

## THE SANCHI STUPA: ONE EPICENTRE OF BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

*Dr. Banibrata Goswami<sup>23</sup>*

**Abstract:** *The Stupa, an architectural structure usually housing the cremated remains or possessions of important saintly figures, is considered to be the structural emblem and the most important type of monument of Buddhism. The Great Stupa at Sanchi is one of the most important Buddhist monuments reflecting gem of Buddhist art and architecture. It was laid by one of the greatest Indian Emperors, Ashoka of the Maurya Dynasty who reigned over almost the entire Indian subcontinent from c. 268 to 232 BCE. He commissioned construction of the Stupa here after redistributing the mortal remains of Lord Buddha so as to build several Stupas in different locations across India to spread Buddhism. Located at Sanchi Town, Madhya Pradesh, India, this Stupa is the oldest stone structure in India that was built during the Mauryan period. Sanchi had become an important centre of learning and propagation due to Ashoka's Vidisha based wife. The present paper intends to look into the origin, historical background, architectural design and spiritual/philosophic significance of the Sanchi Stupa, as it stands now, to the people of the world with the UNESCO recognition of a heritage site.*

**Key Words:** Sanchi, Buddhism, architecture, religion, philosophy, Ashoka, Satvahana.

### **The Stupa: Historical Perspective**

The Stupa, an architectural structure usually housing the cremated remains or possessions of important saintly figures, is considered to be the structural emblem and the most important type of monument of Buddhism. Most Stupas have a very distinctive semi-spherical shape, often surrounded by a fence. As Buddhism was introduced in different regions, the basic architectural features of Stupas were transformed into a variety of shapes reflecting the artistic expressions of those cultures.

So far as the meaning of Stupa is concerned, it was customary, right from the Vedic period, to build a Stupa at the spot where the dead body or its cremated remains were buried. The word Stupa occurs in the Rigveda. From the Mauryan period onward the Stupas were encircled by the railing. As a token of honour, the stupas

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<sup>23</sup> Assistant Professor in English, Tehatta Sadananda Mahavidyalaya, Tehatta, Purba Burdwan

were surmounted by the chhatra (parasol). At places the Stupas were also provided with gateways or toranas. Mortal remains (relics) of Buddha or of his disciples were used to be enshrined in these Stupas. It is therefore implied that the Stupa was a sort of a burial or cremation ground. Before the advent of the Buddha image, the Stupa was held in great reverence, and this devotional practice is still on. The Mahaparinirvana (demise) of Buddha happened at Kushinagar in Bihar, where the Mallas ruled. After that, Lichchhavi of Vaishali, Buli of Allakappa. Ajatshatru of Rajagriha, Sakya of Kapilavastu, Mallas of Kushinagar and Pava, Koliya of Ramgrama had taken with them parts of bone relics of Buddha and erected Stupas in their respective kingdoms over the relics. It is traditionally believed that Emperor Ashoka the Great, had got these Stupas re-opened and taken out parts of bone relics to build eighty four thousands Stupas in the kingdom, during his rule, including the one at Sanchi.

### **Origin of the Stupa in the Buddhist Tradition:**

The Mahaparinirvana Sutra (an ancient Buddhist text describing the last days of the Buddha) claims that after the passing away of Buddha his followers divided his cremated remains into eight portions. Each of the eight kingdoms in which Buddha had lived received one portion of the relics, and a Stupa was erected in each kingdom in order to house the remains. Buddhist sources claim that during the 3rd century BCE, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka the Great, ordered these eight Stupas to be opened. He once again distributed the relics of Buddha into 84,000 portions, and desired to build Stupas of varying heights over them all, in the fast expanding Buddhist world. From then onwards the relics of the Buddha are not merely considered a commemorative symbol by the Buddhist community; they are believed to be the living presence of the Buddha, a depository of his protective powers and living energy. Early in the Buddhist tradition, clergy and laity alike practiced the veneration of the Stupas and the relics in them in order to gain spiritual merit. The importance of the Stupas gradually increased as a result of both the emphasis of the Buddhist relic-cult and their multiplication during the time of Ashoka. Stupas became a symbol not only of Buddhism itself but also an architectural testimony to its expansion and strength.

