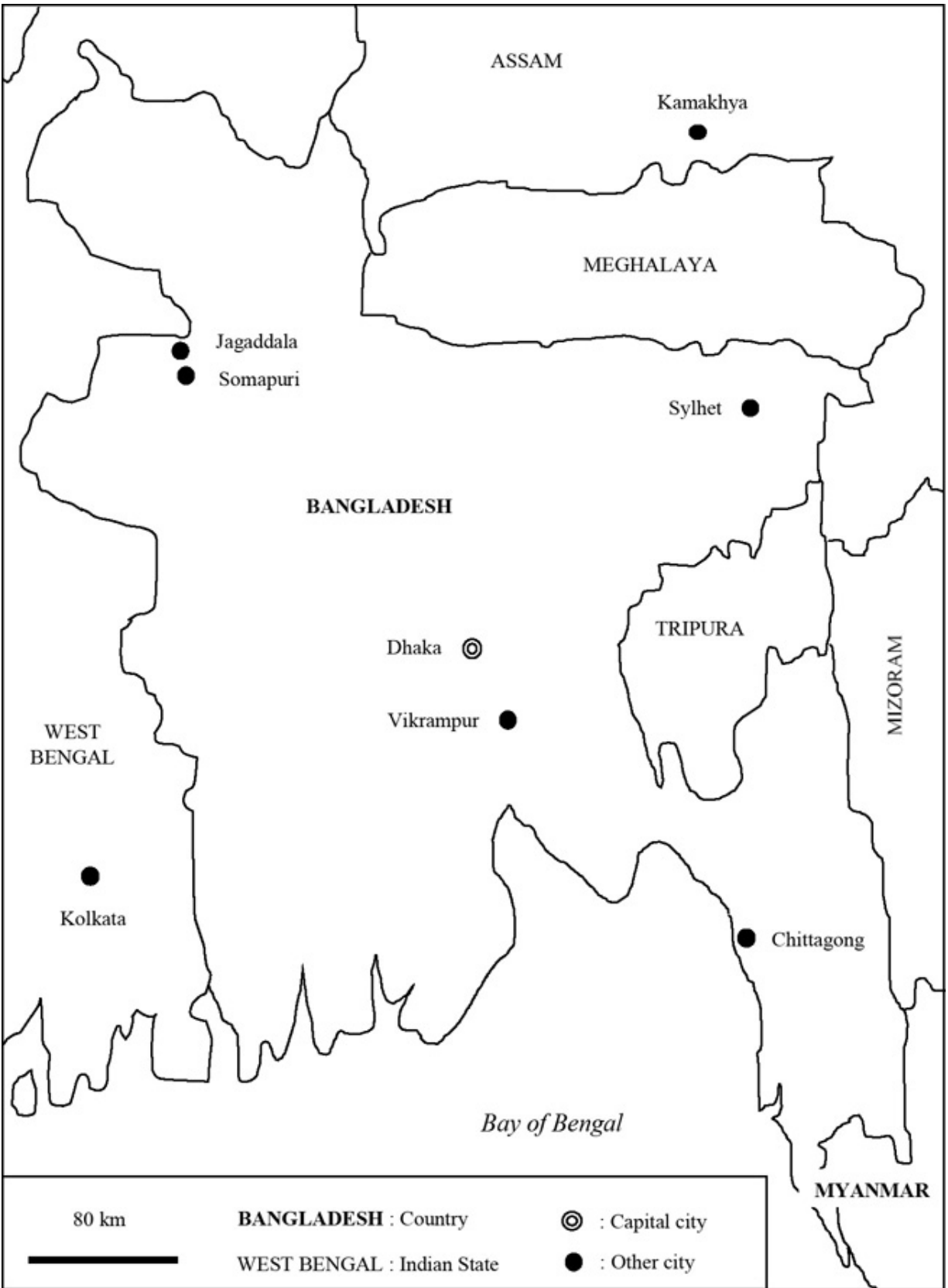
name of Viranja Nagara was, from the 8th to the 10th century CE, the capital city of the Bhaumakara dynasty, patron of Buddhism.

Maps 4 and 5 (below) show the Indian State of West Bengal, and Bangladesh, which together correspond to the Greater Bengal cultural area. They are surrounded by other Indian States with which they constitute the Northeastern India where Tantric Buddhism was born and flourished for almost a millenium. Kamakhya in Assam and Sylhet (formerly Srihatta) in Bangladesh are major Tantric power places. Jagaddala and Somapuri were two of the main monastic universities. At Vikrampur, South of Dhaka, have been recently spotted the remains of the monastery attached to the village of Vajrayogini, the birth place of Atisha Dipamkara Srijnana (982-1054). This famous abbot was invited to teach by the king of Western Tibet, and contributed to a revitalization of monastic life in Tibet.





Map 4: West Bengal (India)



Map 5: Bangladesh

Resorting to the wisdom of non-duality
One reaps the accomplishment of Buddhahood
What need is there for a long discourse?

Lakshminkara

² Shaiva is the Sanskrit adjective derived from the name of the god Shiva.