



The Return of the Buddha

Ancient Symbols for a New Nation

HIMANSHU PRABHA RAY

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Dedicated to Suvira Jaiswal

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Preface

Work on this theme started in 2007 when the Asia Research Institute (ARI) of the National University of Singapore awarded me a senior fellowship and I gratefully acknowledge Tony Reid's support as I initiated research into the modern history of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. John Miksic chaired a presentation at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies on the topic and Geoff Wade included it as ARI Working Paper in September 2007. A revised version of the paper titled 'Archaeology and Empire: Buddhist Monuments in Monsoon Asia' was published in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, volume 45, number 3, September 2008.

The joint co-ordination of an international conference along with Patrick Olivelle and Janice Leoshko on 'Aśoka in the Making of Modern India' in August 2009 provided further fillip to my research. The conference was sponsored by the University of Texas at Austin, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) and the India International Centre (IIC). The papers from the conference have since been published under the title *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and History* by Oxford University Press in 2012.

In 2009, POSCO T. J. Park Foundation in Seoul awarded me a one-year fellowship to continue research on the theme and this enabled me to spend time in Singapore and Bangkok, as also to visit Buddhist sites in India. In June 2010, the Foundation invited me to present my work at a conference in Seoul and I greatly appreciate Juhung Rhi's response to my paper, as also the lively discussion that followed my presentation at the Institute of Humanities, Seoul National University.

The book took shape at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, where I spent a year from September 2010 as Felix Gilbert Member. The Medieval Table chaired every Wednesday afternoon by Caroline Bynum provided not only a forum for open discussion but was also a tremendous learning experience. Marcia Tucker of the School of Historical Studies Library worked hard to ensure a constant supply of newspaper clippings relating to my theme. I enjoyed the presentation

at the Lunch Colloquium of the School so efficiently organized by Marian Zelazny and am thankful to my colleagues for the feedback. I am especially indebted to Sharon Gerstel, Margaret Larkin, Anton Bierl, Gabriel Gorodetsky, and Joan Connelly for providing their academic inputs, but much more for taking care that there was never a dull moment during my stay. Glen Bowersock received me warmly, and Irving and Marilyne Lavine and Giles Constable were a constant source of encouragement.

Chandan has read through and edited the manuscript, listened patiently to myriad ideas that emerged and most of all believed in the project. It was his reassurance that gave me strength and made the completion of this manuscript possible.

I am thankful to Routledge, New Delhi for accepting it for publication. The book is dedicated to Suviral Jaiswal whose commitment to safeguarding academic freedom gave me a fresh lease of life in 1998 at the Centre for Historical Studies (CHS), JNU.

The views expressed in this volume are entirely my own. The Department of Posts, Government of India bears no legal responsibility.

October 2012

Himanshu Prabha Ray

Map 1: Major Buddhist sites in South Asia



Note: Map not to scale.

Source: Prepared by author.

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Preamble

The Buddha in Twenty- First-Century India



The popular English daily *The Hindu* carried a news item in its *Friday Review* on September 10, 2011 under the title ‘Kapilavastu Relics to be displayed in Sri Lanka’. The article referred to the unearthing of the relics at Piprahwa in the present Indian state of Bihar by Major General (retired) Alexander Cunningham (1814–93), the first head of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which was established in 1861. The visual accompanying the news item showed a 16-ft high replica of the seated Buddha image found during excavations at Sarnath near Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh. This copy was installed at the entrance to the International Buddhist Museum complex at the Temple of the Tooth Relic at Kandy, the erstwhile hill capital of Sri Lanka, amid chanting of Buddhist hymns and in the presence of senior venerable monks. The image shown in the *dharmacakra-pravartana mudrā*, or turning the wheel of law, was carved out of a single piece of beige-coloured sandstone from the quarries at Chunar near Varanasi that had also been used for the fifth-century-CE original. The decision to send the relics in January 2012 was taken at the highest level following a request by the Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa to the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his visit to India. Another anticipated spin-off from this gift was an increase in the number of pilgrims traveling from Sri Lanka, due to which the state-owned Indian Railways was planning to launch a special ‘Buddhist circuit train’ from the southern Indian city of Chennai, catering specifically to Sri Lankan pilgrims.

The Pilgrimage Circuit including eight sites associated with the life of the Buddha, such as Bodhi Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, Sarnath,

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Kushinagar, Shravasti, and Lumbini, located in north India and Nepal is an enduring legacy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century archaeology and one that is actively promoted at present. The Mahabodhi Society was founded in Colombo in 1891, and temples and other structures constructed by it are no doubt a prominent presence at all these sites. In the post-Independence period, the Government of India also granted land to various Buddhist countries of Southeast and East Asia to build temples and meditation center in the proximity of these pilgrimage sites. In January 1955, the Government of Bihar acquired 3.92 acres of land near the Tibetan dharamsala, or guest house, and the Mahabodhi rest house at Bodh Gaya and leased it to the Royal Thai Embassy for 99 years. This was meant to allow construction of a Thai temple at Bodh Gaya.¹ This is one of the many examples of the states of independent India facilitating the development of the Buddhist pilgrimage tour, a tour that brings revenue to the states as thousands of pilgrims from countries of South and Southeast Asia travel to different shrines to pay homage to the Buddha.

The news item in *The Hindu* raises several themes that are of interest and will be discussed in this book, such as the beginnings of the archaeology of Buddhism in India in the nineteenth century; the importance of the site of Sarnath where the lion capital of Ashoka was found in archaeological excavations, which now forms the national symbol of independent India; the centrality of the state in controlling objects unearthed at archaeological sites, such as relics; and, more importantly the multi-layered public discourse on Buddhism that continues to make headlines.

Two symbols grace public and private spaces in India today. The Sarnath lion capital of Ashoka occurs as an insignia on government stationery and government-issued documents, such as passports and licence plates of official cars. As an emblem on Indian currency notes and coins, it is recognized widely and finds its way to remote corners of the country. The second is the *chakra* or the wheel with 24 spokes represented on the pedestal of the lion capital and now the centerpiece of the Indian national flag. At the time of Indian independence on August 15,

¹ National Archives of India, New Delhi, File no. 40 (2) BC (B)/56, Ministry of External Affairs (BC Section): Proposal for getting a plot for the proposed Thai temple.

1947, the national flag was meant for official use only, but after the 2002 Supreme Court judgement, private citizens have been allowed to display it. This universal appeal of the flag, the Ashoka chakra and the Sarnath lion capital of historical Buddhism needs to be balanced against the appearance of a somewhat different monumental architecture of neo-Buddhism² that has found prominent representation since B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), better known today as an iconic dalit political leader, converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956 in a public ceremony.

An analysis of the Pāli sources used by Ambedkar has shown that he consciously restructured the nature of Buddhism presented in his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* by changing either the emphasis or the meaning of the texts used in the canon and by omitting other references.³ For example, Ambedkar excluded young Siddhārtha's encounters with human suffering that occur in traditional biographies of the Buddha, such as the four life-changing experiences of witnessing an ailing man, an aged man, a dying man and a corpse. Instead, he highlighted Buddha's involvement in an inter-tribal conflict over water rights. As recounted by Ambedkar, the Buddha was, however, unable to resolve it, as he lacked necessary political leverage and majority support, and the only solution available to him was to renounce the world and prevent the conflict. Similarly, Ambedkar's public attacks on Hinduism are restated in his book.⁴

A striking aspect of this legacy is the sculptural representation of Ambedkar himself, which came to occupy the pride of place posthumously, at several public locations, especially in Maharashtra where a

² Neo-Buddhism or Navayāna is a term often used to differentiate the modern revivalist movement started by B. R. Ambedkar in 1956 from the historical Buddhism that accepts the Buddha as a historical figure who initiated a new religion.

³ Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, 2004, *The Use of Buddhist Scriptures* in B. R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, edited, *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

⁴ Christopher S. Queen, 1996, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation*, in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, edited, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, State University of New York Press, p. 45.

majority of Ambedkar's followers live. A standing image of Ambedkar, dressed in a business suit with a pen in his pocket and a book in his hand, is a prominent attraction on the highway leading north from Aurangabad to the early Buddhist caves at Ajanta. Another representation at the entrance to the Tarodi settlement in Nagpur shows a standing image along with that of the Buddha.⁵ Replicas of early Buddhist architecture like the main stupa at Sanchi have also been adapted for present-day memorials, such as the Ambedkar Memorial shrine at Bombay, though this practice is not restricted to the followers of Ambedkar.

The Mahabodhi Society has continued to play an important role in contemporary India with centers in Sarnath, Sanchi, Lucknow, Bhubaneswar, New Delhi, Chennai Ajmer, Bangalore, etc. The Mahabodhi International Meditation center was set up in Leh in the region of Ladakh by Bhikkhu Sanghasena. In recent years, the Mahabodhi Society has had a somewhat uneasy relationship with Ambedkar's followers, and in 2008 it changed the rules to ensure that only born-Buddhists could hold office, thereby barring neo-Buddhists from claiming a post. The Dalai Lama was made the chief patron and a special position was created for him.⁶

Another major sponsor for the setting up of Buddhist stupas based on earlier models is the order of Nipponzan Myōhōji founded by the Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii (1885–1985). Fujii first came to India in 1931 and later became closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi.⁷ He decided to set up Shanti Stupas or 'peace pagodas' in order to develop programs for promoting peace and non-violence. So far, 80 of them have been established worldwide, of which six are in India. In 1969, Fujii built a peace pagoda at Rajgir in the Nalanda district of Bihar, the site of the miracle of taming of a wild elephant by the Buddha. In 1972, a Shanti Stupa came up at Dhauri in Orissa, close to the site of Ashoka's inscription and another at Vaishali in 1998, where Buddha

⁵ Gary Michael Tartakov, 1990, Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery, *Art Journal*, Winter: 412.

⁶ Ratnottama Sengupta, Now, Hindus Can't Head Mahabodhi Society, *The Times of India*, September 28, 2008, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-09-28/kolkata/27901967_1_mahabodhi-society-buddhist-nations-neo-buddhist (accessed on June 14, 2013).

⁷ <http://www.shantistupa.org/> (accessed on September 27, 2011).

had preached his last sermon. In 2007, a stupa was formally opened by the Dalai Lama in Indraprastha park, New Delhi. Architecturally, these Shanti Stupas present a collage of motifs borrowed from several ancient stupas. These appropriated patterns are then transformed into a unified whole to meet contemporary aesthetic requirements.⁸ The modern constructions rework models unearthed in excavations, thereby reinforcing the continuity of a tradition in much the same way as Cunningham used models of the temple at Bodh Gaya to renovate it in the nineteenth century.

Another facet of this discussion is the propagation of the Buddha *dhamma* by Tibetan spiritual leaders who have a long tradition of traveling and sojourning in India. This was by, no means, a one-way traffic, as there is evidence for several Buddhist teachers traveling from India to Tibet and Nepal throughout history. On February 22, 1910, the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, began his visit to India and stayed there for three years. In 1959, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama and the chief spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists, came to India along with about 85,000 followers. His followers are now settled in 52 centers across 10 states of India, five of them located in the southern state of Karnataka. The presence of Tibetan Buddhists has changed the landscape in two major ways: one through the construction of new stupas at locations with large Tibetan populations, such as Mcleodganj in Dharamsala and Bir Khas, both in Himachal Pradesh and so on; and the second through a devotional engagement with older archaeological sites by way of performance of rituals, such as the *kālacakra* initiation.⁹

A significant element in the framing of this book is the enormous interest that Buddhism generated in North America in the nineteenth century. This moves North America's interest in Buddhism beyond the binary correlation between the colonizer and the colonized. The appeal

⁸ Jinah Kim, 2009, What Makes a Stupa? Quotations, Fragments and the Reinvention of Buddhist Stupas in Contemporary India, in Jason Hawkes and Akira Shimada, edited, *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 301.

⁹ Catherine Becker, 2009, Remembering the Amaravati Stupa: The Revival of a Ruin, in Jason Hawkes and Akira Shimada, edited, *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

of Buddhism was by no means restricted to academics and universities but found tremendous public support through the activities of the Theosophical Society founded in 1875 in New York and the World Parliament of Religions held in 1893 at Chicago. The Theosophical Society soon opened branches in India and Lanka¹⁰ and through them played an active role in the shaping of the modern history of Buddhism in South Asia. Large donations from North America ensured that the branches were never short of funds and the international links guaranteed worldwide publicity to issues, such as control of the temple at Bodhi Gaya.

The enshrining of Buddhist symbols as emblems of independent India has led to greater interest in the study and research of, as also more focussed attention on, archaeological sites related to Buddhism. Starting with salvage operations conducted at Nagarjunakonda in present-day Andhra from 1954 to 1960, prior to the construction of the Nagarjunasagar dam, that resulted in the unearthing of a large number of monastic structures and temples, the ASI and other state and university archaeology departments have added to the list of Buddhist sites known across the country. Several themes, however, continue the colonial legacy and some of these are highlighted in the next chapter, starting with the image of the Buddha. The attempt is to draw attention to lacunae in current research practices and the need to move beyond colonial paradigms.

The institutionalization of archaeology by the colonial state provided Buddhism, which had until then been based on the study of manuscripts and texts, with physical and material remains associated with the life of the historical Buddha.¹¹ Buddhist relics and reliquaries recovered by digging into stupas, though often for institutional benefit or personal gain, brought archaeology increasingly into the domain of imperial politics, with the British Raj using models drawn from ancient Indian

¹⁰ Lanka is used throughout for the modern island state of Sri Lanka, known as Ceylon in the colonial period.

¹¹ There is no unanimity regarding the date of the historical Buddha. Most early-twentieth-century historians dated his lifetime to between c. 563 BCE and 483 BCE, but more recent opinion dates his death to between 486 and 483 BCE (L. S. Cousins, 1996, *The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 6[1]).

history, such as that of the third-century BCE Buddhist emperor Ashoka to legitimize its role in rejuvenating Buddhist doctrine in India. The nineteenth-century discourse, however, marginalized living Buddhist communities in Ladakh, eastern India and Tibet by relegating them to the status of practitioners of a “degenerate” form of the religion characterized as “esoteric Buddhism.”

By the early twentieth century, many of the earlier practices were challenged from different quarters within South Asia, though some of the stereotypes continued, such as Ashoka’s contribution to the expansion of Buddhism by redistributing the relics and by propagating a pristine and ethical Buddhism preached by the historical Buddha. There was no unanimity among scholars and practitioners of Buddhism regarding the decline of Buddhism in the twelfth century CE, with prominent thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi accepting the Buddha as an *avatara* (incarnation) of Viṣṇu as recognized in the *Purāṇas*.

The book, thus, has two foci. The first is to trace the making of a public discourse based on archaeological discoveries in the colonial period that led to the acceptance of Buddhist symbols by independent India in 1947. The second is to shift the spotlight on the post-colonial period and the research over the last six decades that has provided new data to question and unravel the earlier stereotypes. It is increasingly evident that the Buddha was located not in history, but in a world populated by gods and sentient beings. The two together complete the narrative of the Return of the Buddha.

Outline of the Book

The book essentially discusses the material remains of Buddhism, as archaeological sites associated with the life of the Buddha came to be discovered, identified and written about widely in the print media and other channels of communication. This widespread interest not only caught the imagination of the populace, but also entered the public discourse on India’s Buddhist past. These issues are addressed thematically by six chapters dealing with the redefinition of the historical memory of Ashoka and the Buddha; the beginnings of archaeology in South Asia with reference to sites associated with Buddha’s life; the creation of a new sacred landscape as a result of the re-enshrinement of relic caskets found in sometimes random and at other times purposeful digging; the

construction of the degenerate esoteric Buddhism; and the formulation of a disjunction between it and the historical Buddhism of the early centuries of the Common Era.

A critical element in this discussion is the value accorded to the past by the new nation state at the time of independence on August 15, 1947, especially since the Constitution of India is unique in encasing the political document in a dialogic relationship to the cultural heritage of the country. Chapter 6 on Buddhism and the birth of a nation elaborates the diverse understandings of the history of Buddhism among modern Indian thinkers, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, B. R. Ambedkar, and the artist Nandalal Bose. All of them have left a large corpus of writings on events leading up to Indian independence. There was, however, tremendous diversity in their thinking as each of them worked in different fields, held different views from each other and yet agreed on the basic principles that resulted in the adoption of the national symbols.

The book thus scrutinizes the ancient Buddhist past through the lens of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This remote past was mediated through archaeology and preserved through legislation that hierarchized monuments and religious structures based on European notions of art and aesthetics. Even though Buddhism in India was not a European superimposition, the sacred landscape was certainly structured through European understanding of the historical Buddha that derived either from texts, or was, as in the case of Alexander Cunningham, a search for sites described in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims who traveled to the Indian subcontinent and visited Buddhist centers in the fifth and seventh century CE. Counterbalancing the colonial agenda was local engagement with what was perceived as the country's cultural heritage in which political leaders and thinkers played an invaluable role.

In this book, I make a case for a parallel engagement with the past in South Asia that had its roots in cultural memory and an appreciation of the pluralistic sacred geography of the subcontinent. Conservation practices adopted in the early twentieth century transformed mounds of brick into imposing stupas with elaborate and intricately carved railings, such as at the Buddhist complex at Sanchi, in present-day Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, and also provided the now 'refurbished' monuments with histories. To John Marshall, the Director-General of ASI

from 1902 to 1928, goes the credit of restoring the hemispherical dome at Sanchi from the mass of rubble that it had been reduced to and to 'identifying' the brick core of the stupa as belonging to the Mauryan period and hence older than the stone casing that he suggested was built later in the first and second centuries CE. The elaborately carved gateways were put together and dated to the early centuries CE. In these histories attached to the Buddhist monuments, the third century BCE king Ashoka was attributed a major role both in the establishment of stupas and in the supposed redistribution of the Buddha's relics to 84,000 stupas across South Asia. What was underplayed, however, was the continuous building activity at the site and the presence of ninth-century images in the complex.¹² For example, at Sanchi itself, some of the stupas of the sixth-seventh centuries CE contained relic chambers and Marshall found older sculptures of Mathura sandstone buried in the relic chambers of stupas 12 and 14.

The singular focus on Stupa 1 with the hemispherical dome at Sanchi also detracted from the larger landscape within which the monastic center was located. Later archaeological explorations around Sanchi, for example, has revealed a series of Buddhist sites, painted rock shelters, habitation areas, but more importantly a complex water management system including 16 dams.¹³ Stupa 1 was unique in several other ways as well. For one, the main stupa carries 631 epigraphs, of which four are imprecations and the remaining 627 are donator and yet unlike Bharhut, there are no label inscriptions identifying the scenes from Buddhist narratives depicted at the site. Like the architectural history of the stupa, the epigraphs were also classified into six groups chronologically arranged from the Mauryan to the Gupta periods.¹⁴

In 1989, Sanchi was declared a World Heritage site, and under UNESCO sponsorship, Satdhara, a Buddhist site, 10 km south-east of Sanchi, is being further excavated, conserved and environmentally developed. Thus, the trajectory of Sanchi from a place of worship to a

¹² Debala Mitra, 2003, *Sanchi*, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 60–61.

¹³ Julia Shaw, John Sutcliffe, Lindsay Lloyd-Smith, Jean-Luc Schwenninger, and M. S. Chauhan, 2007, Ancient Irrigation and Buddhist History in Central India, *Asian Perspectives*, 46(1).

¹⁴ John Marshall, Alfred Foucher and N. G. Majumdar, 1944, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, 3 vols, Probsthain, London.

heritage site is complete. Today, the stupas stand within landscaped and well-tended lawns, but the archaeological context of the stupas has long been lost.

The twentieth century transformed the ‘image’ of the Buddha by providing it physicality. Events in the Buddha’s biography had by then acquired monuments largely based in the Ganga valley, which were assigned modern aesthetic and cultural values. The colonial state conserved and restored the structures through legislation and institutional control in the twentieth century. Religious shrines also attained the status of ‘heritage’ sites. This added to the enormous public appeal of the archaeology of sites associated with the Buddha, both within South Asia, but much more across Europe and North America. Edwin Arnold’s (1852–1904) poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879), did much to propagate an appreciation of Buddhism in the Western world, as also did the Theosophical Society, set up in New York in 1875, and the activism of its members. The ability of archaeology to uncover India’s past fascinated Nehru and other contemporary political leaders as they visited many of the newly discovered sites in their travels across the country.

The discipline of archaeology has evolved considerably since the nineteenth century when the primary interest was either in making collections for museums or in identifying places described in historical accounts, such as Cunningham’s search for the Buddhist sites described by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang in an account of his visit in the seventh century CE. In a study titled *Archaeology as Long-term History* published in 1987, Ian Hodder argued that “cultures are produced as organized and organizing schemes of action that are meaningful to the individuals involved.”¹⁵ These organizational schemes are at one level arbitrary, since they are determined by the individuals themselves and not by external influences, but once formalized these external influences continue to transform them. Archaeology thus helps understand the processes of social change by concentrating on the particular context of this transformation while at the same time highlighting long-term continuities. These long-term continuities and the means through which communities in the past constructed power and identity are central to this volume. Some of the significant themes in this context relate to

¹⁵ Ian Hodder, 1987, *Archaeology as Long-term History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 2.

the creation of archaeological knowledge in the colonial period and the negotiation of religious identities.

Archaeological research shows that the past is constantly reconstructed to create meaning for a changing present. Archaeologists uncover this past by sifting through multiple layers dating from the contemporary down to those of the remote past. This is a methodology that I adopt in the book as I initiate discussion on contemporary visual cultures accepted by Buddhists in India. This methodology facilitates emphasis on distinctive patterns that link the remote past with the present and is one that has found favor with archaeologists working in different parts of the world.¹⁶

Chapter 1 titled ‘Engaging with Buddhism’ focuses on theoretical frameworks that underwrite this enterprise, such as the public life of history and its enormous appeal. At the same time, it is important to clear the decks regarding the status of present research on the archaeology of Buddhism and to move away from loaded nineteenth-century categories of Theravāda,¹⁷ etc. The term ‘Buddhism’ itself appeared around the beginning of the nineteenth century and was marked by Western attempts to characterize ‘authentic Buddhism’ defined as the teachings of the historical Buddha who lived and preached in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. No doubt, there were several philosophical and ideational transformations within Buddhism, as also in its relationship with Jainism and Hinduism, but to what extent could monastic sites be divided into sects? A stupa was considered a public asset and any sect could participate in its decoration and veneration. As evident from large-scale public sites, such as Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda and Bodhi Gaya, pilgrims owing allegiance to different sects could reside in their vicinity. Secondary writings often divide Buddhism into two opposing camps, viz., Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. This division is, however,

¹⁶ Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson, 2003, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

¹⁷ In a recent publication, Skilling analyses the term ‘Theravāda’ and stresses its absence in indigenous records, such as chronicles, inscriptions and literature of pre-modern South and Southeast Asia. There is little doubt that both Theravāda and Theravāda Buddhism are terms of modern usage and construction (Peter Skilling, 2012, “Introduction,” in Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham, edited, *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*, Silkworm Books, Bangkok).

erroneous, since “Hīnayāna” is a polemical term that even in Mahāyāna texts is used in specific contexts. Prapod Assavirulhakarn reminds us that monks affiliated to different “sects” sometimes lived in the same monasteries and support was given to members of different sects even by the same lay person.¹⁸

The following three chapters are thematically arranged, but temporally related to the colonial period. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the archaeology of sites associated with the Buddha and Ashoka respectively. The primary agenda of East India Company officials in the early nineteenth century was to search for sites associated with Alexander’s campaign in the East and the extent to which this information could provide useful clues for British military forays into Punjab and Afghanistan. The Asiatic Society of Bengal’s collection had a large manuscript map of the Punjab compiled by Colonel (then Lieutenant) Wilford “from the route and compass surveys of a native, Mirza Mogul Beg, expressly instructed and employed from 1786 to 1796 in travelling and collecting materials to illustrate an account of Alexander’s progress”.¹⁹ The first phase of antiquarian quest for cities founded by Alexander may be dated from 1800 to 1839 after which the British annexed the Punjab province, thereby making it accessible to the East India Company officials.

The monuments that drew the attention of early European travelers were termed “topes.” Mountstuart Elphinstone first used the term “tope” for the stupa at Manikyala (Punjab, present-day Pakistan) in 1808. In the process, however, the Europeans discovered Buddhist stupas through which they rifled in their search for coins, gems and other antiquities, many of these collections being sold either to museums or private collectors in Europe. For example, the collection of coins brought by the French military officer Jean-François Allard (1785–1839) made headlines in European newspapers and was valued at 400,000 Francs at that time.²⁰ Thus, by the end of the nineteenth

¹⁸ Prapod Assavirulhakarn, 2010, *The Ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, Silkworm Books, Bangkok.

¹⁹ James Prinsep, 1836, edited, *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 5 (January–December): 468.

²⁰ J.-M. Lafont, 2006, Conducting Excavations and Collecting Coins in Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Kingdom (1822–1839), in Himanshu Prabha Ray, edited, *Coins in India: Power and Communication*, Marg Publications, Mumbai.

century, a large number of Buddhist stupa sites in Punjab and Afghanistan had been visited and dug into, and numerous sculptures, Indo-Greek and Kuṣāṇa coins, gems and intaglios had been collected, though the cities founded by Alexander continued to elude these early attempts at exploring and identifying centers based on descriptions in ancient Greek writings. With the establishment of the ASI in 1861, the search widened to include identification of sites associated with the life of the Buddha, though there is increasing consensus among Buddhologists at present, that the biographical traditions preserved in texts of the various Buddhist communities cannot provide much in terms of historically reliable information about the Buddha's life.²¹

Chapter 3 examines the distribution of relics of the Buddha and his disciples unearthed in archaeological excavations in the subcontinent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These sacred objects, however, became pawns in the power struggle between colonial officials, the ASI and the Mahabodhi Society. To what extent did the newly discovered material remains of the Mauryan period, especially of the third-century-BCE king Ashoka legitimize this process? It is being suggested here that the search and distribution of relics cannot be discussed without reference to the archaeology of the edicts of Ashoka, the main champion of Buddhism, as pointed out earlier by Cunningham as well.

Chapter 4 takes up for discussion the marginalization of certain regions, such as the Western Himalayas and Tibet, as a result of Cunningham's obsession with identifying sites associated with the life of the historical Buddha and largely located in the Ganga plains. This focus distorted an understanding of Buddhism in the different regions. It also did not help in an appreciation of the later forms of Buddhism and instead widened the rupture between context and icon in what came to be seen as degenerate Buddhism.

Janice Leoshko has shown how the formulation of Tibetan Buddhism being degenerate and distinct from the original historical Buddhism of the first millennium BCE was a complex process negotiated by colonial officials who traveled to the region and published papers on their

²¹ George Bond, 1980, *Theravada Buddhism and the Aims of Buddhist Studies*, in A. K. Narain, edited, *Studies in History of Buddhism*, B. R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.

discoveries. These discoveries reached wider audiences through popular writers, such as Rudyard Kipling, the author of the novel *Kim*, who celebrated British imperialism and drew on the latest results of the explorations, as also the explorers involved.²² As discussed in this chapter, one of the sites that have received very little attention is Tabo monastery, which is one of the oldest continuously functioning Buddhist centers in India. It is situated in the village of the same name, at an altitude of 3,280 metres near the Tibetan (Chinese) border in the secluded Spiti valley, just north of the Sutlej river. The complex includes nine temples constructed over several centuries from 996 to 1908 CE and is dotted with 23 stupas. The chapter thus underscores regional variations in the practice of Buddhism and the need to engage with this wider database rather than the narrow nineteenth-century focus on sites associated with the life of the Buddha.

Another issue of significance to this book relates to Buddhism in historical memory and the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition as discussed in Chapter 5. The core of the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition comprising of the epics and the *Purāṇas* dates back to the seventh century BCE or even earlier and continues to be alive and popular in the subcontinent.²³ This tradition has three main constituents: myth, genealogy and historical narrative. The remote past was described as myth, the more immediate past was recorded in the form of genealogies, while historical literature provided narrative history. In the past this tradition was largely ignored by historians on account of its largely mythological content. However, Sanskrit literary tradition has always claimed both antiquity and authority for the *itihāsa purāṇas*, which provide valuable insights into how the past was viewed at various points of time.²⁴

What is relevant for this study is the changing relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism from the middle of the first millennium CE onwards. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, one of the oldest *Purāṇas*, Buddha is introduced as one of the many forms of *māyā-moha* or the delusive power of the deity. Buddha's atheism is placed in the same category

²² Janice Leoshko, 2003, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

²³ Klaus K. Klostermaier, 2007, *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York, Albany (SUNY), pp. 59–72.

²⁴ Romila Thapar, 1979, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Orient Longman Pvt Ltd, Hyderabad, p. 256.

as that of the materialists or the preachers of the Cārvāka doctrine.²⁵ It is around the eighth century CE that Śaṅkarācārya, a theologian of Hinduism wrote the *Daśāvatāra Stotra* that recognized the Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu identified as a *yogin* or sage seated in meditative posture. The earliest inscription mentioning the Buddha as an *avatara* appears in the Ādivarāha cave at Mahabalipuram on the coast of Tamil Nadu dedicated to the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu. Although the temple was dedicated to Viṣṇu, Śīva images also occur, such as in the descent of Ganga and Durgā panels. Of the inscriptions found in the cave, the earliest is an eighth-century Sanskrit record listing the ten *avataras* of Viṣṇu²⁶ above the Harihara panel representing the combined image of Viṣṇu and Śīva. Thus, the relationship between different religious traditions of the subcontinent varied over time and to reduce it to mere confrontation or antagonism, as often suggested by colonial authors is not substantiated by the archaeological evidence. For example, there is evidence for the presence of a large number of Hindu and Jaina icons at numerous major Buddhist sites, such as Sarnath, dated to the first millennium CE, which co-existed with the expansion of monastic centers. How are the changing equations between Buddhism and Hinduism to be understood on the ground?

It is often suggested that newly emerging nations take recourse to symbols from the past to create a sense of nationhood and in this sense India was no exception. In addition to the *chakra*, the Sarnath lion capital was chosen as an emblem of India to be represented on currency notes and coins, government stationery and so on. The Sarnath capital was, however, adapted for use as an emblem and carries a legend from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* reading *satyameva jayate* (“truth alone triumphs”). The following resolution was proposed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and passed in the Constituent Assembly on July 22, 1947, just prior to India’s independence:

Resolved that the National Flag of India shall be horizontal tricolour of deep saffron (*kesri*), white and dark green in equal proportion. In the centre of the

²⁵ Klaus K. Klostermaier, 2007, *A Survey of Hinduism*, p. 39.

²⁶ *nārasimhaśca vāmanaḥ rāmo rāmaśca rāmaśca buddhaḥ kalkī ca te daśa* (H. Krishna Sastri, 1945, Two Statues of Pallava Kings and Five Pallava Inscriptions in a Rock Temple at Mahabalipuram, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, vol. 26, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 5).

white band, there shall be a Wheel in navy blue to represent the Chakra. The design of the Wheel shall be that of the Chakra (Wheel), which appears on the abacus of the Sarnath lion capital of Asoka.

In explaining the choice of the *chakra* or wheel, Pandit Nehru expressed his pleasure at the selection of the emblem and stated:²⁷

For my part, I am exceedingly happy that in this sense indirectly we have associated with this Flag of ours not only this emblem but in a sense the name of Asoka, one of the most magnificent names not only in India's history but in world history . . . Now because I have mentioned the name of Asoka, I should like you to think that the Asokan period in Indian history was essentially an international period of Indian history. It was not a narrowly national period. It was a period when India's ambassadors went abroad to far countries and went abroad not in the way of an empire and imperialism, but as ambassadors of peace and culture and goodwill.

Therefore, Nehru continued to assert that the flag was a symbol not of empire or imperialism, but of freedom and peace. The adoption of an ancient symbol by a modern nation is significant, but what is also striking is the twentieth-century reference to Ashoka who ruled in the third century BCE.

What was special about Ashoka and his rule that brought him to the centerstage of modern political thought? Was the choice of Ashokan symbols, i.e., the *chakra* and the Sarnath lion pillar, a 'creation' of a non-sectarian past to suit national expediencies, particularly after the partition of India along religious lines on August 15, 1947? Who was instrumental in creating this non-sectarian past — was it the academic historians in universities and colleges of India, or was it the political parties, such as the Indian National Congress? How did the public react to the decision to adopt the national symbols, or did they have a say at all? What role did institutions concerned with the study of the past, such as the universities or the ASI play in the popularization of the history of Ashoka and Buddhism?

This book discusses Buddhist imagery as it was created through archaeological investigation, as it entered the field of politics through distribution of relics and how it rose to the surface of visual rhetoric

²⁷ S. Gopal, edited, 1973, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, vol. 3, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 71–72.

and communicated crucial messages of unity and liberation, as it was finally enshrined in India's most significant political document, the Constitution of India. At the same time, the genealogy of the visuals that illustrate the Constitution also trace their conceptualization within the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition of the subcontinent that locates continued Buddhist presence in historical consciousness. These diverse understandings of *Buddha dhamma* are balanced against new research over the last six decades that has made it possible for the archaeology of Buddhism to move beyond documenting sites associated with the life of the Buddha.



1

Engaging with Buddhism



The value of history of the ancient past for the present is an ongoing debate that has continued to impact the public domain. Writing of lessons that history holds for life and politics in the present,¹ Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen reasons that Ashoka and Buddha embodied a rational and critical tradition of inquiry and were markers of a liberal and pluralist India. In his review of Sen's work, historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya countered the notion of continuity between the past and the present and instead suggested that a dialogic link with the ancient past is possible and desirable, "not only to correct the Hindu fundamentalist version of history as well as what Edward Said identified as 'Orientalist' essentialism, but also to reclaim 'tradition' from those who have appropriated and instrumentalized it today for political ends."²

The approach here is not to establish a direct relationship between the Buddhist past of the subcontinent and the thinkers of modern India, but to draw attention to the nineteenth and early twentieth century advances in archaeology that were used to construct a past suited to colonial perceptions and needs. This exercise, however, did not go unchallenged within the subcontinent, nor did it have a uniform impact in the public domain. By negotiating the remote past through the layering added to it in the colonial period, this book also presents a different perspective to writings that either trace the continued presence of

¹ Amartya Sen, 2006, *The Argumentative Indian*, Penguin Viking, New Delhi.

² Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 2005, The Acquiescent Indian, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(41), October 8–14.

Buddhism in eastern India³ or accept the decline of Buddhism thereby crediting social reformers with the revival of Buddhism in India.⁴

History was not a university subject in India at the postgraduate level until after the First World War. The first master's degree in modern and medieval histories was initiated by the University of Calcutta in 1919 and most graduate-level history departments in other universities came up in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵ Clearly learned societies and amateur historians had an important role in creating awareness of the ancient past in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) used the expression “enthusiasm for history” in an essay he wrote in 1899 in the literary magazine *Bharati*, welcoming the decision of Akshaykumar Maitreya (1861–1930), an amateur historian, to

³ Benoy Gopal Ray, for instance, has argued that Buddhism continued to survive in the medieval period in eastern India and was revived in the nineteenth century by reform movements (1965, *Religious Movements in Modern Bengal*, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan). Similarly, based on a study of old Oriya manuscripts, Nagendra Nath Vasu attempts to show in his work that Buddhism continued to survive until the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries in the region and was then transformed into the Mahima Dharma movement of the nineteenth century, (1911, *The Modern Buddhism and Its Followers in Orissa*, U. N. Bhattacharya Hare Press, Calcutta).

⁴ See, for instance, Trevor Ling, 1980, *Buddhist Revival in India: Aspects of the Sociology of Buddhism*, St. Martin's Press, New York. Torkel Brekke also refers to complete transformation in religions in India in the nineteenth century at two interrelated levels: on the one hand, there was a conceptual shift in the understanding of religion among the English-educated elite, while on the other, religious leaders worked towards creating a community identity. He uses three case studies in his book, viz., that of the Hindus of Bengal, Buddhists of Sri Lanka, and the Śvetāmbara Jains of western India to corroborate his thesis. The three religious leaders, viz., Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Anagarika Dharmapala (1863–1933) and Virchand R. Gandhi (1864–1901) attended the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in August 1893 and played pivotal roles in the making of modern Indian religions. Hindus, Buddhists and Jains redefined what it meant to belong to their respective communities. “They did this inside the parameters laid down by the English language, by European ideas of religion, European ideas of history, and European ideas of societies and nations” (Torkel Brekke, 2002, *Makers of Modern Indian Religions in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 157).

⁵ Bain Attwood, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Claudio Lomnitz, edited, 2008, *The Public Life of History*, *Public Culture*, special issue, 20(1): 145.

launch a journal called *Oitibashik Citra* (Historical Vignettes) from Rajshahi in northern Bengal (now in Bangladesh). To what extent did this public notion of the past draw from the *itihāsa purāṇa* or Indic tradition of historical narratives?

The aforesaid issues are important, as it is often suggested that Buddhism declined in India around the twelfth century and that the new knowledge of Ashoka, the Buddha and the archaeology of sites associated with the life of the Buddha was a colonial construction. This idea was first proposed by Philip Almond in 1988 as he examined the creation and maintenance of a discourse on Buddhism in Victorian England. The discourse on Buddhism also provided a mirror which reflected both the “Orient” and the Victorian world.⁶ Buddhism had another appeal to the Victorian mind; it was based on reason and restraint and was seen as opposed to ritual and superstition. Besides, “original Buddhism” and “pure Buddhism” like the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome was long dead, but as a creation of the “Occident,” it could also be controlled by it. “The Buddhism that largely concerned European scholars was an historical projection derived exclusively from manuscripts and block-prints, texts devoted largely to a “philosophy,” which had been produced and had circulated among a small circle of monastic elites . . . As a result, much of the representation of Buddhism to the west . . . has centred on philosophical doctrines (often in the guise of an ancient wisdom) deserving their place in the history of ideas, with little attention paid to the more difficult questions of the contexts of textual production and circulation.”⁷

More recent research questions the notion of a British discovery and instead traces interest in the Orient and Oriental philosophy to the sixteenth century when Europeans travelled to the then unknown regions, such as the New World and much of Asia. It became difficult, if not impossible, to account for these encounters within the Biblical world-view. “Given that only Noah and his family had survived the universal

⁶ Philip Almond, 1988, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 5–6.

⁷ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., edited, 1995, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, pp. 7–8.

deluge, the question inevitably arose: which son of Noah is the ultimate ancestor of the inhabitants of the newly discovered regions?"⁸ Were these questions of interest only to the academic community, or were they of relevance to a wider audience as well? Can the print media be tapped for the reception of archaeological discoveries at the popular level?

A strand that runs through this book is the public interest in these archaeological "novelties" fueled by reports appearing in the print media, but also propagated through new groups, some with political aspirations. Two prominent thinkers who have generally been credited with the revival of Buddhism in the subcontinent are the Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) with a missionary zeal to reclaim the place of Buddhism not only in South Asia, but in the world at large.⁹ The other is B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) who created his own version of Buddhism and converted along with a large group of followers.¹⁰ Though the two had different notions and conceptualizations of Buddhism, they both succeeded in bringing it into the public domain. It is the public appeal of the archaeology of Buddhism and its construction that is of interest to this work.

The Power of the Public Life of History

The productive tension between the values of academic history and those that are rehearsed in institutions of public life is still insufficiently understood . . . The performance of history in the present has suffused public life and the media, and it spills into legal debate and policy formation. In this regard, the role of representational art forms, various genres of performance and non-academic non-fiction writing is significant.¹¹

In this quote, Dipesh Chakrabarty raises the issue of the public life of history and the extent to which the discipline of history was able to forge connections with institutions and practices outside the university and official bureaucracy. According to him, when the public actually

⁸ Urs App, 2012, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought*, University Media, Kyoto, p. 111.

⁹ Torkel Brekke, 2002, *Makers of Modern Indian Religions*.

¹⁰ Trevor Ling, 1980, *Buddhist Revival in India: Aspects of the Sociology of Buddhism*.

¹¹ Bain Attwood et al., 2008, *The Public Life of History*, p. 3.

debates the past, the discipline of history acquires a public life.¹² In the nineteenth century, Indian scholars, such as Rajendralal Mitra (1822–91), Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay (1885–1930), R. G. Bhandarkar (1837–1925) and others, imbibed the disciplinary tools introduced by Europeans for a study of the past and worked with a variety of sources, such as family genealogies, sculptures and coins. For Rabindranath Tagore, the criterion by which knowledge could be judged “true” lay in its ability to improve the life of the people. Tagore and his contemporaries, such as Akshayakumar Maitreya (1861–1930) and Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958), regarded the historian as a custodian of the nation’s or the people’s memories. Thus, knowledge of the past had to be acquired and publicized among ordinary people, if it was not to remain confined to a limited group of people, i.e., academicians — a situation termed “mere argumentation among the learned.”¹³

Literary and cultural societies were a new feature of the late nineteenth century in different parts of the country and I have referred to the prominent role of the Mahabodhi Society. In Madras, Pandit C. Ayodhya Dasa, better known as Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), established the Sakya Buddhist Society (also known as the South Indian Buddhist Association) in 1890, and spearheaded a social protest movement among Paraiya laborers which spread through the labor diaspora in South Africa and Burma. The first president of the Indian Buddhist Association was the German-born American Paul Carus, the author of *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894).¹⁴ Thass sought the English poet and journalist Edwin Arnold’s (1832–1904) assistance in promoting Buddhism in the south. He started a weekly magazine called *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (*One Paisa Tamilian*) in Chennai in 1907, which discussed traditions and practices of Tamil Buddhism, new developments in the Buddhist world and the Indian subcontinent’s history from the Buddhist point of view. Undoubtedly, Edwin Arnold’s 1879 publication, *The Light of Asia*, was a catalyst in the popularization of Buddhism.

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2008, *The Public Life of History: An Argument out of India*, in Bain Attwood, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Claudio Lomnitz, *The Public Life of History*, *Public Culture*, special issue, 20(1): 143.

¹³ Chakrabarty, 2008, *The Public Life of History*: 148.

¹⁴ V. Geetha, 2001, *Towards a Non Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Bhatkal & Sen, Calcutta.