It should be noted that the veneration of the Stupas is not unique to Buddhism. This practice had its origin in Indian traditions pre-dating the emergence of Buddhism. From pre-historical times, burial mounds containing the remains of the dead were a common funeral practice in some Indian societies: in these mounds, the living paid homage to their dead, just like Buddhists would do for their saints, centuries later.

### **The Stupas, Early Buddhism and Ashoka, the Great:**

The earliest archaeological evidence for the presence of Stupas in North India dates to the late 4th century BCE. These are all pilgrimage the Stupas, which means that they were built outside the domains of monastic complexes, at pilgrimage sites. Although we have no material evidence of earlier the Stupas, Buddhist scriptures claim that the Stupas were built at least a century earlier. It is possible that before this time, the Stupas were built with non-durable materials such as wood, or even as burial mounds, in which case archaeological detection would be nearly impossible.

The earliest evidence of monastic Stupas dates back to the 2nd century BCE. These are the Stupas that were built within Buddhist monastic complexes. It is possible that these Stupas replaced older Stupas made of wood: some of their architectural components were shaped imitating wooden parts. Unfortunately none of these has any visible trace now.

The Stupas, Monasteries, Pillars, Temples, Chaityas all are archaeologically called Buddhist monuments. The credit of erecting Mahastupa goes to Ashoka, the great. It is believed that Ashoka in the early phase of his life, was known as Chandashoka, due to his violent nature. He was married to the daughter of a merchant at Vidisha during a halt, on his way to Ujjain after becoming its Governor. According to the thirteenth Rock Edict, Ashoka invaded the country Kalinga, during his rule, and thousands of people died in the battlefield.

The massacre and its aftermath moved him from within, and he resolved not to take up military expeditions any more. Deep realisation of the severity of death and promise of life, made him accept Buddhism, and he engaged himself for its propagation. He appointed people to propagate the morals of Buddhism, and also ordered to make engravings and inscriptions on rocks and pillars on the subject of Buddhist religion and philosophy. People started to call him now Dharmashoka.

### **The Stupa at Sanchi: Origin and History**

Sanchi (Lat.23.29' N.: Long. 77. 45' E) located on the bank of the river Betwa, is about 46 K.M. east of Bhopal, 23 K.M. from Raisen and 10 K.M. from Vidisha. The early inscriptions found there, suggest that this locality was known at that time as Kakanaya or Kakanava. The Gupta records of fifth century A.D. refer to it as Kakanadabota, and those of seventh century as Bota Sri Parvat. Sanchi had become an important centre of learning and propagation due to Ashoka's Vidisha based wife. Since solitude and isolated place is pre-requisite for Buddhist learning and practices, Sanchi hill in the neighbourhood of Vidisha was found suitable. The Mahastupa (Stupa 1) was built by Ashoka and the monastery by his wife, Devi. It is noteworthy that the propagation of Buddhism was started for the first time in the entire world from Sanchi wherefrom Ashoka's son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra with a

branch of Pipal tree (*Ficus Rekigiosa* Linn) had gone to Sri Lanka for spreading dharma. They, along with their mother, had stayed in the monastery at Sanchi.

As a convention, the Stupas were built only at those places which had been associated with the life of Buddha, for example, Lumbini, where Buddha was born, Bodhgaya, where he gave his first sermon, Sravasti where he showed the miracle, Kushinagar, where Buddha got his mahaparinirvana, Rajagriha, where Buddha paid visits several times, Sankisa, where Buddha descended from trayastrinsa heaven, Vaishali where he made three visits for sermoning, Nalanda where also he visited several times. Similarly, places like Girnar, Dhanka near Porbandar, Siddhasar, Talaja, Sanha, Valabhi, Kampilya, Bhaj, Kondane Pitalkhora, Ajonta, Vedasa, Nasik, Junnar, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Srimulkavasama have some Buddhist link and are considered holy and sacred to the Buddhists. All these places have Stupas of varying heights and shapes.

