

Lumbini the Peace-Shrine and Place of Pilgrimage

- T. R. Vaidya

Lumbini, situated in the Tarai of south-western region of Nepal, is renowned in the world as the birthplace of Lord Gautam Buddha, the Apostle of Peace. On the Vaisakha full moon day of 623 B.C.¹ Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha, was born there when his mother Mahamaya was on the way to Devadaha, her native home.²

Importance of Lumbini

It is mentioned in the Buddhist texts that Siddhartha Gautam immediately after birth walked seven steps, raised the second finger of his right hand and proclaimed

*Aggohamasmi Lokassa...*³

“I am the foremost of all the creatures of the world to cross the riddle of the ocean of existence. I have come to the world to show the path of

Emancipation. This is my last birth and hereafter I will not be born again”

The Nativity sculpture of Lumbini (dating 4th-5th century A.D.) shows Mayadevi, mother of Lord Buddha, supporting herself by holding a branch of a tree by her right hand. The newly born Siddhartha Gautam is depicted standing upright on the lotus flower. Two other celestial figures are seen pouring water. Lotus flowers are also seen scattered from heaven.

Later on after attaining Buddhahood, while visiting Kapilavastu, Lumbini and nearby areas in connection with his preaching, Lord Buddha is described to have said, while discussing with his disciple *Bhikshu* Anand:

“Anand! There are four places which

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- 1 Sri Lankan date is followed here. There are many versions about the date.
 - 2 It is still a tradition among some communities that a pregnant woman goes to her father's house for the delivery of the first child.
 - 3 *Jatak Attha Katha*

should be (visited and) seen by a person of devotion and which would cause awareness and apprehension of the nature of impermanence”

The Digha Nikaya further mentions:

“Anand! all those who are on a pilgrimage to (these) shrines,⁴ if they should die with devotion in their hearts during the course of their pilgrimage, will after (the dissolution of the body) be reborn in a good destination, a fortunate celestial (deva) realm.

Pilgrimage Shrine

Being the birthplace of Lord Buddha Lumbini was considered a holy pilgrimage shrine since ancient times. In the 20th year of his coronation i.e. in 249 B.C. Emperor Ashoka of India guided and accompanied by his royal preceptor Upagupta visited the spot, erected the *stambha* (pillar) with a typical Asokan inscription and placed a commemorative stone (*Silavigadabhica*) to mark the birth place of Lord Buddha (at the exact spot where prince Siddhartha Gautam touched on earth) for the benefit of the future generations of mankind.

The five line inscription of the Ashokan pillar gives us the exact information that King *Piyadasi*

(Ashok), the beloved of Devas, in the 20th year of the coronation, himself made a visit to Lumbini and paid homage to Lord Buddha. Realizing that Buddha Sakyamuni was born here, *Silavigadabhica* was placed and stone pillar (*stambha*) erected. As *Bhagavan* (Buddha) was born here, Lumbinigrama was declared *ubalikekate athabhagiyecca*.⁵

In the translation of the text (inscription) there is much controversy about the word *Silavigadabhica*. Different scholars have given different interpretations about the word. A. Barth and R. Basak explained it as “a stone image of she-ass as the capital”, R. Pischel and G. Buhler “not as uncouth as a donkey” or “by finely wrought, polished”, Dr. B.C. Law, V.A. Smith and J. Charpenlier “a stone horse (capita) not a donkey”, or “a stone bearing a horse”, R. Pischel (later on) “a flawless block of stone” from which the pillar was made, J. F. Fleet “a stone wall which is an enclosure and a screen”, P. Thieme “a featherless horse”, Kenneth R. Norman “a wall made from or decorated with stone”⁶. R. K. Mookherji has interpreted it as “a stone bearing a figure”⁷. Rajbali Pandey, Amulyachandra, Dinesh Chandra Sircar, Romilla Thapar and Janardan Bhatta have interpreted the word as the “railing of stone”. *Bhikshu* Sudarshan *Mahasthavira* of Nepal has written that a meeting, conducted on his request, attended by the monks, scholars and professors of Chulangkorn University,

4 *Caturmahasthana*-Birthplace= Lumbini, Place of Enlightenment =Bodha Gaya, First place of Sermon- Sarnath and Place of *Mahapariniravana* -Kusinagara.