Around the same time, another organization, the Bauddha Dharmankura Sabha (later renamed the Bengal Buddhist Association) was founded in Calcutta in 1891 by Kripasharan Mahasthavira or Mahathero (1865–1927), a Buddhist monk and missionary from the Chittagong Hill tracts, and in 1903 the group opened its first Buddhist temple.¹⁵ Kripasharan Mahasthavira was educated within the Sangharaj Nikaya community, a Sinhalese-inspired Theravāda Buddhist revival movement which began in Arakan in the late eighteenth century and which he helped spread to India.¹⁶ These various scholars and institutions maintained close contacts with European Orientalists and members of the Pali Text Society in London.

This is an issue that occurs repeatedly in this book as I discuss the choice and acceptance of Buddhist symbols for the new nation state. The Constituent Assembly debates, newspaper reports and non-academic writings, such as Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, form important sources for this study. In the preface to the poem, Arnold states:

The Buddha of this poem — if, as need not be doubted, he really existed — was born on the borders of Nepal, about 620 BC, and died about 543 BC at Kusinagara in Oudh. In point of age, therefore, most other creeds are youthful compared with this venerable religion, which has in it the eternity of a universal hope, the immortality of a boundless love, an indestructible element of faith in final good, and the proudest assertion ever made of human freedom. The extravagances which disfigure the record and practice of Buddhism are to be referred to that inevitable degradation which priesthoods always inflict upon a great idea committed to their charge. The power and sublimity of Gautama's original doctrines should be estimated by their influence, not by their interpreters; nor by that innocent but lazy and ceremonious church which has arisen on the foundations of the Buddhistic Brotherhood or 'Sangha.'¹⁷

Thus, Arnold made a distinction between the “pristine” teachings of the Buddha and their interpretation by members of the Sangha or Buddhistic Brotherhood. He emphasized similarities between the lives

¹⁵ The Bauddha Dharmankura Sabha Vihara still exists at 1 Buddhist Temple Street, formerly 1 Lalitamohan Das Lane, Calcutta.

¹⁶ Toni Huber, 2008, *Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 276.

¹⁷ Edwin Arnold, 1891, Preface to *The Light of Asia*, Theosophical University Press, Boston, p. 11.

and doctrines of the Buddha and the Christ, used Biblical phrases to present an intellectual context with which most readers from a Christian background could feel comfortable.¹⁸ In addition to the intrinsic value of his writing, Arnold also benefitted from his New England connections for popularizing the book in the United States.¹⁹ Arnold had studied in London and Oxford and was the principal of the Government Sanskrit College at Poona and Fellow of the University of Bombay until 1861. In 1888, he was created Knight Commander of the Indian Empire by the Queen.²⁰ On his return from India, Arnold became connected with the London *Daily Telegraph*. “Whatever time he could spare from his journalistic duties he spent in the East, and he emphasized his Oriental tastes by marrying for his third wife Tama Kurokawa, a Japanese woman.”²¹

Arnold’s work also formed the model for writings in several Indian languages thus gaining enormous popularity within South Asia. Ram Chandra Shukla (1884–1942), the first codifier of the history of Hindi literature, translated *The Light of Asia* into Hindi. Narasimharao Divetia (1859–1937) was a provincial civil servant who became a teacher of literature at Elphinstone College, Bombay, after his retirement. He was a pioneer of lyrical poetry in Gujarati and translated Arnold’s book into Gujarati in 1934. Velcheru Narayana Rao has analyzed the popularity of themes associated with Buddhism in Telugu literature and has traced changes in its literary representations within the socio-political milieu of the period, even though none of the authors themselves were Buddhist.²²

The popularity of Arnold’s poem was by no means limited to translations produced in vernacular languages; it also made inroads into the world of films. An adaptation of his 1861 epic was made into a film

¹⁸ Brooks Wright, 1957, *Interpreter of Buddhism to the West: Sir Edwin Arnold*, Bookman Associates, New York, pp. 71, 86–97.

¹⁹ Douglas C. Stenerson, 1991, Some Impressions of the Buddha: Dreiser and Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 3.

²⁰ Death of Sir E. Arnold: Distinguished English Writer, *Times of India*, March 25, 1904: 5.

²¹ Sir Edwin Arnold Dead, *New York Times*, March 25, 1904.

²² Velcheru Narayana Rao, 2008, Buddhism in Modern Andhra: Literary Representations from Telugu, *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 1.

in 1925 by Franz Osten and Himanshu Rai and titled *Prem Sanyas*.²³ The opening credits of the film inform the viewer that it was “shown by royal command at Windsor Castle, April 27, 1926.” The Indo-German production was released worldwide including in United States (US) and opened with documentary shots of tourists in Bombay watching street performers. They then travel around India to Delhi, Benares (present-day Varanasi), Gaya and Bodh Gaya. A white-bearded old man sitting under the bodhi tree narrates the story of Gautama, son of king Śuddodhana and queen Māyā, who left his consort Gopā and became a wandering teacher credited with founding Buddhism. The religious epic, with its idealized figures, takes up the narrative in flashback and ends with Gopā kneeling before Gautama asking to become his disciple. This film closely followed Dadasaheb Phalke’s (1870–1944) 1923 film titled *Buddhadeva*. There was thus heightened interest in Buddhism both in South Asia, as also outside it in Britain and Europe, but more importantly in the US. How was this engagement with Buddhism in the US different from that in Britain and Europe, since the former had no colonies in the region? Or did the universal appeal of Buddhism cut across more mundane concerns of colonialism?

Buddhism on the World Stage

The American philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) were some of the early scholars to be interested in Indian thought, especially Vedanta. In 1836, courses in Sanskrit were introduced at the City University of New York and in 1841 at Yale. A year later, the American Oriental Society was founded in 1842.²⁴ The Theosophical Society was founded in late 1875 in New York City by Russian noblewoman Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and American Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), along with attorney William Quan Judge and a number of other individuals interested in Eastern philosophy and spiritualism expounded by Madame Blavatsky. As a report in the *Pioneer* based on the *New York Herald*

²³ Rachel Dwyer, 2006, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 21.

²⁴ Klaus K. Klostermaier, 2007, *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York Press (SUNY), Albany, pp. 461–62.

report shows, her views were often caricatured and mocked, while she nevertheless had a tightly knit society of loyalists. “The scores of tricksters who, under the name of Spiritualism, were imposing on the credulous and making a pseudo-fame by clumsy charlatanry, found in her one who had studied Eastern psychology, together with Eastern religion, and who could by no means be imposed upon.”²⁵

In 1879, the principal founders, Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott, moved to India, where the Society increased its outreach rapidly and in 1880 both Blavatsky and Olcott took Buddhist layman’s vows in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka).²⁶ In 1882, they established the Society’s International Headquarters in Adyar, a suburb of Madras (presently Chennai), where it has since remained. Blavatsky and Olcott also visited Ceylon, where Olcott was so active in promoting social welfare among oppressed Buddhists that even now he is a national hero of that country. In his book on the construction of Buddhism as evident in popular writings in English in the nineteenth and twentieth century, J. Jeffrey Franklin argues:

The international Theosophical movement, as well as some other late Victorian hybrid religions, not only was shaped by Buddhism, but then became a vehicle for a certain construction of Buddhism that disseminated throughout Western culture. ‘Esoteric Buddhism’ is virtually unrecognizable as Buddhism, and yet it was this very non-Buddhism that was instrumental in disseminating a popular understanding of and fascination with Buddhism in the West.²⁷

Esoteric Buddhism came up for discussion at the International Congress of Orientalists held at Geneva in 1894. In a detailed paper, Dr Pfunst of Frankfurt presented historical data and textual analysis to show that no such doctrine was referred to in any of the Buddhist canonical books. His presentation was received well by those present at the meeting and he also obtained the views of major scholars, such as Max Mueller, who were not present at the venue. They all strongly supported Dr Pfunst’s findings and there were no dissenting voices.²⁸

²⁵ Madame Blavatsky, *The Pioneer*, January 25, 1879: 4.

²⁶ J. Jeffrey Franklin, 2008, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, p. 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁸ The International Congress of Orientalists at Geneva, *The Manchester Guardian*, October 10, 1894: 8.

An Irishwoman, Annie Besant (1847–1933) was one of the most active early members of the Society. In 1908, Annie Besant became the president of the Society and began to steer the Society away from Buddhism and towards Hinduism. She came to India in 1893 and in 1917 was elected the president of the Indian National Congress at its Calcutta session. In her book *Hindu Ideals*, she challenged Hindus to spread the message of the “spiritual East” to the “soulless, materialistic West.”²⁹ It was this urge to reach out to the West — not just Europe and Britain, but also the US — that became the leitmotif of several religious leaders in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These charismatic political leaders worked at two levels: one, within the subcontinent to modernize and revitalize religions; and second, as representatives of Eastern religions in the wider world, as evidenced by the increased number of them addressing meetings overseas.

In September 1893, the World Parliament of Religions was held for 17 days at Chicago and coincided with the great World Fair organized to celebrate the quatercentenary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.³⁰ An entire city extending for 686 acres was built along the shores of Lake Michigan in a grandiose style of Greek classical architecture. The total budget for the Exposition was US\$ 28 million, but this was matched by the 27.5 million visitors, thus breaking even for the organizers. The organizers had sent more than 10,000 letters across the world inviting participation in the World Parliament of Religions. One of the objectives of the Parliament was “to forge a public religion for a globalizing society,” which at the end of the nineteenth century was perceived as the Christian century.³¹

It involved representatives of 10 world religions, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Though 152 of the 194 papers were on Christianity, there was some representation from other religions: there were 12 speakers representing Buddhism; 11, Judaism; 8, Hinduism; 2, Islam; 2, Parsi religion; 2, Shintoism; 2, Confucianism; 1, Taoism; and 1, Jainism. The largest non-Christian Asian delegation

²⁹ Klostermaier, 2007, *A Survey of Hinduism*, p. 422.

³⁰ Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

was thus of the Buddhists. Anagarika Dharmapala, a Theosophist from Sri Lanka, represented Buddhism at the World Parliament, while His Royal Highness Prince Chadradat Chuddadhama, brother of the king of Siam was the other prominent representative of Buddhism.³² In his speech, Dharmapala referred to the works of several European scholars, such as Eugène Burnouf, Thomas W. Rhys Davids, James Prinsep, etc., on Buddhist texts and declared:

Twenty-five centuries ago India witnessed an intellectual revolution . . . Six centuries before Jesus Christ walked over the plains of Galilee preaching a life of holiness and purity, the Tathagata Buddha, the enlightened Messiah of the World . . . traversed the whole peninsula of India with the message of peace and holiness to the sin-burdened world.³³

In addition to Dharmapala, Swami Vivekananda was another charismatic speaker who “combined elements of East and West in order to forge a strategy to further an Asian agenda.”³⁴ Shortly thereafter, he founded the American Vedanta Society in 1895 and the Indian Ramakrishna Mission in 1897. At least 23 women delegates spoke on a range of subjects as dispersed as suffrage, crime, Judaism, women in India, American ideals, ecumenism, and race. With Christianity dominating the scene, other world religions had to jostle for space. Nevertheless, their representatives exposed the American public and the media to a multireligious world, with Asian delegates to the Parliament asserting the integrity of their own religious traditions and countering the aggressive Western aggression Christian missionary propaganda in their respective countries. As John R. McRae states:

That the impact of Asian religions was disproportionately large, relative to the number of Asian representatives, was due to interest on the part of the general public. This was due to the impact of Vivekananda, Dharmapala and other very memorable figures . . . the successful performance of these figures in Chicago inspired major reactions in the participants’ homelands, that is in India, Japan and eventually China.³⁵

³² Ethnic Faiths of the Orient, *New York Herald*, April 17, 1893.

³³ Seager, 1893, *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, p. 110.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁵ John R. McRae, 1991, *Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe*, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 11, p. 15.

In his address Dharmapala placed the Parliament within the context of Buddhist history and the Mauryan king Ashoka's despatch of missionaries to different parts of Asia, which, he concluded, would now include the West. Dharmapala made a strong case for Buddhism as an international religion. The Parliament has been described as a "liberal, western, and American quest for world religious unity that failed . . . Having failed as a liberal quest for religious unity, the Parliament unintentionally turned out to be a revelation of the plurality of forces on the American and world scenes."³⁶ More importantly, the Parliament helped create new religious traditions, as Asian religions interacted with votaries of Christianity. This was valid for both Hinduism and Buddhism, the latter owing much of its portrayal as a uniquely scientific religion not dependent on miracles, myths, revelations, or a creator god to late-nineteenth-century thinkers.

The proceedings of the Parliament were widely reported in the US print media and, in a way, set the tone for Americans' engagement with Buddhism and Buddhist themes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *New York Herald* titled its story on the Parliament in the following manner: "Congresses at World's Fair will show the Intellectual Development of Man during the Last Century in the various Departments; Religion Will Claim Universal Attention and Every Faith Will be Represented like a Second Pentecost — In no other Country and at No Other Time Could Such an Event be Made Possible."³⁷ The report went on to suggest that the Parliament was not designed for debate and controversy, but to represent the brotherhood of mankind from different perspectives. The *Daily Inter Ocean* referred to the well-attended devotional meetings held in the morning, before the presentation of papers,³⁸ while the *New York Herald* carried a second story on the same event on April 17, 1893. This time, it was labeled "Ethnic Faiths of the Orient" and discussed the non-Christian representatives from Asia who had decided to set aside "clamping conditions of Oriental exclusiveness and come to the World's Fair."³⁹ One dissenting voice, however, was that of the Sultan of Turkey who, owing to his "conservative" nature,

³⁶ Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions*: xxix.

³⁷ Congresses at World's Fair, *New York Herald*, April 11, 1893.

³⁸ Firm in their Faith, *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 13, 1893.

³⁹ Ethnic Faiths of the Orient, *New York Herald*, April 17, 1893.

did not approve of the Parliament and prohibited newspapers in his country from reporting about the Congress.⁴⁰

This late-nineteenth-century interest in the religions of the “Orient” was by no means limited to reporting on the Parliament of Religions, but continued and evolved into an interest in archaeological discoveries, especially those related to Buddhism. The *New York Times*, on April 10, 1910, carried a well-illustrated story on the discovery of Buddha’s ashes and credited the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) with the discovery of the relics of the Buddha at Shahji-ki-dheri near Peshawar, Mirpur Khas in Sind, and Piprahwa in Basti district of the United Provinces (the present state of Uttar Pradesh).⁴¹ At Shahji-ki-dheri, D. B. Spooner, curator of Peshawar Museum, dug a 20 ft deep trench in the center of the stupa and reached a stone chamber. There he found a bronze casket with another crystal reliquary inside, which contained greyish white powder and four charred human bones. The Peshawar stupa was said to have been built by the Kuṣāṇa ruler Kaṇiṣka who figured prominently in Chinese sources, rather than in the Pāli or Sanskrit tradition. The issue of the authenticity of the relics was raised in the newsarticle, as this find countered the Buddhist canonical tradition, which attributed the redistribution of relics of the Buddha in 84,000 stupas to the Mauryan king Ashoka. The article dated the death of the Buddha to 543 BCE soon after which his relics were distributed in eight stupas in north India. The report also narrated the biography of the Buddha and mentioned Sarnath as the place where the Buddha had attained Enlightenment. It then added, on the testimony of the art historian Ernest Binifield Havell (1861–1934), that amid the ruined monastic structures, the only standing religious shrine at Benares was a Jaina temple. This to the reporter was an indication that Buddhism no longer existed as a separate religion in India, having been supplanted by Jainism. The visual showing recitation of sacred texts at Benares, was presumably meant to indicate the then current presence of Hinduism in the area.

Fascinating insights into the making of a public discourse are provided by the visuals used to illustrate the story. The image of the relic casket was woven with a variety of pictures starting from the Mauryan

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Have Buddha’s Ashes Been Found at Last?, *The New York Times*, April 10, 1910: 5.

pillar at Lumbini, identified as the Buddha's birth-place, a Buddha image from Sanchi in central India and a portrait of the then Dalai Lama, described as a "man of mystery revealed by the camera." In addition, the painted walls at Ming-ui in China were perhaps meant to indicate the spread of Buddhism in East Asia. Thus, the report of the archaeological discovery of the relic casket was imperceptibly tied to the continuing tradition of Buddhism as indicated by the person of the Dalai Lama. It also highlighted the historicity of its founder, the Buddha, by referring to the Ashokan pillar marking his birth-place.

It is argued in this book that this worldwide interest in Buddhism in the nineteenth century impacted its development in colonial India in a variety of ways and needs to be taken cognizance of in any study of the modern history of Buddhism in India. This provides a different perspective to the assertion made by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., that no political role of European powers to colonize the "Orient" may be evident in the case of Buddhist Studies,⁴² since Buddhism had disappeared from India by the time the country became a part of the British Empire and few scholars of Buddhism, with the exception of Rhys Davids, served in the British administration. Besides, many of the ideas of Rhys Davids continue to be reproduced unacknowledged in the writings of later historians.⁴³

In contrast to Lopez's statement, it is evident that Arnold and other members of the Theosophical Society actively participated in the dispute over the control of the site of Bodh Gaya in Bihar, associated with the Buddha's Enlightenment by Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the ASI. Arnold proposed that Bodh Gaya and other sites be returned to Buddhists. He wrote to the Governor of Ceylon and to the Lieutenant Governors of Bengal and Madras. But it was his several

⁴² Donald S. Lopez, Jr., 1995, 'Introduction', in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., edited, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, pp. 11–12.

⁴³ For example, a comparison of Rhys David's *Buddhist India* (1903, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York) with analogous sections in Romila Thapar's *A History of India*, vol. 1 (1966, Penguin, Harmondsworth) shows a great deal of close, unacknowledged overlap between the two historical accounts (Charles Hallisay, 1995, *Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism*, in Lopez, edited, *Curators of the Buddha*, pp. 34, 55, n 25).

articles in the *Telegraph* that served to effectively advertize the cause.⁴⁴ Second, monetary donations for several causes linked to Buddhism were obtained from rich patrons in the US. Third, as already suggested, there was a close working relationship between philologists in Europe and England who provided academic legitimacy to archaeological discoveries and manuscript collections made in India by military and administrative officials involved in antiquarian work. More importantly, the construction of a Buddhist sacred geography based on archaeological discoveries distorted the relationship between the major religions of India and dismissed the notion of the past as available in Sanskrit writings as unreliable and mythical.

The Archaeology of Buddha *Dhamma*

Buddha dhamma was one of the ascetic movements that rose in the middle of the first millennium BCE. It distinguished itself from Upaniṣadic thought and Jaina tenets by redefining *karma* and liberation. The eight-fold path shown by the Buddha was founded on wisdom, morality and concentration.⁴⁵ Like other contemporary Indic religions, Buddha *dhamma* had no central organization, “no single authoritative text, no simple set of defining practices.”⁴⁶ Its core principle was refuge in the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the Sangha, though as it expanded across Asia it absorbed local traditions, responded to historical factors and evolved philosophically.

The physical manifestations of the *dhamma* appeared in the archaeological record at least two to three hundred years later in the form of inscriptions, stupas, images and other objects of veneration. Relic and image worship were important features in the expansion of Buddhism across the subcontinent and in other parts of Asia. Peter Skilling has convincingly shown that images of the Buddha are not merely “art objects;” they are products of complex ideologies. “Across Asia, images multiplied and played multiple roles — bringing rain,

⁴⁴ Alan Trevithick, 2006, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya (1811–1949)*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, p. 63.

⁴⁵ Stephen C. Berkwitz, 2010, *South Asian Buddhism: A Survey*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Jacob N. Kinnard, 2011, *The Emergence of Buddhism*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, p. xi.

warding off disease, offering protection and victory in war, and acting as tribute in diplomatic missions.”⁴⁷ How does archaeology help unravel these multiple functions? Archaeology, as it has developed over the last three decades, helps define a context for both relic and image worship. It maps Buddhist sacred spaces not only horizontally across the physical and natural landscapes, but also vertically in time, highlighting antecedents of religious sites and their subsequent transformations. A good example of this is a comparison between two contemporary sites, viz., those of Amaravati on the Andhra coast and Kanheri on the west coast of peninsular India. Both these sites provide the largest number of records of donations in their respective regions, though unlike Amaravati, there is no evidence for royal patronage at Kanheri and gifts of money and land are striking features of the Kanheri monastic complex.

Amaravati is often referred to as the site of one of the early Buddhist stupas built in close proximity to an Iron Age urn burial site. Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821), the Surveyor-General of India who visited Amaravati on the river Krishna in Andhra in 1798, reported that there were about 17 or 18 stone circles of black granite, a kilometer-and-a-half to the west of the Buddhist site and that numerous similar circles skirted the hills 10 km to the south-east of the site. Some of the circles were reported to have yielded human bones and earthen pots containing ashes.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, I have mentioned the Megalithic antecedents of Amaravati and transformations across peninsular India from the fourth–third century BCE onward, which needs to be factored into any discussion of Buddhist sites that came up in the post-Ashokan period across Deccan.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Peter Skilling, 2011, Buddhism and the Circulation of Ritual in Early Peninsular Southeast Asia, in Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade, edited, *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, p. 370.

⁴⁸ Colin Mackenzie, 1823, Ruins of Amuravutty, Depauldina and Durnacotta, *Asiatic Journal*, 15.

⁴⁹ Himanshu Prabha Ray, 1986, *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Satavahanas*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; 2006, *Inscribed Pots, Emerging Identities: The Social Milieu of Trade*, in Patrick Olivelle, edited, *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Archaeology thus establishes multiple layering of a site, thereby indicating sharing and negotiation between contemporary belief systems. Finally, religious architecture has to be seen as a ritual instrument that integrated the lay devotees and the communities into a social fabric. It is the strands of this social fabric that need to be understood and appreciated. While origin myths of most shrines associate their founding with a royal patron, there is little historical evidence for this; instead, several communities claim special relationship with the image and help maintain the shrine.

We begin by listing the causal links between archaeology and *Buddha dhamma* that are of relevance to this study:

- (a) It is suggested here that the institutionalization of archaeology under the ASI in 1861 initiated a search for the historical Buddha and the sites associated with his life.
- (b) The fixation of the first Director-General, Alexander Cunningham, with the life of the historical Buddha created an artificial framework for the study of *Buddha dhamma*, based on an inadequate understanding of the essence of the *dhamma*, and this framework has continued to be repeated in secondary writings.
- (c) Cunningham traveled mostly across north India and his identifications prioritized sites in the Ganga valley to the exclusion of other parts of the subcontinent, especially Punjab and peninsular India.
- (d) A textual analysis of the Buddha's biography, as contained in the *Lalitavistara*, *Mahāvastu*, Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* and the *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins, indicates that between the second and fourth centuries CE the narrative of the life of the Buddha was still in the process of formation.⁵⁰ This was long after a veritable upsurge in the construction of stupas and viharas in almost all regions of the Indian subcontinent.
- (e) Even though Cunningham visited Ladakh and knew of the practice of Buddhism in the Himalayan region, he and other Buddhist scholars disregarded it. It was termed 'degenerate'

⁵⁰ Max Deeg, 2010, Chips from a Biographical Workshop, in Linda Covill, Ulrike Roesler and Sarah Shaw, edited, *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined*, Wisdom Publications, Boston and The Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, pp. 51–52.

Buddhism on account of its ritualism and use of multiplicity of images. A painting found extensively in Tibet and elsewhere was that of the *bhavacakra*, symbolizing the Buddhist concept of dependent origination.⁵¹ The acceptance of a linear framework of Buddhist sects from Hīnayāna to Vajrayāna meant that no links were acknowledged between the Tibetan *bhavacakra* and a similar painting in Cave 17 at Ajanta.

- (f) The public discourse on the Buddhist past was undoubtedly influenced by the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition, which accepted the Buddha as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Travels across the Bay of Bengal and encounters with the living *dhamma* of the Buddha in countries, such as Burma, helped shape this discourse through the colonial period.
- (g) The promulgation of laws, such as the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act in 1904, transformed religious shrines into monuments and heritage markers for attracting visitors and tourists.
- (h) The adoption of Buddhist symbols by the new nation state of India at the time of independence on August 15, 1947 and the inclusion of paintings from history in the Constitution of India was the outcome of heightened public interest and enthusiasm for the Buddhist past, coupled with an appreciation of the deep cultural roots of the country by the political elite.

In the final analysis, as archaeological sites associated with the life of the Buddha came to be discovered, identified and reported about widely in the print media and other channels of communication, this widespread interest not only caught the imagination of the populace, but also entered the public discourse on India's Buddhist past. It is the perceptions of this past that need to be revisited for a comprehensive understanding of the archaeology of *Buddha dhamma*.

⁵¹ Dependent origination or the principle of causality articulated by the *Pratītyasamutpāda Sūtra* encapsulates the essence of the Buddha's *dhamma*. The venerable Assaji, one of the first five disciples of the Buddha, is said to have explained the doctrine to the monks Sāriputta and Moggallāna through this *Sūtra*.

Redefining the Monastic Order

It is curious that the Pāli *Vinaya* contains no rules, which govern the behavior of monks with regard to stupas, nor does it describe the shape and form of the stupa to be worshipped. The absence of such details has generally been taken to mean that the construction and worship of stupas was the concern of laymen and women rather than monks and nuns. Gregory Schopen has argued against this assumption on the basis of data from inscriptions, which refer to donations by Buddhist monks and nuns.⁵² The active participation of Buddhist clergy in the stupa cult and their mobility across Asia is a factor that is seldom taken into account in the study of the religious architecture of Asia.

Learned monks and nuns, termed *tripīṭakas* in the records, set up the first cult images dating back to the early centuries of the Common Era at the sites of Sarnath, Shravasti, Kaushambi and Mathura. Of the 22 image inscriptions from Sarnath dating back to the second to fourth centuries CE, 15 are by monastics and only seven by laymen. Of the 42 known inscribed images from Mathura, laypersons donated 17, while monks and nuns gifted 25.⁵³ This was true also for north-western India and Deccan where monks introduced images of the Buddha into the monastic cave complexes of Kanheri and Kuda. Another sphere where monks and nuns contributed in a major way was the construction of monastic sites, as evident from post-Mauryan inscriptions. References in early Buddhist literature, such as the second-century-BCE *Apadāna* indicate the organization of festivals by *theras* or monks to mobilize resources.⁵⁴ This is further corroborated by the epigraphs; for example, the monks and nuns contributed nearly 30 and 35 percent of the donations for the stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi respectively. The decisive role

⁵² Gregory Schopen, 1997, *The Stupa Cult and the Extant Pali Vinaya*, in Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu.

⁵³ Gregory Schopen, 1988–89, *On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism*, *Artibus Asiae*, 49(1.2): 166.

⁵⁴ Jonathan S. Walters, 2002, *Stūpa, Story and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India*, in Juliane Schober, edited, *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Tradition of South and Southeast Asia*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, pp. 170–71.

of monks and nuns in the setting up of stupas and expansion of monastic centers is evident. But, how were these monastics organized?

Buddhism has come to be studied in chronological terms, such as Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, which are often seen as exclusive blocs or sects, generally in chronological sequence. Skilling has shown that the term “Theravāda” itself, indicating a “kind of Buddhism,” was a nineteenth-century creation. Theravāda is a term rarely found in the early Buddhist texts and histories or in early European writings. Pāli and Sanskrit texts refer to *ācāryavāda* or *nikāyāntara* when referring to other schools or religious affiliations. At present, Thais, for example, define their religious identity as “Buddhist” rather than as “Theravādins.”⁵⁵ This monolithic category of Theravāda and its overuse has obscured the fact that ordination lineages in different parts of the Buddhist world were autonomous and formed a part of the “independent system of self-production of monastic communities.”⁵⁶ They invoked their credentials of ordination at well-known and established monastic centers to either establish hierarchies or claim legitimacy. While these lineages were linked with each other in a global Buddhist network, they continued to maintain institutional distinctiveness at the local or regional level.

The history of Buddha *dhamma* is not a history of “sects” in the sense of broad-based lay groups, as in Reformation Europe. Instead, it is a history of monastic orders or *nikāyas*, 18 of which are referred to in the Pāli canon dated to the first century BCE. A *nikāya* can be best described as a monastic order; its lineage was transmitted through ordination within the Sangha. Members of a *nikāya* observed a shared code of rules for monks and nuns, the *prātimokṣa* (*pātimokkha*). Eighteen is obviously a standard figure and the number of monastic orders is likely to have been higher; some remained obscure and seem to have had little influence outside of their individual centers. The historicity and workings of these autonomous monastic orders is still unclear, but it is evident that they were neither under centralized control nor under a parent ordination lineage.

The idea that Pāli texts are the oldest and most authentic is modern; it is a product of Western philological and text-comparative methodologies . . . Not only

⁵⁵ Peter Skilling, 2009, Theravada in History, *Pacific World*, Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Third Series, 11 (Fall).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

must we consider the relations between the various schools and the Mahāyāna on the level of ideas, we must remember that the monastics who practised Mahāyāna took Śrāvaka vows, and shared the same monasteries with their fellow ordinands.⁵⁷

The 18 *nikāyas* were distinguished on the basis of region, language, interpretation, and teachers. The Buddha is said to have preached in Māgadhī, the language of Magadha in eastern India. The school that we know today, which performs its rites and liturgies in a language which has come to be called Pāli, was codified primarily by Buddhaghōṣa, a Buddhist scholar and commentator, in fifth-century Lanka at the Mahāvihāra. This ordination lineage is the most widespread at present, while the Sarvāstivādin and Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineages are active in Tibet and East Asia respectively. We know very little of most of the others, though there are indications that several *nikāyas* were present at Nalanda in present-day state of Bihar. In Tibet and China, for example, the language used and the means through which the texts were authenticated were very different from those in large parts of India. These ordination lineages have left no historical records of their expansion or spread. There was no centralized authority to regulate or control them and as the ordination lineages spread, new texts were produced and claims to their authenticity arose.⁵⁸ It is this spread of monastic ideals and lineages that we must try to identify and unearth in the archaeological record.

Detailed excavations at Nagarjunakonda in the Krishna valley have provided valuable data for identification of lineages from Lanka. Dharini Vihara or site number 38 has an unusual plan. It is a four-winged vihara with 20 cells and with stupa, chaitya, as well as small votive stupas inside the compound. The stupa was brick-built and had a brick enclosure. On a slab near the entrance to the stupa *buddhapāda* (footprints of the Buddha) was carved with an inscription stating that the sacred feet were of the Buddha and were for the Mahāvihāravāsins (residents of the Mahāvihāra) of Lanka.⁵⁹ This is just one example of the

⁵⁷ Peter Skilling, 2010, Scriptural Authenticity and the Śrāvaka Schools: An Essay Towards an Indian Perspective, *The Eastern Buddhist*, 41(2): 5–6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ K. V. Soundararajan, 2006, *Nagarjunakonda 1954–1960, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 75, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 192.

possibilities that exist, which can be investigated further through careful archaeological research.

In India, by the medieval period, at least four languages were used for the transmission of the tenets of monastic orders and language formed an important component of the identity of the order. Thus, Sarvāstivādin used Sanskrit; the Mahāsāṃghikas, Prakṛt; the Saṃmitīyas, Apabhraṃśa; and the Sthaviras, Paiśācī. The Mahāvihāravāsins of Lanka were aware of their distinction from these schools in terms of their arrangement of sūtras and their emphasis on Pāli as the language of *dhamma*.⁶⁰ It is evident then that the authenticity of a Buddhist lineage was judged on the basis of the place of origin of its core texts and whether these had been translated from an Indian or Indic source as *Buddhavacana* or words of the Master. This awareness initiated travel and search for the ‘authentic’ teachings of the Buddha — a quest that seems to have continued unabated through the centuries.

It is also important to maintain a distinction between monastics and lay devotees. How were relations between the laity and the monastic lineages defined? Even if the monastics were Sarvāstivādin, or belonged to Sihalavaṃsa or some other lineage, was this affiliation to a particular *nikāya* also true of the laity? To what degree did the distinctions and identities of monastic lineages apply to the laity? These are questions to which there are no ready answers at present, but they are crucial for understanding the interaction between the monks and the laity. Ritual performances in which both participated provided occasions for the monks to help the laity renew their vows. Here we shall restrict ourselves to one of the rituals that linked the two: the mortuary landscape and the entombment of bones of both monks and lay devotees.

The Mortuary Landscape

The stupas enshrined relics of the Buddha and his disciples, while the space around them were often dotted with smaller structures raised to the monastic dead. In this section, we present a few case studies in order to highlight the diversity and also indicate the presence of the remains of laity in the mortuary landscape around the stupas. As early as 1854, Cunningham published the results of his perfunctory excavations at

⁶⁰ Skilling, 2010, *Scriptural Authenticity*, p. 6.

Sanchi where it was clear to him that an extensive cemetery was associated with the Buddhist monastic site at Bhojpur, and both there and at Sonari and Andher in the vicinity of Sanchi there was evidence for elaborate housing and worship of the monastic dead.⁶¹ Similarly, at Bodhi Gaya hundreds of small stupas of various sizes were gathered around the principal monument. Accounts of the Dharmarājikā stupa at Taxila in present-day Pakistan indicate rings around it of smaller stupas containing relics, bones or ashes. How are these examples to be explained?

Schopen has elaborated that, “an old literary tradition exists which indicates that the Buddha was thought to be actually present at certain spots with which he was known to have had direct physical contact.”⁶² This physical presence of the Buddha was invoked both by monks and nuns, as also by the laity as our examples show. Buddhist literature also contains instructions for monks to perform funerary rites and build stupas for deceased members of their community.⁶³ More recent research has meticulously documented the enormous diversity of death rituals and funerary practices in Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the context of the laity.⁶⁴ This section considers the evidence for inclusion of the laity in the mortuary landscape around stupa sites.

Thotlakonda is a Buddhist monastic site located 16 km north of the present city of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and, along with Bavikonda and Pavuralakonda, forms a cluster of monastic sites in northern part of coastal Andhra Pradesh. Thotlakonda was excavated by the Andhra Pradesh State Department of Archaeology and is roughly divisible into three general areas. The first comprises a central courtyard flanked on three sides by monastic cells and with a large columned hall in the center. The second portion of the monastery has the

⁶¹ Cf. Alexander Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes: Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith Elder and Company, London, pp. 184–89, 203–5, 211–20, 223–26.

⁶² Gregory Schopen, 1987, Burial ‘Ad Sanctos’ and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism, *Religion*, 17.

⁶³ Gregory Schopen, 1997, An Old Inscription from Amaravati and the Cult of the Local Monastic Dead in Indian Buddhist Monasteries, in Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu.

⁶⁴ Margaret Gouin, 2010, *Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist Funerary Practices*, Routledge, London and New York.

large main stupa, main chaitya, several smaller votive stupas and several circular chaityas. Just to the north of these ritual structures are the remains of three cisterns.⁶⁵

Archaeological investigation based on a systematic survey has revealed a graded mortuary landscape around the stupa starting with small stupas and including roughly 200 stone cairns located on the hill sides with a clear view of the monastery. These cairns were constructed of natural boulders, easily available in the fields dotting the hilltops and were contemporary with the several viharas, chaityas, stupas, and other Buddhist remains at Thotlakonda, which the excavators have dated between the third and second centuries BCE through the second or third centuries CE. Most of these cairns range between one and three metres in diameter, but a few larger ones are more than 10 m in diameter. Their distribution also shows a hierarchical proximity to the stupa on the hill: some are located on Thotlakonda hill itself, while others are in the valley below the nearby settlements.⁶⁶

Another example comes from north Karnataka. The Buddhist monastic complex at Sannathi, 60 km south of Gulbarga, is located on a tributary of Krishna, viz., Bhima where it takes a northerly turn. The presence of Ashokan edicts (XII and XIV Rock Edicts and Separate Edicts I and II) inscribed on both sides of a granite slab indicates the origins of the site in the Mauryan period, though it must be mentioned that the inscribed slab was not found in situ. Instead, it was being used as a base for an image in the temple of goddess Chandralamba at the site and was discovered during restoration work at Sannathi by the ASI in 1988.⁶⁷ Remnants of an ancient city were located within the loop created by the river, while several scattered mounds were identified as stupa sites. Remains of a brick fortification enclosing an area of 86 ha and having a raised inner citadel are visible at the site, while at least two Buddhist stupas have been identified outside the city walls, as also a brick-built monastic complex.

The ASI excavated one of the stupa mounds named Kanaganahalli and uncovered a large and richly embellished stupa. The sculpted stones show scenes from the life of the Buddha, worship of the *buddhapāda* as

⁶⁵ Lars Fogelin, 2006, *Archaeology of Early Buddhism*, Altamira Press, Lanham, Toronto, New York, and Oxford, p. 86.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 376–91.

⁶⁷ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1988–89, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 93.

well as of the relics. Two drum slabs, each with eight inscribed labels inserted into the visual field itself, depict the popular legend of merchant Anāthapiṇḍaka's purchase of the park known as the Jetavana in order to present it to the Buddha and his disciple-monks for their use as a monastic establishment.⁶⁸

The Buddhist monastic complex at Sannathi is dated from the fourth and third centuries BCE to the fourth century CE, though in around the ninth and tenth centuries CE, a temple dedicated to Chandralamba was built at the site. The site has yielded more than 145 donatory inscriptions of which one refers to Rayo Ashoka and is inscribed on a carved slab depicting king Ashoka and his queen.⁶⁹

Distinctive finds from Sannathi include memorial slabs, which were found in the 1986–89 excavations and have also been collected over the years from various mounds and placed in the State Museum at Gulbarga. Many of these slabs were placed near stupas and are divided into panels. The top panel is generally arched and decorated with a series of tiered roofs and windows. The second panel carries the portrait of an individual or couple, while the third commonly shows either an unyoked bullock cart or a horse without a rider. Many of these are inscribed and the legends dated from first to third century CE leave no doubt that these were set up in the memory of *amātyas* (ministers), *vanījas* (traders) and *grhapatis* (householders).⁷⁰

These memorial slabs from Sannathi are unique in conception and representation, and are different from the free-standing greenish white limestone pillars found at Nagarjunakonda in the Krishna valley.⁷¹

⁶⁸ V. Dehejia, 2007, Questioning Narrativity and Inscribed Labels, in Himanshu Prabha Ray, edited, *Sacred Landscapes in Asia*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, pp. 285–308.

⁶⁹ I. K. Sarma and J. V. P. Rao, 1993, *Early Brahmi Inscriptions from Sannathi*, Harman Publishing House, New Delhi.

⁷⁰ K. V. Ramesh, 1967, A Brahmi Inscription from Belvadigi, *Epigraphia Indica*, 37.

⁷¹ They bear inscriptions honoring the kings and queens, chieftains and generals, religious personages, foreman of artisans, and soldiers. The foreman of artisans (*avesani*) Mulabhuta by name hailed from a place called Pavayata. A narrow-necked vase, perhaps a guild mark, has been incised over the inscription (D. C. Sircar, 1966, More Inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda, *Epigraphia Indica*, 35: 16).

Their significance may be discussed at several levels. Clearly, these memorial slabs are an indication of the wealthy lay community that patronized the stupa. At the same time, representation of donor couples at stupas was an accepted norm in the Buddhist monasteries of western Deccan but to a much lesser degree in Andhra. Also, the erection of memorial slabs indicates the revival of an earlier practice of honoring the deceased as evident in the construction of Iron Age megalithic monuments of peninsular India. More significantly, it is apparent that the stupa at Sannathi served as the focus of a large sacred landscape.

The archaeological data suggests that though Sannathi is the most extensive in terms of size, it is by no means the only large post-Mauryan Buddhist site in north Karnataka. Others include a Buddhist vihara and an apsidal shrine at Vadgaon-Madhavpur on the outskirts of Belgaum city dated to the first century BCE; a vihara and a tank at Banavasi donated by the king's daughter; and Buddhist sculptures of the early centuries CE recovered from Hampi in Hospet district.⁷² However, Sannathi differs from the other two in terms of its unique landscape.

There seems to have been a change in the mortuary landscape as evident from post-fifth-century monastic sites, such as Ratnagiri in Orissa, Nalanda in Bihar, Paharpur in Bangladesh, etc. The monastery at Ratnagiri comprising of a stone-paved central courtyard surrounded by a verandah and 24 cells with a shrine in the center of one of the sides, is the finest in the Indian subcontinent. It had an upper storey and investigation indicates two phases of repair and construction.⁷³ More than 700 portable monolithic stupas were exposed in the area around the monastery at Ratnagiri. Five hundred and thirty-five of the portable stupas were found on the south-western side of the main stupa area and date from the ninth to thirteenth century CE. Of these, 269 stupas have a single niche with the image of a deity enshrined within it, while one has two niches.

The most popular deity was Tārā followed by the Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Māricī and Vajrasattva. Some of the portable monolithic stupas found at Ratnagiri were meant for enshrining bone

⁷² Sarma and Rao, 1993, *Early Brahmi Inscriptions from Sannathi*, pp. 104–12.

⁷³ Debala Mitra, 1981, *Ratnagiri (1958–1961), Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 80, 2 vols, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 152.

relics, as evident from the provision of sockets at the base. This was also the case with a large number of minor structural stupas, which yielded partially charred bones and reliquaries. Inscribed texts or *dhāranīs* were placed in many of the small stupas that crowded around the main stupa. These *dhāranīs* were taken from specific groups of texts that were concerned with problems of death and the means to avoid rebirth.⁷⁴

It is this interrelationship with the laity that made the sacred geography of the stupa accessible to both monks and lay devotees and continues to be one of the distinguishing features of Buddhism, not just in the early period, but throughout its history. Also evident from this discussion is the regional variation in many of the practices associated with Buddhism. It is only when we move beyond the narrow focus of unearthing the “historical” Buddha that we can attempt to comprehend changes in precepts and practices within Buddhism over time.

Votive Tablets and the Wider Network

A ritual activity that indicates wider networks of monks and nuns relates to the making and distribution of what are termed “votive tablets.” These unbaked clay seals and sealings are ubiquitous at Buddhist sites of the early medieval period and were often wrongly described in the nineteenth-century literature as pilgrim’s mementoes. Instead, they are ritual objects associated with merit-making. One stanza that occurs extensively across the Buddhist world and was also found at Sarnath, besides being included in a painting of the Buddha’s first sermon by Nandalal Bose, is *Pratītyasamutpāda Sūtra*, the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism. It reads:

*Ye dhammā hetuppabhavā tesāṃ hetum tathāgato
 Āha tesāṃ ca yo nirodho evaṃ vādī mahāsamaṇo ‘ti*
 Those *dhammas* which arise from a cause
 The Tathāgata has declared their cause
 And that which is the cessation of them
 Thus the great renunciant has taught.

