

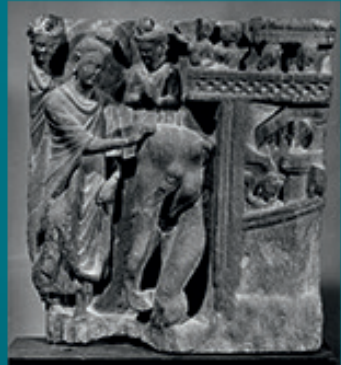
# Buddhist Circuit



Birth at Lumbini



Sarnath



Rajagriha



Twin Miracle of Shravasti



Mahabodhi temple Gaya



Sankissa

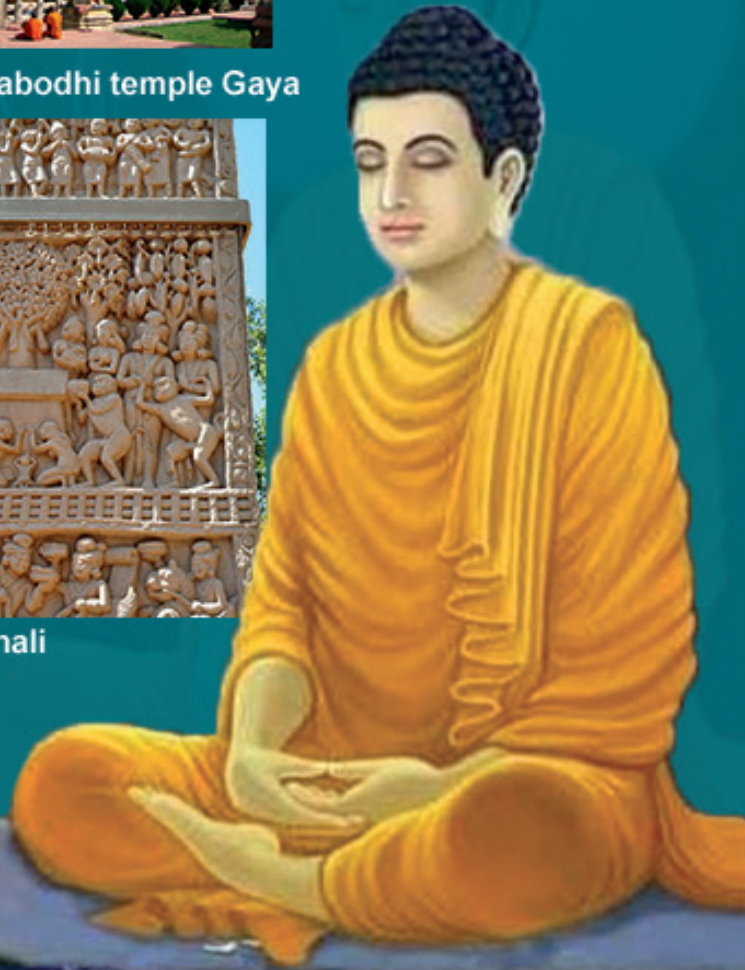


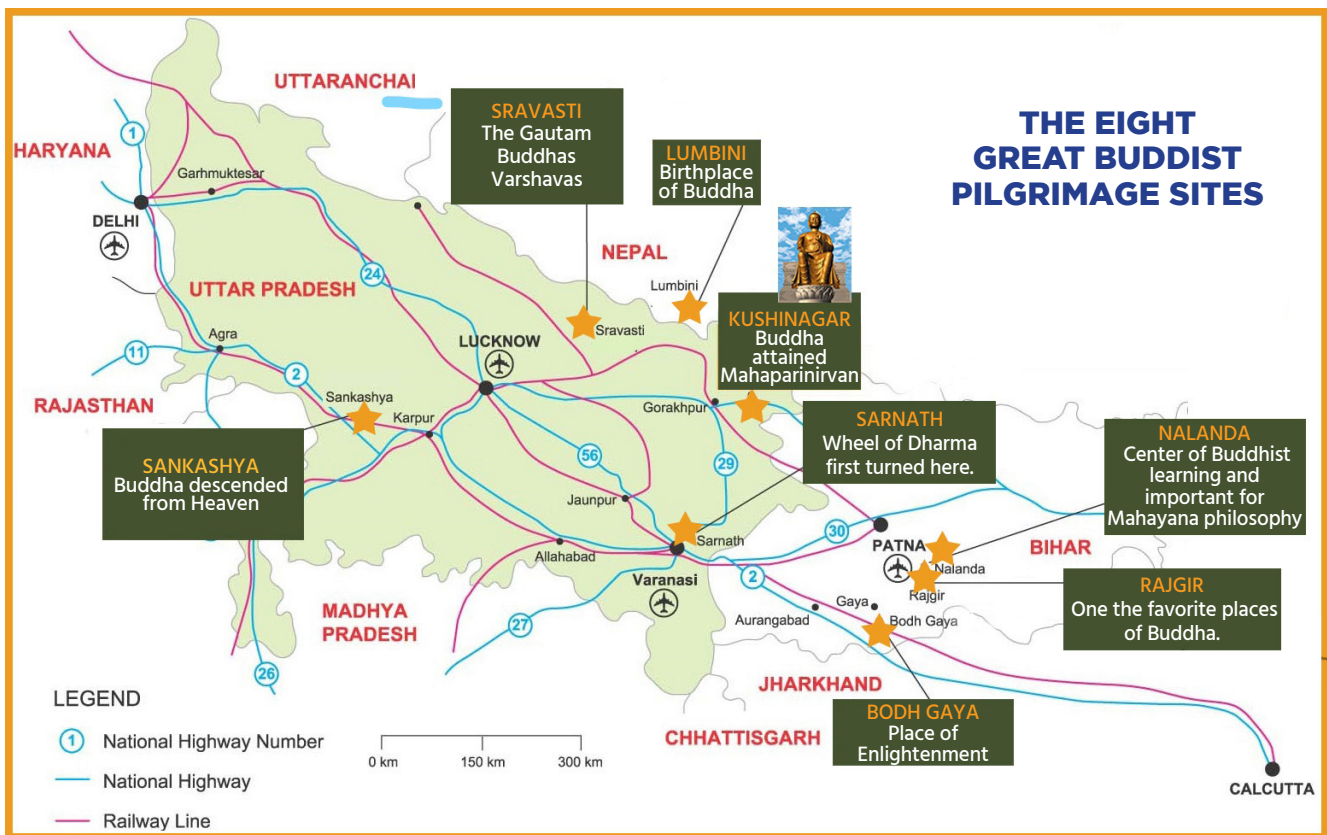
Vaishali



Kushinagara

Buddhist Circuit, which focused on places, which have significance in the life of Gautam Buddha.





# Buddhist Circuit : A pilgrim within

Generally speaking, a Buddhist person would strive to undertake a pilgrimage tour to the important places which were associated with the Buddha's life. The entire journey is called as the 'Ashtamahasthanayatra' (a pilgrimage of Eight Great Places). The places included in this pilgrimage include those four places where very important events took place in the life of Gautama Buddha. They are Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Saranath and Kushinagara. The other four places are those where he performed great miracles. They are Rajagriha, Sankissa, Vaishali and Shravasti.

Dr. Manjiri Bhalerao

Gautama Buddha was the founder of Buddhism, which became a popular religion over the period of time. The religion, though born in India, crossed its boundaries and spread across the Asian continent and established itself. It, in many parts, developed into a new local variant of the original

local religion. This religion manifested in different manner in several parts of the world but its original concepts, philosophies, mythological episodes never dissociated themselves from India. Hence it has always been a dream of a pious Buddhist to visit the land of the Buddha. Generally speaking,

a Buddhist person would strive to undertake a pilgrimage tour to the important places which were associated with the Buddha's life. The entire journey is called as the 'Ashtamahasthanayatra' (a pilgrimage pilgrimage include those four places where very important events took place in the life of Gautama Buddha. They are Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Saranath and Kushinagara. The other four places are those where he performed great miracles. They are Rajagriha, Sankissa, Vaishali and Shravasti. Let us begin our journey of understanding the Ashtamahasthanas and their significance for a pious devotee of the Gautama Buddha.

Before starting this journey, we should know the various names by which Gautama Buddha is known to us through the Buddhist tradition. We address him generally as Gautama Buddha. However, his birth name was Siddharth, his father's name was Shuddhodhana, and mother's name was Mahamaya (as she was the elder daughter of the family). He was born in the Shakya clan. His father was living in Kapilavastu. His mother had seen a dream of an elephant entering her womb before she realized that she was pregnant. For the delivery of the baby, she started for her parents' place. However, on her way, in the small park called as Lumbini (modern Rummindei near Nepalese Terrain), she gave birth to a child. It was a miraculous birth as the child took birth from the side of his mother from where the elephant had entered her womb. Immediately after the birth, the child could stand on his feet.

Siddharth's father was living in Kapilavastu. His mother had seen a dream of an elephant entering her womb before she realized that she was pregnant. For the delivery of the baby, she started for her parents' place. However, on her way, in the small park called as Lumbini (modern Rummindei near Nepalese Terrain), she gave birth to a child. It was a miraculous birth as the child took birth from the side of his mother from where the elephant had entered her womb.

He declared that it was his last birth and that he would be liberated. It is told to us that his mother expired after his birth. He was brought up by his maternal aunt Prajapita Gautami, who was also his step mother. Hence, he was also called as Gautama.