5 Rajabali Pandey-*Historical and Literary Inscriptions*, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1962,p.39

6 Kenneth R.Norman-“A note on *Silavigadabhica* in Ashok’s Rummendei Inscription “*The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. III London: 1994, p.237

7 Radha Kumnd Mookherji- *Ashoka* (Revised 2nd Edition) Delhi: Raj Kamal Publication Ltd., 1955, P.197

Dhammasaha University and Chakravat of Bangkok, the word *silavigadabhicha* was interpreted as “disfiguring a stone or engraved the inscription on a stone.” *Bhikshu* Sudarshan is also of the opinion that all participants in that Bangkok meet were unanimous in their opinion that a stone figure, probably a prototype of the famous Nativity image of Lumbini was made.⁸

The discovery of the block of stone known now as the Marker Stone on the platform made of seven layers of bricks (from the natural soil) and an arched niche with two sandstones on the east of the Marker Stone are unique features in the entire Maurya *terracotta* structure at Lumbini. Moreover these stones are found vertically under the spot where the Nativity image was placed. So the Marker Stone and an arched niche with two sandstones have an important message to convey i.e. pointing out the exact spot where Prince Siddhartha Gautam was born. Ashokan pillar inscription also mentions *hidabuddhajate* and *hidabhagavanjateti*. The *Divyavadana* refers that royal preceptor Upagupta had said *Asmin Maharaja pradeshe Bhagawna Jata*. It also mentions that *Idam hi pratham chaityam Buddhasyotam Cakshyusa* (This is the first chaitya of Buddha the Enlightened One). Thus the inscription and the literary evidence clearly mention the exact spot of birth of Lord Buddha. Emperor Ashoka, having erected the *stambha* (pillar) with inscription, seems to have constructed a vihar in that complex. The excavations have indeed revealed the Mauryan *terracotta* structure around the pillar.

Ashoka erected inscribed pillars also at Gotihawa and Niglihawa to mark the birth places of Krakuchhanda Buddha and Kanaka Muni Buddha, respectively. The Niglihawa pillar inscription of Ashoka mentions that King *Piyadashi*, beloved of Gods, (Ashoka) after 14 years of his anointment enlarged for the second time the stupa of Kanaka Muni Buddha and in the 20th year of his anointment he came himself and worshipped and caused (this) stone pillar to be erected. Thus Emperor Ashoka visited the birthplaces of Krakuchanda and Kanaka Muni the previous Buddhas as well as Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Gautam Buddha. Being shocked by the huge bloodshed in the Kalinga War Ashoka became a Buddhist and a peace loving emperor whose motto, henceafter, became *Dharmavijaya* (victory by peity) instead of *Digvijaya* (victory by arms). To attain mental and spiritual solace he had visited Lumbini and other sites.

Having erected the *stambha*, Emperor Ashoka declared the Lumbinigrama an *Ubalika* = *Abalika*, which means no animal sacrifice (*bali*) will be performed here.⁹ The villagers of Lumbinigrama were made subject to pay only one-eighth of the produce as the land revenue instead of the usual rate.¹⁰ Emperor Ashoka must have placed the Marker Stone on the exact spot where baby Siddhartha Gautam was born. Thus *Silavigadabhicha* is connected with the Marker stone.¹¹ Ashoka's construction of stupa, erection of the pillar, declaration of Lumbinigrama as an area of *ubalika* and a significant reduction of

8 *Bhikshu Sudarshan Mahasthabir*—“Silabigadabhicha-chhagu Adhayayan (A study on *Silavigadabhicha*), *Lumbiniya Kichale*, Kathmandu Offset Press, N.S. 116 p.100

9 *Bhikshu Sudarsan Mahasthabir* is also of this opinion.

10 D.C Sircar—*Inscriptions of Asoka* (Publication Division, 1967) p.69

11 T.R. Vaidya—“Nepal and Emperor Asoka” *Voice of History* Vol. XII No. I. (Journal of Central Department of History, T.U. 1997), p.18

revenue to the villagers (special facility) made an impact not only on the contemporary period but also on the posterity. Lumbini became a holy shrine and pilgrimage center for all the peace loving people and Buddhists of the world.

Henceafter many monasteries were constructed around and nearby the birthplace of Lord Buddha from 3rd Century B.C. to 6th Century A.D. as the excavations have revealed. The overlapping and crowded structures are the strong evidence of the desire of the religious minded Buddhists to be closure to the sacred spot.

Lumbini, the Sacred Shrine

Lumbini as the sacred shrine attracted not only local scholars and pilgrims but also the religious minded people and scholarly travelers from foreign lands. Unfortunately so far we have not found the accounts of the local scholars visiting the holy pilgrimage shrine. From the time of Emperor Ashoka Lumbini became the Buddhist pilgrimage as well as the center of peace, compassion, humanism, non-violence and universal brotherhood. Ashoka himself achieved profound spiritual solace by visiting the spot. Later on Lumbini attracted scholars and pilgrims like Sheng Tsai (350-375 A.D), Fahien (406 A.D.), Hiuen Tsang (636 A.D.) from China who visited the site to pay homage to Lord Buddha. They have left some accounts about Lumbini, Kapilvastu and Ramgrama, which were in deteriorating condition.