The venerable Assaji, one of the five first disciples of the Buddha, explained the essence of the Master’s *dhamma* or doctrine to the

⁷⁴ Schopen, 1987, Burial ‘Ad Sanctos’ and the Physical Presence of the Buddha, p. 199.

monks Sāriputta and Moggallāna in the *Pratītyasamutpāda Sūtra*, a verse intimately connected with the Buddha himself and his doctrine of dependent origination. “He who sees the *pratītyasamutpāda sūtra* sees the dharma; he who sees the dharma sees the Buddha.”⁷⁵ The *Pratītyasamutpāda* explains the existence of objects and phenomena as being due to systems of causes and effects.

The verse articulates several layers of meanings: it captures the Enlightenment experience of the Buddha at Bodh Gaya, and links this essence to the *dhamma* or the true body of the Buddha, thereby introducing fluidity between the abstract and the physical. Historically, this critical text was enshrined in stupas across Asia, as a measure that would result in rejuvenating the Sangha and help the lay community renew its vows to the Buddha; and finally the *Sūtra* finds visual representation in the Constitution of independent India. This event is narrated only once in the *Vinayas* of various schools, and the verse occurs only once in the *tripiṭakas* or the Buddhist canon. Yet, its popularity across Asia is truly extraordinary and raises the larger issue of the role of archaeology for a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism.

Among the earliest examples of the use of this verse in India’s archaeological record are stupas on which the verse was found to be inscribed, and by the middle of the first millennium CE, stone images, too, frequently carried it. This practice is not widely known in South-east Asia, though there are examples of inscribed stone Buddha images from Si Thep in Thailand.⁷⁶ In addition are molded images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, stupas and so on that became abundant at north Indian Buddhist sites from the sixth century onwards and are found extensively in Southeast Asia. From the descriptions provided by Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-monk Xuanzang, it is evident that the production of sealings was linked to merit-making and cleansing of sin. To produce an image of the Buddha or to produce a stupa brought merit. Miniature stupas and images were produced in large numbers and were ceremonially placed inside relic chambers of stupas, which were then sealed. This is

⁷⁵ Daniel Boucher, 1991, The *Pratītyasamutpādagāthā* and Its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 14(1).

⁷⁶ Peter Skilling, 2003–4, Traces of the Dharma, *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, 90–91.

an extraordinary practice, which can help trace itineraries of ritual or the circulation of cults and ideas.

Xuanzang wrote about Jayasena who lived in Rajagriha in the seventh century CE:

It is a custom in India to make little stūpas of powdered scent made into a paste; their height is about six or seven inches, and they place inside them some written extract from a *sūtra*; this they call a *dharmasāvira* (fa-shi-li). When the number of these had become large, they then build a great stūpa, and collect all the others within it, and continually offer to it religious offerings.⁷⁷

This practice, it would seem originated in north India and spread to other parts of Asia. The mass production of sealings was a ritual means for earning merit; sealings were produced by monks, nuns, laity, kings and queens. It was a practice that cut across the different *nikāyas*.⁷⁸

The French art historian Alfred Foucher (1865–1952) wrote in 1911 that these sealings were souvenirs brought back by foreign travelers to their respective countries from their visits to Buddhist sites, much like the metal insignia treasured by medieval Christian pilgrims. Since then archaeological literature has consigned them under the label of “small finds” and paid no further attention to them. It is only in recent years that Buddhologists have highlighted the ritual underpinnings of inscribing the *sūtra* and enshrining it in stupas. The primary motive for producing sealings was not to use as souvenirs for “tourism” but to produce merit, cleanse oneself of sins and to promote the welfare of one’s kin and the deceased. It was a social practice that brought the lay community together with the monks and nuns at locations marked by stupas and caityas. The inscribed tablets were then installed inside caityas where they had been produced and the theory of “tourist mementoes” has since been discredited.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Samuel Beal, 1981[1884], *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Si-Yu-Ki, translated from the Chinese of Hieun Tsiang, reprint, AD 629, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, II: 146–47.

⁷⁸ Peter Skilling, 2001, “Buddhist Sealings”: Reflections on Terminology, Motivation, Donors’ Status, School Affiliation and Print Technology, in Catherine Jarrige and Vincent Lefèvre, edited, *South Asian Archaeology 2001*, vol. 2: *Historical Archaeology and Art History*, Éditions Recherches sur les Civilisations, Paris, pp. 677–85.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Other portable objects that circulated widely were stone models of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodh Gaya, the site of Buddha's Enlightenment, averaging about 20 cm in height and carved in dark grey schist. These are widely dispersed from eastern India to Nepal, Tibet, Arakan, and Myanmar and often formed prototypes for the construction of shrines.⁸⁰ What is fascinating is that from the thirteenth century CE, the Mahabodhi temple became a model that was emulated at several other centers and there are at least four re-creations in Myanmar and Thailand. The earliest was built at Pagan (present-day Bagan) in the thirteenth century, followed by Schwegugyi in Pegu (present-day Bago) in 1460–70 CE, Wat Chet Yot in Chiangmai in 1455–70 CE and the fourth one at around the same time in Chiengrai.⁸¹ The two replica temples in Peking were consecrated in 1473 and 1748 CE respectively.⁸² Perhaps, the last temple to be built on the basis of the models was the Mahabodhi complex at Bodh Gaya itself. These portable objects formed a crucial part of the universal visual imagery associated with the spread of *dhamma* across Asia and need to be contextualized within local histories for the establishment of shrines. We need to move away from explanations that attribute the expansion of Buddhism to a royal patron, Ashoka being usually considered an appropriate model.

Ashoka and the Spread of Buddhism

An issue that continues to be debated is the nature of Ashoka's *dhamma*, especially since Buddhist writings have associated the third-century-BCE Mauryan king with Buddha *dhamma*. Buddhist writings kept the tradition of Ashoka alive and a large corpus developed around the legend of *dhammarāja* or righteous king Ashoka. Scholars have suggested that the portrayal of king Ashoka and his generosity towards the Sangha was a part of the evangelistic enterprise and reflects a desire to spread the faith and to gain converts to Buddhism.⁸³

⁸⁰ John Guy, 1991, The Mahabodhi Temple: Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India, *The Burlington Magazine*, 133(1059).

⁸¹ Robert L. Brown, 1988, Bodhgaya and Southeast Asia, in Janice Leoshko, edited, *Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment*, Marg Publications, Bombay.

⁸² Guy, 1991, The Mahabodhi Temple.

⁸³ John S. Strong, 1982, *The Legend of King Asoka: A Study and Translation of the Asokavadāna*, Princeton Library of Asian Translations, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p. 34.

The narrative on Ashoka occurs in several Buddhist texts, starting as early as the *Aśokāvadāna* written 500 years after Mauryan rule in second century CE in Sanskrit. The text formed a part of the *avadāna* genre featuring past lives of important figures and was perhaps compiled in north-western India. Ashoka is eulogized for visiting places associated with the life of the Buddha and sign-posting them either with his pillars or edicts or by the establishment of stupas. One of the concerns of the *Aśokāvadāna* was to define the nature of Buddhist kingship and the extent to which its generosity impacted the monastic community. The *Aśokāvadāna* is important in that it gives the basic version of the Ashoka legend as it circulated in north-west India and as it found its way into Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet. It also inspired several later writings, including the sixteenth-century work titled *History of Dharma* of the Tibetan monk Taranatha.⁸⁴

A second text that popularized the story of Ashoka in Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and other parts of Southeast Asia was the *Mahāvamsa* written in Pāli. Though the general story of Ashoka is similar in the two traditions, there are major variations as well. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, Ashoka is said to have been born 100 years after the passing away of the Buddha, while in the *Mahāvamsa*, he was consecrated 218 years after the Buddha's nirvana. The *Mahāvamsa* associates Ashoka with holding of the third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra and of cleansing the Sangha of false beliefs by defrocking at least 60,000 monks.⁸⁵ Another tradition that is mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa*, but scarcely occurs in the *Aśokāvadāna* relates to the despatch of missionaries by Ashoka to different regions. Thus, the emphasis in the *Mahāvamsa* was on the close interaction between the pivot of political authority, the king and the nucleus of religious doctrine, the monastic community. The king was responsible for maintaining order and discipline within the Sangha and

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸⁵ That the third Buddhist Council was held at all is not accepted by all Buddhist sects. The best known account of a "third council" is that of the Mahāvihāravāsin Theravādins of Sri Lanka, who mention Aśoka as the patron and the Council taking place at the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra (Peter Skilling, 2009, *Redaction, Recitation and Writing: Transmission of the Buddha's Teaching in India in the Early Period*, in Stephen C. Berkwitz, Juliane Schober and Claudia Brown, edited, *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures: Knowledge, Ritual and Art*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 56).

also ensuring proper learning and knowledge of the *Buddhavacana* or words of the Buddha. It is no coincidence that the notions of Buddhist kingship have played a major role in shaping approaches towards governance in countries of South and Southeast Asia, such as Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Burma, where Ashoka was and still is “portrayed as a paradigmatic ruler, a model to be proudly recalled and emulated.”⁸⁶ How did this memory find its physical manifestations and archaeological correlates? As Alexander Cunningham opined:

In the short space of four years he [Ashoka] succeeded in reducing the whole of Northern India, from the mountains of Kashmir to the banks of the Narbadda, and from the mouth of the Indus to the Bay of Bengal; and India, perhaps for the first time, was brought under the control of one vigorous and consolidated government.⁸⁷

Cunningham reached this conclusion on the basis of his reading of the *Mahāvamsa*. At the time that he wrote, the Girnar, Dhauli and Peshawar edicts were known, as also some of the pillar edicts, such as at Sanchi, Lauriya-Nandangarh in Bihar, Delhi and Meerut. The southern edicts were yet to be discovered. The discovery of edicts at Brahmagiri was reported in 1892 and that at Maski in 1915. Yet, this has been the most enduring image of Ashoka. To this may be added the picture of the righteous ruler who is said to have constructed 84,000 stupas. The earliest known pilgrimage to sites associated with the Buddha dates to the reign of Ashoka and the term stupa or *thube* first occurs in the Nigalisagara pillar inscription of Ashoka in Nepal. Schopen has shown the close relationship between the text of the Rummindei inscription (Nepal) of Ashoka and the well-known passage of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* suggesting that Ashoka’s pilgrimage activities may have followed an established tradition of pilgrimage and worship.⁸⁸

The archaeological evidence for dating stupas to the Mauryan period is however sparse. Sir John Marshall dated both the brick core of stupa 1 at Sanchi and the Dharmarājikā stupa at Taxila to the Mauryan period,

⁸⁶ Strong, 1983, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, p. 39.

⁸⁷ Cunningham, 1854, *Ladak: Physical, Statistical and Historical; with Notices of the Surrounding Countries*, pp. 97–98.

⁸⁸ Gregory Schopen, 1997, Burial ‘Ad Sanctos’ and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions, in Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*, pp. 115–16.

largely on the basis of circumstantial evidence. The earliest coins to be found at a Buddhist site in the north-west are those of the Indo-Greek ruler Menander I (155–130 BCE) found at Dharmarājikā stupa at Taxila. In terms of architecture, the earliest phase at Taxila is dated from 200 BCE to late first century CE. It is at this time that there is evidence for the creation of public sacred areas and temples in and around the city of Sirkap, as also at the Dharmarājikā complex.⁸⁹

In contrast to the Pāli sources that extol the munificence of Ashoka, Chinese writings ascribe a major role to the Kuṣāna king Kaṇiṣka I in the spread of Buddhism. Chinese pilgrims, such as Xuanzang, attribute the organization of the third Buddhist Council to Kaṇiṣka and not Ashoka, while Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-monk Faxian credits Kaṇiṣka with the construction of a stupa at Peshawar. Kaṇiṣka's association with the monastic site near Peshawar survived well into the eleventh century as attested by Al-Biruni, an ethnic Iranian and Muslim scholar.⁹⁰ Similarly, the twelfth-century-CE work *Rājataranṅiṇī* accepts that Kaṇiṣka introduced Buddhism into Kashmir. Clearly, there were divergent traditions for the spread of Buddhism that need to be understood within their historical contexts, rather than as explanations for all new developments.

The Buddhist texts, at the same time, credit merchants and trading groups with the setting up of religious shrines, as, for example, in the case of merchant Anāthapiṇḍaka's purchase of the park known as the Jetavana in order to present it to the Buddha and his monks for their use as a place of residence. This is a theme that finds representation at several early Buddhist sites such as Bharhut, Bodh Gaya, Sannathi, Amaravati, etc. In the context of eastern India, the *Vinaya*⁹¹ records that two early disciples of the Buddha, the merchants Tapussa and Bhallika traveled from Ukkala, often identified with Orissa, to where the Buddha was meditating under the Bodhi tree and presented him with rice cakes

⁸⁹ Kurt A. Behrendt, 2004, *The Buddhist Architecture of Gandhara*, Brill, Leiden, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Errington and Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, 2007, 'Introduction', in Elizabeth Errington and Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, edited, *From Persepolis to the Punjab*, The British Museum, London, pp. 126–31 [1–140].

⁹¹ *Mahāvagga*, First *Khaṇḍaka*, 4, in Thomas W. Rhys Davids and H. Oldenberg, translated, 1990, *The Vinaya Texts*, reprint, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, I.4.3, p. 82.

and honey. They are also credited with establishing caityas and monastic complexes on their return.

The historical memory of Ashoka has been very influential in South Asia, but also striking is the enormous expansion of monastic sites in the post-Ashokan period. A majority of the structures associated with early Buddhism were stupas rather than viharas and a second and first centuries BCE date is particularly valid for sites associated with the life of the Buddha, such as Kushinagar, Bodhi Gaya, Shravasti, Rajgir, Sarnath, Kaushambi, Vaishali, Lumbini, and Kapilavastu.⁹²

Large interconnected monastic complexes emerged in the second and first centuries BCE. Sanchi and its neighboring sites, such as Sonari, Satdhara, Bhojpur, and Andher, provide a good example of this phenomenon. By the second and first centuries BCE, many of the sacred spots associated with the Buddha in the core area or *madhyadeśa* (middle country) were widely known and were centers of pilgrimage as indicated by data from inscriptions. This is further supported by representations of these spots at other monastic sites, such as at Sanchi, Bharhut and Amaravati.

Post-Ashokan texts, such as the *Apadāna*, are replete with descriptions of stupa construction and relic worship conceived within a cosmic soteriological framework. There are references to individuals or groups of individuals organizing festivals at the time when construction, expansion or renovation of a stupa was proposed and similarly at the time when it was completed. Jonathan S. Walters argues that texts relating to the Buddha's biography were recited on these occasions as well as theatrically enacted. Thus, the setting up of a stupa was an event when the king, the lay devotee, the stone-carver, and the monks and nuns came together to celebrate the life of the Buddha.⁹³

The Image of the Buddha

The single unifying feature of *Buddha dhamma* is the image of the Buddha that continues to be revered across Asia, while his precepts provide

⁹² H. Härtel, 1995, Archaeological Research on Ancient Buddhist Sites, in H. Bechert, edited, *When did the Buddha Live?*, Satguru Publications, New Delhi.

⁹³ Walters, 2002, *Stūpa, Story and Empire*, pp. 169–71.

an ideal for the life of the individual. Debate about the origins of the Buddha image dogged early-twentieth-century scholarship. By far the most sustained contribution to this debate was that of Alfred Foucher. Beginning with publications as early as 1900 and culminating in his monumental *L'art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhāra* in four parts, Foucher demonstrated a breadth of scholarship in art history sustained by his erudition in Buddhist textual studies that was unrivaled in the field.⁹⁴ Foucher understood Gandharan art through the lens of Greek culture present in north-west India in the form of colonies, such as those of Bactria, from the time of Alexander the Great down to the first century BCE. While firmly establishing the role of Hellenism in the development of Buddhist art, Foucher also changed the framework of the debate and the issue that now became important was the origin of the Buddha image and the reasons for its occurrence in the early centuries of the Common Era. Around the same time, the Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo argued for Chinese influences, given the Mongolian origins of Kuṣāṇa rulers.⁹⁵ Implicit in the discourse developed by Foucher and others on the origin of the Buddha image was the assumption that colonialism stimulated stagnant non-Western societies by introducing the inventions of the Western civilization.⁹⁶

There were several opponents of Foucher's hypothesis. The art historian E. B. Havell argued that Indian art could only be understood with reference to Indian philosophy and Greek influence was marginal and inconsequential to the development of this art. In his review of Foucher's book, the archaeologist Victor Goloubew (1878–1945)⁹⁷ criticized the author for minimizing the contribution of Mathura, a prominent center of art in the early centuries of the Common Era, an argument that was further developed by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), the

⁹⁴ Alfred Foucher, 1905, 1918, 1922 and 1951, *L'art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhāra* in four parts, E. Leroux, Paris.

⁹⁵ Okakura Kakuzo, 1905, *Ideal of the East*, John Murray, London, 1905.

⁹⁶ Stanley K. Abe, 1995, *Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art and the West*, in Lopez, edited, *Curators of the Buddha*, p. 79.

⁹⁷ Victor Goloubew, 1923, Review of Alfred Foucher, *L'art Greco-bouddhique du Gandhāra* in four parts, E. Leroux, Paris, 1905, 1918, 1922, *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)*, 23.

Lankan philosopher and art historian.⁹⁸ One outcome of this debate was an undue emphasis on form and the decontextualized image. As nineteenth-century antiquarians were largely interested in collections of sculptures to fill museums, recording of context in terms of the site and location where the image was found, as also the nature of architecture in which it was placed was irrelevant to the exercise. Iconography or the symbolism of the image became important and came to be studied through texts, but devoid of its architectural moorings. The focus was on form and not the context, as museum collections multiplied.

The British Museum acquired coins and several sculptures from adventurers and military personnel who traveled to Afghanistan and Punjab in the nineteenth century. A significant piece was the Hashtnagar pedestal inscription of year 384 (BM 1890 1116.1) from central Afghanistan. The headless image and pedestal was dug up in the nineteenth century by a local tradesman quarrying the mound for stone. It was given the head originally from another sculpture and set up for worship in a Hindu pilgrims' resthouse at Rajaṛ in present-day Pakistan. In 1883, a colonial official by the name of L. White King, Assistant Commissioner of Peshawar, cut off the inscribed pedestal and removed it for study.⁹⁹ It acquired a new focus as scholars debated the contents and implications of the inscription, but its biography was lost in the process.

In 1867, the new Lahore museum was established and the British government of Punjab sent regular circulars exhorting officers to obtain contributions for the Lahore Central Museum. This resulted in a series of substantial collections from the Peshawar plains in the period between 1868 and 1871. As with the rest of the Lahore acquisitions of this early period however, these were never properly registered and their provenance cannot now be ascertained. In 1873, Cunningham initiated the first attempts at documenting the collections of the Lahore Museum. In 1875, the Punjab government agreed to the proposal that a selected number of duplicates or characteristic specimens of Gandhara sculptures in the Lahore Museum should be sent to Calcutta for the new

⁹⁸ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 1927, *Origin of the Buddha Image*, *Art Bulletin* 9(4).

⁹⁹ Wladimir Zwalf, 1996, *A Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum*, British Museum Publication, London, p. 172.

Indian Museum collection and also for transmission to the India Office Museum in London.¹⁰⁰ This was a practice that was to be repeated subsequently.

The priority given to sculptures meant a disregard for other evidence, such as coins. It is in the representation of the image of the Buddha that Kuṣāṇa (40–360 CE) coins surpass all other contemporary issues. Jean-Baptiste Ventura (1792/3–1858), a French officer at Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court, found perhaps the first copper coin with a Buddha image in the Manikyala stupa in Rawalpindi district of present-day Pakistan that he opened in 1830.¹⁰¹ It is only in recent years that these coins have received attention, as the number of known specimens has increased to include six gold coins and 109 copper coins bearing images of the Buddha.¹⁰² The coins represent three types of Buddha images accompanied by labels in Bactrian written with Greek letters identifying them as the Buddha on the gold coins and Maitreya on the copper coins.¹⁰³ These coins were issued late in the reign of Kaṇiṣka I, but were not special issues and instead should be located firmly in the Kaṇiṣka monetary system as they represented about 1.35 percent of Kaṇiṣka's coinage. We do know that Kaṇiṣka I was instrumental in bringing about several crucial changes, such as the use of Bactrian instead of Greek both on his coins and inscriptions and the setting up of sanctuaries, one of them being at Surkh Kotal in northern Afghanistan where images of Kuṣāṇa kings were enshrined. The Rabatak inscription found not far from Surkh Kotal in 1993 is crucial for understanding several aspects of Kuṣāṇa chronology, but more significantly Kuṣāṇa ideas of kingship as well. The inscription refers to Kaṇiṣka as having obtained kingship from the deity Nana and from all the gods. It is to this relationship between Buddhism and political power that the representation of the Buddha image on Kuṣāṇa coins attracts attention, but this was not recognized in the twentieth century and still continues to be an under-researched area.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Errington, 1987, *The Western Discovery of the Art of Gandhara and the Finds of Jamalgarhi*, PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, pp. 135–36.

¹⁰¹ Alexander Cunningham, 1845, Notice on Some of the Unpublished Coins of the Indo-Scythians, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 16(2).

¹⁰² Joe Cribb, 1999–2000, Kanishka's Buddha Image Coins Revisited, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

In contrast, a king who gets prominence in colonial writings is Ashoka whose image was primarily defined through its Buddhist construction in the fifth-century Lankan Chronicle *Mahāvamsa* written in Pāli.

The phenomenal expansion of Buddhist monastic sites across the subcontinent from the second century BCE onwards and their continued presence in the foothills of the Himalayas from the ninth century well into the present requires an explanation. These monastic complexes have generally been studied either for their art and architecture or their association with Chinese pilgrims and there is little understanding of their religious underpinnings and organizational structure. Buddhism, as stated earlier, did not have a centralized organization that sent out missions to spread the faith. How did new monastic complexes then emerge and continue to relate to each other? More importantly, as shown in this book, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century legacy of colonial archaeology needs to be unraveled in order to move beyond the pigeonholing of artefacts and monastic sites in dynastic or sectarian terms.



2

The Search for the Historical Buddha



By the fourteenth century, and before the arrival of Portuguese explorers, Buddhism had all but disappeared from India . . . There were no Buddhists in India. Instead there were what Burnouf would call ‘monuments’: reliquaries (stupas) of the Buddha, cave temples, the ruins of monasteries, and statues.¹

The quote from the Introduction by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. to the translation of Eugène Burnouf’s (1801–52) *History of Indian Buddhism* first published in French in 1844 sums up the nineteenth-century attitude to the archaeology of Buddhism, a theme that we explore in this chapter. As apparent from Burnouf’s writing, the study of Buddhism in the nineteenth century was largely based on texts. He was appointed to the Chair in Sanskrit at the Collège de France in Paris in 1833 and was also the secretary of the Société Asiatique. It was as secretary of the Society that Burnouf received manuscripts of Buddhist texts in Sanskrit that Brian Houghton Hodgson had collected in Nepal and this changed the direction of his scholarship.² Buddhism had continued to flourish among the Newar community in the Kathmandu valley and it was with the help of a distinguished Newar pundit Amṛtānanda that Hodgson had collected manuscripts of Sanskrit *sūtras*. Burnouf’s contribution was to translate the Sanskrit manuscripts assembled by Hodgson and to present one of the earliest histories of Indian Buddhism, which was widely read in Europe and in the United States (US).³

¹ Katia Bufferttrille and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., translated, 2010, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* by Eugène Burnouf, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Burnouf accepted the Buddha as a historical figure, but was also convinced that it was only through texts in Sanskrit that a history of Buddhism could be written. Trained in Sanskrit, Pāli and Avestan, Burnouf held that the texts considered sacred by the Buddhists of Tibet, Mongolia and China were translations of the Sanskrit originals and concluded that this restored to India and to its language the study of a religion and philosophy of which India was the birthplace. He asserted that the Buddha was a compassionate man who preached to all who would listen without dogma or ritual. Burnouf had a more nuanced approach to the role of caste in Buddhism and did not agree with the generally held view among European scholars, of Buddha being a social reformer, since the view was not based on any Indian Buddhist sources.⁴ However, in keeping with the trends in European scholarship, Burnouf regarded Buddhist Tantra as an aberration both in its acceptance of the “most puerile practices and exaggerated superstitions,” as also in its alliance with Śaivism. In this, he disagreed with Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842), an itinerant scholar from Hungary who had studied Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh from 1827 to 1831 and whose contribution will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Burnouf was the first to unravel Buddhism from Sanskrit sources and his work found unprecedented reception in Europe, not only among scholars, but more so among thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854). Richard Wagner planned to stage an opera titled *Die Sieger* based on a Buddhist poem titled *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* translated by Burnouf, but unfortunately the opera was never completed.⁵ Burnouf followed archaeological discoveries by Alexander Cunningham and others, but these were yet to be incorporated in the study of Buddhism. Part of the reason may lie in the nature of archaeological practice itself, which was still at the primary stage of antiquarianism and had not matured as a discipline involved in the study of religion.

The primary agenda of Europeans was search for sites associated with Alexander’s campaign in the East and the extent to which this information

⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵ Ibid., p. 2–4, 22–24.

could provide useful clues for British military forays into Punjab and Afghanistan. Military men, such as Alexander Burnes (1805–41), Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859) and John Macdonald Kinneir (1782–1830) retraced Alexander’s route in Asia in the nineteenth century. Mounds of earth and brick referred to as ‘topes’ by early military surveyors dotted the landscape in north-western India (see Plate 2.1). In 1808, Elphinstone first used the term for the stupa at Manikyala, which the French dug into in 1830, since in local memory, it was associated with Sikander or Alexander’s horse. These topes yielded rich collections of coins and gems, which were then sold to museums in Europe at huge profits.⁶

In the search for relics and statuary, Cunningham and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) filled museums with collections of sculptures and coins, but left the stupas as heaps of rubble. Lepel Griffin was to write that “a thousand years of time and weather have not done so much injury to the invaluable topes at Sanchi as was caused by the action of Major-General Cunningham, the Director General of Archaeology, who years ago mined deep into the topes in the vain search for coins or inscriptions, and never filled in his excavations.”⁷

A complementary aspect of the practice of excavation in archaeology was conservation and control of monuments. In the nineteenth century, conservation and repair, which were looked after by local governments, were not part of the ASI Director-General’s responsibilities. It was only in 1904 that the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act was passed under Lord Curzon, “to provide for the preservation of ancient monuments, for the exercise of control over traffic in antiquities and over excavation in certain places and for the protection and acquisition in certain cases of ancient monuments and of objects of archaeological, historical or artistic interest.” We discuss the ramifications of this Act

⁶ J.-M. Lafont, 2006, *Conducting Excavations and Collecting Coins in Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Kingdom (1822–1839)*, in Himanshu Prabha Ray, edited, *Coins in India: Power and Communication*, Marg Publications, Mumbai.

⁷ Lepel Griffin, 1886, *Famous Monuments of Central India*, Autotype Co., London.

Plate 2.1: Photo from John Marshall's album of Sanchi



Source: Courtesy of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), New Delhi. Reproduced with permission.

in terms of the monuments at Sanchi and Bodh Gaya, while the final section is devoted to John Marshall's work at the site of Taxila, a site mentioned by historians of Alexander, but also prominently represented in Buddhist texts. The next section traces the beginnings of archaeology in the subcontinent and the search for the Greeks and the cities of Alexander.

The Beginnings of Archaeology of Buddhism

On the march from the Indus to the Hydaspes or Jhelum [in March 1832], a party from the camp of Mr. Elphinstone set out in search of the remains of Taxila, the capital of Alexander's ally Taxiles or more correctly Takshasila, the name of the Hindu city, which the late Colonel Wilford conjectures was situated in this direction. The party met with no ruins or remains of any ancient city, except this building resembling

a cupola in its outline; but which proved to be a solid structure on a low artificial mound. It was about 70 ft high and 150 paces in circumference, cased in most parts with stone, but in some places apparently unfinished. Most of Mr. Elphinstone's party imagined the building as decidedly Grecian, but the natives termed the structure the *tope* or mound or tumulus of Manikyala, which is situated in a large city, 40 miles from Jhelum.⁸

The aforementioned paragraph describes the novelty of the remains that British military officials encountered as they traveled through north and north-west India. The first phase of antiquarian quest for cities of Alexander may be dated from 1800 to 1839 after which the East India Company annexed Punjab and the province thus became accessible to its officials. Charles Masson (1800–53), often described as an itinerant “American” traveler in Afghanistan, was, in reality, an English deserter from the East India Company's Bengal Artillery Regiment in 1827. In December 1832, Karamat Ali, an intelligence agent for the British in Kabul, described Masson as a person who “understood Persian, had with him two or three books in a foreign character, a compass, a map and an astrolabe. He was shabbily dressed and he had no servant, horse nor mule to carry his baggage.”⁹

The accounts of his travels trace his route over three years, from Kabul to Qandahar and then back to the Indus, to Lahore, and down-river again to Karachi, whence he sailed to Bushire on the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ These extensive travels and comprehensive knowledge of the terrain made him an invaluable source of information for the Company's military ventures, as it tried to get a foothold in the hostile environment of Afghanistan, his earlier negative record of service notwithstanding. David Wilson, the British Resident at Bushire, persuaded Masson

⁸ Mohan Lal, 1846, *Travels in the Panjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan*, W. H. Allen, London, pp. 30–32.

⁹ G. Whitteridge, 1986, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan: Explorer, Archaeologist, Numismatist and Intelligence Agent*, Aris & Phillips, Warminster, UK; Atlantic Highlands, NJ, p. 61.

¹⁰ Charles Masson, 1842, *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Panjab*, 3 vols, Richard Bentley, London.

to write a detailed account of the countries he had traversed for the Bombay Government of the East India Company.¹¹

In 1832–33, Masson approached the East India Company for funds for travel and archaeological exploration in Afghanistan. From early 1834, the Bombay Government of the East India Company gave him an annual grant for three years of antiquarian work in the Kabul–Jalalabad region on the condition that all finds be sent to the Company.¹² By 1835, the Company appointed him news-writer in Kabul and this curtailed his travels to some extent. In 1842, Masson returned to London and received a small pension from the Company.

Scholars have provided various estimates of the number of coins that Masson collected ranging from 15,000 to 20,000 in 1837 to nearly 1,00,000 by the time he returned to London. His biographer Gordon Whitteridge refers to 79,735 coins from Begram alone and several thousands from other sites in Afghanistan. These figures indicate the rich potential of the archaeological sites of Afghanistan and also make Charles Masson perhaps the single largest collector of coins.¹³ Masson published several papers on his coins, which ranged from late fourth century BCE to the thirteenth century CE, but it is unfortunate that a detailed catalogue that he prepared never saw the light of day since James Prinsep thought that it would be useless to publish it in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.

The Buddhist rock-cut cave at Bamiyan in central Afghanistan was the first site that Masson surveyed in 1832 and the resulting illustrated account of the monument survives in the British Library.¹⁴ Between 1833 and 1835, Masson surveyed or excavated more than 50 Buddhist

¹¹ *Bombay Dispatches*, Bombay Political Department, Political Consultations 1230/183, April 16 1834, no. 6, pp. 781–90.

¹² Whitteridge, 1986, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, p. 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67; Sanjay Garg, 1998, *Coins Collected by Charles Masson in Afghanistan*, in A. K. Jha and Sanjay Garg, edited, *Ex Moneta*, Harman Publishing House, New Delhi; Elizabeth Errington, 2003, *Charles Masson and Begram*, *Topoi*, 11.

¹⁴ Masson Manuscripts, British Library India Office Collections, MSS Eur. G 42. Masson Papers, British Library India Office Collections (uncatalogued Masson manuscripts).

monuments near Kabul, further to the west at Wardak and, above all, at Hadda and in the Darunta district, to the south and west of Jalalabad — all dated on the basis of finds of coins from first and second centuries CE.¹⁵

Masson's finds illustrate the varied nature of stupa deposits, for they included animal teeth, red lead and human skeletons, as well as the usual reliquaries, ashes, bone fragments, coins, gems, and ornaments and beads of gold, silver or semi-precious stones. Two reliquaries in the Masson's collection are especially important for chronological purposes. First, the gold casket from Bimaran Stupa 2 (found with coins of ca. 60 CE) near Jalalabad contains the earliest datable images of the Buddha in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Second, the bronze Wardak vase has an inscription that records the foundation of a stupa by the Mahāsāṃghikas from Mathura in India, during the reign of the Kuṣāṇa king Huvīṣka in year 51 (of the era founded by Kaṇiṣka I), i.e., c. 178 CE. From studying his collection of bilingual coins issued by Greek and later dynasties (ca. 200 BCE–127 CE), Masson realized as early as 1834 that the Greek legends on the obverse of the coins were directly translated into the then unknown script on the reverse.¹⁷ This provided the first key to unlocking the script now known as Kharoshthi.

In October 1838, before leaving the Peshawar region, Masson spent five days at Shahbazgarhi producing the first complete and accurate facsimile of the extensive rock inscription at the site. This was done not just by making written copies, but also by taking ink impressions of the inscription on 50 yards of calico cloth. On his return to London in 1844, Masson presented his copies and ink impressions of the Kharoshthi rock inscription from Shahbazgarhi to the Royal Asiatic Society.¹⁸ As a result of his painstaking work, it was possible to produce

¹⁵ H. H. Wilson, 1841, *Ariana Antiqua: A Descriptive Account of the Antiquities and Coins of Afghanistan: With a Memoir on the Buildings Called Topes*, by C. Masson, Esq., Court of Directors, East India Company, London, pp. 51–118.

¹⁶ Reginald Le May, 1943, The Bimaran Casket, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 82(482).

¹⁷ James Prinsep, 1835, Further Notes and Drawings of Bactrian and Indo-Scythic Coins, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 4 (January–December).

¹⁸ Charles Masson, 1846, Narrative of an Excursion from Peshawar to Shah-Baz Garhi, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 8.

a “nearly perfect” transcription of the text.¹⁹ By 1845, it was realized that the inscription was another edict of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (ca. 273–32 BCE), with the same text as in his already deciphered Brahmi edicts found elsewhere in India, and this fact provided the final key to deciphering the Kharoshti script.

Alexander Burnes (1805–41), the assistant resident in Kutch, was another intrepid explorer who carried out several political tasks, along with conducting surveys. In 1831, he took a present of horses from king William IV to the ruler of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In 1839, he was appointed the political agent in Kabul, but was assassinated two years later. At this juncture, the focus shifts to Mohan Lal who accompanied Alexander Burnes to Afghanistan in 1832 and who had been trained in surveying in Calcutta by James Prinsep (1799–1840), the secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, also known for his skills at deciphering Brahmi inscriptions.

Mohan Lal (1812–77) was son of Rae Budh Singh and grandson of Raja Mani Ram of Kashmir who held a high rank with a considerable estate at the court of the Mughal emperors of Delhi. Mohan Lal studied Persian at home and English at the English College in Delhi. As C. E. Trevelyan, a British civil servant, wrote in the Foreword to Mohan Lal’s book: “In the person of Mohan Lal we proved to the Mohammedan nations beyond the Indus, our qualifications for the great mission with which we have been intrusted [*sic*] of regenerating India.”²⁰

In addition to the British military officials and Indian informants, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the ruler of Punjab from 1801 to 1839, was another important link in this narrative. The Maharaja hired European mercenaries to train his troops, creating the first modern Indian state army, a powerful military force which delayed the eventual British colonization of Punjab. After the defeat of Napoleon I and the restoration of French monarchy, many Bonapartist army officers found it necessary to seek employment elsewhere, such as Jean-François Allard (1785–1839); Jean-Baptiste Ventura (1792/3–1858) who arrived at Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s court in Lahore in 1822; Paolo Crescenzo Avitabile (1791–1850) and Claude-Auguste Court (1793–1861) both of whom joined

¹⁹ H. H. Wilson, 1850, On the Rock Inscriptions of Kapur di Giri, Dhauli and Girnar, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 12.

²⁰ Lal, 1846, *Travels in the Panjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan*, p. xiv.

them in 1827. The Hungarian doctor Johann Martin Honigberger (1795–1869) was employed by Ranjit Singh as a physician to the Sikh court from 1828 to 1832 and again from 1836 onwards. At the same time, he was superintendent of the gunpowder mill and gun factory at Lahore.²¹

Thus, it is no surprise that in 1830, Ventura, one of the French officers in the employ of the Punjab court, decided to spend his money and time in opening the stupa at Manikyala, which local tradition regarded as the resting place of Sikandar or Alexander's horse.

The name [Manikyala], as Ventura who was in the service of Ranjit Singh explained, meant "White Horse" beneath which are buried extensive ruins. Searches by Ventura had yielded coins bearing Greek legends and he carried out excavations for two months into the cupola. Ventura suggested (grounded on conjecture) that upon this site stood the city of Bucephalia erected by Alexander the Great in honour of his horse. Ventura deemed it probable that the inscription on one of the relics may relate to some circumstances connected with the invasion of the Panjab by that great captain.²²

After his excavations, Ventura informed Ranjit Singh in a short note in Persian, that the resting place of Sikandar's horse had been discovered.²³ This account of the search for Alexander's city leading to the discovery of stupas or Buddhist funerary monuments was repeated several times in the nineteenth century and is one that we will follow in some detail in the next section; here the major players in this search for antiquities in the first half of the nineteenth century have been identified, and we need to highlight their difference from those who followed them.

Manikyala, located north-west of Rawalpindi, was the first stupa to be discovered by Europeans and excavated in April 1830. The remains at the site consisted of a great stupa, south of the modern village, 14 smaller buildings of the same kind, 15 monasteries and many isolated massive stone walls. Jean Phillippe Vogel (1871–1958) joined the ASI in 1901 and was Superintendent of the Panjab, Baluchistan and Ajmer

²¹ Elizabeth Errington, 2007, Exploring Gandhara, in Elizabeth Errington and Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, edited, *From Persepolis to the Punjab*, The British Museum, London, p. 213.

²² Lal, 1846, *Travels in the Panjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan*, pp. 30–32.

²³ Lafont, 2006, *Conducting Excavations and Collecting Coins*.

Circle renamed the Northern Circle. He was critical of the conservation of the Manikyala stupa carried out in 1891 after Ventura's excavation "to convey an idea of the original state of the monument."²⁴

On the basis of the coins of the Kuṣāṇa kings Kaṇiṣka I (127–50 CE) and Huviṣka (150–90 CE) in the reliquary casket at the base of the dome, the Manikyala stupa is now dated to the second century CE. The numismatic evidence indicates that there were several phases of building the stupa: the first in the Kuṣāṇa period, an enlargement in the Sasanian period and a third at the beginning of the eighth century. A recent researcher also suggests that coins were placed at regular intervals in the stupa as deposits to finance any restoration of the monument that may have been necessary during the course of its existence.²⁵ Court continued Ventura's lead at Manikyala and opened 15 other stupas. His most significant finds included a Kharoshthi inscription dated in the year 18 of Kaṇiṣka I, coins of the Kuṣāṇa kings Kujula Kadphises, Wima Kadphises and Kaṇiṣka I, as well as seven worn Roman silver denarii of the Republican period dating from 96 BCE to 41 BCE.²⁶ Court's numismatic collection of 791 coins was still with him in 1873 when he showed it to the Bibliothèque Nationale and wanted to sell it. It would seem that after Court's death in 1880, many of the coins found their way to Cunningham, the Director-General of the newly established ASI in 1871.²⁷

²⁴ J. Ph. Vogel, 1902, Inspection Report of Manikyala Tope, *Annual Progress Report of the Archaeological Survey Punjab Circle for the Year Ending 31st March 1902*, Caxton Printing Works, Lahore.

"Restoration of the stupa base had not been restricted over the planned six metres, but had been carried across more than 38 metres, practically equalling its complete diameter. Yet how could anyone carry out responsible restoration without knowing the stupa's original shape? Hadn't Cunningham already indicated in 1863–64 that excessive weathering made it impossible to make drawings of the carvings on the pilaster capitals? Was it not a fact that, as a result of this, the added pilasters were entirely different?" (Gerda Theuns-de Boer, 2008, *A Vision of Splendour*, Kern Institute Collection of Photography & Mapin Publishing, Leiden and Ahmedabad, p. 56).

²⁵ Errington, 2007, Exploring Gandhara, p. 212.

²⁶ Sten Konow, edited, 1929, *Kharoshthi Inscriptions, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 2, pt 1, Calcutta, pp. 145–50.

²⁷ Elizabeth Errington, 1995, Rediscovering the Coin Collection of Claude-Auguste Court: A Preliminary Report, *Topoi, Orient-Occident*, 5/2.

Thus, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the primary objective was the collection of coins and other antiquities and the general practice was to dig a trench from the top of the stupa to its base. In the process, it was discovered that the stupas were uniformly solid, with the interior filled up with stones, rough or hewn, or with bricks held together by lime or earth. The operations of Ventura indicated the presence of a number of small square chambers formed by stones being placed on edge and covered over by a flat slab, along a line drawn through the center from the summit to the base. The topes sometimes had a small chamber inside within which relics were placed. In some instances, spaces were also found in the center or at the summit of the topes; in the center, they were marked by a large and heavy slab of stone. In a few cases, tunnels from the interior cell to the circumference have been discovered indicating a provision for access to the relics.²⁸

James Prinsep (1799–1840), the assay master of mints at Calcutta and Benares, was also the secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and by 1834 had become involved in the study of coins from Afghanistan and Punjab that were in the collections in Calcutta. Accounts of many of these were published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* and on the basis of Masson's early work on bilingual coins, Prinsep was able to decipher the Kharoshthi script, which he termed Pehlvi or Bactrian-Pehlvi. The culmination of these efforts was Prinsep's decipherment of the Brahmi script and George Turnour's (1799–1843) discovery that the *devānāmpīya* ("dear to the gods") *piyadassi* ("the humane one") of the inscriptions, who Prinsep thought was a king of Ceylon, was Ashoka of the Pāli chronicles, *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa*. This interlinking of the archaeology of the Buddha and that of Ashoka dominates the writings of Cunningham, the Director-General of the newly established ASI.

Alexander Cunningham (1814–93) and the Archaeological Survey of India

The initial period of exploration in Afghanistan and north-west India came to an end with the outbreak of the First Anglo-Afghan War

²⁸ Wilson, 1841, *Ariana Antiqua*, pp. 39–40.