Later on, when the astrologers predicted that this child will either become a sovereign emperor or the founder of a religion, Siddhartha's father took all the care and provided him all the material pleasures of life. Eventually, he got married with Yashodhara. Both of them had a child called Rahul. At the age of twenty-five, one day, he saw a death procession along with the crying relatives. He then a noticed

an ascetic. Then he realized of the miseries of the world especially when one has relatives, family and social bonds. He realized that the ascetic seemed happy as he did not have any bondage and could live his life freely. Hence, he also decided to cut all the bondage of his life by becoming an ascetic and become free. He joined various other groups and tried their ways to find the ultimate truth. However, he was not comfortable with those methods and decided to find his own way. He started his own meditation at Gaya near the river Niranjara. When he was on the verge of getting the enlightenment, he was attacked by the Mara, the God of evil. He wanted to disturb the meditation of Gautama and prevent him for getting the enlightenment. He sent his fierce army, sent his beautiful daughters to lure him but Gautama did not budge. Instead, he touched the ground and appealed the mother earth that she was the witness to his meditation, dedication and he deserved to get the enlightenment. With this appeal, all attacks were cleared and he got the enlightenment. This place became the most important place for any follower of Buddhism as it



was at Gaya that Siddharth became the Buddha -- the Enlightened one. This is the most popular place for the pilgrims. Ashoka had erected a pillar at this place in third century BCE and even a stupa. Later on, in 7th century CE a huge temple was erected during the time of Harshavardhan. Today's temple at Bodh Gaya is the same with a few renovations in some parts.

The Vajrasana stone slab in the campus of the temple is supposed to have been placed there during the time of Ashoka. The Bodhi tree that we see there today was replanted in eighth century CE as it was burnt by King Shashank. In third, century BCE Ashoka's daughter had taken a branch of that tree to Sri Lanka and it was planted there. Hence a branch of the same tree was back to India and was planted at Gaya at the same place. Hence the tree as well as the other monuments, are extremely sacred for a pious Buddhist follower.



Mara's attack at Gaya and enlightenment.

## Miracles in Buddha's life

Over the period of time, Gautama Buddha became a very popular leader. However, there were people who were jealous of his popularity. One such person was his cousin Devadatta. He was an ascetic. He wanted to become the chief of the Sangha. Hence, he tried to kill the Buddha by sending a drunk and mad elephant towards him at Rajagriha. But a miracle occurred. After approaching the Buddha, the elephant realized the Buddha's greatness and prostrated in front of him. This event is known as the Miracle of Rajagriha.

After the enlightenment, Gautama, the Buddha, went to different places. At Sarnath near Varanasi, he met five of his old ascetic acquaintances. He told them about his enlightenment. On their request, he gave them a lecture, which was the first lecture after his enlightenment at Gaya. That lecture is called as the First Sermon. The location was that of a Deer Park. There were many of them moving around. Hence, they also got the opportunity to listen to the Buddha. Thus, whenever it is shown in the sculpture or painting depicting this event, the deer are also depicted in the scene. This event is generally described as the Dharmachakrapravartana. It is believed that by giving this lecture,

the Buddha 'Set the Wheel of Law into Motion'. This also led to the establishment of the Sangha i.e., the monastic order. Hence, Saranath is considered as a very important place in the history of Buddhism. This also is a must visit place for the pious Buddhists.

Over the period of time, Gautama Buddha became a very popular leader who gave the Middle Path to the people as compared to the extreme ways proposed by his contemporaries. However, there were people who were jealous



**Mahabodhi temple,  
Bodh Gaya**

of his popularity. One such person was his cousin Devadatta. He was an ascetic and also came from the Shakya clan. He wanted to become the chief of the Sangha. Hence, he tried to kill the Buddha by sending a drunk and mad elephant towards him at Rajagriha. But a miracle occurred. After approaching the Buddha, the elephant realized the Buddha's greatness and prostrated in front of him. This event is known as the Miracle of Rajagriha. Rajagriha was one of the favourite places of the Tathagata

(another name of the Buddha, by which he is often addressed in the Pali literature). He spent many rainy seasons at Rajagriha near the Gridhrakuta (Vulture's peak). Hence it is also a very significant place for the Buddhist devotees. While spreading his religion, the Buddha once thought of sharing his knowledge with his deceased mother, who was staying in the Thirty Third Heaven among the Gods. So he went to the heaven, preached her and came back to the earth after three months. It is believed that he was escorted by the Gods Brahma and Indra to descend at Sankissa. People, who were witness to this event, recorded that tall staircase came from the heaven and Buddha came to the earth. This is also considered as the Miracle of Sankissa and hence this place is included in the Buddhist Pilgrimage Tour. Later on, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka erected a pillar here.

As Buddha was moving from one village to another, he once went to Vaishali. When he was meeting people, the news of his arrival reached the monkeys in the jungle. They were collecting honey for themselves. They came to meet Gautama in Vaishali and offered the honey to him. This is called as the Miracle of Vaishali in the Buddhist tradition and hence Vaishali is considered as a sacred place for the inclusion in the Ashamahasthanas. Even though Gautama emerged as a leader, he was often challenged by the people from established religious system. He answered them by performing certain miracles. Once at Shravasti, in the religious conference, he was challenged by such people. There he performed two miracles. The first one was that he created fire by one hand and started the rains by other hand. By doing this he showed that he had control over two of the great elements of nature i.e. the fire and the water. The second miracle was that he appeared in one thousand forms in front of the people. This event is known as the Miracle of the Thousand Buddhas. Buddha also spent many of his rain retreats in Shravasti. This made Shravasti a very popular as well as important pilgrim place for the devotees of Buddhism. The last but an extremely significant place for the Buddhist pilgrims is Kushinagar. It was here that the Buddha was liberated from the bondages of life and death and attained the Mahaparinirvana. This place called as Kushinara, was then known as Kushinagara. It was under the rule of the Malla rulers. It was at the age of eighty, that Gautama Buddha took his last breath. That is why this one of the most sacred places of Buddhism. Every Buddhist would want to visit these eight places during his lifetime. It is also popularly known as the Buddha Circuit. There are numerous other places, where Gautama Buddha went during his life time and something or the other happened there. However, these above mentioned eight places are unanimously considered as the Ashtamahasthanas.



# Lumbini : Buddha's birth place

Among the Ashtamahasthanas, the first and foremost is his birth place, called as Lumbini, in the modern Rupandehi district of Lumbini Province of Nepal. In the Nepalese language the word Lumbini means Lovely. Even though there are numerous traditions giving the year of the birth of the Buddha, scholars generally believe that it was 563 BCE. After the death of the Buddha, many new structures came up at this site. The identification of this site never posed any question as the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka had erected a pillar over there with an inscription saying 'Hida Budha Jate' (Here was born the sage of the Sakyas)

**B**uddhism, one of the greatest religions in the world, considers Siddhartha or Gautama, who was the Buddha (the enlightened one), as the founder of this religion. The tradition considers that a devout Buddhist should take up a pilgrimage to the eight great places (Ashtamahasthanas) that are associated with the important events in his life. These events have a great role to play not only in the life of the Buddha but also in the history of the

religion.

The oral tradition has also retained the memory of those events among the local population. In the previous articles, we have taken a brief overview of these eight great places. Now we will try to understand the significance of them in separate articles.

The Buddhist tradition tell us that the king of the Shakya clan, Shuddhodhana and his wife



queen Mahamayadevi were living in Kapilavastu. She belonged to the Koliya clan, which had their territory at Devahrada (Pali - Devadaha). Queen Mahamayadevi saw a dream of an elephant entering her womb before she realized that she was pregnant. The knowledgeable members in the court of the king interpreted this dream as a very good omen. They also predicted the birth of a son who would eventually become a Universal Monarch or the Founder of a religion. Queen Mahamayadevi started the journey to her paternal house to give birth to the child there.

However, when she was passing through the Lumbini grove, she stopped there for a while. In the garden of the Shala trees, she gave birth to a male child from her side (from where the elephant had entered the womb). As it was not a planned delivery and considering the divine nature of the baby, the branches of the Shala tree voluntarily provided a shelter to Mahamayadevi. It has been told in the Buddhist tradition that after the birth, the child was received by the four great kings, who were the guardians of the four directions. Then walked seven steps and on those spots the lotus flowers bloomed. This was an extraordinary event!

The Buddhist tradition records that after the birth of the child Queen Mahamayadevi died after seven days. He was raised by his maternal aunt and stepmother Mahaprajapati Gautami. Hence, he was called as Gautama. His birth name was Siddhartha. He was called as Shakyamuni or Buddha after the enlightenment.

Among the Ashtamahasthanas, the first and foremost is his birth place, called as Lumbini, in the modern Rupandehi district of Lumbini Province of Nepal. In the Nepalese language the word Lumbini means Lovely. Even though there are numerous traditions giving the year of the birth of the Buddha, scholars generally believe that it was 563 BCE. After the death of the Buddha, many new structures came up at this site. The identification of this site never posed any question as the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka had erected a pillar over there with an inscription saying 'Hida Budha Jate' (Here was born the sage of the Sakyas).

Today, from Kathmandu, it is a 10 hour's drive. The closest airport is the Gautam Buddha Airport at Bhairahawa, which is a 30 minutes' drive. For the Indian border territory Sonauli in Maharajganj district is one hour's drive from Lumbini. For those who travel by the railways, the Nautanwa railway station is just a few kms away. At about a 100 kms distance is the city of Gorakhpur and it takes four hours' drive to reach there.

Although located in the midst of plains, the site of Lumbini has the most picturesque background in the distant snow-clad peaks of Annapurna, Matsyapuchchha and Dhawalgiri overlooking the Mahabharata range, black with deep jungles. The site with its ruins largely corresponds to the account

of Hiuen Tsang who described the La-fa-ni grove that is today's Lumbini. Even though all the details described by him cannot be seen today but the most important object - the pillar erected by Ashoka - is still present.

Hiuen Tsang mentions that the pillar had the capital of a horse. But it is not seen there. The sandstone pillar bearing the characteristic Mauryan polish and having tiny blackish specks was quarried for Chunar, like the other Ashokan pillars. The pillar is 24 ft 3 in. tall. It carries an inscription in Brahmi script and Prakrit language, written by Ashoka in five lines recording that he, twenty years after his coronation, paid homage in person to the spot where Buddha was born, that he erected a stone wall around the place as well as a commemorative pillar and exempted the village of Lummini from paying taxes except only one-eighth share of the produce.