Although Sanchi came to recognition through Ashoka and his wife Devi, all four Gateways or toranas of Sanchi carry depictions of the Jataka stories like Chhandanta, Mahakapi, Vessantara, Alambusa and Sama relating to the life of Buddha. The peculiarity of the engravings on the gateways, built during the Satvahana period, is that the life events of Buddha depicted here, have not been shown iconographically, that is, Buddha is not deified. Rather, Lord Buddha has been presented here symbolically, through chhatra, house, elephant, throne, chakra, Tri-ratna, monastery-site, Bodhi-tree etc. As per Buddhist myths and legends, Buddha had taken several births before he finally became Buddha, the enlightened one. The symbols represent many of the events of those previous incarnations and lives of Buddha.

### **An Outline of the Life of Buddha and its Relation with Sanchi Stupa:**

Buddha was born at Lumbini in Nepal in 562 B.C. The name of his father was Suddhodhana and mother, Mahamaya. The former was the ruler of Kapilavastu. The child Buddha, then known as Sidhartha, after the namakarana ritual was named Goutam, after his aunt, Goutami, who, short after the death of Mahamaya at Sidhartha's early childhood, took upon herself the responsibility of upbringing the child. Goutam, from his childhood days, was serene and contemplative. At due time he was married to the lady Yashodhara, who eventually gave birth to their child Rahul. During city travel, one day Goutam saw an old man, a sick man, a mendicant and a dead person. This caused an extreme feeling of detachment in him and realising the futility of this transitory life, he decided to abandon the luxurious life of a prince. One night he left home, leaving behind his sleeping wife and children. While in exile, he came into contact with sages like Adara Kalama and Uddhaka Ramputra. His thirst for true knowledge or wisdom was not quenched. He reached Bodhgaya,

where he did penance amidst dense forest for six years and then one day, spontaneously the idea sparked in him that he would get enlightenment. He then sat with complete awareness under a Pipal tree, in deep meditation. During this time he faced various problems and disturbances, but determined as he was for truth, he remained firm in his meditation, without any deviation. After four weeks, he got the Enlightenment and became known as Buddha, a person who has acquired bodhi or wisdom. During his journey, he happened to meet two businessmen, Mallika and Tapussa, who offered him honey and were privileged to become his first disciples. At Sarnath, Buddha moved the Dharma Chakra, the wheel of truth, and delivered his first sermon to five disciples. It is here that the concept of Sangha came into light.

Having seen and influenced by the miracles of Buddha at Uruvela, Kashyapa Rishi and his disciples became the followers of Buddha. Buddha, along with his disciples, reached Rajagriha, the capital city of Magadha. The ruler and King, Bimbisara offered him a portion of his palace and accepted Buddhism. It is at Rajagriha, that Sariputra and Mahamodagalayayana became his favourite disciples.

On hearing about Buddha, Sudhodhona invited him to Kapilavastu where many people including his son Rahul became his disciples. After the demise of Sudhodhona, Gautami had also expressed her will to join the Sangha and then became the first Nun in the Buddhist Order. Buddha and his followers conveyed to the people the message of peace, fraternity and non-violence, of love and compassion. Many impediments came in the way, but Buddha did overcome all odds by the strength of his religious and spiritual principles.