(1838–42) and with the British annexation of Punjab in 1849. In 1848, Cunningham was the first to explore the Peshawar valley. He retired from the army on 30 June 1861 after 28 years of service, with the rank of Major-General, but soon thereafter was appointed Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of India. He detailed his agenda for archaeological work in his report:

In describing the ancient state of the Panjab, the most interesting subject of enquiry is the identification of those famous peoples and cities, whose names have become familiar to the whole world through the expeditions of Alexander the Great. To find the descendants of those peoples and the sites of those cities amongst the scattered inhabitants and raised mounds of the present day, I propose, like Pliny, to follow the track of Alexander himself. This plan has a double advantage for as Chinese pilgrims, as well as Macedonian invaders entered India from the West, the routes of the conquerors and the pilgrims will mutually illustrate each other.²⁹

This search for sites associated with Alexander the Great, however, led him to the Ashokan rock edict at Shahbazgarhi and the Buddhist monasteries of Jamalgarhi and Ranighat. Instead of discovering the cities founded by Alexander, all that Cunningham found were Indo-Greek coins and possible Greek influence on sculptures.

The idea of government-sponsored archaeology was largely the result of Cunningham's bold initiatives and was in marked contrast to the policies of the Asiatic Society. James Prinsep was against any state-organized archaeological effort. Instead, he said, "an independent pursuer of the object for its own sake, or for his own amusement and instruction" was needed.³⁰ These objections notwithstanding, the ASI was founded in 1861 barely three years after the British Raj had been established in India.

Cunningham was fixated by the archaeology of Buddhist sites visited by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang in the seventh century CE. The image

²⁹ Alexander Cunningham, 1872, *Archaeological Survey of India, Four Reports Made during the Years 1862-63-64-65*, vol. 2, Government of India Central Printing Office, Shimla, p. 1.

³⁰ Abu Imam, 1966, *Sir Alexander Cunningham and the Beginnings of Indian Archaeology*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca, p. 44.

of the Buddha as a social reformer who led a crusade against Hinduism figured prominently in Victorian writings, but through Cunningham these ideas found their archaeological manifestation. Cunningham sought to divide religious architecture on the basis of dynastic history, though his primary concern remained the study of Buddhism, which he felt had found no mention in the *Purāṇas*.

Cunningham had an abiding interest in the biography of the historical Buddha and in his book, *The Bhilsa Topes*, Chapters 2–12 are devoted to outlining the history of Buddhism in India, the life of the Buddha and a discussion of the Maurya, Gupta and Indo-Scythian dynasties. The discussion presents an integration of the archaeological data with textual accounts and inscriptions. The description in the Lankan chronicle *Mahāvamsa* dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE, was used for an analysis of the building and dedication of stupas in Chapter 13. It is significant that many of Cunningham's formulations, such as his identification of places associated with the life of the Buddha, description of the Buddha as a social reformer, the prominent role of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka in spreading the faith, and the degenerate nature of Buddhism after seventh century CE, received widespread publicity and continue to be repeated in secondary writings.

After his discovery of Sankissa, Cunningham wrote to Colonel Sykes, who had been elected in 1840 to the Board of Directors of the East India Company, stating that the establishment of an ASI would be an asset to the colonial state and the British public. To the former, it would prove that India had generally been divided into numerous petty chiefdoms and had been unable to face invasions, but had prospered whenever it had been in the control of one ruler. To the British public, it would show that Brahmanism was of comparatively modern origin and had constantly received additions and alterations. The fact that Brahmanism did not have any great antiquity could prove useful in the establishment of Christian religion in India.³¹

In his 1871 publication titled *The Ancient Geography of India*, Cunningham divided the history of the country into three periods, viz.,

³¹ Alexander Cunningham, 1843, An Account of the Discovery of the Ruins of the Buddhist City of Samkassa, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 7(2): 246–47.

the Brahmanical period, which covered the period from the expansion of the Aryan race over north India to the rise of Buddhism; the Buddhist period during which Buddhism was the dominant religion of India and which is stated to have lasted until the conquest by Mahmud of Ghazni; and, finally, the Muhammadan or modern period. What is, however, intriguing is that Cunningham based his conclusions solely on surveys conducted in north India. By his own admission, while his travels had been extensive and covered a vast area from Peshawar and Multan in present-day Pakistan to Rangoon and Prome in Myanmar and from Ladakh and Kashmir in the north to the banks of the Narmada in central India, he had seen nothing further south than the celebrated Buddhist caves of Elephanta and Kanheri in western India near the modern city of Mumbai.³²

The extent to which Cunningham's surveys defined the Buddhist sacred geography and impacted the study of religious architecture has been assessed by Janice Leoshko.³³ Cunningham evaluated images as mimetic and straightforward illustrations of the text. He repeatedly juxtaposed the fourth-century-BCE activities of Alexander with the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's account which was penned down a thousand years later. These two served as his chief guides throughout the volume, though he failed to assess the limits and errors of these accounts. Xuanzang's writing was, by no means, the account of an objective observer, but that of a devotee and the information can only be used with extreme caution.³⁴

Through his extensive travels as detailed in the 23 annual reports (1871–85), of which the first 13 were largely based on his personal discoveries, Cunningham brought the study of Buddhism to the forefront and established archaeology as a discipline that was essential to comprehend the history of religions. Cunningham's output in terms of cataloguing and documentation of archaeological data was extensive, though never comprehensive. He hurried from site to site, often visiting as many as 30 sites in one season. At the site of Manikyala, 20 of

³² Alexander Cunningham, 1871, *The Ancient Geography of India: Buddhist Period*, Trübner and Co., London, p. viii.

³³ Janice Leoshko, 2003, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

his diggers unearthed the remains of a large monastery in an hour. The monastery comprised five rooms and yielded a rich collection of bronze images of the Buddha.³⁵ At times, these visits ended as mere object-hunting expeditions where sites were cleared and sculptures and coins collected.

This method of summary excavation adopted by Cunningham was paralleled by a complete disregard for the protection of standing monuments within their local surroundings, which meant that in most cases the structures were dismembered and removed from their location to be displayed in museums — often against local sentiments. An example of this was the removal of the railings and sculptures of the Buddhist monuments at Bharhut in central India, though Cunningham was not so successful in Paharpur in present-day Bangladesh where the local zamindar restrained him from digging the site. His annoyance is reflected in his report:

[A]lmost everywhere in Bengal I have found the same dog-in-the-manger conduct on the part of the zamindars. In the present instance the Raja's agent repeated what I had previously heard from the people of the surrounding villages, that a great treasure was buried in the mound. This is the general belief all over the country, but it is in Bengal alone that the owner of the land will neither dig up the treasure himself nor allow anybody else to make any excavations."³⁶

As evident from Cunningham's reports, local stories and legends circulated about archaeological mounds and abandoned structures, which had protected them over centuries. The archaeological finds were dispersed in far-away collections and the remains now had "authentic" narratives attached to them that had entered the popular domain of historical fiction and tourism.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, a large number of Buddhist stupa sites in Punjab and Afghanistan had been visited and dug into, and numerous sculptures, Indo-Greek and Kuṣāṇa coins, gems and

³⁵ *Archaeological Survey Report*, vol. 2, 1872, pp. 171–72.

³⁶ A. Cunningham, 1882, *Report from a Tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879–1880: From Patna to Sunargaong*, *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, vol. 15, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, pp. 118, 120.

intaglios had been collected. The cities founded by Alexander continued to elude these early attempts at exploring and identifying urban centers based on descriptions in Greek. Nevertheless, museum collections in India and Britain continued to expand as a result of these ventures, though often, as in the case of the coin collections of Masson, Ventura or Court, these were either lost or bought off by others. Before moving on to the changed nature of archaeology in the twentieth century, it would perhaps be appropriate to discuss the linking of the biography of the Buddha with the shrines and monuments discovered in the course of antiquarian search.

Archaeology and the Biography of the Buddha

There is increasing consensus among Buddhologists at present, that the biographical traditions preserved in texts of the various Buddhist communities cannot provide much historically reliable information about the Buddha's life.³⁷ Modern scholarship in Buddhist studies focuses on the evolution of the Buddha's biography, rather than continuing the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Buddha and his original teaching.

In recent years, with the discovery of the earliest Buddhist birch-bark manuscripts in Gāndhāri Prakṛt in the British Library, Robert Senior, Martin Schøyen and the University of Peshawar collections,³⁸ the importance of vernacular writings in understanding commonalities as also differences between diverse Buddhist traditions has become apparent. Many of these documents are written in the Kharoshthi script, which was first used in the inscriptions of Ashoka dated to the third century

³⁷ George Bond, 1980, *Theravada Buddhism and the Aims of Buddhist Studies*, in A. K. Narain, edited, *Studies in History of Buddhism*, B. R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.

³⁸ Richard Salomon, 1999, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhara: The British Library Kharosthi Fragments*, University of Washington Press/ British Library, Seattle and London; Mark Allon, 2007, *Recent Discoveries of Buddhist Manuscripts from Afghanistan and Pakistan*, in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Daniel T. Potts, edited, *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

BCE and continued in use until the fourth century CE.³⁹ In contrast to the limited use of Gāndhārī largely in north-western parts of the Indian subcontinent, Sanskrit was adopted as the language of pan-Buddhist transmission from the middle of the first millennium CE onwards. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century, Pāli came to be accorded primacy, as the Pāli canon, comprising the *Tipiṭakas* and the commentaries, was the most extensive and easily accessible. It was edited and translated into English by the Pāli Text Society and was hence readily available in its published version.⁴⁰ Clearly, the dynamics of language use and transmission reflected choices made by monastic agents in different regions of South Asia in terms of ideas, values and practices to be adopted, which they then attributed to the Buddha's words or *Buddhavacana*.

The reconstruction of the life of the Buddha first took place at least 200–300 years after his death with the composition of the *Mahāvastu*, a text written between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit.⁴¹ Other early biographies of the Buddha are also known, such as the *Buddhacarita* in ornate Sanskrit by the poet Aśvaghōṣa dated to second century CE and the *Lalitavistara* in Hybrid Sanskrit of third and fourth centuries CE. Aśvaghōṣa, according to tradition, was a Brahmin who later became a Buddhist monk. In the *Buddhacarita*, he presents Buddhism as the “crowning and consummation of the Brahmanical religion.”⁴² For him, the Buddha's *dhamma* was higher and original, far surpassing that of Manu, the law giver of the Brahmanical tradition. The monk Buddhaghōṣa composed the *Jātakatṭakathā* recounting the previous lives of the Buddha

³⁹ Richard Salomon, 1998, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Other Indo-Aryan Languages*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, pp. 42–56.

⁴⁰ K. R. Norman, 1983, *Pali Literature Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all Hinayana Schools of Buddhism*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden; Oskar von Hinüber, 1996, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin; <http://www.bodhgayanews.net/pali.htm> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁴¹ J. J. Jones, translated, 1949–56, *The Mahāvastu*, 3 vols, Luzac & Co., London.

⁴² Patrick Olivelle, translated, 2008, *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa*, New York University Press, New York, p. xix.

and the *Nidānakathā* (*Account of the Origins*) in Pāli in the fifth century CE.⁴³

Four places that acquired prominence in the Buddhist tradition as mentioned in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* are: where the Buddha was born; where he achieved Enlightenment; where he preached his first sermon; and where he passed away.⁴⁴ The lay devotee and the monk were motivated to “see” or perform *darśana* of these events or places, as this seeing was intimately linked to gaining merit, which would ultimately lead to rebirth in a higher realm.⁴⁵ These philosophical concepts found physical expression in the *dhammayātā* or religious travel performed by the Mauryan king Ashoka who erected stone pillars to mark some of the places. After the sixth or seventh century CE, the grouping of eight sites associated with the life of the Buddha in a single sculpture occurred, though there was no uniformity in the scenes depicted.⁴⁶ In 1906 a stele depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha was found in the excavations at Sarnath, but this dates from the eighth century. These conclusions are, however, based on recent scholarship; in the nineteenth century, English translations of Pāli texts were just beginning to appear. The first printed version of the *Mahāvamsa*, a Buddhist chronicle detailing the history of Lanka translated by a civil servant George Turnour, was published in 1837 and the German translation by Wilhelm Geiger appeared in 1912.

The authorship of the *Mahāvamsa* is attributed to a Buddhist monk Mahānāma who wrote under the patronage of a Lankan king. The Buddha himself is said to have traveled to the island and the chronicles present detailed accounts of his visit. It is significant that only three sites associated with his life in India or Jambudīpa are mentioned. The first is Uruvelā (Gaya) in Magadha where the Buddha attained Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; then he went to Bārānasī (Benaras, now

⁴³ Stephen C. Berkwitz, 2010, *South Asian Buddhism: A Survey*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Ratan Parimoo, 1982, *Life of the Buddha in Indian Sculpture: An Iconological Perspective*, Kanak Publications, New Delhi.

⁴⁵ John C. Huntington, 1985, *Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism*, part I [Lumbini and Bodhgaya], *Orientalism*, 16(11): 47.

⁴⁶ Janice Leoshko, 2003, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia*, p. 71.

Varanasi), where he set the wheel of the law (*dharmacakra*) turning; and finally Kusinārā (Kushinagar), where he attained *parinirvāṇa* (“the Final Extinguishing”).⁴⁷ In contrast to the *Mahāvamsa*, the pillar edict of third century BCE Mauryan king Ashoka at Lumbini in the Rupandehi district of Nepal refers to only one site associated with the Buddha’s life, viz., where he was born. Lumbini had been a place of worship and pilgrimage since Ashokan times. Ashoka traveled to the site in his 20th regnal year, had a stone railing and a pillar erected and exempted the village of Lumbini from taxes. Thus, the four sites of Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kusinārā have ancient textual and epigraphic associations. In the nineteenth century, these traditions were provided with physical form in the guise of archaeological histories and the most vociferous proponent of the life of the historical Buddha was Alexander Cunningham.

Cunningham’s search for sites associated with the life of the historical Buddha based on the account of the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang led him to visit Nalanda, then known as Bargaon, in his first year as Archaeological Surveyor. He had already explored Sarnath in 1835, repeatedly visited Bodh Gaya between 1861 and 1881 and identified Basarh with Vaishali in 1861. In his book on Bodh Gaya published in 1892, Cunningham illustrated the first-century-BCE relief from Bharhut labeling it as a depiction of the “temple built by Ashoka at Bodh Gaya.”⁴⁸ Clearly Xuanzang’s list of sites was longer than that of the *Mahāvamsa* and also included those sites which preserved the memory of Ashoka.

The position of Shravasti had long puzzled scholars, partly because Chinese pilgrims made contradictory statements about its location. Cunningham compared the descriptions by the Chinese pilgrims with that given in the *Purāṇas* and the “Buddhist books from Sri Lanka.” The average distance given matched the location of the ruined city of Saheth-Maheth near Balrampur in the eastern part of the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh, where Cunningham found a colossal statue of

⁴⁷ Wilhelm Geiger, translated, 1950, *The Mahāvamsa*, Ceylon Government, Colombo, I.12, I.14 and III.2.

⁴⁸ Alexander Cunningham, 1892, *Mahabodhi or the Great Buddhist Temple under the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya*, W. H. Allen, London, p. 4, plate 3.

Buddha with an inscription containing the name of Shravasti itself. He excavated the site and identified the entire plan (see Plate 2.2).

In this chapter, it would also be useful to contrast Cunningham's work in unearthing the Buddha's biography, with other sites, such as Sanchi in central India, which was not connected with events in the life of the Buddha and yet was one of the most extensive sites spanning a long period from third century BCE to the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE when a stone wall was built around monastic structures on the hill. The objective in this chapter is to concentrate on nineteenth-century transformation of the biography of the Buddha through archaeology, while the next chapter discusses the emergence of another major figure in the archaeology of the period, i.e., the Mauryan king Ashoka.

It is evident that Bodh Gaya and Gaya were revered by several sections of society with diverse religious affiliations and underwent both spatial and temporal transformation.⁴⁹ In the search for origins and chronology, the social history of religious architecture or the constant changes that any religious structure underwent as a "living" monument in Asia were obliterated. This makeover of a complex with a multireligious following into a relic is a practice that was to be repeated at several other places of worship in South Asia. At Bodh Gaya, as elsewhere, it had serious ramifications, as reported in the print media⁵⁰ and comprehensively documented by Alan Trevithick.⁵¹

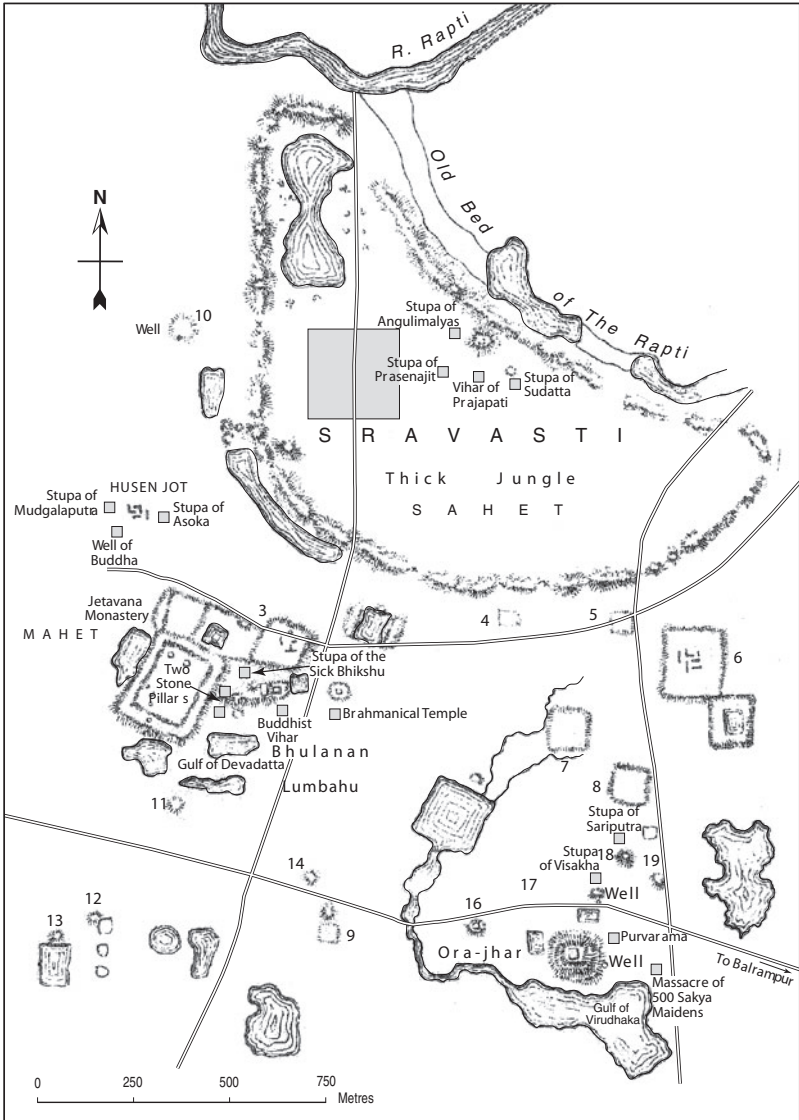
⁴⁹ Himanshu Prabha Ray, 2008, Archaeology and Empire: Buddhist Monuments in Monsoon Asia, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 45(3).

⁵⁰ Reviews: *Mahabodhi*, *The Pioneer*, October 15, 1892: 3; Assault on Buddhist Priests, *The Overland Ceylon Observer*, February 13, 1893: 182; Buddhism in India, *The Tribune*, Lahore, March 1, 1893: 17; A Religious Row at Gaya, *The Tribune*, Lahore, March 9, 1895: 20; The Budh-Gaya Case, *The Pioneer*, May 7, 1895: 8; Edwin Arnold, Asoka's Temple, *The Times*, September 18, 1895: 4; Mr. Dharampala's Crusade, *The Pioneer*, September 24, 1895: 2; Bodh Gaya, *The Pioneer*, Allahabad, April 22, 1896: 10949.

The Pioneer (Allahabad, April 14, 1897: 11253) reported that after losing the case for control of Bodh Gaya, Dharampala had returned to the US and was seeking gifts for shipping corn promised by the Governor of Iowa State for the famine-stricken people of Calcutta.

⁵¹ Alan Trevithick, 2006, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya (1811–1949)*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi.

Plate 2.2: Plan of Shravasti



Source: Alexander Cunningham, 1871, *The Ancient Geography of India: Buddhist Period*, Trübner and Co., London, Plate L.

Two other sites worth considering here are those of Sarnath, the find spot of the lion capital; and Sanchi, which is linked to the Buddha's prominent disciples. The latter, though not associated with events in the life of the Buddha, is, nevertheless, well known for the Schism edict of Ashoka, as is Sarnath. In his Schism edict, Ashoka cautions monks against creating dissensions within the Sangha. The two sites of Sanchi and Sarnath were excavated by both Cunningham and Marshall, but in very different ways. The final section contrasts the results from them with those from Taxila now in Pakistan. Marshall chose to excavate Taxila on account of its association with the Greeks. Instead, he found the region dotted with Buddhist remains, which he attributed to Ashoka's munificence and propagation of the *dhamma*! What he missed in the process was an understanding of the chronology of the expansion of Buddhism in north-western India.

The next section moves the discussion to another site that followed a similar trajectory as Bodh Gaya. About 250 km from Bodh Gaya where the Buddha is said to have attained Enlightenment is Sarnath, where he is known to have preached the first sermon. The archaeology of Sarnath, located 13 km north-east of the holy city of Varanasi on the banks of the Ganga, in a rich cultural zone of the middle Ganga plains is relevant here, as we trace changes in the religious landscape produced by the nineteenth-century practice of archaeology.

Sarnath, the Site of the First Sermon

The British artist William Hodges (1744–97) traveled to Sarnath in 1780 and carefully documented the Dhamekh stupa, which he assumed was a Hindu structure.⁵² In 1794, Jonathan Duncan, Commissioner of Benares, reported the digging carried out by Jagat Singh, the Dewan of the Raja of Benares, for collecting bricks about 500 ft (150 m) to the west of the Dhamekh stupa. Workmen found two vessels, one of stone and the other of marble and one inside the other at a depth of 27 ft. Inside were some human bones, decayed pearls, gold leaves and jewels, as also an inscribed image of the Buddha, the inscription dated Samvāt 1083 or 1026 CE. The inscription reportedly commemorated the construction of a “tower with an inner chamber and eight large niches”

⁵² William Hodges, 1793, *Travels in India*, J. Edwards, London, p. 62.

by the Raja of Gauḍa in eastern India. The account of a local villager confirmed that the marble reliquary had been given to Duncan, while the outer stone box was left in the mound itself and later removed by Cunningham to the Bengal Asiatic Society museum, where the box was erroneously labeled as “sarcophagus found in the tope of Manikyala!”⁵³ After this accidental discovery of the site, Colonel Colin Mackenzie explored Sarnath in 1815 and presented the sculptures found by him to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. But no account of his exploration seems to have been published.

Sarnath was described by Cunningham who visited it in 1861 as a huge mound of brick and stone remains “about half a mile long and nearly a quarter of a mile broad.”⁵⁴ On the north and east were three large sheets of water and one of these had a small Siva temple in front of the lake. Two villages lay close to the monastic complex, one of them known as Barāhi, reminiscent of the Buddhist goddess Vārāhī, and the other as Guronpur, or village of the teachers. An antelope reserve existed in the vicinity indicating, perhaps, the ancient name of the site as *mṛgadāva* or deer park. Also, present at Sarnath was a Jaina temple of the Digambara sect established in 1824.⁵⁵

How old is the association of Sarnath with the Buddha? The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who visited India in the seventh century CE, according to Cunningham, had described Sarnath as the place where the Buddha preached his first sermon and reported the find of a copper image of the Buddha in the “turning of the wheel of law” (*dharmacakrapravartana*) posture from the site. Cunningham also found a large number of stone images of the Buddha in the “act of turning the wheel of law,” which in his view confirmed the identity of the two.

Xuanzang, in fact, referred to about 30 Buddhist monasteries in the Varanasi district, as compared to the much larger number of more than 100 Deva temples, the majority being devoted to Śiva. To the north-east of the city, he mentioned a tope of Ashoka with a pillar in front, but makes no mention of the lion capital. The pillar is said to have been

⁵³ Alexander Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India Report: Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862–63–64–65*, vol. 1, Government Central Press, Simla, pp. 114–15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 53.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–7.

“of polished green stone, clear and lustrous as a mirror in which the reflection of the Buddha was constantly visible.”⁵⁶ He then went on to describe the Deer Park monastery and an impressive temple with a hundred rows of niches, each containing a gilt image of the Buddha. Inside the temple was a life-sized image of the Buddha in the preaching attitude.

The only monumental structure that marked the site in the nineteenth century was the Dhamekh stupa. The lower part of the stupa was built of stone blocks secured with iron clamps and had niches on four sides, perhaps, for the placement of images of the Buddha, while the upper part comprised large-sized bricks. Cunningham started his excavation work from the pinnacle of the stupa, by sinking a shaft, 5 ft in diameter. At 3 ft from the top, he found a rough stone slab and at a depth of 10.5 ft from the top an inscribed stone piece was found with the inscription “*ye dharma hetu prabhava*” in hybrid Sanskrit and Pāli written in a script dating to the sixth century CE.⁵⁷ He then started digging a horizontal gallery from the top of the stone work. This gallery met the vertical shaft at a distance of 44 ft showing that the stupa comprised an inner stone-work core that was only 33 ft in height, while the outer stone-work was 43 ft in height and in the middle was a pillar of stone rising 6 ft higher than the inner mass. Since no relics were found, Cunningham suggested that the stupa was a memorial stupa established to commemorate an event, viz., the first sermon, and concluded, “[T]hus ended my opening of the great tower after 14 months labour and at a cost of more than Rupees 500.”⁵⁸

A second stupa that Cunningham excavated in 1835 was Chaukhandi mound, a 74-ft high octagonal structure crowned by a 24-ft building, about half-a-kilometer south of the Dhamekh stupa. An inscription on

⁵⁶ Thomas W. Rhys Davids and S. W. Bushell, edited, and Thomas Watters, translated, 1996[1904–5], *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India, AD 629–645*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2 vols, reprint, p. 48.

⁵⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, the “*Ye dhammā*” verse has perhaps the most extensive circulation in the Buddhist world and occurs on stone images, clay tablets, metal plaques, and on palm-leaf, paper and cloth. The stanza was spoken not by the Buddha, but by Assaji, one of the group of five monks converted to Buddhism at Sarnath (Peter Skilling, 2003–4, *Traces of the Dharma, Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient [BEFEO]*, 90–91.

⁵⁸ Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, pp. 108–12.

the doorway records that it was built in the reign of Akbar to commemorate the emperor Humayun's ascent of the mound. Cunningham opened this mound by sinking a well from the floor of the building to the earth beneath the foundation and also drove a horizontal gallery into it in search of a relic, but found none. Cunningham then concluded that it was not a relic tower.⁵⁹

Major M. Kittoe conducted the next reported excavations in 1848–49. As the appointed “Archaeological Enquirer” to the Government of India, he was entrusted with the construction of the Queen's College in Benares. Kittoe exposed “the foundations of numerous stupas and shrines around the Dhamekh tower,” excavated the so-called hospital and “commenced clearing a large monastery west of the Jain temple.”⁶⁰ Unfortunately, Kittoe fell ill and died before publishing his report and his notes and memoranda have been lost, though a large number of his drawings are still available. Mr E. Thomas continued Major Kittoe's excavations of the monastery and Thomas was followed subsequently by Dr F. Hall and Mr C. Horne in 1865. There is also an account of one Dr Butler obtaining permission to continue Dr Hall's excavations but if these were conducted at all, no reports of them have survived. Further, there is a reference to Rivett-Carnac “digging up a Buddha image at Sarnath in 1877, but it is not known what became of it.”⁶¹

The site has also witnessed a great degree of depredation, even after the ASI had become operational. Thus, for example, Cunningham and Kittoe had discovered a large number of small votive stupas around the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath, but, unfortunately, there is no evidence of these small stupas at the site, nor are photographs recording their appearance available. It seems that the excavators did not deem it necessary to preserve their finds, which occurred in such abundance. The final irreversible damage was done in approximately 1894 when a railway line was constructed past Sarnath and stones and bricks from Sarnath were broken up and employed as ballast for laying railway tracks.

The next significant strides were made by F. O. Oertel, engineer of the Public Works Department who undertook excavations at Sarnath in 1904–5 with the approval of the ASI. Oertel exposed the main shrine

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁶⁰ *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report of the Year 1904-05*, p. 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

and, at a short distance from it, discovered the stump of the Ashokan pillar in situ (see Plate 2.3).⁶² The lion capital was unearthed after clearing the debris close to the western wall of the shrine. Oertel admired the capital for its elegant statuary and supported the dominant view that it marked the high watermark of Indian art, which has since been in decay. Excavations around the concrete floor of the pillar showed evidence of earlier structures, including pieces of stone railing and several phases of rebuilding around the pillar. Two inscriptions were engraved subsequently on the pillar in the early centuries of the Common Era, the latest being in characters of the fourth century CE.

Plate 2.3: F. O. Oertel's excavations at Sarnath



Source: Courtesy of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), New Delhi, India. Reproduced with permission.

The next set of excavations, conducted by John Marshall and Sten Konow, commenced in 1907, covering a large portion of area in the northern and southern sections of the site. Marshall and Konow unearthed, underneath the Kumāradevī monastery of the twelfth century CE, three monastic buildings, which they dated between the late Kuṣāṇa and early

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 68–70.

Gupta periods, as well as a large number of inscriptions and sculptures including the Kumāradevī inscription.⁶³ It consists of 26 verses and gives the genealogy of Kumāradevī, the queen of Govindacandra the dates of whose inscriptions range from 1114 to 1154 CE. Verse 21 mentions that the queen built a vihara at Dharmacakra or modern Sarnath and that she restored the image of Śrī Dharmacakra Jina or “Lord of the Wheel of Law” as it had existed in the days of dharma Ashoka. The inscription was composed by the poet Śrīkunda and engraved by the mason Vāmana. This twelfth-century reference to the memory of the Mauryan king Ashoka indicates the longevity of the association of the king with major Buddhist sites in the Ganga valley.

H. Hargreaves continued with the excavations to the north, east and west of the main shrine in 1914–15. Among his significant discoveries were the dated inscriptions of Kumāragupta II and Buddhagupta. Further, his work exposed numerous votive stupas, ruined shrines, inscriptions, and sculptures dating from the Mauryan to the medieval periods. Finally, the last major series of excavations was conducted under Daya Ram Sahni of the ASI for five field seasons commencing in 1917–18. The focus of these excavations was the area between the Dhamekh stupa and the main shrine and monastery II. During the course of his work at Sarnath, Sahni exposed a number of structures including the 162-ft long *chankrama* or promenade in front of the main shrine and a small temple.

In a paper written in 1911, Vincent Smith, the civil servant and Indologist, compared the finds from Sarnath with those from a Vajrayāna monastery at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka dating from about the eighth century and stressed the unique features of the lion capital marking the spot where the Buddha had preached his first sermon.⁶⁴ The legacy of Ashoka having built the first stupa at the site continued well into the twelfth century, as evident from the Kumāradevī record mentioned earlier.⁶⁵

⁶³ Their excavations were conducted over two seasons of fieldwork and the report was published in the *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report of the Years 1906–07 and 1907–08*.

⁶⁴ Vincent A. Smith, 1911, *The Monolithic Pillars or Columns of Asoka*, ZDMG, 65.

⁶⁵ J. Ph. Vogel, 1990, *Buddhist Sculptures from Benares*, *Archaeological Survey of India: Annual Report 1903–04*, Swati Publications, New Delhi, reprint, 1990.

Thus, it was in the early twentieth century that Sarnath acquired its present form and status (see Plate 2.4).

Plate 2.4: Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath



Source: Photograph by author.

It is also evident that the colonial framework of archaeology radically altered it into a monoreligious “Buddhist” site, though the Jaina temple continued to exist in close proximity to the Dhamekh stupa. A theme that underwrites the archaeological reports of Cunningham and Oertel is that of the wilful destruction of Sarnath. Cunningham wrote in 1854

that Buddhism started declining in India from around the seventh century and that it was finally extinguished in the eleventh or twelfth century, “when the last votaries of Buddha were expelled from the continent of India. Numbers of images, concealed by departing monks, are found buried at Sarnath, and heaps of ashes still lie scattered amidst the ruins to show that the monasteries were destroyed by fire.”⁶⁶ This statement has been repeated *ad nauseum* in secondary writings. What scholars failed to check was the nature of evidence used by Cunningham and it was here that the Director-General’s “creative” archaeology came to a head. No published data was provided to support the statement and instead Cunningham cited “personal communication” with Major Kittoe as evidence. Hindu sculptures found in the debris at the site received little attention and have generally been disregarded.

The Hill of Sanchi in Central India

After his excavations at Sarnath and other sites in north India, Cunningham turned his attention to Sanchi (the Bhilsa topes) situated on a low ridge on the banks of the river Betwa and excavated it in January and February 1851, along with F. C. Maisey. Unlike Sarnath, Xuanzang does not refer to Sanchi and Faxian’s identification of the site can only be confirmed with difficulty.⁶⁷ In his report, Cunningham does not explain the reasons for the location of monastic structures on the hill, but merely presents the biography of the Buddha as described in the *Mahāvamsa*. He starts by presenting a chronology of political dynasties that ruled in the ancient period. He then goes on to describe the distinct groups of stupas within a 10-km radius around Sanchi, viz., Sonari, Satdhara, Bhojpur and Andher, and the relics recovered from these. Near the southern entrance to the Sanchi stupa, Cunningham recovered remnants of an Ashokan pillar and a lion capital; a second pillar to the north of the stupa crowned by a life-size human figure; and pieces of two other pillars to the north-east, one of which had an inscription of the fourth–fifth century CE. Cunningham stressed the significance of the pillars by quoting from the *Mahāvamsa*, that when a

⁶⁶ Alexander Cunningham, 2009, *The Bhilsa Topes*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, reprint, pp. 88–89.

⁶⁷ Alexander Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes: Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith, Elder and Company, London, pp. 180–81.

rich patron desired to set up a stupa, he first established a pillar stating his intentions. The pillar was subsequently removed once construction on the stupa had begun.⁶⁸

Cunningham's primary interest was in relics and relic caskets and, as at Sarnath, he dug shafts through the center of the stupas at Sanchi. However, unlike the case at Sarnath, he was more successful in collecting a large hoard from the several stupas he opened at Sanchi and its vicinity. He found relics of the Buddha's disciples Śāriputta and Moggallāna, as evident from the inscriptions in Stupa 2 at Satdhara and Stupa 3 at Sanchi. Cunningham transported the caskets containing relics to London and discarded the stone boxes in which the caskets had been placed. The stone boxes were subsequently located during the excavations conducted by John Marshall, but the relics along with the caskets seem to have been lost.⁶⁹ John Marshall theorized that the relics

Plate 2.5: John Marshall's house at Sanchi



Source: Photograph by author.

⁶⁸ Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes*, p. 169.

⁶⁹ Sir John Marshall and Alfred Foucher, 1940, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, The texts of inscriptions edited, translated and annotated by N. G. Majumdar, 3 vols, Probsthain, Calcutta and London, p. 12.

of the two monks had been shifted to Sanchi when additions were made to the monastic structures.⁷⁰

The number of inscribed relic caskets found at Sanchi is striking and they may be identified as associated with Buddhist monks and teachers.⁷¹ Not all stupas, however, contained relics and Cunningham lists several that he opened without finding anything.⁷² The stupas at Bhojpur, about 12 km south-east of Sanchi, were built on four terraces, rising one above the other. Six memorial stupas occupied the uppermost platform; 16, the second platform; and seven, the third and the smallest platform.⁷³ Reliquaries were found inside four of the stupas at Bhojpur, but due to the absence of inscriptions, it is not easy to identify the monks with whom they were associated.⁷⁴

The reliquary inscriptions from the Sanchi complex indicate the dominance of teachers of the Hemavata school under the leadership of Gotiputa in the second–first century BCE. Their relics were found in Sanchi Stupa 2, Sonari Stupa 2 and Andher Stupa 2. Gotiputa was a teacher of considerable eminence and many of his disciples are referred to in inscriptions. The Hemavatas are categorized in Buddhist sources as close to Sthaviravādins.⁷⁵ It is significant that the reliquaries of the Hemavatas are found deposited in secondary stupas built outside the walls, which surrounded the big stupas. At Sanchi, the reliquaries of the Hemavatas were enshrined in a stupa at the base of the hill.⁷⁶

Thus, the relics at the site belong either to the Buddha's disciples, or to the teachers of the Hemavata school. This is in dissonance with the sculptural representations on the southern and eastern gateways at Sanchi, which have been identified as graphic representations of the division of relics by Droṇa after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* at Kushinagar; the stupa at Ramagrama, one of the seven original stupas said to have been opened by Ashoka and the subsequent redistribution of relics in

⁷⁰ John Marshall, Where the Restored Relics of Buddha's Chief Disciples Originally Rested: The Stupa of Sariputta and Mahamogalana, *Illustrated London News*, 29 January, 1949: 142.

⁷¹ Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes*, p. 293.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁴ Michael Willis, 2000, *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India*, The British Museum, London, pp. 89–94.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

84,000 stupas; and to Ashoka's visit to the Bodhi tree. According to the Buddhist canon, both Sāriputta and Moggallāna had died in the vicinity of Rajagriha and their bones had been placed in stupas in that area. How then did they reach Sanchi in central India? Alexander Cunningham explained this shift in the relics from Rajagriha to Sanchi through the agency of Ashoka who redistributed the relics of the Buddha and his disciples throughout the country.⁷⁷ Clearly, the legend of the *Asokāvadāna* came in handy here. Cunningham explained the importance of his discoveries in the following manner:

As the opening of the Bhilsa Topes has produced such valuable results, it is much to be hoped that the Court of Directors will, with their usual liberality, authorise the employment of a competent officer to open the numerous Topes which still exist in North and South Bihar, and to draw up a report on all the Buddhist remains of Kapila and Kusinagara, of Vaisali and Rajagriha, which were the principal scenes of Sakya's labours. A work of this kind would be of more real value for the ancient history of India (the territory of the Great Company) than the most critical and elaborate edition of the eighteen *Purāṇas*.⁷⁸

It is with these words that Cunningham justified his work at Sanchi and his efforts at retrieving the Buddhist past of India, as well as at establishing a central agency for archaeology. After the excavations, Cunningham and F. C. Maisey, who had joined him in the 1851 excavation season, divided the finds, with Cunningham keeping many of the inscribed reliquaries. Relics from Sonari and Sanchi were shipped back to England, but the steamer *Indus* that was carrying them sank near Jaffna. A few that had remained with Cunningham were eventually given to the British Museum and among these were the Hemavata relief caskets.⁷⁹ How did this dismal state of affairs change in the twentieth century?

Lord Curzon visited Sanchi in November 1899, within his first year as the viceroy of India. On Curzon's instructions, repairs were carried out, such as fixing an iron band around the dome of the main stupa, collecting hundreds of sculptured stones in one place, and undertaking

⁷⁷ Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes*, p. 30.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. x–xi.

⁷⁹ Michael Willis, 1997, *Sculpture from India*, in M. Caygill and J. Cherry, edited, *A. W. Franks: Nineteenth Century Collecting and the British Museum*, The British Museum, London.

the repair of the railing around Stupa 2 as also rebuilding its dome (Plate 2.6).

Plate 2.6: Stupa 1 at Sanchi after conservation



Source: Photograph by author.

Massive reconstruction of the site scheduled over several years was undertaken by the then Director-General of the ASI, Sir John Marshall and was made possible by the Begum of Bhopal, Jahan Begum's support. In 1912, the Begum expressed a desire to support a comprehensive publication on Sanchi and entrusted Marshall with the job. The publication, however, required extensive excavation and conservation work at the site. During his excavations, Marshall discovered a brick core of the stupa, which was later encased in stone and dated the setting up of the stupa to the Mauryan king Ashoka's reign. He documented the gradual expansion of the site and additions made to it over time.⁸⁰ It was around this time in 1919, that the Bhopal Durbar initiated negotiations for

⁸⁰ Nayanjot Lahiri, 2004, Sanchi: Destruction, Restoration, Restitution, in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Carla Sinopoli, edited, *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*, Indian Council for Historical Research and Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

the return of the relics that Cunningham had taken from Sanchi, negotiations that would continue into post-Independence India, as we will discuss in the next chapter. Here we continue our discussion of stupas excavated in the nineteenth century and associated with Ashoka.

Taxila and Archaeology of the Greeks and Ashoka

If Cunningham laid the foundations of text-based archaeology and provided the outlines of the archaeological landscape of Buddhism in north India, John Marshall (1876–1958), Director-General of the ASI from 1902 to 1928, made large-scale excavations the norm. He worked at both Sarnath and Sanchi and while his work at the former site followed a long list of excavators in the post-Cunningham period, as discussed earlier, his operations at Sanchi were of a different magnitude, where he almost single-handedly “reconstructed” the main stupas on the hill. A careful excavator, Marshall is well known for the discovery of the Indus civilization, but what interests us here is his work at Taxila and his excavation of the Dharmarājikā Stupa. To what extent did his methodology differ from that of Cunningham? More importantly, what was the impact of his work at sites such as Sanchi and Taxila? Taxila, for him had “historic associations with Greece; for it was in Taxila that Alexander the Great halted and refreshed his army before advancing to do battle with Porus.”⁸¹

Besides the remains of the three cities of Bhir mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh, the site is surrounded by a large number of monasteries and stupas, the most conspicuous being the imposing Dharmarājikā stupa, which is of relevance to this chapter. The term “Dharmarājikā” was seen as denoting a stupa over the bodily relics of the Buddha who was referred to as a Dharmarāja.⁸² The first point to remember is that Buddhist temples and stupas were found both inside the settlements and also outside it. As Marshall states:

Today, the mounds which cover the ruins of these many *sanghārāmas* are readily distinguishable, even at a distance, by reason of their peculiar and almost

⁸¹ John Marshall, 1951, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila Under the Orders of the Government of India Between the Years 1913 and 1934*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. xv.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 234–35.

uniform conformation — a parallelogram by the side of a circle: the former marking the site of a monastery or vihara, the latter of the stupa surrounded by a multitude of smaller edifices.⁸³

This last point about the stupa being surrounded by smaller edifices is important and we will discuss it in some detail below.