Near the present top are several later records of pilgrims, of which one is the well-known mantra "Om Manipadme hum" in Tibetan character. To the immediate north-east and south-east of the pillar are two small brick stupas, both with a square base, while to its south-west is a brick plinth of moderate dimensions. These three structures are much later in date than the pillar of Ashoka. To the north-west of the pillar is a damaged cell-like structure. A few yards to the east of the pillar is a modern flat-roofed temple with a spacious paved platform around. Inside the temple is enshrined a fragmentary image, variously known as Rupadei (Rupadevi) and Rummindei (Rummindevi), the tutelary goddess of Lumbini. It presents in high relief the nativity of Buddha.

Mayadevi, nearly life-sized, stands under a tree grasping its branch with her right hand, her left hand resting on her hip. On her right side and supporting her is a woman, presumed to be her sister Mahaprajapati Gautami. Next to her is a slightly bent figure of Shakra, with a high crown, who is in the attitude of receiving the new born child, who is emerging from his mother's right side. The small figure of Siddharth with a halo around his head stands below. Behind Shakra is a male figure. The whole sculpture is dated to the Gupta period that is circa fifth -sixth centuries CE.

Other than the above mentioned archaeological remains, the site of Lumbini has many stupas, remains of temple-like structures, tanks, monasteries, images of Buddha, Maitreya, Manjushri, Lokeshwara etc. On the basis of the style, it can be surmised that Lumbini maintained its existence as a Buddhist site till around 11th century CE. A modern Buddhist devotee wants to visit all these places showing their antiquity at this site. Many of these structures were erected over a period of time. However, the context of these structures underline their significance.



# Shravasti : Buddha spent rainy seasons

Shravasti, situated on the bank of the Achiravati (modern Rapti), was the capital of the kingdom of Kosala in ancient times. Today it is the districts headquarter of the same name. It is located very strategically on the trade route going to various important trade centres of the Indian subcontinent including Nepal. All the ancient literary sources unanimously record that Shravasti was a great prosperous urban centre of ancient India. Ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Jain literature and even the accounts of the foreign travellers have given vivid descriptions of Shravasti.

In the Buddhist context, it is considered as one of the most favourite places of the Buddha as he had spent around 29 of his rainy seasons (Varshavasa) at this place. He is said to have performed many miracles in Shravasti. A monastery was constructed at this place by a devout lay follower Sudatta, who was famous by the name Anathapindika.

Shravasti, although, is extremely famous in the literary source, did not retain its name in the oral tradition. When the town of Shravasti was searched for, researchers proposed that the site of Sahet – Mahet should be considered as the ancient city of Shravasti because of the habitation remains there and the huge fortification walls around the towns. In the Buddhist literature, the miracles of the Buddha that he had performed here, have been described in detail.

The most famous of them are the Yamakapratiharya (i.e. the twin miracle) and Mahapratiharya the miracle of the thousand Buddhas. When the Buddha was challenged by the rival teachers to perform a miracle, he accepted the challenge and declared that he will perform the miracle on the full moon day of the Ashadh month under a mango tree. Hearing this all the mango trees in the vicinity were cut by the rival teachers. But on the full moon day, a gardener found a mango fruit and offered it to the Buddha.

Buddha ate the fruit and buried the seed in the ground and washed his hands. Immediately, a new tree grew up. He then created fire from the upper

part of his body and water from the lower part of his body, later he switched them. Later on, he appeared in multiple forms, generally called as 'the Miracle of Thousand Buddhas'. As these miracles were performed at Shravasti, it became a very important pilgrim place.

Shravasti is also famous for the Jetavanavihara, donated by Anathapindika. Even though his name was Sudatta, he was famous as Anathapindika as

he used to give food (Pinda) to the homeless (Anatha). He was a very generous merchant of Shravasti. He was a great devotee of the Buddha too. He wanted to construct a vihara for the Buddhist monastic order in Shravasti. Hence he requested the Buddha to choose the land for the same. Buddha chose the location of a garden, known as the Jetavana, outside the city. It was owned by the prince Jeta. When Anathapindika contacted Prince Jeta for the purchase of the land and the price for the same, Jeta told him to cover the selected area with gold coins and that was the price of the land. Ananthapindika did that and constructed a beautiful monastic establishment.

As the Buddha stayed there, it became famous as the Mulagandhakuti or Gandhakuti. The Buddhist art has given a lot of importance to these three events

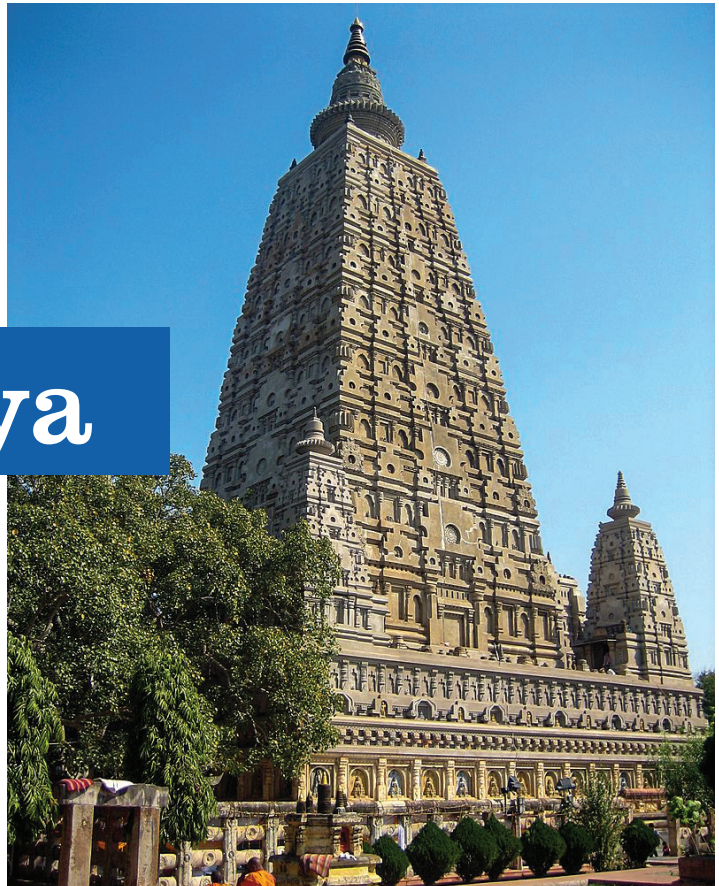
in the life of the Buddha i.e. the two miracles and the donation of the Jetavana-arama. The events are depicted at many stupa sites like Bharhut, Amaravati, Kanaganahalli and also in the Gandhara region i.e. in modern Pakistan.

The excavations carried out at both Sahet and Mahet have revealed various structures, starting from third century B.C. Some of them are believed to be the part of the Jetavana-arama. Along with these ruins, the site also revealed the remains of a few stupas, viharas, images with inscriptions, chaitya complex constructed there over the period of more than 1000 years i.e. till 13th century A.D. Today also it is a very significant pilgrim and tourist place. Numerous pilgrims visit these places to offer their homage to the Buddha as well as Anathapindika.



# Bodh Gaya

## Siddhartha became the Buddha here



Unlike most of the centres of northern India, this establishment survived the shock of the Muslim invasion of Bihar. It, however, did not escape entirely unscathed from the hands of these invaders, as we can gather from the biography of the Tibetan monk pilgrim Chag lo-tsa-ba Chos-rje-pal (the translator Dharmasvamin), who visited Vajrasana (Bodh-Gaya), Rajagriha and Nalanda in C.E. 1234-36.

**B**odh Gaya, in modern Bihar state, is the most important pilgrim place for the Buddhists across the world. This is the site where Siddhartha became the Buddha. Today it is located in the Gaya district. This is a sacred landscape for both the Hindus as well as the Buddhists. The Hindus believe that at Vishnupada Gaya, there is a footprint of Lord Vishnu. This place is also considered as very auspicious as it is believed that if one performs the funeral rites of one's father here, he attains salvation. Hence, for the Hindus, this place is of utmost importance.

It was in the sixth century B.C.E. that after performing very rigorous meditation, Siddhartha could not even move. At that time, Sujata, a village woman, helped him with some Kheer (rice and milk pudding). After that he gained some strength

and then went to Uruvela, i.e. modern Bodh Gaya. There, he sat down under a pipal tree, on the bank of Niranjana (today's Lilajana) river. He started meditating and after some time, when he was on the verge of getting enlightenment; the demon Mara started his attack. He also sent his three beautiful daughters to seduce Siddhartha. In Buddhism, Mara represents death, rebirth and desire. It is also suggested by some scholars that Mara is the personification of the dilemma that Siddhartha was facing at that time. He had realised that it was the last point in his life when he had to take any decision as to continue with the ascetic lifestyle to go back to the life of a prince with material pleasures.

It was considered figuratively as the attack of Mara. Siddhartha continued his meditation, touched

the mother earth and appealed to her that his efforts are genuine and she has been a witness to them. Then immediately the attack weathered. Siddhartha got the enlightenment and became the Buddha i.e. the enlightened one. He sat there for a few more days and thought about the revelation. As Siddhartha got the enlightenment there, the place came to be known as the Sambodhi. It was popular by this name during the times of Ashoka, as he has referred to his visit to Sambodhi in one of his major rock edicts. Later on, the entire Buddhist establishment came to be known as Mahabodhi. The pipal tree, at the foot of which Gautama obtained his Bodhi, formed the nucleus of a great establishment. The tree which is now present at the back of the Mahabodhi temple is only its remote



successor. There is no record of the number of times it died but was revived through grafts and seeds.