At the age of eighty one, he realised that the time had come for him to leave this physical world. He then asked his chief disciple, Anand, to spread a cloth (asana) under a Sal tree at Kushinagar and there he left this physical body. The day of Baisakhi Purnima had all along been highly significant in his life, for, his birth, Enlightenment and death, all occurred on this particular day. His last sermon was to the Vikshus of the Sangha, in which he said:

*I have nothing more to say to you now, except that whatever is manifest shall perish and to achieve deliverance or Nirvana, you yourself must make all possible efforts with zest.*

*As the news of Buddha's demise spread, the kings of several states gathered and each of them wanted to get the bone relics of Buddha. Sensing the possibility of a war over relics, a sage named Drona, intervened and divided relics to be distributed among the eight kings. Each king returned with his own share and got the Stupa built in their respective kingdoms. At a later stage, Emperor Ashoka, the Great, got seven out of the eight Stupas re-*

*opened and took out the relics to distribute the same to construct 84,000 Stupas in his large kingdom. Stupa number 1 at Sanchi, is the most remarkable one of them.*

### **The Stupa at Sanchi : Architecture:**

The Great Stupa at Sanchi is one of the most important Buddhist monuments reflecting gem of Buddhist art and architecture. It was laid by one of the greatest Indian Emperors, Ashoka of the Maurya Dynasty who reigned over almost the entire Indian subcontinent from c. 268 to 232 BCE. He commissioned construction of the Stupa here after redistributing the mortal remains of Lord Buddha so as to build several Stupas in different locations across India to spread Buddhism. Located at Sanchi Town, Madhya Pradesh, India, this Stupa is the oldest stone structure in India that was built during the Mauryan period. The present hemispherical dome with a height of 12.2816.46 m (54.0 ft) consists of a central chamber where the relics of Lord Buddha are placed and its edifice is double in diameter of the original brick structure built by Ashoka, consisting of the relics of Lord Buddha. A chatra that is an umbrella like structure made of stone crowned the hemispherical brick structure that was surrounded by a wooden railing. Four ornamental gateways facing four directions and a balustrade surrounding the Stupa were later added in the first century BCE.

Queen Devi, wife of Ashoka and daughter of a merchant of Vidisha, who was born in Sanchi, supervised the construction of this monument. A sandstone pillar, inscribed with Schism Edict by Ashoka as also with ornate spiral Brahmi characters from the Gupta period resembling conch shells referred as 'Shankhalipi' or 'shell-script' by scholars, was erected in the site. While the lower portion of it is still grounded, the upper portions are kept under a canopy. A typical example of a Stupa and an excellent illustration of the development of Buddhist art and sculpture starting from the third century BC through the twelfth century AD, the Sanchi Stupa attracts hundreds of visitors from across the world. Enlisted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1989, it is counted among the best conserved ancient Stupas of central India.

### **Probable Destruction and Expansion of the Stupa during Shunga Period:**

The Senapati or General of the Maurya Empire, Pushyamitra Shunga killed Brihadratha Maurya, the last Mauryan Emperor in the middle of an army review in 185 BCE and laid the foundation of the Shunga Empire in North India. Going by the Indian Sanskrit-language text titled 'Ashokavadana' that describes the birth and reign of Ashoka, assumptions crop up that the Stupa was probably destroyed during the second century BCE, an incident which many believe to be associated with the rise of the power of Pushyamitra. Later it was re-constructed by his son, Agnimitra.

During the Shunga dynasty, expansion of the Stupa, nearly double its original size with a more flattened dome, was undertaken using stone slabs that entirely covered the actual brick Stupa. Three superimposed umbrella-like structures were built to crown the dome. It symbolised the Wheel of Law or 'dharma'. A high rounded drum that can be reached through a double staircase became the seat of the dome enabling one to circumambulate the sacred dome.