In 1913 when Marshall started excavations at Dharmarājīkā Stupa, it was buried under fallen debris and it was only after clearing the precincts that the raised terrace around the base of the circular stupa and the circumambulatory path could be discovered. The core was of rough rubble masonry and there were no indications to date it, except to hypothesize that it was not earlier than the time of Ashoka and not later than the first century BCE when a ring of small stupas was built around it. The stupa seems to have been rebuilt and repaired in the early centuries CE. It is significant for our purpose that Marshall categorically states that there is neither a record nor tradition of any relic being discovered in the Dharmarājīkā Stupa.⁸⁴

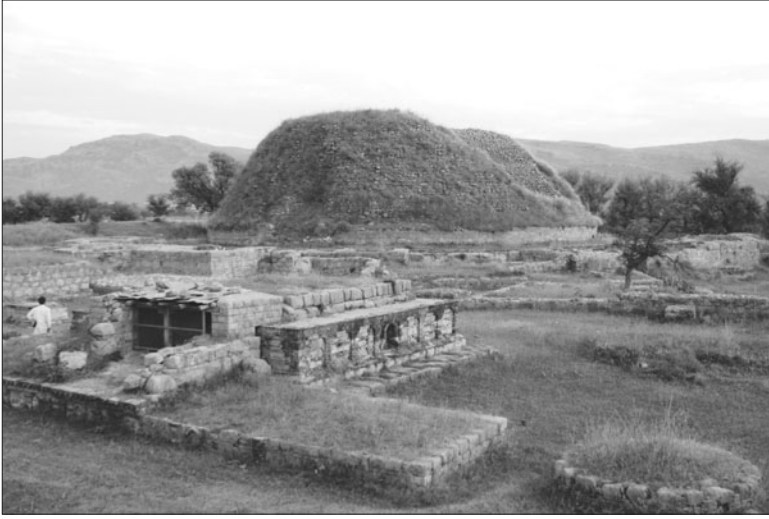
The excavations also provide testimony to the expansion of the shrine and the fact that the space around Dharmarājīkā was not left unoccupied, as in the case of the modern reconstruction of the Sanchi stupa, but was instead filled in during the subsequent centuries with a number of smaller stupas, some of them containing bone relics, beads, coins, etc. The sacred landscape included not only the stupa and the monastery, but also smaller stupas and water bodies, such as tanks and wells. Details of smaller stupas available from the Taxila excavations also show the organic growth of the sacred landscape around Dharmarājīkā, as it interacted with the community that worshipped and supported it (see Plates 2.7 and 2.8).

A ring of 12 small stupas was built around the main stupa and date from 50 BCE to 40 CE. Marshall suggested that an earthquake in the first half of the first century CE destroyed them and a new set of small stupas was built over them in the middle of the first century CE. Five (see Table 1: R4, S8, S9, B6, B3) of the 12 small stupas contained relic caskets and these were found buried several metres below their foundations. There is evidence to suggest that some of the small stupas

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Plate 2.7: Dharmarājikā Stupa at Taxila after conservation



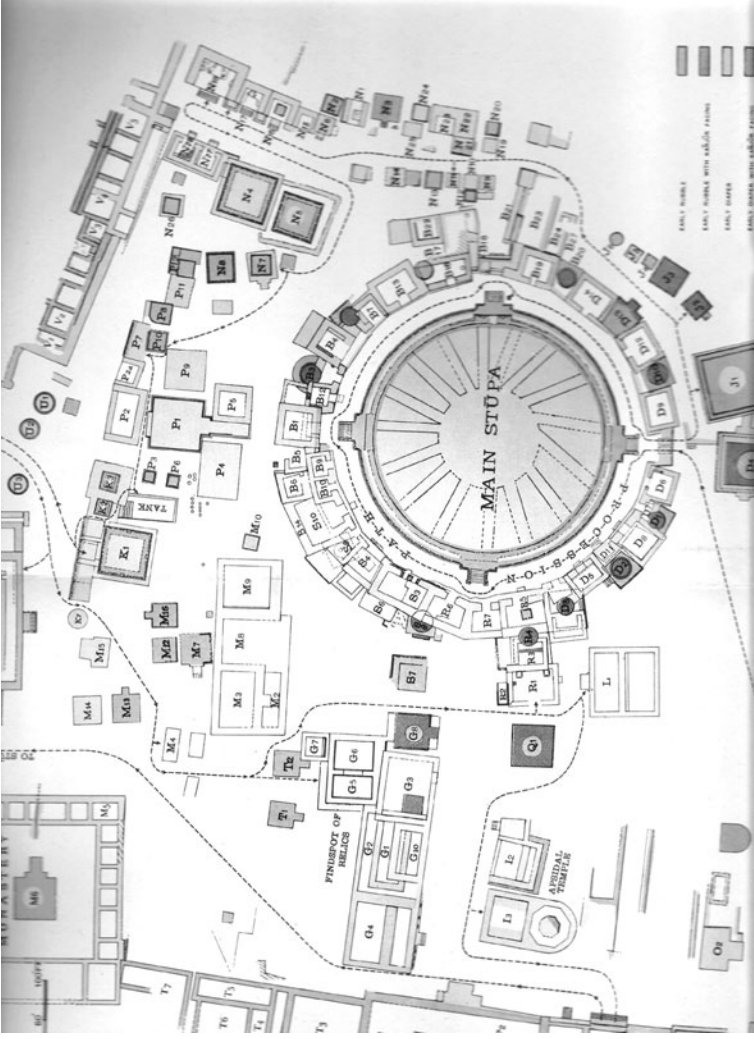
Source: Courtesy of Nasim Khan.

were repaired several times, while others have decayed and only the plinth survives.⁸⁵ Three other small stupas may also be dated to the same period, though they are located at some distance from the Dharmarājikā Stupa and only one of them (J2) contained relics. Another stupa base (N7) yielded a relic casket and also provided evidence for repair and restoration in the third and fourth century CE. Q1 also marked the plinth of a stupa, which contained relics, comprising ash. At some distance from the Dharmarājikā to the south-west were individual cells and two of these contained stupas, while to the north-west was a tank and a shrine.

The second phase of rebuilding after the earthquake involved the setting up of a circle of small chapels. Antiquities recovered from these included votive offerings in the form of stucco, terracotta and stone sculpture. Two of the stupas (G4 and G5) yielded relics, those in G5 also including an inscribed silver scroll. The Kharoshthi inscription on the silver scroll is dated to the year 136 of Azes (first century CE) and records the enshrinement of the Buddha's relics by Urasaka, a Bactrian

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 240–41.

Plate 2.8: Plan of Dharmarājikā Stupa



Source: John Marshall, 1951, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Plate 45.

in the Dharmarājīkā Stupa at Taxila.⁸⁶ It does not mention how Urasaka obtained the relics, almost 500 years after the Buddha's passing away. The relics were recovered from a stupa near the Dharmarājīkā and not from the Dharmarājīkā itself, thus indicating that the term referred to the entire area around the stupa, rather than merely to the main stupa.

The table at the end of the chapter indicates the continued practice of enshrinement of relics in the stupa area at Dharmarājīkā well into the fifth century CE, as also the increasing occurrence of Kuṣāṇa coins in and around relic caskets. In only one case (stupa at U1) is there any indication of the transfer of the contents of a relic chamber destroyed in an earthquake to that of a later stupa.⁸⁷ As compared to Sanchi, inscribed relics are almost non-existent, with the exception of the silver scroll also placed in the reliquary. It is hence difficult to identify those interred around the Dharmarājīkā.

The distribution of the relics was a popular theme in Gandhāran art and representations of it show the Brahmin Droṇa with eight ball-shaped relics, while the princes stand around.⁸⁸ The first-century-BCE Indravarman inscription refers to relics being obtained from another nearby stupa and re-enshrined in a secure, deep and previously unestablished place.⁸⁹ It would then seem that the acquisition of Buddha's relics in the region of Gandhāra was not difficult, and already deposited relics could be taken and re-deposited. What cost both time and money was depositing the relic in another stupa built for the purpose, a process that involved not only construction of a monument, but also gifting the relic with valuable treasure.⁹⁰ It is sometimes suggested that local Buddhists, given the dearth in this region of sites immediately associated

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 256.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 263.

⁸⁸ Robert L. Brown, 2006, The Nature and Use of the Bodily Relics of the Buddha in Gandhara, in Pia Brancaccio and Kurt Behrendt, edited, *Gandharan Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, Texts*, UBC Press, Vancouver and Toronto, pp. 183–84.

⁸⁹ Richard Salomon and Gregory Schopen, 1984, Indravarman (Avaca) Casket Inscription Reconsidered, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 7(1).

⁹⁰ Brown, 2006, The Nature and Use of the Bodily Relics of the Buddha, p. 188.

with the Buddha's final life as Gautama turned to the *jātakas* to find authentication for their own local places of pilgrimage.⁹¹

Many relief sculptures from Gandhāra show devotees venerating relics often placed on low thrones or pedestals. Several distinct types of shrines were used to display, house and provide security for direct access of these relics.⁹² Some stupas had large relic chambers, which seem to have been opened regularly, for example, the 4-m diameter relic chamber in the main stupa at Kalawan, about a kilometer from the Dharmarājikā. This relic chamber was painted several times and similar chambers have been found in other stupas in Swat. It would seem that these stupas were entered periodically from above.⁹³

Peter Skilling has assessed an extensive range of textual references to relics and concluded that the “cult of relics is central to all Buddhism” and links the history of Buddhism to the history of relics.⁹⁴ No doubt, scholars have moved beyond early-twentieth-century perceptions of Buddhism. Of interest to this study, however, is the control and redistribution of relics by archaeologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is here that the image of the Mauryan king Ashoka emerges prominently and it is to the recovery of the archaeology of the Mauryas that we will turn to in the next chapter.

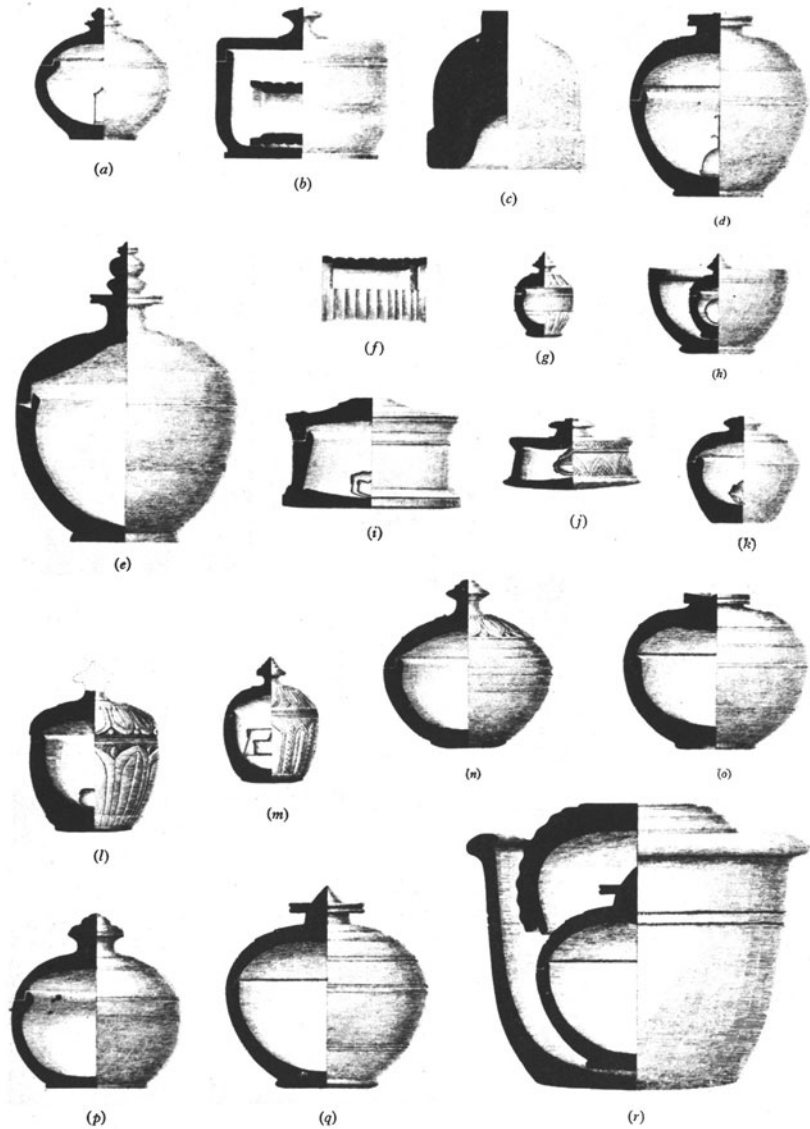
⁹¹ Koichi Shinohara, 2003, The Story of the Buddha's Begging Bowl: Imagining a Biography and Sacred Places, in Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara, edited, *Pilgrims, Patrons and Place: Localizing Sanctity in Asian Religions*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.

⁹² Kurt Behrendt, 2006, Relic Shrines of Gandhara: A Reinterpretation of the Archaeological Evidence, in Pia Brancaccio and Kurt Behrendt, edited, *Gandharan Buddhism*, p. 83.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁹⁴ Peter Skilling, 2005, Cutting across Categories: Relics in Pali Texts, *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University*, 8.

Plate 2.9: Relics caskets found around Dharmarājikā Stupa, Taxila



Source: John Marshall, 1951, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations, Carried out at Taxila under the Orders of the Government of India between the Years 1913 and 1934*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Plate 50.

Table 2.1: Relic caskets found near the Dharmarājikā stupa, Taxila (Figure 2.9)⁹⁵

<i>Stupa number</i>	<i>Location of relic casket/chamber</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Stupa R4	Relic casket, 5 ft below ground level	Casket of grey schist with small cylinder of gold containing bone ash and a carnelian fragment; copper coin of Azes.	Marshall, 1951: 241
Stupa S8	Relic chamber, 6 ft from top	Four copper coins of Maues and Azes I; casket of schist; miniature casket of gold; three gold pins; six beads; a tiny bone relic	Marshall, 1951: 242: in 1917 the relic casket and its contents were presented by the Government of India (GoI) to Ceylon and installed in Temple of the Tooth at Kandy.
Stupa S9	Circular relic chamber with heavy slab of stone	Ivory casket with another small ivory reliquary; bowl-shaped pieces of silver; gold pieces; gold wire; pearls; beads	Marshall, 1951: 242
Stupa B6	Relic chamber at a depth of 13 ft	Casket of schist, reliquary of silvery bronze; bone; ash; beads; limestone casket	Marshall, 1951: 242
Stupa B3	No proper relic chamber, but casket in earth, 5 ft below the base	Schist casket with miniature gold reliquary; fragment of bone; pearls; carved carnelian; beads.	Marshall, 1951: 243
Stupa J2	Relic chamber, 2 ft above the floor level	Casket of schist with a small box of silver; beads	Marshall, 1951: 244
Stupa N7	Neatly cut relic chamber, 7 in. square	Crystal lion; copper coin of Azes I; casket of schist	Marshall, 1951: 245
Stupa Q1	Relics from the interior of stupa	Ashes in tiny round gold casket along with pearls; beads placed inside a schist casket	Marshall, 1951: 246

⁹⁵ Marshall, 1951, *Taxila*, pp. 236–56.

Table 2.1 (*Continued*)

<i>Stupa number</i>	<i>Location of relic casket/chamber</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Chapel G4	Two relic caskets beneath blocks heaped on the floor near apsidal temple	Silver box and gold casket inside one schist container; smaller casket of ivory and gold reliquary in another schist container	Marshall, 1951: 255
Chapel G5	Vase-like casket of schist, 1 ft below the original floor	Silver vase inside with an inscribed scroll of silver (6.25 in. × 1.35 in.) and small gold casket containing minute bone relics with a heavy stone placed on top.	Marshall, 1951: 256
Small Stupa T ₁₂	Grey schist casket found in the debris of T ₁₂	Small box of silver inside casket and a smaller one of gold containing a relic bone	Marshall, 1951: 258
Stupa K3	Small earthenware vase with ash	Three copper coins of Kaṇiṣka portraying king at altar and wind god	Marshall, 1951: 263
Stupa P6	Earthenware vase and 10 copper coins	Three coins of Huviṣka and three of Vāsudeva above the relic vase; three coins of Vāsudeva inside the vase; and one below it	Marshall, 1951: 263
Chapel S10 (3rd–5th century)	Two relic caskets found buried under stone near the base of its west wall	Two caskets of schist: one yielded seven lumps of clay; other was empty	Marshall, 1951: 267
Stupa U1 (reconsecration of earlier relics)	Earthenware pot with schist casket and ribbed bowl placed upside down	Bone relic; coins of Apollodotus, Maues, Vonones, Sphalahoresh; 32 disks of beaten gold; fragments of silver leaf; gold rings; beads of carnelian, garnet, agate, pearl, and glass	Marshall, 1951: 271–73



3

The Empire in the Footsteps of Ashoka



Have Buddha's Ashes Been Found at Last?
Casket Found in India Contained Burned Human Ash Supposed
to be Dust of the Founder of the Faith.¹

This article in the *New York Times* of April 10, 1910, was mentioned in Chapter 1 as an example of the making of a public discourse through a subliminal intermeshing of the visual and the text. The story of the discovery of relics of the Buddha at Shahji-ki-dheri near Peshawar in present-day Pakistan, was widely reported and appeared in the *Baltimore American* on May 22, 1910, and several other US newspapers, such as the *Morning Oregonian* on September 22, 1909; *Lexington Herald* on October 10, 1909; *Idaho Daily Statesman* on April 17, 1910; *Baltimore American* on May 22, 1910; *Dallas Morning News* on May 22, 1910; *Colorado Springs Gazette* on September 19, 1910; and *Kansas City Star* on September 19, 1914. The *New York Times*, however, carried the most detailed write-up with a discussion of its historical value and a critical assessment of the find:

Asoka is said to have erected 84,000 stupas . . . The impression throughout the Buddhist world is that the ashes of the Great Teacher were by him so finely subdivided that for three charred bones to be afterward found together in any single deposit would be impossible. Now, as the writer in the *Brahmavadin*² pointed

¹ Have Buddha's Ashes been Found at Last?, *The New York Times*, April 10, 1910: 5.

² The *Brahmavadin* was the name of a Journal brought out under the inspiration of Swami Vivekananda from 1895 to 1914.

out, these bones and the stupa under which they were discovered are not attributed to the Asokan deposition. The enshrinement in this case is supposed to have been made by Kanishka, who reigned at Peshawar from 125 to 150 AD.

The article further raised a significant issue of contestation over the control of relics and their distribution during the colonial period: “The writer [in the *Brahmavadin*] further pointed out that the days were past when the sacrosanct treasures of the nation and religion could be scattered by secular executive officers without a word being raised.” This chapter examines the distribution of relics unearthed in archaeological excavations in the subcontinent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Torkel Brekke claims that the relics were perceived differently by British archaeologists, who valued the reliquaries for their aesthetics, and Buddhist believers, who regarded them as sacred objects. These holy objects, however, became pawns in the power struggle between the colonial officials and Buddhist activists. Brekke adds that in the post-Independence period “the Indian Prime Minister Nehru used the Buddhist relics in his programme of secular, multi-religious nation building from Independence in 1947.”³

This chapter, however, maintains that Brekke’s hypothesis glosses over a complex process of formation of a sacred landscape based on the concept of the historical Buddha, which itself was a creation of the Victorian mind. This process, no doubt, started with an antiquarian search for relics that could be sold profitably to museums in the nineteenth century, as discussed in the earlier chapters. At the same time, as will be shown here, the colonial government was not averse to using archaeological finds, such as relics, to further its geopolitical agenda. Antagonism towards the colonial policy of control and distribution of relics came not only from Buddhist activists and the Mahabodhi Society, but also from the so-called Hindu journals like the *Brahmavadin*, as mentioned earlier and, last but not least, from the informed public. A new feature that emerged in the early twentieth century was the colonial approval of “re-enshrinement” of relics, often within archaeological sites, such as Sarnath.

To what extent did the newly discovered material remains of the Mauryan period, especially of the reign of the third-century-BCE king

³ Torkel Brekke, 2007, *Bones of Contention: Buddhist Relics, Nationalism and the Politics of Archaeology*, *Numen*, 54.

Ashoka, legitimize this process? It is suggested here that the search and distribution of relics cannot be discussed without reference to the archaeology of the edicts of Ashoka, the main champion of Buddhism, as accepted by Alexander Cunningham. The chapter starts with discussing the nineteenth and the early twentieth century disputes on the distribution and re-enshrinement of relics and then proceeds to discussion of the archaeology of Ashoka and Kaṇiṣka that also dates to the same period, as the role of these two “Buddhist” kings often became convenient pegs for the legitimization of the agency for re-distribution.

Distribution and Re-enshrinement of Relics

In these days of delicate and intricate diplomacy in the East the possession of such a relic [Kanishka reliquary from Shahji-ki-dheri] may be regarded as an asset; shall Great Britain let it go to her ally Japan or will she bestow the precious fragment upon a monastery in one of her own Buddhist possessions, Burma or Ceylon? China will probably be ignored though there are more Buddhists in that country than anywhere else.⁴

This issue of the use of relics in diplomatic strategy in Asia can perhaps best be answered by tracing the archaeological discoveries of relics in stupas and their distribution from the nineteenth century onwards. The stupas include those discovered at Sanchi (1851) in Madhya Pradesh, Sopara (1882) in Maharashtra, Girnar (1889) in Gujarat, Bhattiprolu (1891) in Andhra Pradesh, Piprahawa (1897) in Uttar Pradesh, Shahji-ki-Dheri near Peshawar (1908–9), and Mirpur Khas in Sind (1910), the last two now in Pakistan. There was no uniform pattern that worked in all cases and each case has to be discussed separately. Relics from stupas at Sanchi date to the earliest period, but had a complex trajectory before they were brought back to Sanchi almost a century later. Thus, they stand apart from the other finds and will be discussed at the end of the section. I start with Sopara and Girnar and proceed in the order in which the relics were found.

⁴ Find Buddha’s Bones after 2,000 Years, *Indianapolis Star*, September 5, 1909: B14.

Relics in Western India: Sopara and Girnar

In 1882, Bhagwanlal Indrajī excavated a mound locally known as Buruda (or basket-maker) king's fort at Nala Sopara, a large village about 50 km from the city of Bombay. Indrajī (1839–88) was an Indian scholar and an honorary fellow of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. The site was brought to his notice by the Collector of Thana district, W. B. Mulock, and since the shape of the mound appeared very similar to that of a stupa, he visited Sopara in April 1882, along with James M. Campbell, member of the Bombay Civil Service and compiler of the *Bombay Gazetteer*. Indrajī was familiar with the term “stupa,” as it occurred in the early Buddhist donatory inscriptions in caves of the western Deccan, such as those at Nasik, Junnar, Karle, and Naneghat. As detailed in Indrajī's report, Sopara was an ancient town with several tanks and wells that found mention in Buddhist, Hindu and Jaina sources, as well as in the accounts of foreign travelers. The most important discovery at the site was that of a fragment of the Eighth Rock Edict of Ashoka, which emphasized the beneficial nature of the religious tours (*dhammayātās*) started by Ashoka to replace the pleasure trips (*vihārayātās*) of earlier kings.⁵

Raja Buruda's fort was a large brick mound more than a kilometer to the west of modern Sopara. In the center of the mound, Indrajī excavated a brick chamber a little below the level of its base, and within this chamber he found a circular stone coffer. In the middle of the coffer stood an egg-shaped copper casket surrounded by a circle of eight small seated bronze images of eight Buddhas dated to the eighth and ninth centuries CE. The copper casket contained four smaller coffers of silver, stone, crystal, and gold. Inside these caskets were gold flowers, precious stones, beads and a small image of the Buddha pressed out from a thin sheet of gold. Also found were a silver coin of the Sātavāhana king Yajña Sātakarṇi, dated to the early centuries CE and fragments of what was identified as a begging bowl. Indrajī suggested that the stupa had been raised over the begging bowl of the Buddha, which had been passed on from generation to generation.

⁵ Bhagwanlal Indrajī, 1882, Antiquarian Remains at Sopara and Padana: Being an Account of the Buddhist Stupa and Asoka Edict Recently Discovered at Sopara and of Other Antiquities in the Neighbourhood, *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 15.

Indraji dated the stupa to the second century CE and suggested that the small bronze images of the Buddhas were put in at a later date after the stupa had been reopened for repairs and renovation.⁶ About 2 km from the relic mound was Brahma Tekri or Brahma's Hill, which yielded several low cairns of basalt boulders about 9–12 ft across with first-century-CE inscriptions giving names in the genitive case, indicating ownership. The excavator suggested that these may have been memorial structures of lay devotees. Similar cairns have been found more recently at Buddhist sites in coastal Andhra mentioned in the Preamble and are linked to the notion of sacrality of the stupa complex, within which memorial structures continued to be constructed, as discussed in the context of Taxila in the last chapter. Subsequent excavations in 1940 brought to light a second brick-built stupa of the second century CE.⁷

Campbell wrote a long letter to the editor of *The Times of India* on April 19, 1882, describing the excavations and the finds from Sopara and concluded by stating that he would forward the relics to Dr Codrington so that they could be placed in the Bombay Asiatic Society's museum in the Town Hall unless he received orders to the contrary from the government in a day or two. A live frog was also found about 6 ft below the relic box, which was handed over to the Museum of Grant Medical College for research.⁸ Funds for digging a trench across the mound were made available by the Collector, who was later reimbursed the amount by the government.⁹ The finds were, no doubt, considered valuable and a Bombay merchant offered 2000 rupees for one of the images of the Buddha. At the same time, Ven. H. Sumangala, the High Priest of Lanka and President of Widyodaya College, Colombo, showed interest in obtaining a small fragment of the begging bowl.¹⁰

Not everyone was, however, convinced that the bowl belonged to the Buddha. An editorial article in *The Times of India* questioned the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁷ Remains of Buddhist Stupa: Finds at Sopara, *The Times of India*, February 19, 1940: 5.

⁸ The Discovery of Buddhist Relics, *The Times of India*, April 19, 1882: 5. The same article also appeared in *The Pioneer*, April 24, 1882: 6.

⁹ J. Montearth, The Buddhist Remains, *The Times of India*, May 30, 1882: 3.

¹⁰ The Sopara Relics, *The Pioneer*, December 1, 1882: 5.

assumption that the fragments were of the Buddha's begging bowl and suggested instead that they probably belonged to one of his disciples. The author of the article stated, "The most fatal objection of all, however, is furnished by the fact that, in common with other relics, it has undergone the process of being miraculously multiplied, and is now claimed by no less than four rival shrines."¹¹ The author concluded by stressing that the remains be sent to England and kept in the India Museum at South Kensington.¹²

This cynicism aside, the relics remained in Bombay. A request from Sumangala sent to the Bombay government through the Governor of Ceylon was, however, accepted by the former and one of the 13 fragments of the bowl was sent to the High Priest, along with seven of the 3,000 gold flowers also found in the excavations.¹³ The editorial in the *Weekly Ceylon Observer*, however, did not approve of the participation of the two governments of Bombay and Ceylon in relic distribution:

Our special correspondent noticed in writing from Bombay that the Buddhists of Ceylon had applied for some of the so-called relics of Buddha recently discovered in Western India. It was a foregone conclusion that their wishes should be complied with, but certainly not that the donation should be dignified by passing through two Governments, that of Bombay and that of Ceylon. The effect will certainly be to create amongst the Buddhists the impression that both Governments recognize the rubbish as genuine relics of what Bhagwanlal Indrajī of Bombay (a Hindu), terms 'the World Honoured' and that the founder of a system of deliberate atheism, is believed in and honoured by the Governments, the members of which are professedly Christian.¹⁴

Despite the discordant note of the editor, Sumangala organized a public display of the relics in Colombo on the full moon day of October–November 1882 at a special ceremony in the presence of Mr Hope, the Governor's Private Secretary; Maha Mudaliyar or headman, also attached

¹¹ *The Times of India*, May 13, 1882: 4.

¹² The Late Pandit Bhagwanlal Indrajī, *Times of India*, May 25, 1888: 3. This article indicates that the author referred to in the earlier report of *The Times of India*, May 13, 1882: 4 was perhaps Dr Burgess, the Archaeological Surveyor in Bombay.

¹³ Editorial, Buddhist Relics and the Governments of Bombay and Ceylon, *The Weekly Ceylon Observer*, November 6, 1882: 959.

¹⁴ Ibid.

to the Governor's immediate office staff; and H. S. Olcott of the Theosophical Society. Thousands of people turned up to pay homage to the relics and this also provided Olcott with an occasion to address the gathering, explaining the history of the Sopara find. It was earlier thought that it would be best to re-enshrine the relics in a new stupa, but then it was decided to place the relics on a silver lotus in a crystal shrine specially built for the purpose. No doubt, possession of the relics brought sanctity and honor to Sumangala's Widyodaya College. The correspondent went on to express hope that the Bombay government would present similar relics to other Buddhist countries, such as Siam, Burma, China, and Japan, "sending them not, as in the present instance, parcel post, but in a more dignified and diplomatic fashion."¹⁵ This use of relics as a potent instrument of political diplomacy is an issue that underwrites this entire section and one that kept reappearing not only in statements by colonial policy-makers, but more so in the print media. An unintended result of the publicity was the interest aroused in the public; often, literary societies organized special lectures and tours for their members. For example, Gujarat Research Society that had been established in Bombay arranged for G. V. Acharya, curator of the Archaeology Section of the Prince of Wales Museum, to speak to its members, including the Society's president, Mr Justice H. V. Divatia, and to arrange for their visit to Nala Sopara in December 1936.¹⁶

After opening the stupa at Sopara, Indrajī ruminated about his childhood and the memory of an old brick mound that he had seen at Girnar hill. Unfortunately, his early death robbed him of an opportunity to return to it. Campbell, however, did not lose interest in the enterprise and returned to Gujarat in 1889. He discovered a brick mound three times the size of the mound at Sopara, locally known as Lakha Medhi in the Boria valley to the south of Girnar hill, about 10 km to the south-east of Junagadh. Campbell's venture was supported by the Nawab of Junagadh.

The account of the excavation indicates that a 20-ft wide trench was dug across the stupa, followed by further digging, which revealed a stone coffer containing a stone pot in which were found, first, a little copper

¹⁵ The Sopara Relics in Ceylon, *The Pioneer*, November 25, 1882: 4.

¹⁶ Gujarat Research Society: Sopara Excursion, *The Times of India*, December 17, 1936: 8.

pot, then a silver box and, finally, a little gold box. In the gold box were found an aquamarine bead, a ruby, a sapphire, an emerald, two small pieces of wood, and a 'relic' described as a sliver of bone, stone, or clay. The presence of seven life-size damaged images in the mound surrounding the central relic coffer led Campbell to suggest that the relics had been housed in an older structure, before being moved to the present location. Walabji Haridat, the curator of Rajkot Provincial Museum, visited and showed interest in the excavated site, leading the Nawab of Junagadh to consider the Rajkot Museum as the likely place for housing the relics from Lakha Medhi.¹⁷ Thus, in the case of both Sopara and Girnar, the relics were kept in India and, except for the bowl fragment sent to Lanka, were not considered for re-enshrining. In contrast, the excavations at Piprahwa in the Basti district of north India show a very different pattern.

Piprahwa to Wat Saket, Bangkok

In the nineteenth century, north-eastern part of the large Basti district in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh was home to Europeans who had been granted large estates and had converted dense forests in the area to cultivable land. Birdpur estate was one such property of the Gibbon and Peppe families. It was located in an area known for its rich archaeological remains. Anton A. Führer of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) surveyed the Nepalese Terai in March 1895 and wrote about his results in a letter to the editor of *Pioneer*.¹⁸ His claims at having discovered not only an Ashokan edict, but also the Buddha's birth-place were supported by the epigraphist G. Bühler who deciphered the inscription.¹⁹

The discovery of the inscribed Ashokan pillar at Rummindei just inside the border of Nepal and its identification with Lumbini, the birth-place of the Buddha had aroused interest about the mounds

¹⁷ J. M. Campbell, More Buddhist Relics Discovered by Mr. Campbell, *The Times of India*, February 26, 1889: 5.

¹⁸ Anton A. Führer, Who Found Buddha's Birthplace?, *The Pioneer*, October 13, 1897: 7; Anton A. Führer, 1897, *Monograph on Buddha Sakyamuni's Birthplace in the Nepalese Terai, Archaeological Survey of Northern India*, vol. 6, Government Press, Allahabad.

¹⁹ G. Bühler, 1897, The Discovery of Buddha's Birthplace, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, April.

that dotted the landscape for a distance of 25 km from Kapilavastu to Lumbini. One large mound on the Nepal frontier lay close to the village of Piprahwa in the estate of William C. Peppe. In October 1897, Vincent A. Smith (1843–1920), a member of the Indian Civil Service and an Indologist, visited the estate at Peppe’s invitation and identified the mound as that of a stupa. He informed Peppe that “if anything were to be found inside, it would be found in the centre, and probably at about ground-level.”²⁰ The stupa was a solid mass of brickwork and a monastery was located to its east. Smith commented on the similarity of the stupa at Piprahwa to that at Bhattiprolu in Andhra, which had been discovered in 1870. The area was rich in remains associated with Ashoka. The Nigalisagar pillar inscription of Ashoka was located about 25 km due north of Birdpur House and had been documented in 1893 by a Nepalese officer, while the Rummindei record was about 18 km away from the site of Nigalisagar inscription.²¹

Excavation started in January 1898 and a “well ten feet square was dug down the centre of the stupa,” which yielded a stone chest of large dimensions in which were found three steatite urns, a crystal bowl and two stucco slabs. In the crystal bowl, there were a number of small gems and a few stamped pieces of gold leaf. Many of the ornaments found bore similarity to those unearthed by Alexander Rea in his 1892 excavations at the site of Bhattiprolu. The most important relics, however, were about a handful of charred bones and ashes. On one of these urns there was an inscription. Bühler read the inscription as: “This relic shrine of divine Buddha (is the donation) of the Sakya Sukiti brothers along with their sisters and wives.”²² This inscription caught the imagination of the archaeologists and the colonial administration.

The first intimation of the finds was reported by William Hoey, Commissioner of Gorakhpur Division, in the *Pioneer* on February 17, 1898. Smith wrote about the discoveries in a popular article, identified the site of Piprahwa with Kapilavastu, the hometown of the Buddha,

²⁰ William C. Peppe, 1898, The Piprahwa Stupa Containing Relics of Buddha, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, July: 573.

²¹ Vincent A. Smith, 1898, Kausambi and Sravasti, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, July.

²² G. Bühler, 1898, Preliminary Note on a Recently Discovered Śākya Inscription, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April.

and discussed their importance for the history of Buddhism, especially in the context of the find of Ashokan pillar in the vicinity.²³ The discovery was heralded as the first find of a relic of the Buddha authenticated by an inscription.²⁴ The *New York Daily Tribune* announced it as the most important discovery of the century, as significant as the recovery of ashes of the Roman Emperor Caesar during excavation in the Forum at Rome.²⁵

Records in the National Archives of India in New Delhi provide interesting details of the discovery and subsequent distribution of relics from the mound of Piprahwa Kot in Basti district. At this point the story of the finds gets more complex as a high priest, Jinavaravansa, cousin of the king of Siam had come on pilgrimage to visit this stupa, the recently discovered Ashoka pillars, the Lumbini garden, and the site of Kapilavastu. He sent a letter dated April 9, 1898, to Mr Peppe, enclosing a memorandum on Buddha's relics stating that the ashes of the Buddha be made over to him for presentation to the king of Siam as the then head of the orthodox community of the present day and the sole reigning Buddhist monarch.²⁶ While debating the fate of the relics, Dr W. Hoey, Officiating Commissioner, Gorakhpur Division, wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Government of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh and the letter is worth quoting, as it provides insights into the functioning of the colonial administration:

It is a matter of common knowledge that the Buddhists are not satisfied because the Bodh Gaya temple is in the possession of the Hindus. The attitude of the Government of Bengal in this matter is necessarily one of neutrality. At the same time the connection of the British government with Buddhist countries

²³ Vincent A. Smith, Recent Buddhist Discoveries, *The Pioneer*, March 1, 1898: 3.

²⁴ Buddhist Relics: The Name of Gautama and His Actual Birthplace Found, *The Minneapolis Journal*, April 27, 1898; Relics of Buddha Found, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 29, 1899: 3; Gautama Buddha, *The Sun*, Baltimore, January 26, 1899.

²⁵ Literary Notes, *New York Daily Tribune*, January 7, 1899: 8.

²⁶ National Archives of India, 1899, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings April 1899, nos 92–117: Presentation to the king of Siam of certain Buddhist relics discovered near Piprahwa in the Basti district. Visit of Phya Sukhum to India to receive the relics: no. 115.

renders it desirable that if an incidental opportunity to evince its consideration for Buddhists should arise, advantage should be taken of it to manifest its goodwill. Viewing the Government of India in this case as the British Government I consider its relations with Siam, a country bordering on Burma, would justify the gift for which the application has been made. At the same time I believe that the coveted relic should be forwarded through this Government to the Government of India and transmitted by His Excellency the Governor-General to the king of Siam.²⁷

The then Chief Secretary, Vincent A. Smith, suggested in his reply that while the relics may be of interest to religious communities, the accessories, e.g., the stone coffer, the crystal vase and the small finds were of importance for the Europeans and that the two classes of objects required different treatment. While the former could be gifted to the king of Siam, the appropriate place for the latter was the museum, such as the Imperial Museum in Calcutta. It was hence decided that the relics would be handed to a representative of the king of Siam, who in turn would distribute them to communities from Burma to be displayed at Rangoon and Mandalay and at Anuradhapura, Kandy and Colombo in Lanka. In keeping with this agreement, the Royal Commissioner of the Ligor Circle, Phya Sukhum, arrived with his secretary on February 14, 1899, at Gorakhpur and proceeded to Piprahwa. On February 16, the relics were brought from the Royal Treasury and handed over with great ceremony. The relics were then placed in gold plated pagodas which Phya Sukhum had brought with him and that same evening he left Gorakhpur for Calcutta.²⁸

The self-congratulatory address by Dr Hoey on this occasion, alluding to references from the past and linking them with those of the present, is revealing. It praises the British government for its policy of

²⁷ National Archives of India, 1899, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings April 1899, nos 92–117: Presentation to the king of Siam of certain Buddhist relics discovered near Piprahwa in the Basti district. Visit of Phya Sukhum to India to receive the relics: no. 94, no. 4366 – VII-32 dated April 13, 1898.

²⁸ National Archives of India, 1899, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings April 1899, nos 92–117: Presentation to the king of Siam of certain Buddhist relics discovered near Piprahwa in the Basti district. Visit of Phya Sukhum to India to receive the relics: no. 115.

religious toleration, while castigating earlier kings, based on the then current understanding of India's Buddhist past:

On this occasion we cannot but recall the gathering of rival kings who were prepared to fight at Kusinara for the cremated body of the great preacher of peace among the many episodes of whose life none stand out more beautiful than his interventions between brother tribes and kingly neighbours to prevent bloodshed: nor can we forget the events that, which [*sic*] led to the extinction of Buddhism in the Indian land where it was first propagated. One of many instances, which may be cited in the history of the world, in which the power of kings was used to push or crush a religious system [*sic*]. Reflecting on these bygone days we are entitled to congratulate ourselves that we live in an age of toleration and of wide sympathy with the faiths, which others profess. As a practical illustration of this sympathy the present memorable occasion loses none of its significance.²⁹

The ceremony of delivering the relics to deputations from Burma and Lanka took place in keeping with the decision of the king of Siam that the relics be kept in some important city or town frequented by Buddhist pilgrims. One portion each was assigned to Mandalay and Rangoon, while three towns were assigned one portion each: Anuradhapura, which contained an important pagoda; Kandy, the then capital, which also possessed the tooth relic; and Colombo on account of its being a large town.³⁰ In Bangkok, the relics were enshrined in Wat Saket.

The elaborate ceremony for the handing of relics was unique and unprecedented, as was the wide reporting of the find. There were nevertheless discordant notes, one of them being a letter of protest against the distribution of relics in the *Pioneer* by one of the principal proprietors of the Birdpur estate.³¹ The protest, however, came too late as the relics had already been given away and the claim to proprietorship was denied

²⁹ National Archives of India, 1899, Home Department, Public A, Proceedings April 1899, nos 3–20: Visit to India of HE Phya Sukhum, envoy of the king of Siam.

³⁰ National Archives of India, 1900, Home Department, Public A, Proceedings February 1900, nos 259–61: Distribution of Buddhist relics by the king of Siam to deputations of Buddhists from Burma and Ceylon.

³¹ The Buddhist Relics: Presentation to the Royal Commissioner of Siam, *The Pioneer*, February 23, 1899: 3.

by Peppe himself.³² The results of Peppe's discovery continued to reverberate for several years, to the extent that the renowned Buddhologist Thomas W. Rhys Davids undertook a journey to India to check the veracity of the finds. On April 10, 1900, he presented the results of his investigations to the Royal Asiatic Society in the presence of Peppe and Hoey. He "came to the conclusion that the relics found are probably some portion of the bones and ashes collected after Buddha's cremation; and that they represent one of the eight portions into which according to the old Buddhist documents, these relics were divided."³³ The results gained further strength from the pillar edict of Ashoka found close to the site. Members of the Royal Asiatic Society accepted the findings of Rhys Davids and passed a resolution requesting the Government of India to sanction a grant from public funds to Peppe to continue the "good work." Clearly, the Piprahwa finds caught the imagination of both the public and the academia and in this they found a close parallel in the Shahji-ki-Dheri finds.

Shahji-ki-Dheri, Peshawar

D. B. Spooner of the Archaeological Survey of India unearthed relics of bone during archaeological excavations of a stupa said to have been built by the Kuṣāṇa ruler Kaṇiṣka near Peshawar, Pakistan, in the second century CE. The French art historian Alfred Foucher had identified the site and first suggested that it could be the stupa described by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang during his travels in India. Spooner followed up the suggestion and excavated the massive stupa measuring 285 ft (87 m) along each side, built of roughly dressed stones. Square in plan, it had large projections on the four faces and circular towers at the corners. It was ornamented with a band of enameled tiles with a Kharoshthi inscription engraved on it.³⁴

John Marshall, the then Director-General of the ASI, visited the site and instructed Spooner to dig a shaft in the center of the monument through the massive walls. The original relic chamber was reached at a

³² William C. Peppe, Letter to the Editor, *The Pioneer*, March 5, 1899: 5.

³³ Recent Buddhist Revelations, *The Pioneer*, May 27, 1900.