The present tree sprang up out of the roots of its immediate predecessor which had fallen down in 1876. The earliest construction at the foot of the Bodhi tree was a polished sandstone throne (Vajrasana), with typical designs generally found on Mauryan pillar capitals. It is ascribed to Asoka. The establishment flourished tremendously throughout the early centuries of the common era but especially during the long rule of the Palas. Some of the available inscriptions recording dedications are dated in the reign of the rulers of this dynasty.

If the Buddhists resorted to Nalanda for learning, they flocked to Mahabodhi, the most sacred place of pilgrimage, for its special sanctity. The thought of every pious Buddhist, no matter Indian or foreign, was to perform pilgrimage to the sacred spot, offer his prayer at the foot of the image of Buddha at Vajrasana and erect memorials according

to his capacity. Thus, grew up the multitude of votive offerings, mostly in the form of stupas, the spontaneous and tangible expressions of devotion. Their number shows the magnitude of Buddhist devotional piety. Many of these stupas are monolithic, others are of stonework and still others of brick. Among the pilgrims & records are a few in Chinese characters.

Unlike most of the centres of northern India, this establishment survived the shock of the Muslim invasion of Bihar. It, however, did not escape entirely unscathed from the hands of these invaders, as we can gather from the biography of the Tibetan monk pilgrim Chag lo-tsa-ba Chos-rje-dpal (the translator Dharmasvamin), who visited Vajrasana (Bodh-Gaya), Rajagriha and Nalanda in C.E. 1234-36. This pilgrim furnished an eyewitness account of the unsteady condition of the area overrun by the Muslims who were still to establish a stable government. When he reached Vajrasana in 1234, the place was deserted and only four monks were found staying (in the Vihara). One (of them) said, "It is not good! All have fled from fear of the Turushka soldiery & they blocked up the door in front of the Mahabodhi image with bricks and plastered it. Near it they placed another image as a substitute. They also plastered the outside door (of the temple). On its surface they drew the image of Mahesvara in order to protect it from non-Buddhists. These monks, too, fled away and also with them Dharmasvamin. After seventeen days, when the Muslim forces were reported to have gone far away, they returned, and normal condition was restored. The partition-wall was removed and the image, which had been deprived of its emerald eyes by a Turushka soldier on an earlier occasion, in the sanctum, came to be worshipped.

The temple was in use even in the fourteenth century, long after the Muslim conquest of northern India, as is evident from the records of pilgrims, inscribed on the pavement-slabs. Not long afterwards, it fell into decay. The present condition of the temple and its premises is the result of the thorough makeover completed in the eighties of the nineteenth century. In recent years a museum has been established near the site to house loose sculptures and other antiquities found at the site and its neighbourhood.

Today, one can see numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries constructed near the Mahabodhi temple. They were constructed by and for the devotees of Bhutan, China, Magnolia, Cambodia, Korea, Sikkim, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibetan and many more. They were constructed according to the style of their native architecture. Thus, once a small village called Uruvela, later on became the world-renowned centre only because it was here that Siddhartha got enlightenment!





## Sarnath : Where Buddha set the Wheel of Law into motion

During the Sunga period, about a dozen carved pillars were erected as a part of a stupa railing. To the Kushan period belongs a colossal image of Bodhisattva of red sandstone standing under a stone umbrella—an import from Mathura—set up in the chankama (pathway) of Buddha in the third year of Kanishka by the monk Bala. He also made similar gifts elsewhere as well. Two foreigners, the Great Satrap Kharapallana and Satrap Vanaspara, local governors of the Varanasi region, participated in this work of piety.

Sarnath, (District Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh), 10 kms to the north of Varanasi, is one of the holiest sites of the Buddhist world. The whole landscape has been considered extremely sacred due to its proximity to the confluence of Ganga and Varuna. Varanasi has been a very revered place since time immemorial for the Hindus. Not far from it is Sarnath, where Gautama Buddha went after getting enlightenment. It is told to us that after his enlightenment at Gaya, he stayed there for eight days and thought over the knowledge that was revealed to him. Then he wanted to share his knowledge with the people with whom he had spent his early days of asceticism. Hence when he came to Sarnath, which was known as Rishipatana (in Sanskrit) or Isipattana (in Pali) and also as Mrigadaya (a free park for deer).

It is told to us that on his way to Sarnath, Gautama met five of his old acquaintances. When they came to know

about his enlightenment, they requested him to give a lecture to them about his newly gained knowledge. He started telling them and at the same time a group of deer joined them to listen to Gautama's lecture. This event of giving his first lecture after the enlightenment, made the Wheel of Law (Dharmachakra) turn. Hence this event is also recorded as the Dharmachakrapravartana (Sanskrit) or Dharmachakkapabattana (in Pali).

This event is also known as the First Sermon of the Buddha. This event has got an immense significance in the history of Buddhism. It led to the foundation of the Sangha or the monastic order for the monks. The thoughts became regularised resulting in the foundation of a religion. It is told to us that by giving this lecture he set the 'wheel of law into motion'.

This wheel of law was the cosmic wheel of changing the lives of the people, bringing the happy days after sad ones. It had become static and there was grief everywhere. By setting it into motion, Buddha assured people that now the peace will prevail. Sarnath enjoys a high position in the Buddhist world and it is one of the Eight Great Places. Hence emperor Ashoka constructed various structures at Sarnath. These are the earliest remains at Sarnath. Ashoka erected a pillar (only the lower portion of which is now in situated and the other pieces are kept in the same campus) here and inscribed on it his Schism Edict threatening rebellious monks with expulsion from the Sangha. This warning was not an empty threat as the Pali literary sources tell us about the actual action taken up by Ashoka of driving more than 1000 monks not only out of the Sangha but also out of the country. The pillar has on its surface an exquisite polish. The detached magnificent capital is now displayed in the Sarnath site museum. It consists of four components (a) a lotus at the base; (b) a circular abacus carved with an elephant, bull, horse and lion separated from one another by a wheel; (c) four lions set back-to-back over the abacus; and (d) a surmounting wheel (a few fragments have been recovered). The lion-part of the capital with the abacus, of superb workmanship, has now been adopted as the National Emblem of India. On this pillar, were inscribed in later periods two more records, one, of the Kushana period, referring to the reign of Ashvaghosha, a ruler of Kausambi, and the other, of the early Gupta period, mentioning the teachers of the Sammitiya sect.

Another monument attributed to Asoka is a stupa, the ill-fated Dharmarajika, to the south of the pillar, which was extensively demolished in the last decade of the eighteenth century. In its core, was found a sandstone box and a green marble relic-casket, the latter placed inside the former and containing a few pieces of human bone, decayed pearls, gold leaves and other jewels. The sanctity of this stupa is amply borne out by the six enlargements which it successively underwent, the last addition

being in the twelfth century A.D. The last object which is ascribed to Asoka is a monolithic railing, which was found buried inside the foundation of the south chapel of the Main Shrine.

During the Sunga period (i.e. in 2nd century B.C.), about a dozen carved pillars were erected as a part of a stupa railing. To the Kushan period belongs a colossal image of Bodhisattva of red sandstone standing under a stone umbrella-an import from Mathura-set up in the chankama (pathway) of Buddha in the third year of Kanishka by the monk Bala. He also made similar gifts elsewhere as well. Two foreigners, the Great Satrap Kharapallana and Satrap Vanaspara, local governors of the Varanasi region, participated in this work of piety. This image along with the umbrella and also the pillars mentioned above are now exhibited in the local museum at Sarnath.

The Gupta period witnessed a phenomenal rise in the sculptural and structural activity at Sarnath so that the place, already a holy centre of Buddhism, became an important centre of art. The artists of the Gupta period finally achieved the apt expression on the face of the Buddha image. The expression of calm serenity, springing from a complete mental and physical discipline, and spiritual luminosity combined with grace and beauty of form in these images remain unparalleled by the products of any other schools. Hence the art of this period is called the Classical Art of India. The combination of both the foreign (Gandhara School of art) and the native traditional India (Mathura School of art) resulted in such divine manifestation. Such images were made on a large scale and were transported to various parts of the country. Many composite sculptures narrating the important events from the life of Gautama Buddha were also created at Sarnath and became very popular in no time. Along with these, over the period of time, the images of the deities of the Mahayana-Vajrayana pantheon were also made here like those of Tara, Lokeshvara, Marichi, Siddhaikavira, Nilakantha, Jambhala, Vasudhara, Shadakshari Lokeshvara with Manidhara and Shadakshari Mahavidya and Simhanada Lokeshvara etc.

The Jain tradition associates Sarnath with the 11th Teerthanker Shreyansanath. At this place four out of five important events in the life of the Tirthankara (generally known as the Kalyanakas) took place. Hence this is also a very sacred place for them. Even after the decline of Buddhism, the importance of Sarnath has not fallen. Every Buddhist devotee in the world makes it a point to visit this place. The result is that this place is throbbing with the national and international pilgrims. They visit the ruins of the stupas, viharas, Ashokan pillar and the museum at this place, Numerous international Buddhist associations have constructed their temples at this place making the visit to their own people a comfortable and memorable one. ■■■



# Rajagriha : City of the Kings

Buddha spent many years of his life at Rajagriha which was the chief centre of propagation in the early years of his spiritual administration. Many were the places here associated with his life. The Buddhist literature tells us that Rajagriha was Buddha's one of the most favourite places. He had spent many of the rain retreats there.

Rajagriha or modern Rajgir (District Nalanda, Bihar), is located 62 miles south-east of Patna. It still preserves the old name Rajagriha, the ancient capital of Magadha (South Bihar), one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas that came into existence before the birth of Buddha. The place was variously known as Vasumati, Brihadrathapura, Kushagrapura and Girivraja (meaning enclosure of hills). The last is the most appropriate descriptive name of this city. Its location is very strategic as it is placed in an extensive valley surrounded by hills on all sides with narrow passes in between. In fact, it was an ideal location for a capital in ancient days. It appears that the ancient habitation at this place started from around 1000 B.C. The archaeological remains found here indicate this date. The strong, long cyclopean wall or the old fortification wall is one of the most noteworthy features of this city. In fact, this is one of the oldest examples of the cyclopean walls in the world. However, the literary references start appearing from the Mahabharata, indicating it as already being associated with king Jarasandha.