According to the monk Sheng Tsai "Emperor Ashoka made a lapislazuli statue of the queen in the

act of grasping (the tree) and giving birth to the prince. The branch of the tree... still shelters the stone statue".¹² According to the account the statue of Mayadevi giving birth to prince Siddhartha was not made from the point of view of deification (as upto that time Buddha was not defied). But one thing must be accepted that from the 4th Century A.D. the Nativity sculpture had become popular object of worship among the people.

Fahien found many of the famous Buddhist sites of India and Nepal in waste and deserted condition. According to him the city of Gaya was empty and desolate. The holy places of Bodhgaya were surrounded by jungle. The extensive tract of the country near the foot of mountains which was once thickly populated in the 6th/5th centuries B.C. was sparsely populated in 4th/5th centuries A.D. Kushinagar, Lumbini and Kapilavastu were waste and deserted. There were only few monks and their lay attendants living in the area.

Hiuen Tsang (who visited Kapilavastu, Lumbini and Ramangrama- the three most important sites connected with Lord Buddha) has given the account of the stupa built by Emperor Ashoka. He mentions about the decayed Ashoka tree (under which the Lord Buddha was born), a spring with cold and warm water flowing (where the newly born baby was purified), many other stupas. By then the Ashokan pillar with the horse capital was damaged by the lightning flash. He also saw the river of oil (Telar river) at Lumbini.¹³

12 Luciano Petech (ed.)- *Northern India According to the Shui Ching Chu*. Rome: Instituto Poligrafico Dello Stato Piozza Verdi, 1950, p.35

13 Samuel Beal (ed.)- *Travels of Hiuen Tshang* Vol. II, Calcutta: Sushil Gupta (India) Ltd., 1958. pp. 276-277.

Ripu Malla, King of western Nepal, while visiting the holy shrines Lumbini and Niglihawa,¹⁴ had engraved the sacred *Buddha Mantra-Om Mani Padme Hum* and his name *Sri Ripu Malla ciranjayatu* on the Ashoka pillar of Lumibini. He had also made a pilgrimage to the holy shrines of the Kathmandu Valley in 1313 A.D.¹⁵ Thus upto the early years of 14th century Lumbini was a holy shrine for the Buddhists and the peace-loving people. But after that due to foreign invasions, spread of disease specially malarial disease and other reasons the whole Tarai region including Lumbini was deserted and remained covered by dense forest infested by reptiles and wild animals. Lumbini was a neglected and lost shrine for about five hundred years.

The Discovery of Ashokan Pillar

Due to the effort of Genl. Khadga Shamsher Rana, the Governor of Palpa and Dr. A. Fuhdrer, the Ashokan Pillar was discovered on Dec. 1, 1896 A.D. Thus Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, the Apostle of Peace, was discovered to the happiness of the Buddhists and peace loving people of the world. It was a great landmark in the history. Many scholars and devotees were attracted to the site and the inscription of the Ashokan pillar became the scholars' main concern of study and interpretations. The recent discovery of the Marker stone (pointing out the exact spot of Lord Buddha's birthplace) now seems to have solved the controversy of the meaning of the word "*Silvigadabhica*".

The White Temple of Mayadevi

The inscription confirmed Lumbini as the

birthplace of Lord Buddha but the ignorant local people mistook the famous Nativity sculpture as the Vanadevi (Goddess Bhagvati) and animals and fowls were sacrificed there. Shocked at the practice, the Buddhists from Nepal and abroad made a pressing request to the Government of Nepal to stop the practice. Thus in 1926 Chandra Shamsher, the then Prime Minister, stopped it. In 1930s Kaishar Shamsher Rana took the initiative to excavate and conserve the site with a white Mayadevi Temple with the Nativity sculpture in it built on the top of platform. Where he got the Nativity Sculpture is not known. Due to his lack of archaeological knowledge he placed the 5th Century Nativity Sculpture in the 20th century structure. Had he got minimum knowledge of archaeological norms he would have placed the historic image in proper stratigraphic spot or left the written account about his excavation and construction of the Mayadevi temple.

With the dawn of democracy and departure from the policy of isolation after fall of the Ranas (1950-51), foreigners could have free access to Nepal.

King Tribhuvan adopted a bold policy by involving personally in the promotion of Buddhism. Accompanied by *Bhkishu* Amritananda King Tribuhvan personally participated in the procession to receive the relics of Sariputta and Maudgalyayana, the two famous disciples of Lord Buddha, from Sri Lanka on Nov. 8, 1951 A.D. Chairing the mammoth gathering at Tundikhel he spoke highly of Lord Buddha's teachings and their relevance in the world full of tension. He expressed his great pleasure to

14 Asokan pillar of Niglihawa bears an inscription which reads "*Om Mani Padme Hum Ripu Mallasya ciranjayatu 1234*" (1312 A.D.)