Construction & Decoration of the Gateways:

As perceived from inscriptions, presumably the four intricately decorated toranas or gateways facing all four directions and an ornamented balustrade surrounding the Stupa were added later in the first century BCE during the Satavahana rule. Various designs and motifs are carved on the railing and the gates of the Stupa. The sculptures on the toranas consist of decorative illustrations of events encompassing the life of Lord Buddha as elucidated in the tales of Jataka. Inanimate figures like that of a tree are used here to symbolise Lord Buddha. One of the most striking features regarding the Stupa is that instead of images, Lord Buddha has been depicted symbolically by figures like thrones, wheels and footprints among others.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STORIES PORTRAYED ON THE GATEWAYS:**

##### **North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Vessantara Jataka story**

There is mention of story of the previous birth of Buddha, who was the prince Vessantara then. The prince had an elephant with supra-physical power by which he could cause rains anywhere anytime. Due to draught in Kalinga Brahmins of the kingdom got this elephant as donation. Enraged father of the prince sent him in exile. The prince Vessantara along with his wife Moddi and son and daughter left the kingdom riding in a chariot. On the way he donated the horses and chariot while being asked for. He also gave his son and daughter to the sage Jataka and his wife to Sukra. Finally, however, the Prince got back everything he donated to others.

##### **North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Allambus Jataka story**

Kassapa Bodhisattva was born as a saint in one birth. He fell in love with a doe. From her he got a son with a thorn. His name was Isisinga. Lord Indra sent a damsel named Allambus to tempt him but she did not succeed. In the depiction, Isisinga is standing before Kassapa. The doe mother is seen to be lying at the feet of Bodhisattva.

##### **North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): West Pillar, Second Panel**

In this scene, a monkey is offering honey to Buddha.

**North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): West Pillar, Front View**

In this scene, Buddha is shown coming down from the site of Shankashya after preaching his mother in trayasitransha heaven.

**North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): West Pillar, Side two, Front View**

In this scene, Goutam Buddha is shown wandering in Kapilavastu. During this, he saw a sick man, an old man, a saint and a dead body. After seeing this, he had the feeling of detachment, and he decided to leave behind, his family life, the palace and kingdom, everything.

**North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): First Panel**

Here, Buddha is shown as preaching to the common people of Shakya state.

**North Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Second Panel**

In this scene, Sujata, the daughter of the head of Urubela village, is shown offering Kheer (sweet rice cooked in milk) to Buddha, after he got the Enlightenment.

**East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): First Panel**

Here, Siddhartha is shown as leaving his home, in Kapilavastu with his charioteer Chhandaka, at midnight. Chhandaka, leaves the prince on the bank of the river Anoma.

**East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Second Panel**

In this scene, King Ashoka is shown to be worshipping.

**East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Southern Pillar, Third Panel, Front View**

In this scene, Buddha is shown walking through the Niranjana river. Amazed people are felicitating him.

**East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Northern Pillar, Second Panel, Inner View**

In this scene, King Suddhodhona of Kapilavastu and his queen are shown as sleeping and a white elephant is entering in the womb of the Queen, mahamaya.

**East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Northern Pillar, Third Panel, Inner View**

In this scene, Lord Buddha is shown as coming to Kapilavastu through Astral travel (Akash marga). Amazed King and his people are standing to welcome him.

**East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Southern Pillar, Third Panel, Inner View**



In this scene, people of Uruvala are shown as performing yagna, celebrating pleasure, emanating from a snake. Since this yagna was organised without taking consent of Buddha, did not burn. As a result, the yagna failed.

### **East Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Second Panel, Inner View**

In this scene King Ashoka is being shown as going to open the Stupa of Ramagrama, while the local nagi people are praying for not to re-open the Stupa.

### **West Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Third Panel, Front View, Chhaddanta Jataka Story**

Bodhisattva was born as a six toothed elephant in one incarnation. He had two wives. Out of the feeling of retaliation, the disappointed younger wife prayed to God for becoming a queen in the next birth. Fortunately, she became the queen of the king of Varanasi. She had then seen the teeth of Chhaddanta broken by a tiger called Sonuttara. While witnessing the pain and agony of the elephant, the queen repented and died.