Later on, it was the capital of king Bimbisara,

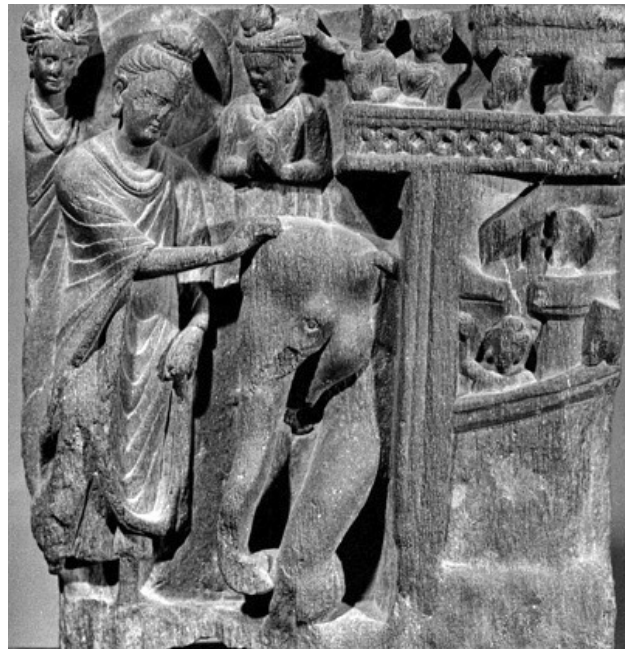
the illustrious ruler of Haryank dynasty. He was contemporary to both Bhagavan Mahavira and Gautama Buddha. He finds mention in the literature of both the religious traditions. During the days of the Buddha, the kingdom of Magadha was fast rising to power and prosperity under its rulers Bimbisara and his son Ajatashatru. Its capital attained great importance as a political and religious centre during this period. Bimbisara was greatly influenced and was quite close to Buddha. It is believed that he was killed by Ajatashatru. But Ajatashatru, too, came under the influence of Buddha later on.

Buddha spent many years of his life at Rajagriha which was the chief centre of propagation in the early years of his spiritual administration. Many were the places here associated with his life. The Buddhist literature tells us that Rajagriha was Buddha's one of the most favourite places. He had spent many of the rain retreats there. The Saptaparni cave, the Gridhrakuta (Vulture's peak) hill etc were the most visited spots by the Buddha. After every meal he would go for a walk, generally known as the Chankama. Then he would give his lecture to the disciples.

It was at Rajgir that the famous miracle of Rajagriha took place. It has been told that Devadatta was a cousin of Buddha who was a part of the monastic order. In fact, he also belonged to the Shakya community. He used to think that he was as equal as Gautam Buddha. Hence, he was eligible to become the head of the monastic order. But he was also aware that as long as Gautama was alive, he had no chance of reaching that level. Therefore, he decided to kill Gautama. He made an elephant named Nalagiri drink a lot of liquor. When the elephant lost his control, it started killing people on its way to Gautama. As soon as it approached Gautama, it realised the greatness of the Tathagata and came to his senses. This event is considered as a miracle in the Buddhist tradition and hence is known as the Miracle of Rajagriha. This is an important event in the history of Buddhism as this shows that the popularity of the Buddha was increasing day by day and there were some people who were jealous of his popularity among his near and dear ones. This event suggests the difficulties that were posed in front of him while spreading his religion. But with a lot of tactfulness, he eradicated all the problems in his early days and established himself as the Great Teacher.

Rajagriha has always been an important political, religious and economic centre. The strategic location of this city was responsible for making it one of the most important urban centres in ancient India. During the life of Buddha and even after his death, the status of the city did not change. One finds that after the death of the Buddha, when the time came to organize the First Buddhist Council (Sangiti), it was organised at Rajagriha by the Magadha Emperor Ajatashatru. After this conference the Buddhavachanas were edited and divided into Vinaya Pitaka (code of conduct for the monks and nuns) and Sutta Pitaka (Discourses of the Buddha). Mahakashyapa, Aanand and Upali were present during this event. It is believed that went on for seven months. The whole gathering of the Buddhist scholars was organised by king Ajatashatru. On the northern scarp of the Vaibhara hill there is a group of natural caves, identified with Saptarni, in front of which, in a hall constructed by Ajatashatru, was held the First Buddhist Council, attended by five hundred monks.

Rajagriha was equally sacred to the Jainas. Not only was it regarded as the birth-place of Muni Suvrata, the twentieth Tirthankara, but it was in this city and its suburbs that Mahavira, the last Tirthankara and contemporary of Buddha, spent many a rainy season. There still are some Jaina sculptures seen in the cave locally known as Son Bhandar. Not much is known about the subsequent history of Buddhism at Rajagriha. When the Chinese travellers Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang visited the place in the fifth and seventh centuries respectively, they did not find the religion in a flourishing condition. The latter found many Digambaras on the Vipula (modern Vaibhara) hill, where formerly there had been Buddhist edifices



including a stupa. But that the faith had its adherents till the beginning of the Muslim occupation of the land is proved not only by the discovery of a few sculptures, votive stupas and inscribed terracotta plaques of the tenth-eleventh century A.D., but by the testimony of the Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin, who, during his stay at Rajagriha in A. D. 1235, studied many doctrines with the Mahapandita Yasomitra. When Dharmasvamin visited the Gridhrakuta, it was surrounded by forests infested with carnivorous animals and contained on its peak a brick stupa with terraced steps and the ruins of a building of large bricks. The valley and its neighbourhood are studded with ancient remains, which are but natural, as the place not only had direct associations with lives of Buddha and Mahavira, but was once the capital of Magadha. Exposed Buddhist monuments are rather scanty, partly due to gradual decay and denudation and mostly on account of inadequate excavation. Most of the sites mentioned in the Buddhist texts have been located with the help of the directions and distances given by Chinese pilgrims, but the identifications are not always beyond doubt.

The ancient Buddhist University of Nalanda was constructed not far from this place. Today the district is known by its name and Rajgir is a part of this district. This place is a popular tourist destination for the tourists from all over the world and the devotees of Buddhism and Jainism. The ropeway facility to go to the mountain has become very popular. The modern Vishwa Shanti stupa is also a favourite spot of the international and local tourists. Thus, the City of the Kings still lures people across the world, even though the kings no longer live here. The sacredness of the spot is enough for them.



People forgot about Sankissa over the period of time and the sculptures and architecture fell into disuse and were neglected by the local people. Today it has ruins of old monasteries and Buddhist monuments. It is rarely visited by people as it is difficult to access, and there are hardly any facilities.

After a long time, Alexander Cunningham discovered the place in 1842. Eighty-seven years later Sir Anagarika Dharmapala (Sri Lanka) came here on a spiritual quest. In 1957 Panditha Madabawita Wijesoma Thero (Sri Lanka) came to Sankissa for a few years and started a Buddhist school (Wijesoma Widyalaya) for poor people.



## Sankissa : Where the Lord descended from heavens

Among the most important Buddhist pilgrim places, Sankissa (Pali version) is considered as one. It is variously known as Sankashya or Sankshya (Sanskrit versions). Today Sankissa is in the Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh. This is a hardly known place among the Buddhists too. The importance of the place is highlighted through the sculptures depicting the event that took place at Sankissa and the remains of the Ashokan pillar over there.

The event associated with this site is described in the Tipitakas - the most sacred Pali Canons. After the enlightenment the Buddha wandered spreading his religion. His lectures were becoming very popular. He moved to modern Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and gave numerous lectures. We already know that after the

birth of the Buddha, his mother expired and went to the Tavatimsa (Pali) or Trayastrimsha (Sanskrit) , the 33rd heaven where the Gods resided including Brahma and Shakra (Indra). Gautama wanted to share his knowledge with this mother. Hence, he went to the 33rd heaven. It is believed that he met his mother there and stayed there for three months and taught her the Ahidhamma philosophy.

After three months, when he decided to go to the earth, he descended to this place called Sanskissa. It is recorded in the Pali canons that when he came to earth, he was accompanied by Brahma and Shakra. The people saw three tall ladders coming down from the heavens. It is considered as a miracle and hence is known as the Miracle of Sankissa. This event was witnessed by the local people. The memory of

this event was also retained during the times of Ashoka when he erected a pillar at this site with the capital of an elephant. He also constructed a stupa and a temple over there. The beautiful elephant capital and the broken pieces of the pillar have been preserved over there. Even though there is no certain information about what happened later at this site, the celebrated Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang visited India in the 7th century C.E. At that time he had visited all the important places associated with the Buddha and other famous sites. He wrote a detailed account of what he saw then, in his travelogue Si-Yu-Ki. There he gave very important information about Sankissa. He wrote that he saw the ruins of three ladders, which had been built of brick and stone by Ashoka, to commemorate the Buddha's descent, but the ladders were nearly sunk in the earth. Thus, we have got another evidence of Ashoka's devotion towards and efforts to promote Buddhism in a concrete form.