15 Dhanavajra Vajrachraya and Kamal P.Malla- *Gopalarajavamasvali*, Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlaz, Nepal Research Center Publication; Kathmandu: No. 9, 1985, p.99

have the relics of renowned disciples of Lord Buddha¹⁶. It was a departure from the age-old tradition of Nepal as the Ranas before 1950 had undermined the existence and development of Buddhism during their rule.

King Mahendra and the Development of Lumbini

His Late Majesty King Mahendra visited Lumbini on Falgun 7, 2012 B.S. (Feb 19, 1956 A.D.) Addressing the mass meeting organized there in his honor, he spoke in appreciation of the great person of Nepal, Lord Buddha and His teachings. He said, 'the forthcoming *Baisakha Poornima* would be celebrated as the 25th centenary throughout the world. As *Baisakha Poornima* is a holy day (Birthday of Lord Buddha) I wish it be observed throughout the kingdom without any animal being killed. The government machinery will make necessary arrangement (to stop the slaughter of any animal or fowl).' He further emphasized that it was our bounder duty to immortalize Lord Buddha and materialize His Ideas. The Govt. of Nepal was also sincere in it. He expressed his **satisfaction** at the commencement of the **construction** of a guest house, garden, temple, bridge and road there.¹⁶

King Mahendra also laid the foundation of pillar at Lumbini garden (west of Mayadevi temple) on that very day.¹⁷

King Mahendra's devotion and dedication to Lord Buddha and sincere wish to develop Lumbini

Garden will ever be appreciated by all the Buddhists and peace loving people of the world. He was the first King of Nepal to visit Lumbini to pay homage to Lord Buddha. He must be given due credit to introduce the system of celebration *Baisakha Poornima* as a national festival on which day the Government employees are given holiday. In ancient time Emperor Ashoka made Lumbini-a zone of *ahimsa* = *Ubalika Abalika* (as per the Ashokan pillar inscription). In the modern period from Lumbini King Mahendra declared the celebration of *Baisakha Poornima* as the festival in honor of Lord Buddha and prohibition of animal slaughter on that day.¹⁸ King Mahendra had done a commendable work in doing so.

The chapter does not end here. Actually it was the **beginning of plan to develop** Lumbini as the pilgrimage center and holy shrine of the peace loving people of the world, for which King Mahendra will ever be remembered by all peace loving people of the world. Because of his dedication and effort from Nepal and Mr. U. Thant, the then Secretary General of UN, the Master Plan of Lumbini was conceived in 1967 A.D.

The Master Plan is based on Buddhist philosophy also. It divides the entire complex into three zones in built form as conceived by the renowned architect-engineer Prof. Kenzo Tange of Japan. The UN emphasized the importance of Lumbini on the six aspects :

- a) Religious
- b) Cultural

16 Grishma Bahadur Devakota (ed.) - *Nepalko Rajnitik Darpan* Vol. I. Kathmandu. Dhruva Bahadur Devakota 2036 (3rd print). pp. 378-79

17 According to Sri Loke Darshan Vajracharya, the then Principal Private Secretary of king Mahendra, the whole expenses of the construction of the pillar- *Mahendra Stambha* was borne by the royal palace.

18 It seems that Sri Loka Darshan Vajracharya had also played a positive role in the affair.

- c) Archaeological
- d) Historical
- e) Social and
- f) Touristic

Conclusion

From ancient times till present Lumbini has secured a very sacred and holiest place as a pilgrimage centre for all the Buddhists and peace loving people of the world. The Lumbini Development Trust, the sole custodian entrusted by HMG/Nepal for the development of the complex and the region, is making all efforts to carry out the construction according to the Master Plan. So far several such constructions and the physical-natural setting of the area has given

Lumbini a new revived face with all the ancient sites and monuments preserved in place. The Mayadevi shrine is expected to come up with the most sacred finds *in situ*. The famous Ashokan Pillar is showing somewhat slanting position which needs immediate attention by the archaeologists/experts. The rusted iron ring binding the pillar needs to be immediately replaced by other better tool. With the growing international support and cooperation, Lumbini complex and the region will further develop as peace shrine and places of pilgrimage. The World Buddhist Summit organized by HMG of Nepal here at Lumbini in Nov. 30 - Dec. 2, 1998 is truly a landmark in the recent history of Nepal. One can hope that the future of Lumbini is bright.