

## Sarnath: Past, Present and Future

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The Buddha turned the Wheel of Law in Motion and delivered his first sermon in Sarnath after his enlightenment at Bodhgaya. The event is known as the *Dharmacakra pravarttana*. Sarnath, the ancient Isipatana (R̥ṣipattana) or Migadāya became the birth-place of Buddhism and thus, has attracted the attention of scholars, archaeologists and enthusiasts who searched for antiquarian remains for over the last two hundred years. The earliest such reference is by Jonathan Duncan in 1794 in his account of the discovery of two urns by Babu Jagat Singh 'in the vicinity of a temple called Sarnath'. Jagat Singh, the Diwan of Raja Chet Singh of Banaras dug the *stūpa* mound in 1793-94 for the purpose of obtaining building material, both stones and bricks for the erection of a market place in the city after his name. Bones, gold and silver ornaments, pearls, rubies etc. were found in a cylindrical marble box which was kept in a round box of sandstone besides a sculpture dated CE 1026. Later, General Alexander Cunningham could locate the round stone box which was left in the *stūpa* and presented it to the museum of the Bengal Asiatic Society.

Col. C. Mackenzie was the first to start systematic excavation at Sarnath in 1815, but could not achieve any significant success. Cunningham took initiative for his great work at the site and described later in his Report the excavation of 1835-36 at Sarnath, besides he also mentioned the excavations carried out by Major Markham Kittoe in 1851-52 which were completed by E. Thomas and Fitz Edward Hall after Kittoe's departure from Banaras. Due to the untimely death of Major Kittoe at a young age, soon after his departure for England in January 1853, the details of the excavation were never published.

Alexander Cunningham began excavation in December 1834 and closed it in January 1836 at a cost of Rupees 517-3-10. He excavated Dhamek, Dharmarājika and Caukhaṇḍī *stūpas*, besides exposing a monastery and a temple towards north of Dhamek. Attached with the temple, he located a chamber with sculptures and also the large block of stone which he identified with the stone mentioned by Huen Tsang which was believed to be the stone over which Lord Buddha spread his robe after bathing in the nearby pond.

Cunningham himself climbed the Dhamek on 18 January 1835. His measurement of its diameter at base is 93 feet and height 110 feet. He started its excavation from top and found a stone slab inscribed with Buddhist creed in the script of sixth century. He also did some excavations round the outer wall of Dharmarājika *stūpa* to ascertain its thickness. Later Kittoe and Thomas also excavated its inner parts and exposed the foundation of these outer casing. Cunningham in his later visit finally examined the diameter at base which was found to be 49 feet and suggested it to be an ancient hemispherical *stūpa* about 35 to 40 feet in height including the usual pinnacle. After addition of the brick casing wall in C.E. 1026 its outer thickness increased due to 16 and half feet thick wall, making the diameter to be 82 feet and height about 50 feet.

Cunningham proved Caukhaṇḍī *stūpa* to be a commemorative one after excavating it and identified it with the *stūpa* mentioned by Huen Tsang as located 2 or 3 *li* to the south-west of the Deer Park Monastery, where the group of five *bhikkhus* declined to rise to salute Buddha.

One of the most important structures exposed during the excavation by Major Kittoe in 1851-52 was the monastery (numbered as Monastery V) with twenty-eight separate apartments, courtyard and a well. It was believed to be a structure of no less than 3 or 4 storeys in height. Evidence of ready-made wheaten cakes, half-cooked food and other grains found there suggest sudden and rapid abandonment of the monastery by monks. Kittoe exposed numerous votive *stūpas* and shrines around Dhamek *stūpa* and a large quadrangle, called a hospital by him to the west of the Dhamek.

Both Cunningham and Kittoe collected a large number of statues, stone umbrellas, inscriptions, bas-reliefs and other sculptured panels. Excavation was also carried out by C. Horne in 1865, but no significant find is credited to him. In 1877 H. Rivett-Carnac found a Buddha image there.

The nucleus of the ancient deer park was struck by F.O. Oertel in 1904-05 when he excavated and exposed the main shrine, Aśokan pillar with its lion capital, the famous preaching Buddha, Bodhisattva statue of Kaniṣka's year 3 and its stone umbrella along with four hundred and seventy-six pieces of sculptures and forty-one inscriptions which are housed in the Archaeological Museum at Sarnath.

Sir John Marshall resumed the work at Sarnath in 1907 and 1908 assisted by Sten Konow, W.H. Nicholls, Daya Ram Sahni and B.B. Chakravarti and covered a large area. He exposed structures of three monasteries of late Kuṣāṇa period beneath the so called Dharmacakrajinavihāra of Kumāradevī towards the north of the huge compound wall besides excavation to the east and west of the main shrine and the area of the so-called 'Hospital'.