This was not enough, as this event of Sankissa was considered as a Miracle and was remembered and was reminded to people again and again through various media. One of them was the sculptures on the railings of the stupas. The stupas at Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodh Gaya carried the sculptures of the Descent of the Buddha to earth at Sankissa are explicitly shown. The first depiction of this scene occurs in one of the sculptures at Bharhut (M.P. 2nd century B.C.E.). As one would know, the early Indian Buddhist art was aniconic. There Gautama Buddha was not shown in the human form but his presence was suggested through certain symbols like his foot prints, stupa, Bodhi tree etc. Here at Bharhut, the artist has depicted three ladders and has suggested the presence of the Buddha through his footprints with Dharmachakra that are shown descending the central ladder. The rest of the two ladders are reserved for Brahma and Shakra, as per the story given in the canon. At the end of the ladder a tree is shown decorated with garlands and people are shown worshipping it. This is another symbol used to suggest the presence. In fact, there are two divine flying beings showering flowers on the Bodhi tree. The event is witnessed by the devotees on Sankissa and they are shown with folded hands. The depiction of this event at Bharhut was replicated at Sanchi (1st century B.C.E.) also. However, the pillar with elephant capital was erected by Ashoka in 3rd century B.C.E. That pillar was probably shown in one of the sculptures at Bodh Gaya. Here the elephant is shown as the capital of a pillar. But at Sanchi, due to the crunch of the space, only one ladder was shown and there are no symbols of Gautama shown on the ladder. On the contrary one Bodhi tree is shown at the top and another one is shown at the base of the ladder, suggesting the completion of the descent. By this time the narrative must have become so popular that the beholders probably did not need the minute details that were shown in the sculpture

at Bharhut. Later on, when after 1st -2nd centuries C.E., the Buddha was shown in the human form, the elaborate sculptures made in the Gandhara region (i.e., modern Pakistan and Afghanistan). One such sculpture (5th century CE) showed three separate ladders with three separate figures descending the ladders, the central one of course being the Buddha himself. The person with the attire of an ascetic is Brahma and the one with a crown is Shakra. At every level, there are devotees shown watching the event and some are showering flowers and others are ready with the garlands. Such was the importance of this event at Sankissa that it was depicted at many stupa sites far and wide in the country. Unfortunately,



people forgot about it over the period of time and the sculptures and architecture fell into disuse and were neglected by the local people. Today it has ruins of old monasteries and Buddhist monuments. It is rarely visited by people as it is difficult to access, and there are hardly any facilities. After a long time, Alexander Cunningham discovered the place in 1842. Eighty-seven years later Sir Anagarika Dharmapala (Sri Lanka) came here on a spiritual quest. In 1957 Panditha Madabawita Wijesoma Thero (Sri Lanka) came to Sankissa for a few years and started a Buddhist school (Wijesoma Widyalyaya) for poor people. Let us hope that the present scheme of the Buddhist tourism circuit will bring back its ancient grandeur !



# Vaishali : One of the Most ancient cities in India

According to the record of the Tipitaka's (the Buddhist Canons), the Buddha is said to have performed various miracles at different places. It was in Vaishali that Buddha was offered a bowl of honey by a monkey. It is believed that when Buddha had come to Vaishali, people gathered to worship him and listen to his sermons. When the monkeys living in the nearby forests came to know about this, they were collecting honey for their own consumption. But considering the greatness of the Buddha they wanted to express their reverence towards him. So, they went to see him and offered their bowl full of honey to him.

Vaishali, today, is the part of the Tirhut Division in the modern state of Bihar. Muzaffarpur is the district headquarter. In ancient times it was the capital of the Lichchhavi clan. It was one of the largest cities at the time of Buddha, who visited it several times and stayed at some of its shrines and chaityas which were present there. This city was the capital of the Lichchhavi Ganarajya, prior to 6th century B.C. It was the first republican state in India and also probably in the world.

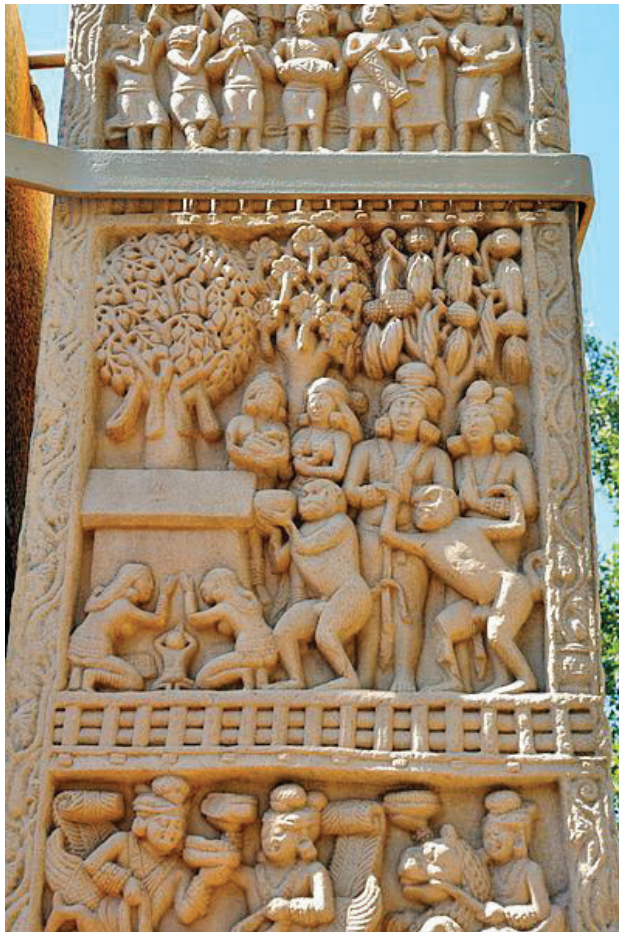
The city has got a lot of importance in the political, social, economic and religious spheres. Being the capital city of the Lichchhavi Ganarajya, it has been a prosperous trade centre. Buddha is believed to have performed a miracle at this place and hence this is a very sacred place for the Buddhists. The Shvetambara Jainas believe that Bhagwan Mahaveer was born at Vaishali to King Siddharth and Queen Trishala. Hence for the Jainas also this is a very sacred site. Thus, from all perspectives, this city has enjoyed a very important status in ancient India.

According to the record of the Tipitakas (the Buddhist Canons), the Buddha is said to have performed various miracles at different places. It was here that Buddha was offered a bowl of honey by a monkey. It is told to us that when Buddha had come to Vaishali, people gathered to worship him and listen to his sermons. When the monkeys living in the nearby forests came to know about this, they



were collecting honey for their own consumption. But considering the greatness of the Buddha they wanted to express their reverence towards him. So, they went to see him and offered their bowl full of honey to him. This event is considered as a miracle and is known as the Miracle of Vaishali. The spot, marking the miracle, was honoured, according to Hiuen Tsang, with a stupa located by the side of the Markata-hrada (tank of the monkeys). This event is depicted in a few sculptures at the stupa sites like Sanchi.

Amrapali, the famous courtesan in the court of the king of Vaishali was a contemporary of the Buddha. Later on, she became a devotee of the Buddha.



During one of his visits, not long before his death, Buddha accepted the gift of a mango-grove from the Amrapali. After the death of the Buddha, his relics were distributed into eight parts. The Lichchavis received a share of the relics of Buddha and enshrined it in a stupa near Vaishali. The excavations carried out at a mound at the site has revealed the remains of an ancient stupa containing relics. In fact, it was observed that the stupa was opened once and some relics were taken away and the remaining were kept over there only. It is a known fact that Emperor Ashoka had opened seven out of the eight stupas that were constructed on the relics of the Buddha. Hence this stupa can be considered as one of the oldest stupas

constructed over the relics of the Buddha.

It is also told by the Tipitakas that after the death of the Buddha, there was a need to standardize the teachings of the Buddha. Hence three religious councils were called for by the political and religious authorities from time to time. The first council (Sangiti) took place at Rajagriha, when King Ajatashatru was ruling there. The Second Buddhist Council took place when King Kalashoka was ruling at Vaishali, a century after the death of Buddha. After the Sangiti, the Buddhist Sangha was divided into two categories 1) Sthaviravadin, 2) Mahasanghikas. This was a very significant development in the history of Buddhism. This split in the Sangha, in fact, paved the way for the future major split into Hinayana and Mahayana, that took place after 1st and 2nd century A.D.

The Chinese travellers, both Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang visited the place. The latter saw a large number of Buddhist monuments, including the stupa which had been erected by the Lichchavis and which had been opened up by Ashoka for its relic-contents and also the stupa built by Ashoka himself. In the town today one can see many relics of the monasteries, a big stupa and many small stupas and a tall pillar with the lion capital, but without any inscription. Even though it does not have the inscription of Ashoka, it is considered as one of his pillars, due to the stylistic similarities.

From the finds of images, it may be presumed that Buddhism survived in this place up to the 12th century A.D. The image of Tara of this place was particularly famous as evident from a miniature painting of Tara of Vaishali (Tirabhuktau Vaisali-Tara) illustrated on a manuscript of the eleventh century. Dharmasvamin, who, on his way to Vajrasana from Pa-ta, the capital of Tirhut, passed through the town of Vaishali, which was deserted at that time due to the apprehension of Muslim attack, did not refer to any Buddhist establishment in the country except to a female lay-supporter and a miraculous stone image of the Arya Tara with her head and body turned towards the left, foot placed flat, and the right foot turned sideways, the right hand in the varada-mudra and the left hand holding the symbol of the Three Jewels in front of the heart. The image was known to be endowed with great blessing, and the mere beholding of the goddess' face relieved devotees from distress. Other than this there are no other records of the presence of Buddhism in Vaishali.

Even though the Jainas believe that Mahaveer was born in this vicinity, there are hardly any archaeological remains present there today to support this belief. However, this faith of the Jain devotees marks this place as one of the most important pilgrim places of the Jainas.

Thus, the modern town of Vaishali, still enjoys the status of an important town for both the Buddhists and the Jainas all over the world and has become a very important tourist place.





# Bhutan : Buddhist Land of Happiness

**B**hutan is a tiny country sandwiched between India and Nepal. The name Bhutan has been given by the foreigners to this beautiful land. The native people call this country as 'Druk – Yul or the Land of the Thunder Dragon.' The country is well known today for preserving its rich heritage and natural beauty. This country was considered as the happiest country of Asia, according to a survey in 2006.

