

# Archaeology of Buddhist Sites in Nepalese Tarai

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It has been a century since the discovery of three Chunar sand stone pillars erected by Mauryan Emperor Ashoka in Lumbini, Kapilavastu area in Nepalese Tarai. Most important in the series is the pillar at Lumbini with the inscription testifying the authenticity of Lumbini where Lord Buddha was born. This pillar is standing in situ with the inscription engraved by Ashoka in Brahmi script and Pali language which has been translated as "king Piyadasi (Ashoka), the beloved of gods, in the twentieth year of the coronation, himself made a royal visit. Buddha Shakyamuni having been born here a stone railing was built and a stone pillar erected. The Bhagavan were born here, Lumbini village was tax freed and entitled to the eighth part only."

Equally important was the discovery of another pillar at Nigalihawa. This pillar is broken into pieces and only two pieces are lying near a tank called Nigalisagar. In this pillar is the inscription engraved by Emperor Ashoka. This also in Brahmi Script and Pali language has been translated as "King Piyadasi (Ashoka) on the fourteenth year of his reign enlarged for the second time the stupa of the Buddha Kanakamuni and in the twentieth year of his reign having come in person did reverence and set up a stone pillar."

These two pillars clearly recognized two sites associated with the two mortal Buddhas of Bhadrakalpa. One was the birth place of the historical Buddha – the Shakyamuni and another was the nirvana stupa of Kanakamuni Buddha. When the stump of another pillar made of the same material – the Chunar sand stone and the same polish – the Mauryan Polish was discovered in Gotihawa it was easily identified as the one associated with the nirvana stupa of Krakuchhanda Buddha – another on the list of the mortal Buddhas.

Finding of these three pillars in within a radius of about 15 kilometers inspired the archaeologists to examine the area thoroughly and to try to locate the famous sites associated with Lord Buddha's babyhood and young hood. In this connection many places in the three districts Kapilavastu, Rupandehi and Nawalparasi of Nepalese Tarai were examined and few of them were identified. Even after a century this process of exploration, excavation and research is still an ongoing process.

In this paper an attempt has been made to produce a brief summary of the potential sites clearly identified or recognized as associated with the life of Shakyamuni Buddha and other mortal Buddhas of Bhadrakalpa on the basis of the results of the archeological explorations and excavations.

The Ashokan pillars at the birth site of Shakyamuni Buddha, the nirvana stupa sites of Kanakamuni Buddha and Krakuchhanda Buddha became indicator to confirm the sites of Lumbini, Shobhavati und Kshemavati respectively. In addition to the location of the pillar the descriptions given by the Buddhist literatures and the notes of Chinese travelers Fa-Hian and Hiuen - Tsang helped a lot in locating Kapilavastu, the ancient Shakya capital; Mahavana, the sites of Shakya massacre and Ramagrama, the Buddha's relic stupa built by the Koliyas.

### **Kapilavastu (Tilaurakot)**

The earliest sequence of Kapilavastu (present day Tilaurakot) belongs to the painted grey ware period which has been safely dated by the excavators to the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. An intensive research oriented work is yet to be done but the eastern and western gateway complex and a structural complex inside the citadel has already been exposed. Most important is its complex security system provided by a moat and a defense wall all around the citadel of Kapilavastu.

The list of the name of the excavators is quite long in the case of Kapilavastu. The first spade was of P.C. Mukherjee in 1899 and was followed by Debala Mitra, Risho University of Japan and T. N. Mishra of Nepal.

### **Mahavana (Sagarhawa)**

Mahavana (present day Sagarhava), the site of Shakya massacre, was excavated by A. Fuhrer in 1897 A.D. He exposed seventeen brick stupas and claimed to find the relics of the Shakya heroes. Motifs of weapons and flowers are engraved on the bricks laid to cover the relic vases.

### **Kshemavati (Gotihawa)**

Kshemavati (present day Gotihawa), the nirvana stupa site of Krukuchhanda Buddha was first excavated by Major Waddell in 1898 which has been drawn and reported by P. C. Mukhelji. A stupa close by the stump of the Ashokan Pillar was discovered. Recently Nepalese - Italian team of archaeologists was successful in bringing to light the mat or cod impressed ware dateable to 1011, 9th century B.C. as the earliest material from the site. This date was confirmed by the C 14 analysis of a charcoal sample 1'1m above this layer whose result was 815-780 B.C. The stupa was built in the 3rd century B.C. and a pillar was erected by Emperor Ashoka in the same century. The stupa was further rebuilt or enlarged at least two times aner its first construction.

### **Shobhavati (Nigalihawa?)**

The pillar erected by Emperor Ashoka in 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. in Shobhavati, the nirvana – stupa site of Kanakamuni Buddha, is now laying in two pieces in Nigalihawa near a tank called Nigalisagar. The pillar seems to be not in situ and the nirvana stupa mentioned in the pillar is to be sought nearby.

## **Lumbini**

Discovery of the Ashokan pillar at Lumbini by Khadga Samsher and A. Fuhrer in 1896 opened new horizon in the research of the Buddhist sites. First spade used by an archaeologist in Lumbini was of P. C. Mukherji in 1899. This was followed by the Archaeologists from India, Nepal and Japan. The earliest cultural deposition in the ancient Lumbini village is dateable to 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as the sherds of grey ware from Lumbini are comparable to sherds of this were from Banjarahi, Sakrawa and Nipania. Burnt brick was used in the sacred place of Buddha's birth in Lumbini in the 3rd century B.C. An architectural complex sprung up in this period right at the Buddha's birth spot. Pillar with an inscription was erected by Emperor Ashoka in this century. Since then the monasteries and stupas were also built. Work of building, rebuilding and repairing at the sacred spot of Buddha's birth was continued till the present century. The sanctum sanctorum remained in the same grid in each period of construction.

## **Ramagrama**

The stupa of Ramagrama near Parasi Bazar in Nawalparasi District is one of the noteworthy monuments in this region. First located and identified by Hoey in 1898 this is the famous stupa built by the Koliyas, the maternal uncles of Buddha, on the share of the lord's relic they received. This is believed to be the only intact stupa of the eight stupas originally built over the relic of Buddha. All other seven were opened by Emperor Ashoka and the relic from them was split and distributed to keep in 84000 new stupas built by him in different places.

After studying their antiquity, the rich cultural heritage, distribution of the Ashokan Pillars it is evident that these sites were either the part of or connected with the Uttarapatha – the famous trade route of Northern India of the ancient time.

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