H. Hargreaves in 1914-15 excavated the area to the east and west of the main shrine and exposed the apsidal temple of the late Mauryan period along with other later structures. The apsidal temple on the west of main shrine was located below a large *stūpa* exposed by Marshall earlier. The last major excavation work was conducted by Daya Ram Sahni in 1921-22 when he exposed structures between Dhamek *stūpa* and the main shrine, the decorated brick *stūpa* and the sub-terranean passage to the west of Kumārādevī's monastery attached to it besides other antiquities.

In a recent observation F.R. Allchin has indicated the central elements of the religious complex at Sarnath in the Mauryan period and has compared it with the somewhat similar location of structures in Sanchi. The east-west line cuts the central parts of the main shrine, Aśokan pillar and the apsidal *caitya* in Sarnath. Similarly the north - south line cuts main shrine and Dharmarājika *stūpa* at centre. To add to it, I would suggest that the circular/apsidal *caitya* to the north of the main shrine exposed by Hargreaves in 1914-15 should also be included which belongs to the Maurya-Śuṅga period. Location of two apsidal *caityas* facing the central element is definitely meaningful which needs further investigation. In this context we must also consider the relevance attached to this with cardinal directions as depicted in the Aśokan lion capital, keeping in mind the four animals of the *catuṣpādapaṅkti*, each of whom are separated by a wheel pointing to the four directions and four subsidiary directions. The four great animals guard the four directions of the *anavatapta sarovara*. For stream-lining the disc, it is required to fit the spokes at equidistance which is usually four or eight or more in the same proportion. From the axis, they suggest the cardinal points and in the case of the great holy place of the *Dharmacakra-pravarttana*, location of other important structures in the cardinal direction becomes meaningful as they symbolise the points which cause the 'Wheel of Law' rotate.

Trial-trenches laid over the apsidal structure and in the nearby area by the ASI in 1992-93 confirmed the presence of grey ware, black-slipped ware and plain red ware in layer 2, prior to the construction of the structure indicating the construction in c. third-second century B.C.E. Size of the bricks being 44 X 36 X 5 cm. also suggests the same. Interestingly, layer 3 yielded sherds of Northern Black Polished Ware in black and silver hue shades, but in the absence of any section drawing or details about thickness of the deposits and their association with natural soil together with the fact that the area of operation was quite limited, nothing can be conclusively said about the early stratigraphy of the site.

It is quite surprising that in the long history of archaeological investigations at the site, no serious attempt has ever been made to study the stratigraphy of the site. It is very much essential to know the complete sequence of the site in relation to the cultural deposits

demarcated clearly by habitational and other layers. The surrounding ground level does not have much ups and downs except for the depressions for water bodies. It would be much useful if a survey of the entire site in relation to the adjoining water bodies on the north and west and general ground level takes place which may help in understanding the establishment of the site in accordance with the topographical features. Simultaneously, archaeological excavations are required to corroborate the available evidence of structures at the site in relation to the stratigraphic details of the cultural sequence. Still a fairly large area of the site is left untouched, particularly the one fenced by the Forest Department to the north of the excavated remains. A detailed study of the site plans of different excavations carried out at Sarnath may also suggest substantive area within the archaeological site which is untouched so far. However, it has been observed that the superincumbent masses of brick work of later structures have diverted excavators in going further deep. Hargreaves was perhaps an exception to it who exposed the Mauryan apsidal structure below the square *stūpa* base of late period. Similar attempts are required to be made, particularly in the area around the main shrine for which some structures of secondary nature could be dismantled for making way for more space for area excavation. Even some transplantation of structures may also be required in view of maintaining the newly discovered early structures and their levels. It would also be essential to reach the natural soil in a few trenches and thus preparation of drawings of different sections showing well demarcated structural phases and strata in relation to the reduced levels (RL) may give a clear idea of settlement pattern and planning of the site in different periods.

So far as different periods in the history of the site are concerned, it is not convincing that Aśoka discovered the site in the forest after two hundred years of Lord Buddha and located different spots connected with him and started constructions. It is a recorded fact that Buddha stayed at the site during the *varṣāvāsa* and after the promulgation of the new faith, the site attracted wealthy men and princes who offered donations through establishment of *vihāra* and other religious structures. As the core area of the site is well known, it is just for a systematic worker to excavate with more patience and scientific approach to unearth the pre-Mauryan and other early remains at the site. Recent excavations at Akathā near Sarnath have suggested a date of human activity in the vicinity of Sarnath which may go back to the end of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. Similarly in classification of material and periodisation, due care is to be given to the nomenclature like 'late Kuṣāṇa period' as there seems to be no such phase in the history of Sarnath associated with the late Kuṣāṇas.