## **Early history of Bhutan and Beginning of Buddhism**

The story of this country becomes clearer from the 7th century CE. Guru Padmasambhava moved to Bumthang. There he was welcomed by the followers of the old sect, the Nyingmapa (rNying- ma pa), who called him Guru Rimpoche (the Precious Teacher). This mission proved very successful and as a result Buddhism took firm grounds in Bhutan. This period is also ascribed the earliest foundations of the religious stupa-like structures called the 'Eye-Chortens' of the eastern Bhutan. Thus, Guru Padmasambhava became very popular. In fact, the most important and most widely featured figure after the Buddha is Guru Padmasambhava.

Many legends came into being and some of them even resembled the incidents in the life of Gautama Buddha. Bhutanese people regard him as

the second historical Buddha. They believe that the first Buddha i.e. Shakya Muni revealed the Sutras and Guru Padmasambhava revealed the Tantras. Developing from the Mahayana Buddhism the modern Bhutanese religion has a pantheon of various gods and goddesses. Lord Buddha is the supreme lord but there are a number of Bodhisattvas, female forms such as Tara, protecting deities and a host of fearful gods. Even some Hindu deities, especially Shiva and his consort Mahakali have been included in the all-embracing Bhutanese pantheon.

## **The important Buddhist temples in Bhutan**

Out of the Buddhist monuments in Bhutan, two are the most ancient temples 1) sKyerchu- lHa-khang in sPa-gro valley and 2) Byamspl lHa-khang in the Bum-thang province. These temples conform to the known character of the most ancient Tibetan temples and are the part of an elaborate system of temple construction devised by King Srongbtsan sGam-po, who ruled over Tibet from 627 CE to 649 CE.

**1) sKyer-chu-lHa-khang** – This temple is near the top end of the sPa-gro valley in the hamlet of the same name. The main sanctum contains a beautiful south facing image of Crowned Buddha known as sKyer-chu Jo-bo which is surrounded by standing

images of Bodhisattvas.

2) **Byamspa IHa-khang** – This is a temple of Byas-pa (Maitreya) in Bum-thang. This temple is quite similar to the sKyer-chu-IHa-khang. A number of other shrines have been added to the main temple over a period of time. However, the outward similarity between these two shrines is not matched by the interior. The main image is of Byamspal IHa-khang i.e. the Future Buddha Maitreya.

### **Buddhist Architecture**

1) The Dzongs of Bhutan – The Dzongs and monasteries dominate the secular and temporal life of Bhutan. Without them the life of the people would be incomplete. They are integrated in the history of Bhutan and tell us the stories of antiquity. Dzongs – The word 'Dzong' literally means a fortress. However, the Dzongs combined in themselves the functions of an administrative centre and a monastery and in olden days, were the citadels of defence against any attack. That is why they are located at all strategic points, particularly at points in valleys which were prone to outside attack. Today, the major Dzongs are the seats of district administrations.

The Bhutanese Dzongs gradually became the strongholds of later Bhutanese powerful governors. They were called Penlops. They controlled their respective regions from these Dzongs. The capture of a Dzong, held by a Penlop, by a rival inevitably meant a victory in battle for supremacy. The whole population of a valley used to take protection in the Dzongs in the event of a war. The Dzongs are usually rectangular buildings surrounding a hollow square, in the centre of which is a large tower several storeys high, surmounted by a large copper cupola. The entrance to the Dzong, usually by the side of a river, is over a bridge and has a single gateway lined with iron plates. Some of the Dzongs had special arrangements made for the times of emergency. The Dzongs contain some of the finest statues of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The meditative (Dhyani) Buddha Vairochana and his female companion / consort or Shakti is one of the most popular themes of Bhutanese sculpture. The Dzongs are generally designed as parallelograms, divided into several courts. The construction is mostly of beaten mud and the structure is of timber making them highly susceptible to fire. A number of them were rebuilt after catching fire but the old style was retained.

2) **Buddhist Monasteries** – Monasteries are the most common feature of Bhutan. Besides those located in the Dzongs, most of the others are located some distance away from settlements or villages. Some of them are located at extremely isolated places. The most important reason behind this was the isolation from the world to avoid the temptation for the monk and to provide a peaceful environment for concentration and meditation. A number of prayer flags, inscribed with pious words, charms and religious prayers, flutter most picturesquely from long poles all around the

monasteries. The prayer flags do not merely confer merit on the planter but are for the benefit of the whole country side. The flags carry the message of "Dharma" to all. The last sentence on the flag is usually "Let the doctrine of the Buddha prosper."

3) **Chortens** – Chortens or stupas are the most visible sites on the Bhutanese landscape. We find these religious structures on mountains, hillocks, passes, cross-roads and river banks. The word Chorten literally means a receptacle for offerings. They are solid structures of conical masonry and were intended to be relic holders. Often known as burial mounds, chortens are built in memories of eminent lamas, kings. They are also built to protect a place or a region against evil spirits which are potentially dangerous; such as crossroads and high passes as well as landslide and accident-prone areas. In the modern times they are mostly built as cenotaphs in the memory of Lord Buddha or another saint. Some of them also commemorate the visits of various saints. The whole countryside of Bhutan is full of chortens. Miniature chortens of metal, wood and clay are also made.

4) **Lhakhangs (Temples)** - The word Lhakhang means houses of God. A Lhakhang is generally the central most building in a monastery and is separated from other buildings. But a Lhakhang can also be the only building at any auspicious place. The roof is furnished with one or two ball-shaped domes, which are normally of gilt-copper. It has rows of prayer wheels, which are inserted approximately three feet above the level of the path. These wheels are turned by the visitor sweeping his hands over them as he proceeds.

### **Buddhist art**

Like the other countries in the world, Bhutanese art is also predominantly religious in nature. It was not created only for aesthetic appeal. Its primary aim was to provide support to meditation and devotion. The basic function of Buddhist art in Bhutan was to serve as a visual aid for understanding the complex tenets of Buddhist philosophy and religion. One of the main subjects of the Bhutanese art is the mandala or the khyilkhor. This is basically a mystic pattern used for the purposes of initiation and meditation. It was introduced in Bhutan together with all the teachings and methods of the Northern Buddhist traditions, and its complex geometrical patterns can be seen all over the country in various combinations. The zenith of the Bhutanese art is achieved in the religious paintings or scrolls known as thangkhas. These art treasures are famous all over the world because of their great beauty, divine themes and portable size.

Thus, Bhutan gives us a picture of a country that is happily living embracing all forms of religion under one umbrella of Buddhism, setting a wonderful example for the rest of the world for peace and happiness.





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## Buddhism in Sri Lanka

**B**uddhism reached Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa, a contemporary of King Ashoka in India. King Ashoka is famous for restoring the monastic order of Buddhism by convening the third Sangiti - the religious conference at Pataliputra. It is believed that after this conference nine monks were sent out by Ashok to spread the religion. One of them was his own son Mahendra, who was sent to Sri Lanka. At that time the local king of Sri Lanka was Devanampiya Tissa. Although this particular event is described as the first-ever introduction of Buddhism to the country, many historians believe that Mahendra's arrival was only the official introduction of Buddhism, and that it is very likely that people knew about Buddhism earlier.

It is said that the king and Mahendra met at Mihintale, a place east of Anuradhapura. Having

listened to the Dhamma taught by Mahendra the king and his group took refuge in the Triple Gem (Trisharana or Triratna - Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), the formal procedure of becoming a follower of the Buddha. All records suggest that the new religion rapidly became popular. The absence of any organized form of religious life till this point of time may have been one of the major factors that contributed to this rapid popularity. Furthermore, it seems that the people followed the lead of their king: first it was the immediate family and the attendants of the king; subsequently it was people at large of the island.

Numerous important Buddhist sites developed in the country over the period of time. The first ever stupa and monastic complex -Thuparama - was constructed at Anuradhapura that contained the bodily relics of the Buddha. At the same time,



a branch of the Bodhi tree under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, was planted in Anuradhapura. Stupas and viharas (monk residences) were built at many places. Caves were also excavated. The most notable of these are the caves at Dambulla in central Sri Lanka. They are popularly known as the Rangiri Dumbulla Guha Temple of Dumbulla Cave Vihar.

These caves are located 148 km east of Colombo and 72 km North of Kandy where Buddha's tooth is located. Monks have lived in this group of caves since 3rd century BC. These caves are situated on a small hill. It has a reputation as one of the most remarkable caves in the whole of South - East Asia. They are decorated with exquisite sculptures and paintings.

Another site that developed as a very important site is that of Kandy. It is located in the heart of the Central Provinces. This is a very important political as well as religious place. This is the capital of the Central Provinces and the administrative headquarter. Located on the high lands, this city has been an attraction for the devotees of Buddhism all over the world.

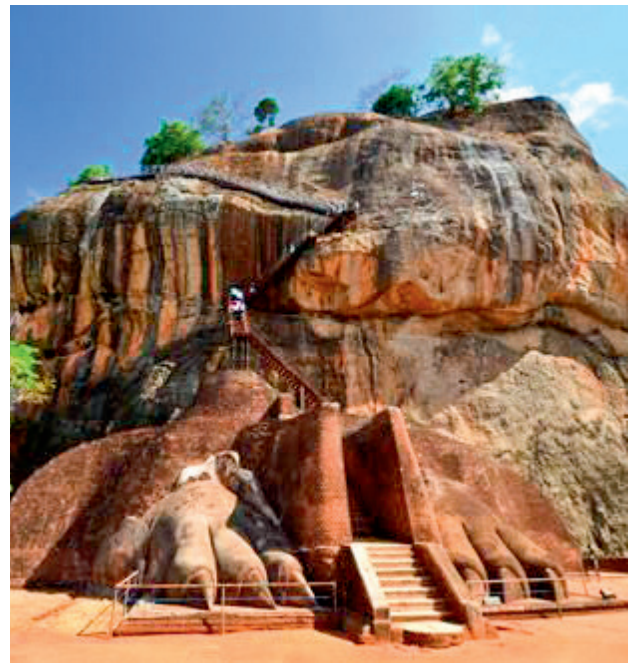
Shri Dalada Maligawa (The Temple of Tooth Relic of the Buddha), is world famous and is also a World Heritage Site. The legend tells us that the tooth relic was hidden in the Kalinga Desha (Odisha) and then it was secretly taken out to Sinhala Desha by Princess Hemamali and her husband Dantha. It was enshrined by the king and from then onwards, it has been the responsibility of the king to take care of the tooth relic. This is a very sacred site for the pilgrims, all around the world.