³⁴ John Marshall, 1909, Notes on Archaeological Exploration in India, 1908–9, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, October: 1057.

depth of some 20 ft (6 m) below the surface. “Within this chamber, still standing upright in the corner where it had been placed some nineteen centuries ago, Dr. Spooner found a metal casket, and within it the relics, enclosed in a reliquary of rock-crystal.”³⁵ The bronze casket carried an inscription recording the gift and on its lid, the Buddha seated on a lotus in the center, flanked by two standing Bodhisattva figures. Three pieces of bone (approx. 1.5 in. or 3.8 cm long) were found in the crystal reliquary placed inside the bronze casket. The beauty of the casket and the stupendous nature of the stupa led Marshall to conclude that no one but a great king, such as Kaṇiṣka, could be credited with the construction of the stupa and the enshrinement of the Buddha’s relics, which may have been shifted from another stupa in his dominion.

The discovery of the stupa was widely reported and by early September 1909, the news had already appeared in the US newspapers.³⁶ The *Ceylon Observer* reported in its July 23, 1909 issue that the Buddha’s relics had been found, but the Government had not taken a decision about their final place of custody. It further added that the relics would most likely be distributed among the monasteries of Lanka, Burma, Siam, and Japan.³⁷ In its August 31, 1909 issue, the *Tribune* clarified that the widow of the late king of Burma, Mindon Min, had offered to give one lakh rupees towards building a shrine at Mandalay for the enshrinement of the relics.³⁸

The Earl of Minto, Viceroy and Governor General of India, decided that they would be removed to Mandalay in Myanmar in 1910, for safe-keeping. At an impressive presentation ceremony in the throne-room of the viceregal palace, the Viceroy handed over the relics in a golden casket to five Burmese in the presence of the Lieutenant Governor of Burma.³⁹ The authenticity of the relics and the issue of ownership, however, did not go unchallenged, as mentioned at the beginning of this

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The Religious Rambler, Find Buddha’s Bone after 2000 years, *Indianapolis Star*, September 5, 1909: B14.

³⁷ The Ashes of Buddha Discovered near Peshawar, *The Ceylon Observer*, July 23, 1909: 1117.

³⁸ *The Tribune*, August 31, 1909: 2.

³⁹ Sacred Burmese Relics: Interesting Presentation by the Viceroy, *The Scotsman*, March 21, 1910: 9; The Relics of Buddha: Mandalay, a Future Place of Pilgrimage, *The Manchester Guardian*, March 21, 1910; Frank G. Carpenter,

chapter. In the journal *Brahmavadin*, the writer also pointed out the inadvisability of the actions of secular executive officers scattering and gifting the sacrosanct relics of the Buddha to foreign princes.⁴⁰

The outcome in this case was very different from that of Piprahwa and was complicated by a petition from Sayed Amir Badshah and Sayed Ahmed Shah, owners of the land from which the relics were found, stating that the religious community be asked to pay for the remains and that the owners of the land be given half the price for their share of the remains. H. H. Risley of the Legislative Department decreed that it would be desirable for the Collector to declare the treasure to be ownerless since “Buddhist bones belong to nobody and have no value” and should go through the form of acquiring it under the Treasure Trove Act VI of 1878. The intrinsic value of the casket could be ascertained for making payment to the owners, if need be.⁴¹

A question was raised in a meeting of the members of Viceroy’s Legislative Council held in Calcutta in 1910 by Babu Bhupendra Nath Basu about the gifting of the Buddha’s relics to Mandalay. In response, Sir Harvey Adamson (1854–1941), member of the Council of the Governor-General of India, stated that the Buddha’s relics were being given not to the Government of Burma, but to Buddhists from Burma. Thus, after enshrinement at Mandalay, they will continue to remain “with the Indian Empire.” The issue of depositing the relics at Sarnath was considered, but Burma was given precedence, as it was the only “Buddhist Province in the Indian Empire.”⁴²

In marked contrast to the above criterion, in the case of relics found at Taxila, Marshall was allowed to visit Lanka in January 1917 in order to present the relics to the people of that island.⁴³ But perhaps, the most

Ashes of Buddha are Discovered, *Dallas Morning News*, Magazine Supplement, May 22, 1910: 5.

⁴⁰ Have Buddha’s Ashes been Found at Last? *New York Times*, April 10, 1910: 5.

⁴¹ National Archives of India, 1909, Home Department, Archaeology and Epigraphy A, Proceedings December 1909, nos 13–16: Petition from Sayed Amir Badshah and Sayed Ahmed Shah, owners of land from which Buddhist relics were recently found at Peshawar claiming a share of the relics.

⁴² Viceroy’s Council, *The Times of India*, March 19, 1910: 9.

⁴³ National Archives of India, 1917, Finance Department, Pay and Allowances for Proceedings February 1917, nos 84–85: Tour of visitation by Sir John

embarrassing fate was that of the relics discovered in 1900 at Bhattiprolu and kept in the Madras Museum. Sir Arthur Havelock, Governor of Madras, offered them to the king of Siam who accepted the offer. Subsequently, on the instructions of Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, J. P. Hewett, Secretary to the Government of India, withdrew the offer and decided that relics of historical or archaeological value be preserved in India and not be parted with in future.⁴⁴ Curzon was of the view that the small piece of bone was not merely an Indian relic, it was an “Imperial British Indian Buddhist Relic.”⁴⁵ All of this was to change with the establishment of the Mahabodhi Society and its growing clout.

The Mahabodhi Society and the Enshrinement of the Relics

The Mahabodhi Society was set up in Colombo on May 31, 1891, for the revival of Buddhism in India and for restoring the ancient shrines of Bodh Gaya, Benares and Kusinārā. Sumangala was elected president of the Society and Col. Olcott its director. Anagarika Dharmapala, as discussed in Chapter 1, was the moving force behind it and, in 1892, the office of the Society was shifted to Calcutta. A generous and rich patron of the Society was Mary Elizabeth Foster (1844–1930) of Honolulu who helped Dharmapala in many of his projects, including the setting up of a branch of the Society at Ealing, London, in 1926.⁴⁶ In this section, the focus is on the Society’s role in keeping the relics within India by re-enshrining them.

Marshall, DG to Ceylon to present the Buddhist relics in person to Buddhists of that island.

⁴⁴ National Archives of India, 1901, Foreign Department, External B, Proceedings March 1901, no. 97: Disposal of a relic of Buddha, which was offered to the king of Siam and accepted.

⁴⁵ Alan Trevithick, 2006, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya (1811–1949)*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, p. 144.

⁴⁶ Birth of Maha Bodhi Society of India, in Rupali Rupasinghe, edited, 1991, *The Maha Bodhi Centenary Volume, 1891–1991*, The Maha Bodhi Society of India, Calcutta, pp. 49–50; Anagarika Dharmapala and the Maha Bodhi Society of India, in Rupasinghe, edited, 1991, *The Maha Bodhi Centenary Volume*, pp. 51–52.

Bhattiprolu to Śrī Dharmarājikā Vihāra, Calcutta

The Buddhist site of Bhattiprolu, a village on the Guntur–Repalle railway line in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh is significant on several counts. It provides details of the second-century-BCE practice of relic worship in coastal Andhra, but, more importantly, patronage for the setting up of the stupa came from the local chief or raja and members of the *goṣṭhī*⁴⁷ and *nigama* or market town. Of the three mounds, the largest is 12 m high and has been known from 1870 onwards. Bricks from the mounds were used for road construction and marble for the making of the sluice in the Krishna canal. During the demolition of the mound, a stone casket was found, which contained a soapstone reliquary, along with crystal phials. The outer stone casket broke during removal and was abandoned, while the inner caskets were transported to England, but broke on the way and were thrown away. Archaeological digging at the center of the main mound in 1892 yielded caskets of crystal, gold, copper and stone, and pottery placed within three inscribed granite containers with lids. They were placed at different levels near the foundations and beneath one of the granite containers, a group of 24 silver punch-marked coins arranged in the form of a svastika were discovered.⁴⁸

In 1916, the Government of India offered the relics of the Buddha discovered at Bhattiprolu to the Mahabodhi Society, provided the Society erected a suitable vihara for the purpose. The Society decided to construct the vihara on a plot of land at College Square that Dharmapala had purchased in 1914 and the foundation stone was laid on December 16, 1918. The construction of the vihara was completed in 1920 and the main donor was Mrs Foster from Honolulu who contributed 63,606 rupees, while the ruler of Baroda gave 5,685 rupees and another 5,000 rupees for purchasing an adjoining plot to the east of the vihara. Birla Brothers, the well-known industrialists, contributed 5,000 rupees

⁴⁷ The term *goṣṭhī* has been translated as committee or association and occurs in the inscriptions of Sanchi, Bhattiprolu and Mathura (Himanshu Prabha Ray, 2006, *Inscribed Pots, Emerging Identities: The Social Milieu of Trade*, in Patrick Olivelle, edited, *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE*, Oxford University Press, New York).

⁴⁸ Alexander Rea, 1894, *South Indian Buddhist Antiquities*, Government Press, Calcutta, pp. 7–17.

as well. The design of the vihara was made after consultation with Marshall. Another supporter of the project was “Mr. Monomohun Ganguly, the author of *Orissa Architecture*, who has been indefatigable and untiring in his labours for giving to Calcutta the architectural aesthetics of a forgotten art in the new vihara at College Square.”⁴⁹

In 1920, the vihara was opened in an impressive ceremony when the relic was taken in the morning in a six-horse carriage from the Government House to Dharmarājikā Vihāra accompanied by Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, the then Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University, Dharampala and Buddhist monks from the countries of South and Southeast Asia. In the evening, the formal opening was held under the presidentship of Lord Ronaldshay.⁵⁰

From Mirpur Khas, Sind to Mūlagandhakuṭī, Sarnath

The case of the relics from Mirpur Khas in Sind, also in Bombay Presidency, took a completely different turn from those discussed earlier, especially those found at Sopara and Girnar in Bombay Presidency. Mirpur Khas had a series of brick mounds that had been quarried by railway contractors for bricks to be used in the construction of lines. In 1910, H. Cousens of the ASI visited the site and started excavations on the largest mound. At the center of the mound he found a chamber, 15 sq. ft by 1 ft deep, within which was a stone coffer containing two earthen pots, gold and coral beads, square copper coins, a crystal bottle, a tiny gold ring, and a small cylinder of gold with ashes inside. Cousens dated the stupa to fourth century CE and also discovered two dozen votive tablets in unbaked clay with inscriptions on each, to the west of the stupa.⁵¹ Following the example set by the re-enshrinement of the relics from the archaeological site of Bhattiprolu discussed earlier, the relics excavated from the stupa at Mirpur Khas were also given to the Mahabodhi Society by the ASI. Mr D. Walisinha negotiated the receipt of the relics on behalf of the Society.⁵² In 1901, Anagarika Dharmapala bought three

⁴⁹ New Buddhist Vihara, *The Leader*, November 27, 1920: 5.

⁵⁰ Calcutta Headquarters, in Rupasinghe, edited, 1991, *The Maha Bodhi Centenary Volume*, pp. 27–28 [25–32].

⁵¹ More Buddhist Relics: Discovery in Sind, *The Times of India*, February 28, 1910: 9.

⁵² Buddhist Relics to be Presented to the Mahabodhi Society, *The Times of India*, April 4, 1934: 14.

bighas of land from a local landlord. The Society constructed rest houses at Bodh Gaya and Sarnath in 1904 and wanted to construct a vihara close to the Dhamekh Stupa, which the ASI disallowed. The Government of India subsequently provided a new site and INR 10,000 as compensation and permitted the construction of the vihara.⁵³

The construction of a new Buddhist temple called Mūlagandhakuṭī Vihāra at Sarnath was the brainchild of Dharmapala with the help of large donations received from a generous patron, Mrs Foster. It was said to mark the spot where the Buddha's own personal meditation cell had been located. Built at a cost of 1,10,000 rupees, the Mūlagandhakuṭī Vihāra was declared open on November 11, 1931. To celebrate the occasion, the Government of India presented the Society with the relics found at Taxila (Plates 3.1 and 3.2).⁵⁴ A three-day programme

Plate 3.1: Mūlagandhakuṭī at Sarnath

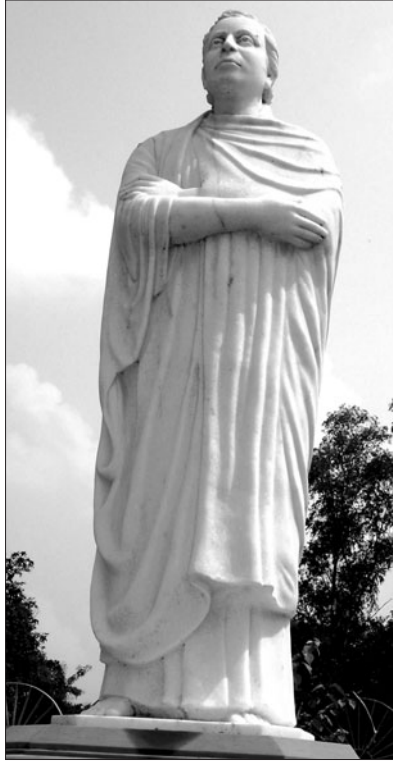


Source: Photograph by author.

⁵³ Peaceful Campaign: Buddhist Vihara to be Built at Sarnath, *The Times of India*, July 5, 1926: 10.

⁵⁴ Buddha Relic Found at Taxila: Government Presents It to Mahabodhi Society, *The Times of India*, November 4, 1931: 10.

Plate 3.2: Figure of Anagarika Dharmapala in front of Mūlagandhakuṭī



Source: Photograph by author.

was planned, including an exhibition and visits of delegates from various countries. The day of November 13 was devoted to a discussion of “The Future of Buddhism with special reference to the Revival of Buddhism in India” and was presided over by Mr B. L. Broughton (Oxon), Vice-President of the British Mahabodhi Society.

A news report in *The Times of India* described the Mūlagandhakuṭī Vihāra as

an impressive and stately example of how ancient and modern architectural styles may be combined without the sacrifice of beauty. Crowned by a lofty stupa like spire, which has been given three smaller companions, and faced with red-sandstone from Chunar, the new place of worship looks towards the south,

gazing forever upon those rich memorials of a past age of Buddhist supremacy, which the archaeologist's spade has brought to light again at Sarnath in recent years.⁵⁵

The new vihara comprised an assembly hall and a shrine room separated from each other by a monolithic lintel. The Buddha image in the preaching attitude inside the shrine was a copy of the famous image found at the site and kept in the Sarnath Museum and was made by the School of Art, Jaipur.⁵⁶ The gigantic stone portal supported a *dharmacakra* design and the walls were painted with scenes from the life of the Buddha.

The relics were carried in a silver casket and brought in a procession to the Mūlagandhakuṭī Vihāra on an elephant. The procession circumambulated the vihara three times and the casket was then taken inside and placed on the altar in front of the Buddha image. In his message on the occasion, Rabindranath Tagore wrote:

Numerous are the triumphal towers built to perpetuate the memories of injuries inflicted by a murdering race upon another. But let us once for all, for the sake of humanity restore to its full significance, this great memorial of the generous past to remind us of the ancient meeting of nations in India for the exchange of love, and for the offering of the treasure left to the world by the Blessed One to whom we dedicate our homage.⁵⁷

The Society continued to receive relics found in archaeological excavations. On the first anniversary of the opening of the Mūlagandhakuṭī Vihāra, the ASI gifted the Mahabodhi Society relics unearthed during excavations at Nagarjunakonda on the Andhra coast.⁵⁸ "The relic was discovered in a tiny round gold box, together with a few gold flowers, pearls, garnets and rock-crystal beads."⁵⁹

In 1933, Dharmapala was ordained a *bhikkhu* at Sarnath, and he died there in December of the same year, aged 78. In April 1934, Daya

⁵⁵ King of Siam to Visit India? New Buddhist Temple, *The Times of India*, September 10, 1930: 4.

⁵⁶ Buddhist Vihara at Sarnath, *The Times of India*, June 18, 1931: 4.

⁵⁷ Opening of Buddhist Temple at Sarnath, *The Times of India*, November 10, 1931: 10.

⁵⁸ Buddha Relic: Viceroy's Gift to Benares Society, *The Times of India*, December 29, 1932: 10.

⁵⁹ Relics of the Buddha Excavated, *The Times of India*, August 4, 1938: 4.

Ram Sahni, Director-General of the ASI, started negotiations with the Mahabodhi Society for enshrinement of the relics from Mirpur Khas in the Society's newly constructed temple, Mūlagandhakuṭī at Sarnath.⁶⁰ J. F. Blakiston, his successor, carried forward and concluded the negotiations. On this occasion the re-enshrinement of the relics, the Government of India was represented by J. F. Blakiston, who said in the course of his speech on November 12, 1935:

If the first relic that was presented at the inauguration of the Vihara in 1931 illustrated the spread of the Dhamma in the Gandhara country, the second one offered at the first anniversary betokened its prosperity in the lower basin of the Krishna River. The relics which I have the honour to present to you today emanate from a site in the lower Indus valley where the influence of Buddhism was equally prevalent.⁶¹

The report continues that “until, any better identification is in the field it may be tentatively accepted that the relics found at Mirpur Khas are those of the Great Founder of the Buddhist Faith and the Arhat Upagupta.” The presented relics were then taken in a procession from the museum to the Mūlagandhakuṭī Vihāra for enshrinement. Mr Devapriya Valisingha, the General Secretary of the Society, announced that the Society made no distinction on the basis of caste, and scheduled castes or *harijans* were as welcome in the temple as any other community. Clearly, the speeches made showed a heady mix of religion and politics and this mix should not be lost sight of as we examine the next case of Sanchi.

Sanchi: Return of the Relics

We have already referred to Cunningham's search for relics in the stupas at Sanchi and other sites in the vicinity in the last chapter. Cunningham found two sets of relics of the Buddha's disciples Śāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna. One set of inscribed stone caskets was found inside Stupa 3 at Sanchi and the second set in Stupa 2 at Satdhara. He thus believed

⁶⁰ Buddhist Relics to be Presented to Mahabodhi Society, *The Times of India*, April 4, 1934: 14.

⁶¹ Buddhist Relics Presented, Fourth Sarnath Anniversary, *The Times of India*, November 12, 1935: 12.

that the relics of the two disciples were as widely scattered as those of the Buddha, since the Chinese pilgrim Faxian referred to their enshrinement at Mathura as well.⁶²

While Cunningham went on to become the Director-General of the ASI, F. C. Maisey, his compatriot at Sanchi excavations, was posted to Burma during the Second Anglo-Burmese War. On his return to England in 1866, he made drawings of the inscribed reliquaries from Stupa 2 at Satdhara and loaned the relics and the caskets to the Victoria and Albert Museum along with other antiquities that he had collected from Burma. Subsequently, the museum bought these objects from his heirs in 1921.⁶³ Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, Buddhist relics continued to be sent outside the country and Sanchi was no exception to this.

On April 17, 1932, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London received a letter from the London mission of the Mahabodhi Society stating that the relics on display from Maisey's collection made at Sanchi had been a source of concern, as they ideally belonged to a new vihara that had been opened at Sarnath.⁶⁴ On November 13, 1932, about 30 devotees were allowed entry into the museum to pay their respects to the relics, thus partially acceding to the demands of the Buddhists. In March 1939, the Trustees of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Burma lodged a strong protest with the British government for allowing the exhibition of the relics in a museum, instead of their being enshrined and worshipped in a pagoda. Similar protests were lodged by other Buddhist organizations in India and in 1939 the decision was taken to return the relics. The outbreak of the Second World War meant that the decision was kept in abeyance. Eventually, in February 1947, the relics, housed not in their original caskets but in wooden reproductions, were presented to the Mahabodhi Society in London.⁶⁵

⁶² Alexander Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes: Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith, Elder and Company, London, pp. 297, 306.

⁶³ Jack Daulton, 1999, Sariputta and Moggallana in the Golden Land: The Relics of the Buddha's Chief Disciples at the Kaba Aye Pagoda, *The Journal of Burma Studies*, 4: 109.

⁶⁴ Saloni Mathur, 2007, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, University of California Press, London, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 146–47.

⁶⁵ Holy Buddhist Relic in Delhi, *The Times of India*, May 24, 1950: 6.

The Government of India strongly objected to the reproductions and insisted on the original caskets being sent.⁶⁶ The relics then traveled through several countries, such as Sri Lanka and Burma, and were brought to Calcutta from Colombo. They were then taken in a procession to the Government House in Calcutta, along with a sapling of a Bo tree from Anuradhapura in Lanka. The sapling was later planted at Gandhi Ghat in Barrackpore, about 20 km from Calcutta where a portion of Gandhi's ashes had been immersed in the Ganga.⁶⁷ A colourful ceremony was held at the Calcutta Maidan on January 14, 1949, and the Prime Minister of independent India, Pandit Nehru, handed over the relics to Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, President of the Mahabodhi Society. Speaking on the occasion, Nehru said:

We have come here to offer our homage not only to these sacred relics but also to the great message, the eternal message of India, preached by Lord Buddha and other great men through the ages and in our own lifetime by Mahatma Gandhi — the message of peace and goodwill, of 'ahimsa' and non-violence, of co-operation and of doing good even to the doer of evil.⁶⁸

An international Buddhist conference was held for two days in Calcutta on January 15 and 16, 1951, and was presided over by the Governor, Dr K. N. Kathju.⁶⁹ From Calcutta, the relics were taken to Gangtok at the request of the Maharaja of Sikkim and then transported to Tibetan soil for veneration. On March 4, 1951, the relics traveled from Gangtok and were taken to Dungkar Gompa where the Dalai Lama was in residence. Elaborate rites of veneration were performed daily and pilgrims came over long distances from Darjeeling, Kalimpong and even Ladakh. The relics set out again on March 22, 1951, accompanied by high-ranking officials and munificent gifts and found their way back to Calcutta.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Mathur, 2007, *India by Design*, p. 150.

⁶⁷ Buddhist Relics from Ceylon, *The Times of India*, January 13, 1949: 5.

⁶⁸ Buddhist Relics Handed over to Bodhi Society, *The Times of India*, January 15, 1949: 7.

⁶⁹ Exposition of Sacred Buddhist Relics, *The Times of India*, January 14, 1949: 5.

⁷⁰ Most Sacred Ceremony of Buddhists, *The Times of India*, November 29, 1952: 9.

The relics then left by a special train that toured several parts of the country and, finally in November 1952, were enshrined in a vihara specially built for them at Sanchi. Balakrishna Gokhale wrote a long piece in *The Times of India* on the occasion. He discussed the importance of the two disciples of the Buddha, Śāriputta and Moggallāna and accepted that their relics had originally been enshrined at Rajagriha, from where they

were redistributed and separately enshrined in several stupas in widely different parts of the country . . . Gen. Alexander Cunningham, who discovered these caskets, thought that the relics were originally enshrined at Rajagriha, from where they were redistributed by Ashoka and thus a portion came to Sanchi, but there is no evidence to support such an explanation. Ashoka probably, had nothing to do with these relics.⁷¹

The second set of relics of the Buddha's disciples, found by Cunningham at Sanchi in 1851, was presented by him to the British Museum in 1887. The trustees of the British Museum decided to return these to the government of independent India in 1956. Sir Thomas Kendrick, Director of the British Museum, presented the relics on behalf of the trustees to Mrs Vijayalakshmi Pandit, India's High Commissioner to Britain.⁷² A statement released on the occasion read:

At the request of one trustee of the British Museum and by agreement with the Governments of India and Ceylon, the fragments of bones in the third casket will be presented by the Government of India to the Government of Ceylon after these relics have been enshrined at Sanchi.⁷³

Brekke interrogates the veracity of the tradition that supports the deposition of the relics at Sanchi, since both Śāriputta and Moggallāna died in the vicinity of Rajagriha in Bihar and their bones were placed in stupas there. He goes on to suggest in his essay that the return of the relics of the Buddha's disciples Śāriputta and Moggallāna dug up at Sanchi by Cunningham in 1851 back to Sanchi, was seen as a victory for both Devapriya Valisingha, General Secretary of the Mahabodhi Society,

⁷¹ Balkrishna Gokhale, Ancient Buddhist Relics Coming Back to Sanchi, *The Times of India*, November 23, 1952: 8.

⁷² India to Receive Buddhist Relics, *The Times of India*, February 1, 1956: 7.

⁷³ Ibid.

and for the newly independent Indian nation “in desperate need of a unifying and peaceful national mythology built around personages, such as Gandhi and the Buddha.”⁷⁴

In this denunciation of the Mahabodhi Society and Nehru, Brekke misses the core issue: the involvement of the colonial state and its institutions, such as the ASI, in consolidation of what Almond terms the “post-1860 Victorian notion of the Buddha” as locatable in history through his contemporary textual presence and thus the object of “objective” history and archaeological research.⁷⁵ This project of creating the “historical” Buddha was further legitimized through the archaeology of Ashoka, who was credited with the distribution of relics in 84,000 stupas across Asia.⁷⁶ It is to this archaeology of Ashoka and its beginnings in the nineteenth century that we turn to in the next section.

The Ashokan Pillar as Monument

The most famous monuments associated with Ashoka are the free-standing pillars, which bear his inscriptions. Of the pillars set up by Ashoka, 20 are now extant, including those inscribed with his edicts in Prakrit (Map 2). The locations of these extend over the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent, from the Nepal Terai to the districts of Champaran and Muzaffarpur in north Bihar, Sarnath near Varanasi and Kaushambi near Allahabad, in the Meerut and Hisar districts, and at Sanchi in central India. Unfortunately, few of the pillar capitals survive and only seven complete specimens are known.

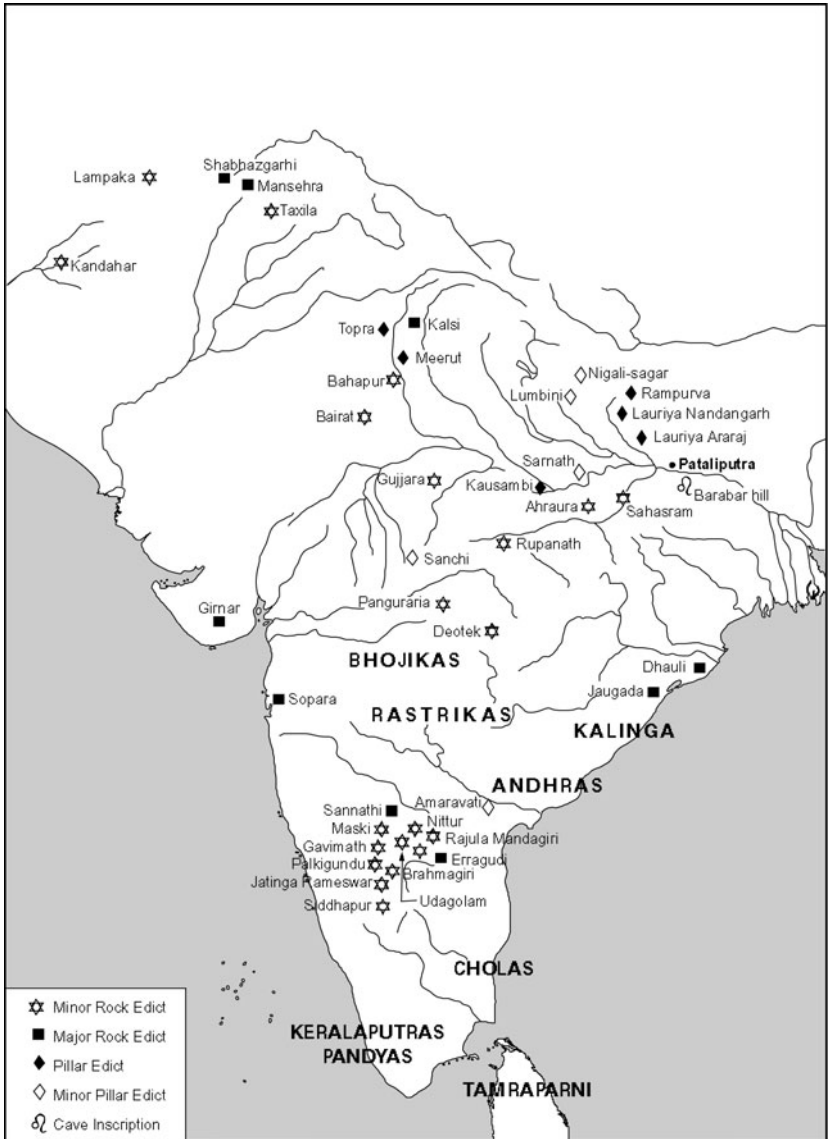
The aesthetics of the sandstone pillars and their polish brought them to the notice of early visitors and travelers, who not only described them in glowing terms, but also sketched and painted them, before photography became the norm. The first pillar of Ashoka was found in the sixteenth century by Thomas Coryat (1577–1617) in the ruins of ancient Delhi. Initially, he assumed from its polish that it was made of brass, but on closer examination he realized that it was highly polished

⁷⁴ Brekke, 2007, *Bones of Contention*, p. 271.

⁷⁵ Philip C. Almond, 1988, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 56.

⁷⁶ J. F. Fleet, 1906, *The Tradition about the Corporeal Relics of the Buddha*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, July.

Map 2: Distribution of Ashokan edicts in India



Note: Map not to scale.

Source: Prepared by author.

sandstone with upright script that resembled a form of Greek.⁷⁷ He credited Alexander the Great with the setting up of the pillar to commemorate his victory over Porus.⁷⁸

The best preserved pillar is the one at Lauriya-Nandangarh in Champaran district, which is complete with the edicts and a lion capital. In the eighteenth century, the still standing pillars with splendid capitals and inscriptions attracted attention. In 1797, James Nathaniel Rind made a pencil, pen and ink copy of the Ashokan inscription on the pillar at Lauriya-Nandangarh, with a small drawing of the lion capital and elevation of the pillar with measurements. The drawing in the British Library (shelf mark WD 3471) is of interest as it provides an early record of the pillar and its measurements.

Henry T. Colebrook (1765–1837) first presented a reliable facsimile of the inscription of the Ashokan pillar in Delhi in 1801.⁷⁹ In the nineteenth century, one of the most visited pillars of Ashoka was perhaps the one located in Ferozeshah Kotla, Delhi. It was this popularity that saved it from destruction at the hands of the Public Works Department which had planned to raze the building to the ground and use the materials for building a bridge across the Yamuna river.⁸⁰

The year 1834 saw the production of the facsimile of Allahabad edict of Ashoka by T. S. Burt and in October of the same year, Brian H. Hodgson (1800–94), British Resident at the court of Nepal, prepared an account of two pillars in northern Bihar at Lauriya-Araraj and Lauriya-Nandangarh and sent it to James Prinsep and the Asiatic Society of Bengal.⁸¹ In 1837, Prinsep deciphered the Brahmi script of the Ashokan edicts and this generated academic interest and brought the

⁷⁷ Dom Moraes and Sarayu Srivatsa, 2003, *The Long Strider: How Thomas Coryate Walked From England to India in the Year 1613*, Penguin, New Delhi.

⁷⁸ William Foster, edited, 1921, *Early Travels in India 1583–1619*, Humphrey Milford/Oxford University Press, London, p. 248.

⁷⁹ Henry T. Colebrook, 1801, Translation of One of the Inscriptions on the Pillar at Dehlee Called the Lat of Feeroze Shah, *Asiatick Researches*, 7.

⁸⁰ North-West Provinces, *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, January 30, 1847.

⁸¹ Richard Salomon, 1998, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Other Indo-Aryan Languages*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, pp. 202–5.

pillars within the domain of the larger corpus of early edicts, also found on rocks. The International Congress of Orientalists held in Geneva in 1894 passed a resolution requesting the Government of India to protect the edicts of Ashoka from the vagaries of nature and human destruction.⁸² In March 1895, the Nigiliva pillar was discovered in the Nepal terai, north of Basti district, and thereafter new finds were constantly reported.

Their location in close proximity to Buddhist stupas and monasteries completed the search for their historicity and chronology. Several pillars still retained their capitals, such as the lion on top of the still standing pillar at Lauriya-Nandangarh and a similar one at the site of Vaishali. The capital of an Ashokan pillar at Sanchi was also discovered in the first half of the nineteenth century although it was not found on its pillar. It was noticed lying amidst the fallen remains of the southern gateway and the remains of the shaft were found later. After his excavations and hunt for relics in central India, Cunningham wrote in 1854, “in the inscriptions found in the Sanchi and Sonari Topes we have the most complete and convincing proof of the authenticity of the history of Asoka, as related in the Mahawanso.”⁸³ It was not until 1915, however, that the first inscription to mention Ashoka by name was discovered at Maski in north Karnataka.

By the end of the nineteenth century, 34 separate edicts had been found all over the subcontinent referring to *piyadasi* as the issuer of the inscriptions, also termed *devānāmpīya* or beloved of the gods. They were ascribed a certain unity on account of uniformity in alphabet, spelling, dialect, and repetition of several phrases, in spite of variations between the inscriptions. They were thus accepted as the proclamations of a single sovereign who was identified as the Mauryan king Ashoka also mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa*.⁸⁴ In 1901, Vincent A. Smith published one of the earliest histories on the subject titled, *Asoka: the Buddhist Emperor of India*. Since then, the Mauryas, dated between 323/2 and

⁸² The International Congress of Orientalists at Geneva, *The Manchester Guardian*, October 10, 1894: 8.

⁸³ Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes*, p. viii.

⁸⁴ Vincent A. Smith, 1901, The Authorship of Piyadasi Inscriptions, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, July.

186/5 BCE,⁸⁵ have maintained their central position in ancient Indian historiography.

Gradually, the search widened and included not merely the reporting of new inscriptions, but also the archaeological confirmation of sites associated with Ashoka's rule. Several attempts were made in the nineteenth century to locate Pataliputra, the capital of Ashoka, and it was at times assumed that the ancient city had been washed away by the river. In 1892, Lieutenant Colonel L. A. Waddell, Professor of Chemistry at the Medical College, Calcutta, visited the modern city of Patna and identified several mounds around it, which he suggested were a part of the ancient capital; for example, he stated the five mounds or *pañca pahāri* to the south of the city to be the remnants of the five stupas set up by the king, though none of these yielded any relics. From 1892 to 1899, Waddell carried out archaeological excavations at Patna and showed that the modern city was located on the top of the ancient Mauryan capital of Pataliputra. At Kumrahar, on the outskirts of Patna, Waddell discovered a large piece of an Ashokan pillar, though it carried no inscription. The vertical cleavage of the shaft of the pillar suggested that the pillar had been struck by lightning and destroyed.⁸⁶

The quest for India's Buddhist past led to the discovery of the Rummindei pillar of Ashoka in March 1895 at Nigiliva, a small village in the Nepalese Terai, mentioned earlier in this chapter, and the associated stupa of Konakamana or Kanaka Muni Buddha. The stupa was located among a heap of bricks on the western embankment of a lake across the spot where the pillar had stood. This find was reported by Führer in the Progress Report of the Archaeological Survey Circle, North-West Province, for the year ending on June 30, 1895. Smith read the inscription as stating, "[W]hen the god-beloved king Piyadasi had been anointed fourteen years, he increased the stupa of Buddha Konakamana for the second time."⁸⁷ This find aroused the interest of

⁸⁵ The Mauryas reigned for 137 years according to the *Purāṇas*, i.e., 323/2 BCE–186/5 BCE and Ashoka ruled from 274/3 to 232/1 BCE (Salomon, 1998, *Indian Epigraphy*, pp. 133–40).

⁸⁶ L. A. Waddell, 1903, *Report on the Excavations at Pataliputra*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, p. 33.

⁸⁷ Vincent A. Smith, 1897, The Birth-Place of Gautama Buddha, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, July.

several colonial officials, such as Waddell, who wrote in a letter published in the *Englishman*, a newspaper in Calcutta, on June 1, 1896, that Kapilavastu, the birth-place of the Buddha, must lie in the vicinity of the pillar, and thenceforth the search for Buddha's birth-place continued. Sir George Birdwood's laudatory note on the discovery and Bühler's reporting of it was published in the *Pioneer*.⁸⁸ The 11th International Congress of Orientalists held in Paris (on a motion initiated by Bühler) passed a special resolution of thanks to the governments of India and Nepal for assistance they had rendered in the identification of and excavations at Lumbini and Kapilavastu, the birth-place of the Buddha. They also recorded their gratitude to the Government of Bengal for having established an Ashoka Gallery under curatorship of Sir Charles Elliott, where the inscriptions of the Mauryan king could be displayed.⁸⁹

Another link was added to this chain by the discovery of the Rumindei pillar edict of Ashoka. This pillar was located close to the estate of Duncan Ricketts, who had sent a rubbing of the inscription on the exposed section to Smith, which turned out to date to the medieval period. The Ashokan edict came to light only when Führer persuaded the Nepalese authorities to excavate the pillar of which 9 ft were above the ground and 12 ft underneath. The excavation did not disappoint and, as anticipated, the inscription of Ashoka was found neatly engraved on the pillar, 3 ft below the surface. In this case, no confirmation could be got from Xuanzang's account, as the Chinese pilgrim had not referred to the pillar. Smith explained this silence by suggesting that the pillar may already have been buried at the time of the Chinese pilgrim's visit.⁹⁰ W. Hoey, Magistrate of Gorakhpur, and Walter Lupton, Joint Magistrate, visited the site in May 1897 and discovered a small shrine close to the pillar containing an image of queen Maya giving birth to the Buddha. While this evidently established the authenticity of the birth-place of the Buddha, Hoey wanted to conduct excavations at Kapilavastu inside Nepalese territory, but was denied permission. The story, however, does not end here.

⁸⁸ The Birth Place of Buddha, *The Pioneer*, February 17, 1897: 5.

⁸⁹ The Orientalist Congress, *The Pioneer*, September 30, 1897: 6.

⁹⁰ Smith, 1897, The Birth-Place of Gautama Buddha, pp. 618–19.

Führer was forced to resign from his post as Curator of Lucknow Museum and Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of the North-Western Provinces and Oude (NWPO), after being charged with “falsification of his correspondence with several Governments” and supplying U Ma, the Burmese priest with sham relics and forgeries. P. C. Mukherji was thus instructed by Smith to check and verify Führer’s results.⁹¹ After his survey, Mukherji concluded that the alleged stupa of Konakamana “is not in existence.”⁹² The pillar at Nigiliva, which Führer had dug, was not in situ and had instead been moved 15–20 km from its original location. Mukherji’s excavations at Rumindei, however, proved very productive, as he was able to excavate walls of ancient structures and vestiges of eight stupas at the ancient site. In addition was the inscribed pillar, which recorded the fact that the site of Rumindei was indeed the Buddha’s birth-place. Mukherji revisited Piprahwa and documented and excavated several stupas and other structures at the ancient site. This led Smith to re-examine the itinerary of the two Chinese pilgrims and their visits to the site of the Buddha’s birth. He finally reached the conclusion that the pilgrims were referring to two different places. “Piprava is the Kapilavastu of Fa-hien, whereas the city round Tilaura-Kot is the Kapilavastu of Hiuen Tsiang.”⁹³ Clearly, results from archaeological excavations had to be ingeniously brought in consonance with the then current political thinking!

The Sarnath pillar and its capital were only discovered in the excavations conducted there in 1905. Unknown in the nineteenth century, they were thus not part of the initial rediscovery of Ashoka although Sarnath had long been important. In 1905, the ASI undertook excavations at Sarnath and it was during these operations that an Ashokan pillar was unearthed in a broken and damaged condition, along with its lion capital measuring 7 ft in height.⁹⁴ The capital carved out of a single

⁹¹ Vincent A. Smith, 1901, Prefatory Note, in P. C. Mukherji, *A Report on a Tour of Exploration of the Antiquities in the Tarai, Nepal, The Region of Kapilavastu during February and March 1899*, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, p. 4.

⁹² Mukherji, 1901, *A Report on a Tour of Exploration of the Antiquities in the Tarai, Nepal, The Region of Kapilavastu during February and March 1899*, p. 30.

⁹³ Smith, 1901, Prefatory Note, p. 10.

⁹⁴ F. O. Oertel, 1990, Excavations at Sarnath, *Archaeological Survey of India: Annual Report 1904-05*, reprint, Swati Publications, New Delhi, pp. 68–70.

block of sandstone comprised four magnificent lions standing back to back surmounted on a drum with four animals carved on it placed between four wheels, as was discussed in Chapter 2.

The unraveling of archaeological remains associated with Ashoka was important in the nineteenth century in order to consolidate the Buddhist past of India, but more so to legitimize the distribution of relics purported to be those of the Buddha. In the image of Ashoka, the colonial state had finally found a role model. In the final section, we analyze the making of the image of Ashoka as that of a king who redistributed the relics.

In conclusion, is it possible to categorize the nineteenth-century attempts at digging relics and redistributing them across South and Southeast Asia as a modern avatar of an ancient practice? As I have shown in this chapter, in the past the expansion of monastic sites across South Asia was attributed to the efforts of the third-century-BCE king Ashoka, while in the nineteenth century it was the colonial search for the historical Buddha and the sacred landscape associated with his corporeal remains that initiated and sustained the practice. Both efforts justified a new beginning, a re-creation and a re-establishment of the Buddhist doctrine or *sāsana*. The difference, however, lies in the motives:

Within a British colonial context it was mainly as a counter to the predominant Hindu system in India that the Buddha could be of use. The Buddha thus created was an opponent of caste and of the priestly system, which supported it, an advocate of social reform.⁹⁵

The Buddhist tradition that sanctified the expansion of monastic sites and the association of these with Ashoka was one that was embedded within the Buddhist community of monks, nuns and lay devotees. The Buddha was located not in history, but in a world populated by gods and sentient beings. This world was closely linked to the *dhammarāja* or the righteous ruler who reinforced the declining *sāsana*. In the nineteenth century, the parameters changed. The emphasis was no longer on re-establishing *dhamma*. It was now on historicity, locating the historical Buddha and presenting a moral and ethical past to a country steeped in superstition, idol worship, caste hierarchies, and priestly or brahmana

⁹⁵ Jonathan A. Silk, 1994, The Victorian Creation of Buddhism, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22(1): 182.

machinations. The Buddha stood for social reform in the eyes of colonial officials and was thus a potent counter to the prevailing Hindu culture of the nineteenth-century India. The world of the Buddha thus spoke both to Victorian England, as also to the colonial rulers of South Asia. Additional factors often disregarded are the roles played by the Theosophical Society and its version of esoteric Buddhism, as also that of its offshoot, the Mahabodhi Society. Both these gained momentum in the twentieth century and added to the further redefinition of the contours of the sacred landscape associated with the Buddha. In the next chapter, we take the reasoning further and discuss it with reference to the reception of this changed realm of the archaeology of Buddhism within South Asia.