On account of mention of cities like Kauśāmbī, Sāketa and Pāṭaliputra forming part of the Kuṣāṇa empire in the year 1 of Kaniṣka's reign as described in the Rabatak inscription, the evidence of inscription of the year 3 of Kaniṣka on the Bodhisattva image from Sarnath

can well be taken as suggestive of the Kuṣāṇa rule over Varanasi area in the early Kuṣāṇa period. But the mention of a ruler Aśvaghōṣa on the Aśokan pillar at Sarnath suggests on palaeographic evidence that soon after Kaniṣka, the Kuṣāṇa rule perhaps ended in the eastern part of the empire. The Maghas also came to power in the area around Allahabad. The area of Sarnath seems to have witnessed the rule of local rulers till the emergence of the Guptas. An image of Hārīti of the so-called late Kuṣāṇa period discovered by me in 1982 in village Baraipur at Sarnath and now displayed in the Sarnath Museum having an inscription in Brāhmī letters of late third or early fourth century CE, possibly mentioning the name of the first Gupta ruler Śrīgupta, suggests the early beginning of the Gupta art at the site which brought about grace and serenity to the sculptures and gave birth to one of the finest schools of Indian art, generally called Sarnath School of Art.

Gupta images from Sarnath, mostly housed in the site museum, have the noblest expression of Buddhist ideal of serenity and compassion. Forms of Buddha's body, expression of his face and the smile hovering over his lips suggest ultimate harmony which had been achieved by the Enlightened One. The images have been fashioned in every aspect according to the prescribed canons of beauty and iconography.

The country has celebrated the Centenary Year in 2010 of its earliest site museum which has the precious possession of the National Emblem in the form of Aśokan Lion Capital. During all these years of archaeological discoveries and developments, ASI has continuously got the support and encouragement from various academic, religious and monastic establishments. This process started after the visit of Anāgarika Dharmapāla in 1891 and subsequent founding of the Mahā Bodhi Society of India. Sarnath came into lime light in the Buddhist World and the followers of Buddhism from many countries were attracted to visit the holy place. The Burmese Buddhist Monastery was established by Bhikshu Mahavira and U.Chandramani Mahasthavira in 1910 in Sarnath. The former was the nephew of Babu Kunwar Singh, a great freedom fighter of the Revolt of 1857 who went to Burma and Sri Lanka after the Revolt, studied there and came to Sarnath with a mission to reintroduce Buddhism. With the early efforts of the above great personalities and their association with the archaeologists of the ASI and with citizens of Varanasi like Acharya Rama Chandra Shukla, the heritage of Sarnath could be saved even before the Protection Notification of the site.

Subsequently, a number of other Buddhist monasteries were established including the Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, Korean and Japanese. The Maha Bodhi Society not only worked for social upliftment by opening dispensaries, school and college, but also started publication of *Dharmadūta* which contained articles by eminent literary personalities, historians and

archaeologists and became extremely popular everywhere. Indian monks and scholars like Bhikshu Jagadish Kashyap, Rahul Sankrityayan, Anand Kaushalyayan and Dharmarakshit and Sinhalese monks Devapriyavali Singh, Dharmaratna, Sangharatna, Ananda Maitreya and many others have contributed a lot for the development of Sarnath. Towards the growth of Buddhism and Buddhist studies here, the contribution of monks and scholars including U. Kittima, U. Tikhendiriya, Sasanasri, Jinaratna , P.Gunaratna, Shasanarashmi, Samdong Rinpoche, Thupten Jugnes, Jagannath Upadhyaya, C.Mani, A.K.Narain and C.S.Upasak shall always be remembered.

With the establishment of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, a new phase of intellectual development started in the second half of the last century in the area of teaching, research and publication concerned with Buddhist literature, philosophy and traditional science. The Institute has the patronage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and it functions as an autonomous institution of the Ministry of Culture of the Government of India. This institution is unique of its kind and is sincerely engaged in the preservation of Tibetan culture, art, literature, tradition and philosophy which has evolved from our own heritage.

Sarnath remains a sacred place for Hindus and Jainas as it has the famous Sāraṅganātha temple, dedicated to Lord Śiva and it is the birth place of the 11<sup>th</sup> Jaina Tīrthāṅkara Śreyāṁsanātha whose temple is located close to the ancient site. In spite of expanding urban growth, Sarnath has retained its peaceful atmosphere which requires to be preserved for posterity. With the recommendation of the ASI, the ancient site of Sarnath has already been included in the Tentative List of the World Heritage Sites of UNESCO and it is likely to be permanently inscribed in the List once the Nomination Dossiers are completed.