Polonnaruwa is another site which is a very popular destination. This is a complex site with the remains of various types of architecture. The most important monument here is the Vatadage, which is a peculiar type of architecture in Sri Lanka. There is a stupa at the centre and a protection wall around it. There are steps to enter it from all cardinal directions.

The Cholas controlled a lot of territory in Sri Lanka. The chola ruler Rajendra 1 shifted the capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa. But Vijayabahu 1 defeated the Cholas and took control of the land. His grandson Parakramabahu 1 undertook a lot of development activities. He constructed a huge lake called Paraakramsamudra. Here he constructed the palace, fortification wall around the city hospitals, bathrooms gardens and viharas. His son in law Nissankamalla 1, came to power after his father-in-law. He wrote many inscriptions. One of them is at Polonnaruwa. He brought a gigantic slab from Mihintale. 72 lined inscriptions were written there describing the greatness of the king. This is called Galapotha by the local people. On the smaller side is carved a Gajalakshmi along with some swans. This is a beautiful site and sculpture with a long inscription.

Sigiriya is also known as Sinhagari. It is located

in the Northern part of Matale district. This site was selected by King Kashyap for his new capital in the fifth century AD. He not only established his capital on the hill but also constructed numerous structures at the base of the hill. He dug canals, constructed structures to fortify the habitation from the enemy. The very concept of converting a 184 mtr steep rock into an inhabitable place was unique. Further technological advance, human skill and determination made it all possible and this out of the world monument came into being. Not only was this but a brick wall constructed parallel to the rock face. The wall was neatly plastered and polished to the extent of giving the impression of a mirror. Hence this wall is called the mirror wall. Paintings of beautiful ladies are also made on the rock faces of this tall hill. The pathways were made along the wall to reach the top of the hill. Numerous steps were carved in the rock in such a way that one has to go



through the lion's paws to go to the higher level. On the top of the hill many buildings were constructed for the royal family as well as the officers of the king. Gardens, lakes etc. were also created that added to the beauty of the location. One can visualize the 1500 years old capital at this point.

Later on, with the changing political scenario some Buddhist monasteries were constructed there and were given to the monks. In this way, Buddhism not only reached Sri Lanka but also established itself as a very popular religion. Today also the government is officially the Buddhist government and is known as the Ministry of Buddhadasana. There are many sites worth visiting in Sri Lanka but we have taken an account of the most significant heritage sites.





# Kushinagara : The place of Mahaparinirvana

Whatever remains at Kushinagara today is a mixture of various period. However, for a pious mind, this does not matter at all. The sanctity of the place is so important that thousands of devotees visit this place during the year especially on the occasion of Buddha Purnima. Like Lumbini, Kushinagara is also one of the most important pilgrim places for the Buddhists as it was here that the Lord attained Mahaparinirvana. In fact, the pilgrimage of the Ashatmahasthanas ends here.

**G**autama Buddha was constantly moving around spreading his religion in different parts of the country. However, over the period of time, he grew older and at the age of 80 he slowed down his pace. Still, he was invited along with the monks by many of his lay devotees for lunch, at their place. One such devotee was Chunda, a blacksmith. He used to live at Pava. He had invited the Tathagata and his disciples for the daily meal. It so happened that after the meal, Gautama became unwell. In that condition, he went to Kushinagara (modern Kasia near Deoriya, Dist. Kushinagara in U.P.). It was a part of the Malla kingdom. There, in the monastery, he was attended by Anand and some other disciples. His body was cremated with all royal honours as he

was the Dharmachakravartin - Sovereign Emperor of the Spiritual World!

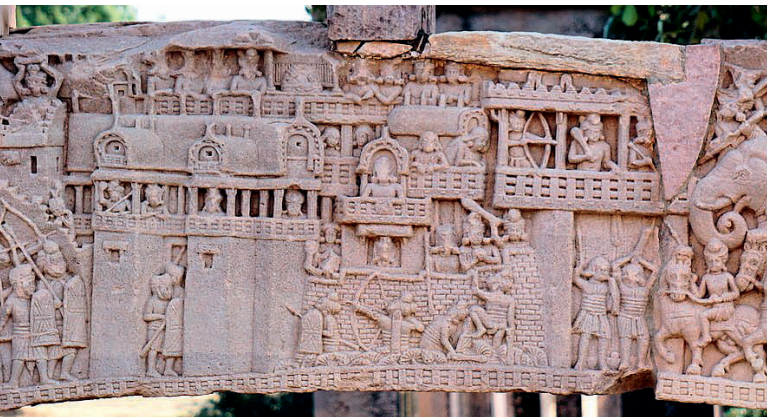
After the cremation, eight groups came forward to get the share of the relics of the body. All of them wanted to construct stupas on those relics. There was quite a struggle among those claimants to get the relics. It is told to us that they almost fought a war to claim the relics. There was a Brahmin named Drona. He suggested that the relics should be divided into eight parts and eight stupas should be constructed on them. The tradition tells us that it so happened and eight stupas were constructed by these claimants in their own respective territories. Among the claimants was King Ajatashatru also. The Mallas constructed a stupa on their own share of the relics at Kushinagara

itself.

The earliest history of this centre is unknown, but according to Hiuen Tsang, Ashoka built three stupas here and in the vicinity. In front of it was a stone pillar with an inscription recording the event of the Mahaparinirvana. He saw a second inscribed stone pillar by the side of the stupa, built by Ashoka at the spot where the relics were divided.

Out of the information given by the three Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-tsing, that of Hiuen Tsang is elaborate. He referred to a number of stupas, commemorating the important events and spots connected with the Mahaparinirvana, such as the Ashokan stupa on the site of the house of Chunda, the blacksmith. The focus of the ruins at the main site is a stupa (Nirvana-chaitya) with a shrine in front (west), both standing on a platform, 9 ft. high. With a cylindrical base, the stupa stood to a height of more than 55 ft. above the platform. During the excavation, at a depth of about 14 ft. from the top, was found a circular brick chamber accommodating a copper vessel, embedded in sand and a mass of cowries.

The vessel contained charcoal, cowries, precious



stones, pearls and two copper tubes, one of which yielded ashes, a small emerald, a silver coin of Kumaragupta I (A.D. 415-55) and a tiny gold tube encased in a silver one. The mouth of the vessel was closed by a copper-plate on which was written, mostly in ink, the Pratitya-samutpada-sutra in Gupta period Brahmi script. The record concluded by saying that the copper-plate (tamra-patta) had been deposited in the Nirvana-chaitya by one Haribala. Further down, at a depth of 34 ft. was found the circular plinth of a small stupa, 9 ft. 3 in high, with a niche on the western façade having a terracotta figure of Buddha in dhyana-mudra, stylistically ascribable to the first century A.D. Inside the stupa were found pieces of charcoal and earth. The Nirvana-chaitya was thoroughly renovated in 1927 out of the donation of Burmese devotees. The Nirvana-shrine in the front houses a colossal sandstone image of

Buddha in the lying state on a brick pedestal, with three mourning figures and an inscription recording the gift of the image by the Mahavihara-svamin Haribala, most probably the same individual as the one mentioned in the copper-plate found within the Nirvana-chaitya.

The shrine was completely but clumsily restored in 1876; it was again rebuilt in 1956 on the occasion of the Buddha-Jayanti celebrations. Both the shrine and the platform on which it stands along with the stupa had been built on earlier remains, as found during the excavation. The other remains at the main site consist of votive stupas, monasteries and miscellaneous remains. The votive stupas are clustered near the south of the main stupa, but small groups occur elsewhere as well. Some of them, to the east of the stupa-platform, are to be seen partially buried under it, indicating their earlier date.

The excavated monasteries, including the partially-exposed ones, are not less than eight in number. They follow the usual plan of an open courtyard in the centre surrounded by cells and, were built and rebuilt at different times, the earliest in the Kushan period and the latest in the tenth-eleventh century A.D. From a few objects, such as clay sealings and tablets dating from the Gupta period, it appears that some of them were constructed more or less simultaneously with the buildings of Haribala. In spite of the record of the activities of Ashoka at Kusinagara, nothing that is definitely earlier than the Kushan period has been found in the excavations. The objects of that period consist of coins of Wima Kadphises and Kanishka and a fragmentary inscription.

Nearly a couple of kilometres to the east of the Parinirvana Stupa is a colossal stupa (about 50 ft. high), locally known as Ramabhar-stupa and believed to represent the spot of the cremation of Buddha. Surrounded by shrines and votive stupas, its plinth is 155 ft. in diameter at the base and is built in two or more terraces, over which rises the drum, 112 ft. in diameter. Excavation into its core did not yield any relics, though various clay tablets with the usual Buddhist symbols were found around it. The stupa, which, no doubt, was an object of high sanctity, underwent earlier repairs and renovations.

In this way, whatever remains at Kushinagara today is a mixture of various periods. However, for a pious mind, this does not matter at all. The sanctity of the place is so important that thousands of devotees visit this place during the year especially on the occasion of Buddha Purnima. Like Lumbini, Kushinagara is also one of the most important pilgrim places for the Buddhists as it was here that the Lord attained Mahaparinirvana. In fact, the pilgrimage of the Ashatmahasthanas ends here.



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