### **West Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Mahakapi Jataka Story**

In one of his previous births, Bodhisattva was a monkey. He was the leader of eighty thousand monkeys living on the bank of the river Ganga and he lived by having fruits from a mango tree. To get rid of the monkeys from the mango tree, the king of Varanasi along with his military men attacked the monkeys. To save their lives, Bodhisattva expanded his body across the river to serve the purpose of a bridge where through the monkeys escaped. The Gods above are shown here as listening to the sermons spoken by Buddha.

### **West Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Mahakapi Jataka Story**

In one of his previous births, Bodhisattva was born as a monkey. He was the leader of a troop of eighty thousand monkeys who lived by the bank of river Ganga and ate mangoes in profuse quantity. To get rid of the monkeys, the king of Varanasi along with his military men attacked the monkeys. But in order to save the lives of his friends, Bodhisattva expanded his body across the river to serve the purpose of a bridge, where through the monkeys escaped. In this plate, it is also depicted that Gods have assembled in the sky to listen to the sermons being delivered by Buddha.

### **Sama Jataka Story:**

While the child Sama goes to fetch water for his blind parents from the river, the king of Varanasi, took the sound of the water entering the pitcher to be the sound of drinking water by a lion. He shoot arrows at the target. But as he heard the cry of the

dying boy he rushed to the spot. He then promised to the boy that he would serve his parents through out their lives. Buddha is also shown here as approaching Nagraja Muchilinga and saving him from a devastating storm.

### **West Gateway/ Torana (Stupa 1): Second Panel, back side**

Buddha got the Mahaparinirvana in Kushinagar, the state of the Mallas. Several kings quarrelled over their true right on the bone relics of Buddha. The sage Drona amicably resolved the problem by distributing the relics among them. This is depicted here. Similarly many other stories are depicted and carved on other pillars and Gateways, all resembling some incidents from previous or last Incarnations of Bodhisattva's life.

### **Stupa number 02:**

The pathway by the front side of the Western Gateway of the Mahastupa goes to Stupa number 02. The latter is located at half a K.M. distance and it is comparable with the Stupa number 03 as far size is concerned. The extent remains of this Stupa include the Anda (dome), the Bhu Vedica (Ground Railing) and two sopana (Stair cases). General Alexander Cunningham had got the dhatu (bone relics) from the garbhagriha (nucleus) at a height of 2.13 meter from the pradakshina patha. The Stupa is said to have been built by the Shungas. The symbolic representations of Buddha are beautifully executed here on the railings and pillars of the Stupa.

### **Stupa number 03:**

Located near Stupa 01, this Stupa also was built by the Shungas. The diameter and height of this Stupa is 15 meter and 8.23 meter respectively. Cunningham recovered the relics casket of Sariputra and Mahamodaglayayana here, who were Buddha's favourite disciples. The Stupa retains a Gateway without railing.

### **Other Stupas:**

In addition to the above mentioned ones, there are many more small size Stupas in Sanchi, scattered all through the site. In them, only the ground plan and few stone courses now have survived. These Stupas are now believed to be belonging to the Buddhist Acharyas and disciples. It has been customary in the Buddhist pantheon to build such Stupas of small size when the wishes of the devotees get fulfilled.

### **Re-discovery in the 19th Century & Restoration Works:**

In 1818, the existence of the Sanchi Stupa was documented in English by a British officer named General Taylor. Till 1881 treasure hunters and Amateur archaeologists caused extensive damage to the Stupa following which appropriate steps were

undertaken to restore the ancient monument. Sir John Hubert Marshall, who served as the Director General of the 'Archaeological Survey of India' (ASI) from 1902 to 1928 supervised the restoration work of the Stupa between 1912 and 1919.

The Stupa has been identified as the body of Buddha. People, who have entered the Stupa, have recollected a sweet and exquisite smell of sandalwood inside. Many of the pilgrims to the inner chamber are supposed to get recovered from various types of illness in their personal lives.

**Recognition:**

*The Sanchi Stupas are now recognised and included in the list of worldwide Heritage sites, declared and prepared by UNESCO.*

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