Table 3.1: Archaeological Discoveries of Pillar Edicts of Ashoka⁹⁶

<i>Place name & District</i>	<i>Location of edict</i>	<i>Coordinates/ associated sites</i>	<i>Discovery</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Allahabad, Allahabad dt	Pillar inside the fort area; abacus reconstructed in 1838; capital in Municipal Museum	25°25N; 81°53E	Earliest mention by Finch in 1608–11, Padre Tieffenthaler in around 1766 and T. S. Burt in 1834	Brought to Allahabad fort re-erected in 1838; no capital
Araraj, Champaran dt	Pillar edict, 28 km west of Motihari; later inscriptions in <i>śankha lipi</i>	26°31N; 84°38E	Earliest mention by Padre della Tomba, Capuchin missionary, in 1758–69	In situ; no capital
Bansi, Siddharth nagar dt	Fragment of capital, found in 1955	27°10N; 82°55E	Found by R. C. Gaur in 1955	Now in Lucknow Museum
Lar Bhairo, Varanasi dt	Pillar stump in metal case, opposite mosque entrance	25°20N; 83°02E		Its Ashokan origins undetermined
Fatehabad, Hisar dt	In mosque; composite pillar re-inscribed with Persian inscription	29°31N; 75°27E	First reported by Major Colvin	Shifted by Firuz Shah Tughlaq

⁹⁶ Harry Falk, 2006, *Asokan Sites and Artefacts*, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein.

Table 3.1 (Continued)

<i>Place name & District</i>	<i>Location of edict</i>	<i>Coordinates/ associated sites</i>	<i>Discovery</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Gotihava, Kapilavastu dt, Nepal	Remaining stump, 5.5 km south-west of Tilaurakot Museum (fragments in the museum)	27°31N; 83°01E	Stupa base adjacent to pillar	Base of pillar in situ
Hisar, Hisar dt	Composite (fire-damaged) pillar in mosque in old Fort	29°09N; 75°44E	First reported by Major Colvin in 1835	Shifted by Firuz Shah Tughlaq
Kaushambi, Allahabad dt	By road from Allahabad via Chail; inscriptions in <i>sankha lipi</i> and Nāgarī mentioning Akbar	25°21N; 81°23E	First reported by E. C. Bayley in 1861	In situ; no capital; report of excavation published in <i>Archaeological Survey of India: Annual Report (ASI: AR)</i> , 1921–22
Lumbini, Rupandehi dt, Nepal	Inside the archaeological complex demarcated at the site	27°28N; 83°16E	First reported by Gen. Khadga Shamsher in 1896	In situ; fragments of capital found later
Mirath, Meerut dt	Bara Hindurao	28°38N; 77°12E	First reported by Maj P. L. Pew who sent details to James Prinsep in 1837	Shifted by Firuz Shah Tughlaq; no capital
Lauriya-Nandargarh, Champaran dt	Pillar with lion capital; medieval graffiti	26°58N; 84°23E	Earliest mention by Padre della Tomba in 1758–69	In situ and with lion capital; one of few pillars not decorated with <i>sankha lipi</i> in mid-first century CE
Nigiliva, Kapilavastu dt, Nepal	Inscribed pillar in two parts; later graffiti on pillar ⁹⁷	27°36N; 83°05E	1893 by a Nepalese officer	Not in situ; lying on the ground

⁹⁷ Mukherji, 1901, *A Report on a Tour of Exploration of the Antiquities in the Tarai, Nepal, The Begin of Kapilavastu during February and March 1899*, p. 30.

Table 3.1 (Continued)

<i>Place name & District</i>	<i>Location of edict</i>	<i>Coordinates/ associated sites</i>	<i>Discovery</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Pataliputra, Patna dt	Fragments of pillars in Kumraharbagh	25°36N; 85°09E	First found in the excavations by P. C. Mukherji (1896–97); Bell fragment & <i>Buddhapada</i> found in nearby Bulandibagh	Fragments found in Mukherji's excavation
Rampurva, Champaran dt	Road beside Nandangarh pillar via Narkatiaganj to Pipariya village (13 km)	27°15N; 84°28E	First reported by a <i>tharu</i> (worker) as per A. Carllyle's report on excavation in 1877–78 Reported for the second time in <i>ASI: AR</i> , 1907–8	Lion capital in Indian Museum and bull capital in Rashtrapati Bhavan
Sanchi, Raisen dt	From Bhopal or Vidisha by road	23°29N; 77°44E	First reported by E. Smith in a survey prior to 1837; inscription first reported by Burt (1838)	base in situ; broken pieces of shaft at the site
Sankissa, Farrukhabad dt	By road from Farrukhabad via Mohammadabad	27°20N; 79°16E	Identified with legendary <i>Sankasiya</i> by Cunningham in 1842	Elephant capital (Mauryan?) in situ; pillar not found
Sarnath, Varanasi dt	Lion capital in site museum and five fragmentary pillar edicts at site	25°23N; 83°02E	Found in F. O. Oertel's excavation (1904–5)	Two pillars in situ
Topra, Ambala dt	Presently in Firoz Shah Kotla	30°07N; 77°10E	First reported by Father Monserrate (1580) and then by Thomas Coryat (1612–17)	Pillar shifted by Firuz Shah Tughlaq; no capital
Vaishali, Muzaffar- pur dt	Lion pillar	26°00N; 85°04E	First reported by Brian H. Hodgson prior to 1834	Pillar in situ with lion capital, (ancient copy?)



4

Excluded Buddhism



The exoteric or outward worship of Chaityas, and of statues of Buddha, no doubt remained unchanged; but the esoteric or philosophical speculations of the learned were continually changing; and the comparatively pure theism and practical morality of Buddha were first encumbered with the mild quietism of the Vaishnavas, and at last deformed by the wild extravagances of the Tantrists.¹

In this statement, Alexander Cunningham made an important distinction between the continued practice of *Buddha dhamma* through worship of the chaitya and the Buddha's image as opposed to the philosophical reflections that underwent transformation, first in the *Purāṇas* as the Buddha was recognized as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu and second through introduction of what he termed "wild extravagances of the Tantrists," this latter phrase reflecting the thinking of his times. As is evident from Cunningham's writings, he faced a constant dilemma, as he tried to reconcile the practice of *Buddha dhamma* in Ladakh and Tibet with archaeological findings associated with the life of the Buddha in the Ganga valley and central India, which he validated through textual data primarily from the *Mahāvamsa*. By the end of the nineteenth century, Cunningham had succeeded in demarcating a Buddhist sacred landscape with emphasis on the Ganga valley. This distorted the understanding of regional variations, especially in areas, such as the Western Himalayas, eastern India, and the peninsula south of the Vindhya, all of which were significant for the development of *Buddha dhamma* in the country. This chapter focuses on the Western Himalayas and peninsular India. Both these regions followed a long and distinctive trajectory of transformation in terms of the archaeology of Buddhism and are

¹ Alexander Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes: Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith, Elder and Company, London, p. 158.

important to highlight the regional perspective on the varied growth of *Buddha dhamma*.

Cunningham visited Ladakh in 1846 as a member of the British Boundary Commission and published an account of his visit, which contained details of the geography, trade, religion, and population of the region.² He referred to the Chinese pilgrim Faxian's visit across the Karakoram range of the Himalayas to pay homage to relics of the Buddha in Ladakh, such as the alms bowl and the tooth relic, enshrined in stupas north of the capital Leh. According to him, the shape of the stupa at Leh was similar to that at Sanchi and also bore resemblance to those from Afghanistan. Cunningham went on to detail continued contacts between Ladakh and Tibet, starting with the introduction of the Nagari alphabet in the seventh century.

Cunningham described the religion of Tibet as a modified form of Indian Buddhism that had been introduced in Ladakh during the Mauryan period by king Ashoka.³ Nevertheless, Faxian mentioned distinctive local practices, such as the use of "revolving cylinders" in prayer. Cunningham thought of the religion of Tibet as being based on Buddhist texts in Indian languages, though unlike the case in India, it was divided into seven classes, the last being "the mystical doctrine of the Tantrikas."⁴ These views on the continued presence of Buddhism in Ladakh from the third century BCE onwards and its transmission to Lhasa, as expressed in his book on Ladakh contrast sharply with those in another publication of the same year titled *Bhilsa Topes*. In the latter, Cunningham claimed that Buddhism had declined in India and suggested that one reason for this was "the sweeping flood of Mahomedanism, which, in a few years, had spread over one half of the civilised world, from the sands of the Nile to the swampy fens of the Oxus."⁵ Somewhat later, in the same volume, he discussed the decline of Buddhism from fifth to seventh centuries CE, on the basis of the accounts of Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang.

In the section on the Gupta dynasty, his discussion of Buddhism gets more involved. Cunningham refers to the city of Pataliputra under

² Alexander Cunningham, 1854, *Ladak: Physical, Statistical and Historical; with Notices of the Surrounding Countries*, W. H. Allen and Co., London.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

⁵ Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes*, p. 53.

the Gupta kings in the fifth century CE where the people celebrated the Buddha's birth anniversary

by a procession of four-wheeled cars, with little chapels at the four corners, each containing a seated Buddha, with Bodhisattvas standing by him. This festival still survives in the *Rath Jatra*, or annual procession of Jagannath, which the crafty Brahmans have adopted into their own creed, because it was too popular to be suppressed.⁶

In the same breath, he referred to the decline of Buddhism in the heartland of Brahmins or “Brahmavarta proper” from fifth to seventh centuries CE. According to him, this decline had accelerated until Buddhism was extinguished in the twelfth century “when the last votaries of Buddha were expelled from the continent of India. Numbers of images, concealed by the departing monks are found buried near Sarnath, and heaps of ashes still lie scattered amidst the ruins to show that the monasteries were destroyed by fire.”⁷ In support of this last statement — a statement that already has been questioned in Chapter 2 — Cunningham referred to his own “excavations” conducted in 1835–36, many decades before he became the head of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Cunningham thus provided archaeological “proof” for disjunction between the two forms of Buddhism, viz., the “pure and practical” Buddhism preached by the Master and its esoteric form surviving in the Himalayan regions.⁸ This so-called disconnect between the two forms as “proved” by archaeology found resonance and ready acceptance among Buddhologists in Europe, as discussed in the next section, leading to its marginalization in a study of *Buddha dhamma* in the twentieth century.

Esoteric Buddhism or Lamaism

The Theosophical Society espoused the cause of esoteric Buddhism, one that was frowned upon by scholars in the nineteenth century including

⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 166–67.

⁸ The Cult of the Lamas, *The Times of India*, February 9, 1895: 4.

by Eugène Burnouf, as mentioned earlier. As Donald S. Lopez, Jr. has shown,

the Theosophists believed Tibet to be the abode of the Mahatmas (Great Souls), keepers of the wisdom of Atlantis who congregated in a secret region of Tibet to escape the increasing levels of magnetism produced by civilizations; they believed as well that the Tibetans were unaware of the Mahatmas' presence in their land.⁹

The Buddhism practiced in Tibet, however, was largely disregarded in the nineteenth-century European understanding of Buddhism in India. Burnouf's study was based on Sanskrit texts from Nepal. F. Max Mueller's 50-volume series titled *Sacred Books of the East* published in the last decades of the nineteenth century contained translations of Pali, Sanskrit and occasionally Chinese, but not Tibetan texts.¹⁰ The few exceptions included a survey of the Tibetan canon by Alexander Csoma de Körös (1784–1842), the Hungarian philologist who spent many years working on Tibetan Buddhism for the Asiatic Society of Calcutta.

Thomas W. Rhys Davids wrote in 1909:

The development of Buddhist doctrine which has taken place in the Panjab, Nepal and Tibet is exceedingly interesting, and very valuable from the similarity it bears to the development which has taken place in Christianity in the Roman Catholic countries. It has resulted at last in the complete establishment of Lamaism, a religion not only in many points different from, but actually antagonistic to, the primitive system of Buddhism; and this is not only in its doctrine, but also in its church organization.¹¹

A second factor that was inexplicable to scholars at this time was the close affinity that developed between Buddhism and Śaivism in its esoteric forms, as will be explained later.

As Tibet became an object of imperial desire, it also fueled fantasies that often presented highly romanticized portrayals of the land.¹²

⁹ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., 1998, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹¹ Thomas W. Rhys Davids, 1903, *Buddhism: Being a Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama*, the Buddha, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, p. 199.

¹² Lopez, 1998, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, p. 6.

Of interest to this volume is the role of scholars in the construction of knowledge about what L. A. Waddell (1854–1938) termed Lamaism in Tibet and defined as a “priestly mixture of Sivaite mysticism, magic and Indo-Tibetan demonolatry, overlaid by a thin varnish of Mahāyāna Buddhism. And to the present day Lamaism still retains this character.”¹³

The reporting slant of archaeologists in India, such as Cunningham and others, did not help in an informed understanding of the later forms of Buddhism and instead widened the rupture between context and icon in what came to be seen as degenerate Buddhism. Iconography came to be relied on heavily for explicating points arising from religious doctrines and the architectural component was relegated to the background. An example of this tendency is Waddell’s identification of the *bhavacakra* or “wheel of life” in a fifth-century painting at Ajanta, based on later examples from Tibet dated to the nineteenth century. Janice Leoshko has analyzed this link between iconography and context that had been missed earlier by interrogating connections between text and image, form and content, aesthetics and religious requirements, and, of course, continuity and change.¹⁴ Relevant for this section is her emphasis on a synchronic reading of visual imagery. This is an issue that will be dealt with in detail later in the chapter. At this stage it is important to underscore the strategic importance of Tibet for British India, as the latter searched for markets in China and trade routes to reach them and this colonial motive cast a long shadow on the study of Buddhism in the region, as evident from several case studies.

The forays made by European explorers into the Himalayan region need to be understood in the context of nineteenth-century power struggles between British India and imperial Russia and the perceived threat from the latter to the former through Tibet of the Lamas, a land shrouded in mystery to most Europeans of the time. In addition to security concerns, European traders demanded the establishment of trade with China through Tibet, while Christian missionaries had long struggled to set up missions in Tibet.¹⁵

¹³ L. A. Waddell, 1958[1895], *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, reprint, W. Heffer & Sons, Cambridge, p. 30.

¹⁴ Janice Leoshko, 2003, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 123–30.

¹⁵ Alex McKay, 1999, The British Imperial Influence on the Kailas-Manasarovar Pilgrimage, in Toni Huber, edited, *Sacred Spaces and Powerful*

Tibet was, however, certainly not inscrutable either to pilgrims from the Indian subcontinent, who traveled to mount Kailash and lake Manasarovar area of western Tibet, the source of the river Indus and revered by Hindus, Jainas and Buddhists alike; or to the Gosains who regularly traded with Tibet.¹⁶ The beginnings of Gosains or Goswamis may be traced to the first six disciples of the Vaiṣṇava saint Chaitanya (1485–1534). In Bengal, the term came to denote heads of Vaiṣṇava monasteries or priests. Gosains are referred to in the memoirs of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (1605–28) as ascetics with whom the emperor had religious conversations. They are known to have traded precious and semi-precious stones, silks, tobacco, indigo, and conch-shell to Tibet in return for musk, gold dust and yak tails.¹⁷ The *Manchester Guardian* carried a graphic account of Tibetan gold-fields as described by the Indian pundits.¹⁸

It was with one such group of Hindu pilgrims that Father Antonio de Andrade traveled from Delhi to Tsaparang in the Guge kingdom in the upper Sutlej valley via the pilgrimage centers of Haridwar and Badrinath near the Manna pass, along the Indo-Tibetan border. He dated its establishment to the ninth century and founded the first Jesuit mission in Tibet in 1625. It was rumored among traveling *jogis* or ascetics that Christian communities lived in the regions beyond the Himalayas and this evoked interest among the Jesuits in India. It is no surprise that following the same rumors, a Russian doctor Nicholas Notovitch claimed to have discovered a Pali manuscript in the Hemis monastery in Leh and published a book on *The Unknown Life of Christ* in 1894, which was reviewed extensively in newspapers.¹⁹ This claim to the discovery of the Pāli manuscript was subsequently verified by a Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) in his five-year expedition

Places in Tibetan Culture: A Collection of Essays, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala.

¹⁶ Alex McKay, 1998, Kailas-Manasarovar in “Classical” (Hindu) and Colonial Sources: Asceticism, Power and Pilgrimage, in McKay, edited, *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, Curzon Press, Richmond Surrey; John Clarke, 1998, Hindu Trading Pilgrims, in Alex McKay, edited, *Pilgrimage in Tibet*.

¹⁷ Clarke, 1998, Hindu Trading Pilgrims, pp. 53–54.

¹⁸ The Thibetan Gold-Fields, *The Manchester Guardian*, March 4, 1869: 3.

¹⁹ Ancient Life of Christ, *New York Times*, April 1, 1894: 17; An Asiatic Mystery, *The Times of India*, May 2, 1895: 6.

to Sikkim, Kashmir, Ladakh, and Central Asia.²⁰ The Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century, however, had no such luck.

The foundation of the first Christian church in Tibet was laid in Tsaparang in 1626.²¹ After a few failed attempts, the Italian Ippolito Desideri was perhaps the first European to reach Lhasa in 1716. Very little was known about Tibet itself and practically no information was available on the precise location of Lhasa or the route of the Tsangpo river, which was known as the Brahmaputra in India. The only known source of information was a 1717 map drawn in Peking by Jesuits, based on surveys conducted by Tibetans whom they had trained in map-making.

In the thirteenth century, Tibet submitted to the Mongol authority and in 1642 Mongol forces intervened to install the hierarch of the Gelugpa sect of Buddhism, the fifth Dalai Lama, as the effective ruler of Tibet. In 1720, China's Ch'ing dynasty inherited the Mongols' mantle of overlordship.²² In 1769, Tibet closed its doors to the outside world largely as a result of internal politics and the overthrow of the Newar rulers of Nepal by the Gurkhas. In 1774, while the eighth Dalai Lama was still a minor, the long-serving third Panchen Lama acquired considerable power and autonomy.

At the invitation of the Panchen or Tashi Lama of Tibet, the East India Company sent 28-year-old Scotsman George Bogle (1746–81), accompanied by Alexander Hamilton, a Company physician, on a mission to Tibet. They met the Tashi Lama in November 1774, but these negotiations for establishing trade relations did not progress much as the Tashi Lama died of smallpox in Peking in 1780 and Bogle in 1781.²³ In order to keep the dialogue going, the British again sent missions to Bhutan and Tibet and in 1783–84 a mission was led by Captain

²⁰ Manuscripts Tell of Christ's Travels in India and Tibet, *Boston Daily Globe*, May 27, 1926: 1; Old Asian Documents Tell of Christ's Visit, *The Washington Post*, May 27, 1926: 1.

²¹ Filippo de Filippi, edited, 1931, *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistola SJ, 1712–1727*, George Routledge & Sons Ltd, pp. 3–18.

²² Alex McKay, 1997, *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre 1904–1947*, Curzon Press, Richmond Surrey, p. 6.

²³ Clements R. Markham, 1876, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, Trübner and Company, London.

Samuel Turner and Lieutenant Samuel Davis, with Dr Robert Sanders as a medical officer. A faithful member of these missions was Purungir Gosain, a Hindu trading pilgrim. Around this time, tensions between Nepal and Tibet escalated and the Gurkhas invaded Tibet in 1788 and again in 1791. Ostensibly to protect Tibet from Nepal, the Chinese army moved in and occupied large parts of the country.²⁴

The annexation by China sent alarm bells ringing in the East India Company which had by then started exploring alternative routes to open trade with Tibet. Between 1750 and 1900, only three Westerners visited Lhasa: Thomas Manning, an eccentric English private scholar in 1811; and two Lazarist priests, Hue and Gabet, in 1846.²⁵ The British Trigonometrical Survey of India that carried out explorations from 1800 to 1883 trained an elite group of trans-Himalayan explorers who went into Tibet and Central Asia, starting with Abdul Hamid in 1863.

The use of agents was sanctioned in the 1860s only after the closing of the borders of Tibet to foreigners, the deaths of several European explorers in central Asia, the unwillingness and inability of the Chinese authorities to make provision for British travellers and decades of reluctance by the Government of India to allow technically qualified Indians to survey beyond the frontier.²⁶

Nevertheless, unhindered access to Tibet continued to be a prime concern of the colonial state in India. "Tibet was thus an object of imperial desire, and the failure of the European powers to dominate it politically only increased European longing and fed the fantasy about the land beyond the Snowy Range."²⁷ The political dimensions of the "search for knowledge" of Tibetan Buddhism were certainly not lost on the early explorers. Often, Indian informants were used as they could be easily disguised as holy men.²⁸

Alexander Csoma de Körös, as mentioned earlier, was a Hungarian philologist driven by the desire to find the origins of the Magyar ethnic

²⁴ Derek Waller, 1990, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, p. 7.

²⁵ McKay, 1997, *Tibet and the British Raj*, p. 7.

²⁶ Waller, 1990, *The Pundits*, p. 1.

²⁷ Lopez, 1998, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, pp. 5–6.

²⁸ Gen. J. T. Walker, 1885, Four Years Journeys through Great Tibet by one of the Trans Himalayan Explorers of the Survey of India, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, 7(2); Waller, 1990, *The Pundits*.

group in Hungary. This led him to travel to Lahore in present-day Pakistan and to Ladakh in present-day Kashmir, though he was unsuccessful in entering Tibet. On July 16, 1822, he met William Moorcroft (1767–1825), a veterinary surgeon and employee of the East India Company, at Leh who suggested that Csoma spend his time learning the Tibetan language, which would aid British strategic interests in the region. Csoma devoted himself to the study of the language and to producing an English–Tibetan dictionary while living at Zangla Monastery in Zanskar, Kashmir, in 1823. He was assisted in this task by the abbot of Zangla, Sangye Phuntsog, who had spent seven years studying at the Tibetan capital Lhasa and centers of Buddhist scholarship in Bhutan and Nepal. The dictionary was finally published in Calcutta in 1834.²⁹

Brian H. Hodgson, the British Resident in Nepal who first made Buddhism of the Himalayas known to the West when he announced in 1824 that the original documents of the Buddhist canon had been preserved in Sanskrit in the monasteries of Nepal, stayed first in the Kathmandu valley from 1820 to 1843 and then as a recluse in Darjeeling from 1845 to 1858 after which he returned to England. Hodgson's fame spread within Asia³⁰ and reached the ears of the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, at Lhasa who sent the English envoy the remaining records of the Christian mission that had visited Lhasa in the middle of the eighteenth century. Hodgson wrote and published extensively on Nepalese culture, religion, natural history, architecture, ethnography, and linguistics and is often referred to as the father of Himalayan studies.³¹

In 1835, Darjeeling was acquired by the British and seen as a crucial link in the route to Lhasa in Tibet. The British established stable relations with Sikkim in 1861, Bhutan in 1865, and in March 1890 signed a convention with China settling the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. However, Russian military activity in the region became a

²⁹ Edward Fox, 2001, *The Hungarian Who Walked to Heaven: Alexander Csoma de Koros*, Short Books, London, p. 57.

³⁰ John Murray, 1897, *Life of Brian Hodgson*, *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record*, third series, 3(5–6).

³¹ David M. Waterhouse, 2004, *The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling, 1820–1858*, Routledge, London and New York.

cause for concern to the British, and in 1904 a military mission was sent to Tibet under Major Francis E. Younghusband (1863–1942) who marched into Lhasa. He firmly believed that “Tibetans are not a people fit to be left to themselves between two Great Empires. They have to look to one or the other — to us or the Russians — for protection.”³² A treaty was signed between British India and Tibet on September 7, 1904 and later ratified by the Anglo-Chinese convention of 1906. The Anglo-Tibetan Convention allowed the British Raj to open three trade agencies (marts) in Tibet: the first at Gyantse, about 180 km south-west of Lhasa; the second at Yatung in the Chumbi valley just across the border from Sikkim; and the third at Gartok in western Tibet.³³

Leoshko has shown how the formulation of Tibetan Buddhism being degenerate and distinct from the original historical Buddhism of the first millennium BCE was a complex process negotiated by colonial officials who traveled to the region and published papers on their discoveries. These discoveries reached wider audiences through popular writers, such as Rudyard Kipling, the author of the novel *Kim*, who celebrated British imperialism and drew on the latest results of the explorations, as also the explorers involved. As Leoshko argues:

The Buddhist elements encountered in *Kim* reveal certain aspects about how Buddhist traditions were viewed at the end of the nineteenth century. Hence the lama in the novel refers to the degenerate nature of current practices by Tibetan Buddhists and privileges the Buddhist holy land in terms of the Buddha’s biography . . . What I find especially significant in *Kim* is how a Buddhist image called the wheel of life (*bhavacakra*) drives Kipling’s narrative. Such images were extensively discussed for the first time in a 1895 publication on Tibetan Buddhism by Austine Waddell,³⁴ who used an example given to him by Tibetan Buddhists.³⁵

In 1894, Waddell suggested that the significance of the *bhavacakra* image lay in its conceptualization of a core teaching of Buddhism, i.e.,

³² Gordon T. Stewart, 2009, *Journeys to Empire: Enlightenment, Imperialism, and the British Encounter with Tibet, 1774–1904*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 173.

³³ McKay, 1997, *Tibet and the British Raj*, p. xx.

³⁴ Waddell, 1958[1895], *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*.

³⁵ Leoshko, 2003, *Sacred Traces*, p. 28.

dependent origination or *pratityasamutpāda*, which is frequently encountered in inscriptions and votive tablets and also continues to be recited by lay devotees, as discussed in Chapter 1.³⁶ Waddell, a medical officer who worked in the north-eastern part of India and was also involved with the 1892 excavations at Pataliputra, produced a large number of publications on Himalayan Buddhism and traced the origins of Tibetan Buddhism to eastern India. He believed that Tibetan Buddhism was the same theistic Mahāyāna form of Buddhism practiced in India and was not a radical transformation as was often suggested. Buddha's own "Buddhism" was essentially a doctrine of negation and despair, but was modified by Ashoka when he adopted it as a state religion.³⁷ In his book, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, he described the spread of Buddhism from India to Tibet and its acceptance as a state religion from the eighth century.

Waddell purchased a Lamaist temple from the practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in Darjeeling complete with altar, images and painted scrolls of the chief Buddhist deities, utensils, drums, etc., and installed it where priests performed ceremonies at the temple which he described and documented.³⁸ He noted that "nearly every village throughout the Buddhist Holy Land contains old Mahayana and Tantrik Buddhist sculptures, and I have also seen these at most of the old Buddhist sites visited by me in other parts of India."³⁹ However these images were often not recognized or documented as information regarding them was available only with the Tibetan Lamas who guarded it closely. As Chief Medical Officer to the Tibetan expedition of 1904–5, Waddell procured large collections of books, flags, etc., which he distributed among the India Office Library and the Oxford and Cambridge University libraries. He also held the position of Professor of Tibetan from 1906 to 1908 at University College, London. However, the chief failing of

³⁶ L. A. Waddell, 1894, Buddha's Secret from a Sixth Century Pictorial Commentary and Tibetan Tradition, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26(2).

³⁷ Waddell, 1958[1895], *The Buddhism of Tibet*, pp. xviii–ix.

³⁸ F. W. Thomas, 1939, Colonel L. A. Waddell, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3(July).

³⁹ L. A. Waddell, 1894, The Indian Buddhist Cult of Avalokita and His Consort Tara, 'the Saviouress' Illustrated from the Remains in Magadha, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26(1): 51–52.

his work on Tibet has been identified as an inability to distinguish local Tibetan elements from those borrowed from India, primarily because of his unfamiliarity with Buddhist literature in Sanskrit.⁴⁰ In contrast to such archaeological forays by colonial officials as those of Waddell, academic engagement between Indian pundits from Kashmir, Nepal and Tibet and Buddhist monks and teachers was a continuing phenomenon from at least the eighth century onwards, as we will show in the next two sections.

The Indian Pundits

Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917) was a tenacious traveler, though he provided accounts of his travels to the British, anxious for information on Tibet. Born in Chittagong, now in Bangladesh, to a Hindu family, Das was appointed headmaster of the Bhutia Boarding School at Darjeeling in 1874. In 1878, a Tibetan teacher, Lama Ugyen-gyatso, arranged a passport for Das to go to a fifteenth-century monastery at Shigatse, the second largest city of Tibet and the residence of the Panchen Lama. In June 1879, Das and Ugyen-gyatso left Darjeeling for the first of the two journeys to Tibet. They remained in Tibet for six months, returning to Darjeeling with a large collection of Tibetan and Sanskrit texts which would become the basis for his later scholarship. Das spent the year of 1880 in Darjeeling analyzing the information he had obtained. In November 1881, Das and Ugyen-gyatso returned to Tibet where they explored the Yarlung valley, before returning to India in January 1883.⁴¹ Both Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the founders of the Theosophical Society, showed awareness of these travels and mentioned Das in their writings.

The Editorial in *The Times of India*, while accepting the contribution of Indians, justified these missions and the methods adopted in the interests of trade:

The last serious attempt to open out Thibet [*sic*] was made by Warren Hastings a hundred years ago, and since the time of Huc [*sic*], who visited Lhasa in 1846,

⁴⁰ Thomas, 1939, Colonel L. A. Waddell, p. 502.

⁴¹ Sarat Chandra Das, 1902, *Journey To Lhasa & Central Tibet*, John Murray, London; and E. P. Button & Company, New York.

no European has succeeded in throwing any light on the internal condition of the country. Of late, however, the Government have encouraged native explorers, and what little we know of Thibet is due to the endeavours of Nain Singh, 'A.K.' and Baboo Sarat Chundra Das, a Darjeeling school-master. This latter gentleman found means of paying a visit to the Tesha [*sic*] Lama in 1879, and succeeded in interesting him and his Minister in the stories told about the marvels of English manufactures. They said they should like to see a telephone and a lithographic press and to try the effect of vaccine. Unfortunately the schoolmaster had no money at his command, and when he returned in 1881 the Lama who had asked for vaccine had died of small-pox. The new Tesha Lama was a child, but the Minister still befriended Baboo Sarat Chandra Das, introducing him to the Delin [*sic*] Lama, a boy of eight years and the spiritual head of the Buddhist religion. This time the Baboo returned with a formal request to spend £ 250 on the wonderful things he had mentioned and the Government, seeing a chance of opening up negotiations with Thibet at once placed this sum to his credit.⁴²

Das attributed the policy of exclusiveness pursued by the Tibetan government to three factors: the "hostile and intriguing attitude of the frontier officials towards the British Government;" fear of introduction of diseases, such as small-pox into the country; and the anxiety that Buddhism would become extinct as a result of foreign intervention. Besides, there was an apprehension that opening of the Darjeeling railway by the British would adversely affect Tibet's trade with China and this bothered Chinese commercial interests.⁴³

It is to the credit of Das that he used his travels in the region to start the Buddhist Text Society in Calcutta with Narendra Nath Sen as its president. The objectives of the Society included promoting a spirit of research into the region's religious history and establishing links with Japan and Lanka. The Society published the first issue of its *Journal* in 1893.⁴⁴ The Tibetan–Sanskrit Dictionary compiled by Sarat Chandra Das was published at the government's expense and the Government of Bengal also sanctioned a sum of 2000 rupees to the Society for printing rare manuscripts collected at state expense from Nepal, Tibet and Burma.⁴⁵

⁴² The Editorial, *The Times of India*, July 29, 1885: 2.

⁴³ Sarat Chandra Das, 1970, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, reprint, Manjusri Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 193 (first published 1902).

⁴⁴ Indian Buddhism, *The Times of India*, March 4, 1893: 4.

⁴⁵ Buddhist Text Society of India, *The Times of India*, November 4, 1895: 7.

Not all travelers were sponsored by the state, a case in point being Bhagwanlal Indraji (1839–88) whose travels differed in that his interest went beyond collection of manuscripts and he often used information gained from personal observations for elucidating sculptures and architecture in India. He kept detailed notes and reports of his fieldwork, but the only extant ones are five notebooks and a series of letters in Gujarati. Three of these notebooks are mostly travelogues though they are not chronological. They date from May 1873 and relate to his visits to several places, including Kahaun, Kushinagar — where he wanted to excavate — Mithia and Radhia, Nepal, Patna, Barabar and Nagarjuni caves, Bodh Gaya, and then Patna again.⁴⁶ In his Nepal notebook, he states:

Due to the monsoon, I spent several months in Nepal. During these months I got to know some Nepali Buddhists, and through them collected information on their religion, religious conditions, rituals, customs and traditions. I could collect eighteen manuscripts and sixty old inscriptions visiting Kathmandu, Patan, Bhatgaon and surrounding areas.⁴⁷

This notebook entry is followed by a detailed observation of Tantric Buddhist practices and practitioners. The Nepal notebook thus describes temples, legends, the caste system, fairs, and festivals of Nepal. He made short notes on a large variety of subjects: trade, witchcraft, the sati system, slavery, measurement, dress, language, craftsmen, houses and interiors, food, last rites, and even the rite of selection of the goddess Kumārī. The Nepalese *Vaṃśāvalī* (chronicle of dynasties) was the only known history of Nepal until Indraji published the results of his fieldwork. “Some Considerations on the Chronology and History of Nepal”

⁴⁶ His letters in Gujarati are in two sets: one, written to a friend in Bombay in 1871, and records aspects of his archaeological tours and fieldwork in that year. They were published in 1896 in a little known journal. The second set has mostly letters written in 1871 and 1873 to the Nawab of Junagadh and contain accounts of his work and travels. They were published almost contemporaneously in the Junagadh State Journal, *Saurashtra Darpan*, and subsequently republished in the 1920s (Virchand K. Dharamsey, 2004, Bhagwanlal Indraji and the Beginnings of Indian Archaeology, in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Carla Sinopoli, edited, *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*, Indian Council for Historical Research and Aryan Books International, New Delhi).

⁴⁷ Dharamsey, 2004, Bhagwanlal Indraji.

was the first historical work on Nepal that was based on evidence from inscriptions and from field observations of monuments, art and manuscript material.⁴⁸ These travels by Indians to the Himalayan region were a part of a long tradition of travel in the subcontinent. It is important to stress these connections and linkages in order to highlight the transformations that these underwent in the colonial period.

Sites of Pilgrimage

This section starts with post-twelfth-century travels to Buddhist sites in the subcontinent, one of the sacred centers visited most often being Vajrāsana or present Bodh Gaya. The first historical record of visits to Buddhist sites in India by Tibetan pilgrims appears in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and it is from this time that Tibetan pilgrimage guide-book literature on Bodh Gaya and Magadha dates. Information about sites, such as Bodh Gaya associated with the life of the Buddha, was based not only on personal visits, but also on accounts in Buddhist Sanskrit literature, which was then becoming available in translation in Tibet. This was further supplemented by Tibetan hagiographies on early Tibetan pilgrims who traveled to India. These hagiographies may not be histories, but their influence was no doubt extensive, as they were often referred to, recited, painted, and theatrically enacted. “While Bodh Gaya and Nalanda were frequent destinations, other sites, such as Shravasti or the Jagaddala vihara in Varendra, only have one or two recorded Tibetan visits” from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.⁴⁹

The life of Chag lo-Tsā-ba Chos-rje-dpal (the translator Dharmasvāmin) is one of the writings that belongs to the aforementioned class of texts and epitomizes both the nature of pilgrimage, as also the preservation of its legacy. The author of the text was *upāsaka* Chos-dar who encapsulated Dharmasvāmin’s narration of his travels to India in 1234–36 CE. Before leaving Tibet in 1226 CE, Dharmasvāmin had spent several years in a monastery studying grammar, logic and philosophy and mastering scripts. He then spent another eight years in Nepal at Svayambhu

⁴⁸ Bhagwanlal Indraji, 1884, *Some Considerations on the History of Nepal, The Indian Antiquary*, 13.

⁴⁹ Toni Huber, 2008, *Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 60–70.

Chaitya and Dharamdhatu Vihara and then started on his journey with a party of some 300 men to Bodh Gaya, including one carrying ashes of his father to be immersed in the river Ganga.⁵⁰

His first stop was Bodh Gaya, bypassing Vikramashila, another large Buddhist monastic center close to the present-day village of Antichak, which had been razed to the ground by “Turushka soldiers.” Vajrāsana was largely deserted and he found only four monks staying there. He described several objects of worship at Bodh Gaya, for example, the Bodhi tree, the image of Mahabodhi, the “*gandhola*”⁵¹ erected by the Dharmarāja Ashoka, “the corner tooth of Tathāgata, the two footprints of the Blessed One,” an empty stone throne of Śākyamuni, the stone railing erected by Nāgārjuna, and the temple of Tārā.⁵² The claim that the temple actually dated from fifth to tenth century CE was established by Ashoka indicates the continued prevalence of the memory of the third-century-BCE king as the righteous ruler. Dharmasvāmin further reinforced Ashoka’s perceived association with the site by recounting several miraculous tales of the “stupas built by Ashoka.”⁵³ He spent three months at Bodh Gaya and often acted as translator for visiting monks speaking different languages. After visiting Rajagriha, Dharmasvāmin went to Nalanda, which he described as having been damaged by the Turushkas, but which nevertheless housed a venerable and learned monk and several holy images of Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Tārā, and other deities. The Tibetan monk spent some months at Nalanda acquiring knowledge from the venerable Guru Rāhula Śrī Bhadra whom Dharmasvāmin found at Nalanda and returned to Nepal probably at the end of 1236 CE or the beginning of 1237 CE.

Chinese visitors to Bodh Gaya included not just monks, but also members of the naval fleets sent by the third emperor of the Ming dynasty Yongle (1403–24 CE) to more than 20 countries in Southeast Asia, as well as to Bengal and the Malabar coast and Aden, popularly known as the voyages of Zheng He. Accounts of these voyages are available in the *Mingshi* (*History of the Ming Dynasty*), which is considered

⁵⁰ George Roerich, translated, 1959, *Biography of Dharmasvāmin: A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim*, K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, p. 58.

⁵¹ The Tibetans referred to the temple at Bodh Gaya as *gandhola*.

⁵² Roerich, 1959, *Biography of Dharmasvāmin*, p. 65.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–80.

the most elaborate and complete history of the Ming dynasty.⁵⁴ It is based on the *Ming Shi-lu*, each of the *shi-lus* comprising an account of one emperor's reign compiled after that emperor's death on the basis of a number of sources created during the reign.⁵⁵ What is relevant for this chapter is the description of visits to Bengal, *Zhao-na-pu-er* or Jaunpur in 1412 CE located to the west of Bengal and to Dili or Delhi. The accounts also mention that Hou Xian, the lesser eunuch, stopped at *Jin-gang bao zuo* or Bodhgaya on his way to or from Jaunpur and offered gifts to the elders there.⁵⁶

In addition to travelers from Tibet and China, there are several examples of prominent Indian monks involved in the study of Buddhism, who traveled to important sites outside the subcontinent in the medieval period. Guiseppe Tucci (1894–1984) was one of the early scholars to propose in 1931 that Buddhism had continued to exist in India well into the present period. He based his conclusions on the presence of Buddhist schools in Bengal and Orissa and on inscriptional evidence from Tamilnadu. The tenth-century Leyden grant, for example, referred to a Buddhist temple at Nagapattinam (which was demolished in 1867 by the Jesuits) and Buddha images within a radius of 10 km around Kumbakonam, in Thanjavur district. This is an issue that we will discuss in detail in a later section. An epigraph of the time of Sevappa Nayaka (1532–80 CE) from Kumbakonam taluk dated 1579 CE records the grant of land to a Buddhist temple by the people of Tirumalairajapuram as compensation for land that became unusable as a result of the construction of a canal through it.⁵⁷ Tucci then discussed the travels of Buddhagupta, the teacher of the Tibetan monk Tārānātha (1575–1634 CE) who traveled to many places in India and elsewhere to find traces of Buddhism. Buddhagupta was born in Rameswaram in south

⁵⁴ Haraprasad Ray, 1993, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Geoff Wade, translated, 2005, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*, an open access resource, Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

⁵⁶ Ray, 1993, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations*, p. 78.

⁵⁷ *Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy*, March 1927, p. 116; Guiseppe Tucci, 1931, The Sea and Land Travels of a Buddhist Sadhu in Sixteenth Century, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 7(4).

India in the family of a rich merchant and traveled extensively across the seas as well. As Tucci opined on the veracity of Buddhagupta's account:

We cannot say that his information is always exact; in this kind of writings we cannot expect to find everywhere that historical preciseness of detail which we demand from modern authors. These Indian and Tibetan saints lived in a kind of mythical atmosphere which gives a peculiar colour to all their experiences; the truth for them is not about external facts but rather about the meaning that they have for them or the ideal significance that they attach to them.⁵⁸

A year later, A. Waley explored the Chinese biography of the Indian Buddhist traveler Dhyānabhadra based on the translation of a poetic inscription on a stupa, which was erected in the memory of an Indian monk Dhyānabhadra or Suunyaadi'sya, at the Korean temple Kuei-yen Ssu (Jupiter Rock Temple).⁵⁹ This inscription was composed in 1378 CE by a certain Li Se, who, prior to the fall of the Mongols in 1368, had been secretary to the Mongol administrator of Manchuria and Korea.

Dhyānabhadra's narrative is important as it refers to the presence of Buddhism in several parts of the subcontinent, from Kanchipuram in coastal Tamilnadu to Jalandhara identified with Jullundur in the present state of Punjab in the north. It also emphasizes the significance of *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Avatamsaka Sūtras* in Dhyānabhadra's study and search for knowledge. The inclusion of these two Mahāyāna texts also counters claims generally made that the post-ninth-century Buddhism in India was solely Tantric. Dhyānabhadra spent his early years studying at Nalanda and, in his 19th year, traveled to Lanka and from there to China and Korea. He died in 1363 CE and his body was mummified and later cremated in 1368 CE. The ashes were divided in four parts, one of which reached Korea in 1370 CE where the relics were buried in Hoemsaji monastery.⁶⁰ Nor was Dhyānabhadra an exception, since there are references to his meeting with another Indian Buddhist monk named Mahāpaṇḍita with whom he traveled to Tibet.

In addition to these, there are references to several other Indian Buddhists, such as Sahajaśrī, Śāriputra (1335–1426 CE), Vanaratna

⁵⁸ Tucci, 1931, *The Sea and Land Travels of a Buddhist Sadhu*, p. 684.

⁵⁹ A. Waley, 1932, *New Light on Buddhism in Medieval India*, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*, 1.

⁶⁰ Kojiro Tomita, 1941, Korean Silver-Work of the Koryō Period, *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, 39(231).

(1384–1468 CE) and Buddhaguptanātha (1514–1610 CE) who traveled to Tibet and whose testimony for the continued presence of Buddhism in India has often been dismissed on the grounds that they belonged to groups of wandering ascetics of *nātha* lineages, which comprised of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities. There was a thin dividing line between the Buddhist and Śaiva sects and the *siddha sampradāya* or *siddha* tradition was common to both. Toni Huber, for example, states that after the decline of Buddhism in the twelfth century, the first serious attempt by Tibetans to visit Bodh Gaya was made in 1752.⁶¹ This argument has been successfully countered by Arthur Philip McKeown on the basis of the Tibetan biographies of some of the travelers, such as Śāriputra, who embodied a system of Buddhist practice based on the monastic institution of the Sangha and who transmitted *Vinaya* texts to Tibet.⁶²

Among the medieval Buddhist travelers, Sahajaśrī has received little attention. Born in Kapilavastu in the fourteenth century CE, he received his ordination in Kashmir and traveled along with 12 others to Wutai Shan in China, revered as the site of Mañjuśrī's manifestation.⁶³ Both Śāriputra and Vanaratna were born in eastern India and the latter is known to have made three trips to Tibet.⁶⁴ The first journey possibly took place in 1426 CE when he traveled to Lhasa and was well received by the Tibetan Buddhists, while his second trip took place in 1453 CE. Sometime later, he visited central Tibet at the invitation of the king and taught *Yogatantra*, a class of texts traditionally said to emphasize internal meditational and yogic practices, at the monastery of Rtse thang. Another visitor to Tibet in 1462 CE from eastern India was Lokottara,

⁶¹ Huber, 2008, *Holy Land Reborn*, pp. 170–71.

⁶² Arthur Philip McKeown, 2010, *From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing: The Life and Times of Sariputra (c. 1335–1426)*, Last Abbot of Bodh Gaya, PhD thesis, The Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., p. 26.

⁶³ Tansen Sen, 2003, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations 600–1400*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, pp. 79–86.

⁶⁴ F.-K. Ehrhard, 2004, *Spiritual Relationships between Rulers and Preceptors: The Three Journeys of Vanaratna (1384–1468)*, in Christoph Cüppers, edited, *The Relationship between Religion and State in Traditional Tibet*, Lumbini International Research Institute, Lumbini.

though Vanaratna is often described as the most successful Indian pundit to travel to Tibet, where he revived Tantric learning.⁶⁵

Śāriputra entered the monastic order at an early age and went to Vajrāsana (Bodh Gaya) where he took on the task of rebuilding the temple of Ratnagarbha over the old temple. He then consecrated the temple on the anniversary of Buddha's Enlightenment, visited Nalanda and Rajagriha and preached to the king of Magadha. In a nine-day debate with representatives of other religions, Śāriputra emerged victorious and the king became a Buddhist and initiated repair and restoration of the temple at Vajrāsana on a large scale.⁶⁶ The patronage provided by the king also led to a process of rebuilding of the Buddhist community in the region. Interesting insights into the power of Buddhism are provided by an incident in which the people of Magadha approached Śāriputra to save them from drought in the region. He asked the people to worship the relics of the Buddha by prostrating before them, circumambulating them and making the five customary offerings of flowers, incense, lamps, parasols, and banners.⁶⁷ In the latter section of his biography, Śāriputra, the abbot of Vajrāsana, visited Tibet sometime in 1418 CE and subsequently went to China. After he died in Beijing, the emperor divided his relics and sent one part back to the temple in Wutai Shan in the Shanxi province of China where a stupa was created to house them and which still exists.⁶⁸

Our last traveler who needs to be brought into the discussion in this section is Tārānātha, the lama of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism who wrote the *History of Buddhism in India* in 1608. One of his early teachers was Buddhaguptanātha who improved his knowledge of Sanskrit and religious history, as also provided him insights into a wide range of learning, especially on the *Hevajra* and *Samputatantras*. At that time, two Buddhists from eastern India named Pūrṇānanda and Puṇyānanda, who had been born in Hindu families, visited Tibet and spent ten days with Tārānātha. Aside from discussing varied topics, the

⁶⁵ Lobsang Shastri, 2002, Activities of Indian Panditas in Tibet from 14th to 17th Century, in Henk Blezer, edited, *Tibet: Past and Present*, International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden.

⁶⁶ McKeown, 2010, From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing, p. 40.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 398.

two visitors also recited the epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In 1624 CE, pundit Kṛṣṇa, a scholar of Indian grammar and literature from central India, visited Tibet and taught Tārānātha grammar. Tārānātha is also known to have translated the ‘Teachings of Lord Kṛṣṇa’ and ‘Benefits of One Thousand Names of Viṣṇu’.⁶⁹ Thus, the Tibetan scholar learnt both Tantric Buddhist teaching and Sanskrit epic literature from his Indian guru.

Tārānātha wrote one of the few existing biographies of his teacher Buddhaguptanātha, a text that provides rich insights into Buddhist practices in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century India. Buddhaguptanātha was apprenticed to the *nātha* sect of Śiva worshippers in medieval India, but then changed his affiliation to Buddhism. David Templeman suggests that this was possible as there may have “existed a lineage within the Nath sect called the ‘Natheshvari,’ which combined Buddhist and Hindu teachings. These Natheshvaris held Buddhist lineages of instruction within their own Hindu teaching milieu and yet they remained Nath *Siddhas*.”⁷⁰

This overlap between Buddhist and Śaiva lineages opens up for discussion the as-yet-unexplored but bewildering world of medieval Buddhism — “bewildering” for historians used to straitjacketed categories of religious affiliation. This is an issue that we cannot delve into here and must return to the history of Tārānātha on Buddhism in India. Though different from the current practice and understanding of history, Tārānātha’s writings are generally respected as being particularly authentic and reliable. Templeman describes him as the “last great person to emerge from the Jonang sect . . . [and] possibly one of the Tibetan historians most frequently referred to by modern writers on the history of Buddhism.”⁷¹

Tārānātha’s history was a narration of the spread of Buddhism based on the *Vinaya Śāstra*, which contains teachings on Buddhist discipline as also medicine; *Abhinīṣkramaṇa Sūtra*; and partly the *Lalitavistara*, the last two containing accounts of the life of the Buddha. The text

⁶⁹ Shastri, 2002, *Activities of Indian Panditas*, p. 137.

⁷⁰ David Templeman, 2011, *Buddhaguptanatha and the Late Survival of the Siddha Tradition in India*, http://www.ordinarymind.net/may2003/feature2_03.htm (accessed on July 4, 2011).

⁷¹ David Templeman, 1981, *Taranatha the Historian*, *Tibet Journal*, 6(2).

starts with an account of the reign of king Ajātaśatru of Magadha, but relevant for this study are chapters 6 and 7 on Ashoka who, after an early life spent in fighting and bloodshed, converted to Buddhism. He then adorned the earth with chaityas containing relics of the Tathāgata at eight holy places and at 84,000 other spots. Daily worship was performed at each of these with lamps, incense and garlands.⁷² The reference to Ashoka in this seventeenth-century history of Buddhism and his establishment of 84,000 stupas underpins the the importance of the Mauryan king in the history of Buddhism not only in India, but also in Asia. It is this repeated narration of Ashoka's contribution that kept his memory alive.

How does the Buddhism of Tibet — the much-maligned esoteric Buddhism of the nineteenth century — relate to that of other sites in the Indian subcontinent? One center of importance to this discussion is the Tabo monastery in the Lahaul–Spiti valley located mid-way between the Tibetan plateau and Kashmir. Tibetan rock inscriptions dated between 700 and 900 CE have been found in the valley.⁷³ The routes along the lower Himalayan ranges pass through fertile valleys cut by the Ravi and Beas rivers and their tributaries and are dotted with shrines.⁷⁴

Tabo Monastery: Between Kashmir and Tibet

Tabo monastery, situated in the village of the same name, lies at an altitude of 3,280 m near the Tibetan (Chinese) border in the secluded Spiti valley, just north of the Sutlej river in the present-day state of Himachal Pradesh and is one of the oldest continuously functioning Buddhist centers in India. It is bounded by Ladakh in the north; Lahaul and Kullu districts in the west and south-east respectively; and Tibet and the Kinnaur district in the east. Located at a distance of 275 km from Kullu, the region has been traversed by four major routes from

⁷² Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, edited, 1970, *Tārānātha's History of Buddhism in India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, pp. 60–63.

⁷³ J. Ph. Vogel, 1911, *Antiquities of the Chamba State*, pt 1, Archaeological Survey of India, Calcutta, p. 254.

⁷⁴ Laxman S. Thakur, 2001, *Buddhism in the Western Himalayas*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001.

the third century BCE onwards, as indicated by the archaeological data. Inscriptions on boulders in Brahmi and Kharoshthi scripts, coins and temple remains have been found along the routes.

The complex at Tabo includes nine temples constructed over several centuries from 996 to 1908 CE and is dotted with 23 stupas.⁷⁵ The vihara comprising of a *mukha-maṇḍapa*, the main hall and a square *garbha-grha* or sanctum, is the earliest structure at the site dated to 996 CE. Its renovation and repair was undertaken in 1042 CE. The temple of Maitreya and the smaller temple of Bromston were added in the last quarter of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century CE. It was in the second half of the fifteenth century CE that Tabo was taken over by the Yellow-robed sect or the Gelugpa sect and has remained under its dominance until the present.⁷⁶ As Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter opines on the continuity in Buddhism practiced in the monastery:

Although there have been significant changes in Buddhist practice during the last millennium, thanks to the good state of preservation and the abundance of primary documentation, it is still possible to trace some of the traditions connected with the first hundred years of the monastery.⁷⁷

Tabo was first visited in 1909 by the German Tibetologist A. H. Francke (1817–1930) of the Archaeological Survey of India,⁷⁸ and subsequently by Giuseppe Tucci and Eugenio Ghersi in the 1930s. The monks at Tabo today belong to a different order and there have been changes in lineages over time. However, the iconographic program and the sculptural *maṇḍalas* retain the original theme of the temple. Klimburg-Salter has long argued that

as a result of the advance of Muslim armies, trade was re-routed over the trans-Himalayan region through present day northern Pakistan and Ladakh. Thus a distinctive esoteric Buddhist art evolved in the tenth to thirteenth centuries

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁷⁷ Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, 2005, *Tabo Monastery: Art and History*, published book, donation to Tabo Monastery from the Austrian Science Fund, Interdisciplinary Research Unit: “The Cultural History of the Western Himalaya, 10th to 14th Centuries,” Vienna, p. 7.

⁷⁸ A. H. Francke, 1914, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, ASI New Imperial Series 38, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta.

in the monastic centres located along these cultural corridors or trade routes through the western Himalayan region.⁷⁹

These monastic centers were avenues for translation projects undertaken by Indian and Tibetan monks and played the role of intermediaries between the communities of India and Tibet.

The earliest inscriptions from Tabo dated to 996 CE retain non-Tibetan names of the monastic community, but from the tenth century CE onwards, the Spiti valley was the scene of intensive missionary activity from western Tibet.⁸⁰ The author of the inscription of 996 CE in the largest temple at Tabo (*gTsug lag khan*) was a monk of the Tabo community who refers to the temple's establishment and renovation.⁸¹ A second epigraph in the *du khan* or assembly hall contains a clear message that "no layman, be he king, minister, lord or whosoever is entitled to physically or verbally punish or insult a monk, regardless of the latter's moral status."⁸²

Tabo has also yielded a rich collection of manuscripts numbering 35,374 folios, which were found wrapped in six large bundles and stored in the assembly hall. Though the manuscripts are in a bad state of preservation and often fragmentary, preliminary research shows that they indicate an independent line of transmission of Buddhism, as compared to the development of the Tibetan canon. To date, 49 fragmentary copies of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* have been identified in the collection, while miscellaneous *sūtras*, mostly of Mahāyāna affiliation, constitute the next largest body of texts.⁸³

The narrative murals in the Tabo complex derive both from Sanskrit texts, such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, *Sukhāvati Vyūha*, *Lalitavistara* and *Āryabhadraśālistambasūtra*, but also Tibetan Buddhist texts. The significance

⁷⁹ Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, 1982, Esoteric Buddhist Art of the Western Himalayas, in *The Silk Road and the Diamond Path: Esoteric Buddhist Art on the Trans-Himalayan Trade Routes*, UCLA Art Council, Los Angeles, pp. 22–23.

⁸⁰ Klimburg-Salter, 2005, *Tabo Monastery*, p. 21.

⁸¹ Luciano Petech and Christian Luczanits, edited, 1999, *Inscriptions from the Tabo Main Temple*, Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Roma, pp. 10–12.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸³ Christina Scherrer-Schaub and Paul Harrison, 2009, *Tabo Studies III: A Catalogue of the Manuscript Collection of Tabo Monastery*, Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Roma, pp. xvii–xxxv.

of Tabo is thus multidimensional. On the one hand, it provides evidence for a long period of continuous Buddhist activity in the Western Himalayas, while on the other, its location on trade routes links it to several contiguous regions of Buddhist activity, such as Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and eastern India. These connections have often been disregarded and need to be highlighted here, as there is evidence for frequent travels along these routes both by trading groups and by pilgrims, as mentioned earlier. Of relevance to this section is the evidence for the import of textiles from western India to Himachal Pradesh in the eleventh century CE, in the form of cloth used to cover the ceiling of the assembly hall and the apse in the Tabo Main Temple.⁸⁴ This leaves no doubt about the larger network within which the Tabo monastery was integrated and which also influenced the sculptural program at the site.

The murals of Phase I dated from 996 to 1000 CE draw on the Mahāyāna *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* and prince Sudhana's quest for knowledge. The narrative is set in peninsular India and describes the various *kalyāṇ amitras* or "spiritual friends" whom Sudhana meets during his journey.⁸⁵ The starting point of Sudhana's journey was Dhanyakara, often identified with Dhanyakataka in Andhra. Historicity is of little account in this Buddhist scripture as the discourse is presented by trans-historical, symbolic beings representing various aspects of universal enlightenment. Trans-locality and long-distance pilgrimage and devotional networks have been an enduring feature of the cultural life in South and Southeast Asia for many centuries. The popularity of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* both at Tabo and in East and Southeast Asia, for example, its prominent representation on the Buddhist monument at Borobudur in central Java, reinforces this trend.

It is this continuation of key central concepts in Buddhism that need to be recognized, as also interconnectedness of Tabo and other sites across South Asia, which has been underscored several times in the discussion. It is evident that these networks of pilgrimage and travel changed radically in the nineteenth century largely due to the demands

⁸⁴ Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, 1999–2000, *The Buddhist Art of Gujarat: on Taranatha's Old Western Indian Style, Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, 6.

⁸⁵ Laxman S. Thakur, 2006, *Visualizing a Buddhist Sutra: Text and Figure in Himalayan Art*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

of the colonial state that required “scientific” knowledge of topography, trade and control over routes. It is perhaps an absence of these controlling factors in peninsular India that resulted in Buddhist sites being dropped out of the network. Cunningham did not go south of the Vindhya, except to visit Kanheri and Elephanta, and his knowledge of Buddhism was entirely based on his travels in the north. It is not that early sites had not been discovered in the Deccan and the far south. As we have discussed earlier, many of these were known, such as the rock-cut caves of the western Deccan or Amaravati on the Andhra coast. But as these were not associated with the life of the Buddha, they held little interest in the colonial framework. In any case, as James Fergusson (1808–86) noted, the south was known for the Hindu temple.⁸⁶ In the next section, we raise some of these issues in the context of peninsular India.

Peninsular India: Land of the Dravidian Temple

Om! There is a city, Sri Dhanyakata
 The door to the city of gods;
 Where Amareśvara Śambhu is worshipped
 By [Indra] the Lord of the Gods.
 Where nearby is god Buddha,
 Worshipped by the Creator (Dhātr),
 [and] where there is a lofty stupa,
 Well ornamented with various ornaments.⁸⁷

This inscription of 1234 CE graphically describes the city of Dhanyakataka in coastal Andhra with its temple to Amareśvara Śiva, as also the stupa to Lord Buddha.⁸⁸ It is this narrative of the co-existence of the two that this section addresses.

⁸⁶ James Ferguson, 1910, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 2 vols, revised and edited by James Burgess (Indian Architecture) and R. Phene Spiers (Eastern Architecture), John Murray, London, pp. 39–40.

⁸⁷ E. Hultzsch, 1901, Two Pillar Inscriptions at Amaravati, *Epigraphia Indica*, 6: 148–49.

⁸⁸ Jonathan S. Walters, 2008, Dhanyakataka Revisited: Buddhist Politics in Post-Buddhist Andhra, in Sree Padma and A. W. Barber, edited, *Buddhism in*

The story of Amaravati starts in the eighteenth century and is closely linked to Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821), who secured a commission in East India Company’s Madras Army in 1783 and carried out two surveys: one of Guntur and the other of the roads from Nellore to Ongole. In 1792, he was appointed as Engineer and Surveyor to the Subsidiary Force in the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad and in 1798 he came across the stupa at Amaravati, making him the first European to discover this second century BCE Buddhist monument. Mackenzie was also perhaps the first European to recognize Jainism as a distinct religious system and labeled the stupa at Amaravati as belonging to the Jainas after a visit to the site in 1798 and published “Account of the Jains” in *Asiatick Researches*.⁸⁹ During his several trips to Mysore, he visited Sravana Belgola and other Jaina monuments still under worship in Karnataka and learnt about Jainism from meeting the local pundits. However, it was not until 1821, i.e., just before his death that he suggested for the first time that the sculptures from Amaravati were Buddhist rather than Jaina.⁹⁰

In 1816, Mackenzie returned to Amaravati with a team of draftsmen who drew pictures of the sculptures found on-site. Mackenzie accumulated massive collections over the course of 38 years, from 1783 when he arrived in India at the age of 29 until his death in 1821. In 1822, his widow sold his collections made largely in south India to the East India Company, which were then catalogued by H. H. Wilson. Over 1700 of his drawings are in the British Library alone.⁹¹ These drawings are now included in the Amaravati Album of the British Library, whose importance lies in two areas.⁹² First, it documents one of the earliest known excavations of a religious site in peninsular India, and second,

the Krishna River Valley of Andhra, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, p. 175.

⁸⁹ Colin Mackenzie, 1809, Account of the Jains, *Asiatick Researches*, 9.

⁹⁰ Colin Mackenzie, 1823, Ruins of Amravutty, Depauldina and Durnacotta, *Asiatic Journal*, 15.

⁹¹ Jennifer Howes, 2010, *Illustrating India: Early Colonial Investigations of Colin Mackenzie (1784–1821)*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

⁹² Upinder Singh, 2004, Documentation and Destruction: The Case of Amaravati (1797–1886), in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Carla Sinopoli, edited, *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*, Indian Council for Historical Research and Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

it contains drawings of sculptures, many of which are now lost, while others are dispersed in museums both in India and Britain largely as a result of this early discovery.

Fergusson, a late contemporary of Mackenzie, also from Scotland, was critical of his work. In his book,⁹³ Fergusson remarked on the lack of details available in Mackenzie's notes on Amravati. He speculated that many of the slabs of the Buddhist monument, which Mackenzie first saw in 1797 were most likely in situ, but since Mackenzie left no record of their precise location, it is difficult to use them for analysis. Fergusson further added that it is due to this carelessness and the fact that Mackenzie published very little on the site that Amravati remained neglected in scholarly discussion. It is no doubt undeniable that Amravati has not received the attention that it deserves as one of the earliest and longest-surviving Buddhist stupa in peninsular India.

As elsewhere, in the coastal region of Andhra also, the presence of Buddhism coincides with the Mauryan period, indicators of contact including Ashokan inscriptions in the Kurnool district and a fragmentary pillar inscription at Amaravati. Archaeological excavations conducted at the twin site of Dharanikota on the river Krishna have provided evidence for five periods of occupation from fourth–third centuries BCE to the eleventh century CE.⁹⁴ It is significant that the sites of Dharanikota and Amaravati are located at the point until which Krishna is navigable and may be defined as landing places for the coastal traffic. Krishna takes a sharp turn at this spot and this link of Amaravati with the river is preserved in a pillar fragment with a post-Ashokan period inscription on it, discovered during clearance of the site in 1958–59.⁹⁵ Engraved on one of the faces is the legend: “the *gosthī* called Vanda at

⁹³ James Fergusson, 1868, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, W.H. Allen and Company, London, pp. 149–50.

⁹⁴ Period I was characterized by the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), fragments of inscribed potsherds, fragment of a pillar edict, etc. Period II (second century BCE–first century CE) was marked by the continuation of the NBPW, punch-marked coins, sculptured panels resembling those of Bharhut and bricks used in the construction of the gateway (47 × 30 × 9 cms; 42 × 21 × 9 cms; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1973–74, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 4–5).

⁹⁵ D. C. Sircar, 1962, Fragmentary Pillar Inscriptions from Amaravati, *Epigraphia Indica*, 35.

Dhanyakataka,” together with the representation of waters.⁹⁶ The term *goṣṭhī* has been translated as committee or association and occurs in the inscriptions of Sanchi in central India, Bhattiprolu on the Andhra coast and Mathura in north India.

The stele from Amaravati is significant for this discussion as it graphically depicts the creation and legitimation of sacred spots in an area as far removed from the Buddha’s peregrinations as the south-eastern coast of India, and the linkages of these to the sacred spots in north India. The three extant faces of the stele depict scenes relating to the last three months of the life of the Buddha from his stay at Vaishali (identified with modern Basarh in Bihar) to his passing away at Kushinagar (or Kasia, 52 km from Gorakhpur in north India). The scenes are further substantiated by explanatory labels. The label on the first face mentions the Bahuputa chaitya and other chaityas at Vaishali, while on the second face the legend Savathi or Shravasti (134 km from Lucknow, the capital of the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh) occurs on one of the three stupa-like structures. Another scene is the purchase of Jetavana in Shravasti by the merchant Anāthapiṇḍaka for the residence of the Buddha and the monks. It is significant that these depictions match in detail, accounts of the life of the Buddha as narrated in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, 5.8).⁹⁷ This stele dated to the Mauryan/post-Mauryan period thus provides the justification for the association of the site of Amaravati with sacred spots in the north, such as Vaishali and Shravasti, and perhaps also explains the prominent part played by monks and nuns in sponsoring religious architecture at the site. An early pillar inscription from Amaravati refers to a donation by a *bhikkhu* or monk from Pataliputra.

An important factor that needs to be taken cognizance of is the traditional practice and systems of restoration of religious sites in Asia by rebuilding, repairs and renovation. Archaeological evidence from

⁹⁶ A. Ghosh and H. Sarkar, 1964–65, Beginnings of Sculptural Art in Southeast India: A Stele from Amaravati, *Ancient India*, 20–21: 175. A subsequent publication suggests a somewhat different reading of *Dhanakada Vandana Mago Ca* as ‘and the pathway to worship Dhanakada’ (Anamika Roy, 1994, *Amaravati Stupa*, Agam Kala Prakashan, New Delhi, p. 193).

⁹⁷ Ghosh and Sarkar, 1964–65, Beginnings of Sculptural Art in Southeast India.

Amaravati indicates that the stupa dates from ca 200–100 BCE and continued to be rebuilt and added to during the period of its existence from second century BCE to fourteenth century CE, though it is the early phase that has often formed the focus of scholarly attention. The stupa at Amaravati was comparable in size with that of Bhattiprolu discussed in Chapter 3, but was slightly larger than stupa 1 at Sanchi. Many of the early sculptural pieces were crushed into small fragments and re-used for the building of the later stupa. Several slabs were re-carved with newer sculptures on the back and re-used.⁹⁸ For example, a palimpsest drum slab was carved in the first century BCE with a scene indicating the Enlightenment of the Buddha represented by an empty throne with his footprints at the base.⁹⁹ In the third century CE, it was re-carved on the other side with an elaborate and tightly decorated stupa showing the Buddha standing in the gateway of the monument worshipped by snake kings and human attendants.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, the railing around the stupa was built in at least three phases: the first from ca 50 BCE to the beginning of the Common Era; the second from 50 to 100 CE; and the last phase from ca 200 to 250 CE.¹⁰¹ The stupa itself underwent a long process of construction and refurbishment and this sets it apart from other contemporary stupas in Andhra. Nearly 140 stupa sites were set up in Andhra from 300 BCE to 300 CE and were concentrated along the river Krishna both east and west of Amaravati, as well as along the coast from Srikakulam in the north to Ramatirtham and Nandalur in the south. Of these, Amaravati continued to be in use for the longest period of time.

Nor did the sanctity of Amaravati diminish with the passage of time as evident from the inscriptions as well as the large number of sculptures found at the site. The finds of large numbers of stone and bronze images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteśvara, Cuṇḍā, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, Vajrapāṇi, Heruka, etc., from Amaravati, suggest not only the continued prosperity of the site from the sixth to

⁹⁸ Akira Shimada, 2006, The Great Railing at Amaravati: An Architectural and Chronological Reconstruction, *Artibus Asiae*, 66(1): 98.

⁹⁹ British Museum OA, 1880, 7–9. 79.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Knox, 1992, *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa*, The British Museum, London, pp. 119, 139.

¹⁰¹ Shimada, 2006, The Great Railing at Amaravati, p. 134.

the eleventh centuries CE,¹⁰² but also the gradual transformation of Buddhism at the site. There is little information on the physical characteristics of the shrines that may have housed these images or the settlements around the site. A large inscription slab containing an elegantly engraved text in Sanskrit dealing with matters of Buddhist principles has been dated to the seventh and eighth centuries CE, or later.¹⁰³ Sir Walter Elliot's drawings and sketches made during his work at Amaravati in 1845 would suggest the presence of a shrine complex, though its date seems uncertain, but certainly later than the fourteenth-century image house referred to in the Gadaladeniya record from Lanka. In the tenth century, a Śiva temple dedicated to the deity as Amareśvara was built about half-a-kilometer from the chaitya. An extensive parallel tradition developed around the temple as evident from the *sthala-purāṇa* associated with it.

In the excavations of 1877 at Amaravati, an octagonal stone pillar was recovered with an inscription dated to 1100 CE and occupying three of its faces.¹⁰⁴ The epigraph starts with a genealogy of the Pallava dynasty and relates the conquest of the four quarters undertaken by king Siṃhavarman. On his way back to Pallava country, Siṃhavarman passed the city of Dhanyakataka where he heard the Buddha preaching the *dhamma*. Two other pillars containing a total of six twelfth-century inscriptions are also known and were recovered from the Amareśvara temple along with three images of the Buddha now kept in the Madras Museum. Five of these inscriptions are dated to 1182–84 CE and record donations made to the Buddha and to the Brahmins.¹⁰⁵ The last known reference to the chaitya at Amaravati is found in an inscription from Gadaladeniya near Kandy in Sri Lanka dated to 1344 CE, which records the repair of a two-storied image house by the Sinhalese monk Dharmakīrti.¹⁰⁶ Dharmakīrti was a prominent member of the sect of

¹⁰² Knox, 1992, *Amaravati*, plates 123–28.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, plate 130.

¹⁰⁴ E. Hultzsch, 1890, A Pallava Inscription from Amaravati, in E. Hultzsch, edited and translated, *South-Indian Inscriptions, Tamil and Sanskrit*, Government Press, Madras, 1890: 25–58, inscription no. 32.

¹⁰⁵ E. Hultzsch, 1901, Two Pillar Inscriptions at Amaravati.

¹⁰⁶ S. Paranavitana, 1935, Gadaladeniya Rock Inscription of Dharmakīrti, *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, 4(2).

forest-dwelling monks and was the author of several Pali works. He was instrumental in setting up the Gadaladeniya shrine in Sri Lanka, which, though intended for worship of the Buddha resembled a Hindu temple of the early Vijayanagara period.

Buddhism continued to flourish, in addition to the lower Krishna valley, at the sites of Sankaram, near Anekkapalle, 50 km from Vishakhapatnam on the highway to Vijayawada and Ramatirtham, 15 km north-east of Vishakhapatnam. Bojjanakonda, the eastern of the two hills at Sankaram is dotted with a series of rock-cut and occasionally brick-built stupas at different terraces. Further north along the Andhra coast, the site of Salihundam is situated on a hill about 8 km from the ancient port of Kalingapatnam located on the sea coast. Images of Māricī, Bhṛkuṭi, Tārā and Mañjuśrī have been found at the site indicating continuity of the Buddhist monastic establishment into the early medieval period and influence of the art and iconography of ancient Orissa.

The archaeological data from further south on the Tamil coast where 127 Buddhist sites have been identified¹⁰⁷ complements that available along the Andhra coast and underscores the vitality and vibrancy of Buddhism in the early medieval period. Nagapattinam was an important seaside town located along the east coast of south India. Fifty kilometers to its north was the site of Kaveripumpattinam located at the point where the river Kaveri enters the Bay of Bengal. It was a flourishing Buddhist establishment from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE. Around the eighth–ninth centuries CE, the center of activity shifted to Nagapattinam, which has yielded a rich hoard of Buddhist bronzes. Three hundred-and-fifty Buddhist bronzes were discovered between 1856 and the 1930s at Vellipalayam and Nanayakkara street in Nagapattinam. Another 42 stunning Buddha bronzes and three Buddha artefacts in stone were found in 2004 in the nearby Sellur village, Kodavasal taluq, Tiruvarur district, Tamil Nadu. They are all datable from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries CE.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.pnclink.org/pnc2011/english/ppt/D.%20DAYALAN.pdf> (accessed on May 2, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ T. S. Subramanian, Stunning Indicators of Nagapattinam's Buddhist Legacy, *The Hindu*, December 25, 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/stunning-indicators-of-nagapattinams-buddhist-legacy/article2745233.ece> (accessed June 18, 2013).

The Dutch traveler Wouter Schouten visited the Tamil coast in the 1660s and described a brick structure at Nagapattinam that he termed the “Chinese Pagoda;” an account repeated by a Dutch priest François Valentyn in his 1724 publication. The structure was extant until the nineteenth century. Sir Walter Elliot visited the Chinese Pagoda in 1846 on board the government steamer *Hugh Lindsay*, which traveled down the coast, and described it as a “four-sided tower of three stories constructed of bricks closely fitted together without cement.”¹⁰⁹ There was a fort in its vicinity and “about 11/3 miles NNW from the fort stands the old Black Pagoda, which is one of the most conspicuous objects in approaching this part of the coast.”¹¹⁰ In spite of local objections, the Governor-in-Council approved the demolition of the Buddhist monastery on 28 August, 1867 by French Jesuits who had been expelled from Pondicherry and had wanted to construct a college in its place.

The two sets of Leyden copper plates, the Larger Leyden Plate and Smaller Leyden Plates, refer to the establishment of the Cuḍāmaṇi Vihāra at Nagapattinam at the initiative of the kings of Śrīvijaya. Construction started during the reign of the Chola king Rājārāja I (985–1016 CE) and was completed under his son and successor Rājendra I (1012–44 CE). The Smaller Leyden Plates in Tamil refer to nine units of land attached to the Nagapattinam Vihara.¹¹¹ The larger plates contain a Sanskrit portion, consisting of 111 lines and a Tamil portion, consisting of 332. The Sanskrit text states that in the 21st regnal year, the king gave the village of Annaimangalam to the lofty shrine of Buddha in the Chulamanivarman Vihara, which the ruler of Śrīvijaya and Kataha, Mara Vijayottungavarman of Śailendra family with the *makara* crest had erected in the name of his father in the delightful city of Nagappattana. After Rājārāja had passed away, his son Madhurantaka caused a permanent edict to be made for the village granted by his father. It is mentioned that the height of the vihara towered above Kanaka

¹⁰⁹ Sir Walter Elliot, 1878, The Edifice Formerly Known as the Chinese or Jaina Pagoda at Negapatam, *The Indian Antiquary*, 7: 224.

¹¹⁰ James Horsburgh, 1874, *Sailing Directory*, W. H. Allen and Company, London, p. 453.

¹¹¹ Peter Schalk, A. Velupillai, Irā Nācakāmi, Ci Patmanātana, and D Dayalan, edited, 2002, *Buddhism among Tamils in Pre-Colonial Tamilakam and Ilam*, vol. 2, Uppsala University, Stockholm, pp. 513–670.

Giri or Mount Meru.¹¹² Nagapattinam finds mention in the 1467 CE Kalyāni inscription of the Burmese king Dharmaceti. Some Burmese monks who were ship-wrecked are said to have visited Nagapattinam and worshipped there.¹¹³

A large number of Buddhist bronze images were recovered during demolition of the monastery at Nagapattinam, as mentioned earlier.¹¹⁴ These included representations of Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya, Lokeśvara, Jambhāla, Vasudharā, and Tārā, and some of them carried inscriptions in Tamil on their pedestals dated between eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE. Three categories of inscriptions are common: those containing epithets of the Buddha; those recording the setting up of images by monks and nuns; those with legends consisting of gifts by lay devotees. The longest and perhaps the most interesting is the two-line legend on the pedestal of a 69.2 cm Buddha image, now in the John D. Rockefeller III collection. The 2002 decipherment of the inscription reads as follows:

The image of the Lord Buddha is for festival procession(s) at the temple of the Lord Buddha attached to the *akkacāḷaipperumpalli* or image house of *Rajendracōḷapperumpalli*.

This image of the Lord Buddha has been installed by the venerable Kunākara IV of Ciṭutavūr.

Hail Prosperity! The prefect of artisan manufactories for the merchants of the eighteen countries.¹¹⁵

Thus, the Buddha image was invested with attributes of divinity and was involved in several rituals with close parallels to those associated with Viṣṇu. Two monastic institutions were located at Nagapattinam, viz., the Cuḍāmaṇi Vihāra and the Rajendracōḷapperumpalli. The inscriptions from Nagapattinam thus provide evidence for the presence of

¹¹² Gokul Seshadri, 2009, New Perspectives on Nagapattinam, in Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja, edited, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, p. 125.

¹¹³ Schalk, 2002, *Buddhism among Tamils*, p. 596.

¹¹⁴ T. N. Ramachandran, 1954, *The Nagapattinam and Other Buddhist Bronzes in the Madras Museum*, Government Press, Madras.

¹¹⁵ Schalk, 2002, *Buddhism among Tamils*, p. 595.

several monastic orders and gifts by monks and nuns to the Sangha. Several conclusions are evident, such as the largely coastal location of Buddhist centers along the Andhra and Tamil coasts; close interaction with other religious communities in the region, notwithstanding the polemics of the textual accounts; and finally a vibrant trans-local exchange of gifts with centers in Sumatra and China. How are these wider linkages of Nagapattinam to be assessed?

As Kenneth R. Hall argues that there is reassertion of the vitality

of a self-sustaining Bay of Bengal commercial network during the 1250–1500 period, which carried over into the next century. This network was inclusive of Pegu (Burma), Ayuddhya (Thailand), Vietnam and Khmer (Cambodia) cultural centers on the Southeast Asian mainland; the Melaka Straits region, inclusive of west Sumatra and the west coast of the Malay Peninsula; Bengal, Andhra and south India's Coromandel coastlines; as well as Sri Lanka.¹¹⁶

This section shifts the focus to travel as a marker of self-identity of *Buddha dhamma*.

Traveling Dhamma

In his Presidential Address in 2009, Robert Buswell explored Indian ascetic traditions of itinerant wanderers and suggested that travel impulse formed an integral part of *Buddha dhamma's* self-identity. He proposed that the motivation to travel was by no means restricted to the terrestrial world, but was deeply ingrained in Buddhist cosmology, as evident from massive anthologies of spiritual journeys.¹¹⁷ The travel to Buddhist imaginaries no doubt helped break down the temporal and spatial barriers between the universal *dhamma* and local practices followed by lineages of Buddhist teachers. In this chapter, we have earlier referred to pilgrimages across the Indian subcontinent. In this final section, we discuss the interlinkages across the Bay of Bengal.

¹¹⁶ Kenneth R. Hall, Structural Change and Societal Integration in Early South India: An Introductory Essay, in Kenneth R. Hall, 2001, edited, *Structure and Society in Early South India: Essays in Honour of Noboru Karashima*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 24–25.

¹¹⁷ Robert E. Buswell Jr., 2009, Korean Buddhist Journeys to Lands Worldly and Otherworldly, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 68(4).

Maritime networks were well established by the middle of the first millennium CE,¹¹⁸ and the practice of setting up religious shrines on successful completion of sea voyages is attested to. A cluster of fifth-century inscriptions of unequivocal Buddhist affiliation was found in Kedah on the west coast of the Malay peninsula. Three of these inscriptions are made of local stone and bear similar illustrations of Buddhist stupas. Texts very similar to these inscriptions have been found on the island of Borneo and on the coast of Brunei.¹¹⁹ The most interesting of these inscriptions in Sanskrit is that of Buddhagupta, which refers to the setting up of the stone by the mariner Buddhagupta, resident of Raktamṛttikā, identified with Rajbadidanga in Bengal, on the successful completion of his voyage.¹²⁰ Nearly 40 inscriptions containing the term *siddhayātrā* or voyages for acquisition of spiritual power appear at several sites in south Sumatra, palaeographically dated to the seventh century CE and inscribed in connection with ceremonies, roughly Buddhist in nature, on the successful completion of journeys.¹²¹

Interesting information about circumnavigation of the Malay Peninsula is contained in the Buddhist monk Yijing's account of the voyage to India in 671 CE.¹²² Yijing spent six months in Sumatra studying Sanskrit and then traveled to Tamralipti in Bengal from where he visited holy places associated with the life of the Buddha. Yijing refers to a distinguished teacher in Nalanda and others who had traveled extensively. Twelve years later, Yijing returned by the same route traveling on the winds of the northeast monsoon to reach Kedah, but this trip required two months, whereas the outward journey had taken only 25 days.

The itinerary of Yijing brings into focus the Buddhist and other remains from southern Sumatra. Seven inscriptions have been found in the region, the most elaborate being the one from Sabokingking.

¹¹⁸ Himanshu Prabha Ray, 1999, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi.

¹¹⁹ J. W. Christie, 1995, *State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia: A Consideration of the Theories and the Data*, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 151(2): 256.

¹²⁰ B. Ch. Chhabra, 1965, *Expansion of the Indo-Aryan Culture during Pallava Rule*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹²² Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002, *Malay Peninsula: Crossroads of the Maritime Silk Road (100 BC–1300 AD)*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, pp. 53–54.

The epigraph is on a seven-hooded Naga stone. The first part is in a local dialect, while the second is in Old Malay in the Tamil Grantha script. The imprecation formula comprises an invocation to the gods, a curse upon evildoers and finally a blessing (*tantramālā*) for those who remain loyal to the Datuk (Chief).¹²³ It would seem that the sites of these imprecatory inscriptions were focal points of local power centers.

The archaeological data from the hill known as Bukit Seguntang on the river Musi in Sumatra includes an inscription of 682 CE mentioning Śrīvijaya, late-seventh- and early-eighth-century stone and bronze images of the Buddha and Avalokiteśvara, as well as images of Śiva and Gaṇeśa.¹²⁴ The largest concentration of Buddhist remains have been located at Muara Jambi, an extensive temple complex dated between eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE, located 26 km east of the city of Jambi on the river Batang Hari. The statuary found at the site included a headless image of Prajñāpāramitā dated to the thirteenth century CE, as well as gold foil sheets found in ritual deposits bearing the names of the five Tathāgatas, 16 Vajra Bodhisattvas and the sixteen Vajra Tārās. Jambi has thus provided indications for extensive maritime links not only with India and China, but also with Thailand and the western Indian Ocean.¹²⁵

These movements across the ocean and the making of donations for establishing religious centers continue in later periods. We have earlier referred to the vihara at Nagapattinam, which received gifts from kings of Southeast Asia and China. A Sanskrit inscription engraved on a large copper plate found in Nalanda in 1921 records that the king of the Pala dynasty, Devapāla (ruled ca 810–47 CE), allocated five villages to support a monastery established there by Mahārājā Balaputradeva, lord of Suvarṇadvīpa (Sumatra).¹²⁶ The inscription emphasizes such religious tenets as “*bodhisattvas* well-versed in *tantras*” and the copy-

¹²³ Edwards E. McKinnon, 1985, Early Politics in Southern Sumatra: Some Preliminary Observations Based on Archaeological Evidence, *Indonesia*, 40(October): 2–5.

¹²⁴ O. W. Wolters, 2008, *Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays*, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell, pp. 110–11.

¹²⁵ McKinnon, 1985, Early Politics in Southern Sumatra.

¹²⁶ Hiranand Shastri, 1924, The Nalanda Copper Plate of Devapaladeva, *Epigraphia Indica*, 17(7).

ing of Buddhist texts. The inscription provides important details about the ancestry of Śrīvijaya's ruler at the time. It records his claim that his maternal grandfather was king Dharmasetu and his mother was named Tārā. His fame is compared to that of the five Pāṇḍava brothers of the *Mahābhārata*. The inscription goes on to refer to families of Hindu deities including Śiva and Pārvatī, Indra and Paulomī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, as well as to Buddha, son of Queen Māyā, as analogous to the parents of Balaputra. It is important to place this interaction between Nalanda and the Indonesian archipelago within the larger context of Buddhist sites in the region.

Hiram Woodward has suggested that a distinctive world of Mantrayāna and Yoginī Tantras pervaded Java and Sumatra, as also large parts of India from the seventh century CE onwards. "A good argument can be made for treating Indonesia and India as an integral unit well into the ninth century."¹²⁷ In this he counters the overview presented in Ronald M. Davidson's study based largely on textual sources.¹²⁸ Important links in Woodward's unit are provided by the sculptural and iconographic programmes of the stupa and Borobudur in central Java and the Tabo monastery discussed earlier. Both adopt a sequence of texts and depictions that parallel each other, i.e., the life of the Buddha according to the *Lalitavistara* and Sudhana's pilgrimage as detailed in the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*. Providing a link between the two regions was the renowned *dhamma* teacher Atīśa (982–1054 CE) who is said to have studied at with the master Dharmakīrti of Suvarṇadvīpa from 1012 to 1024 CE. He traveled to the Indonesian archipelago on board a merchant ship along with his students. On completion of his studies, he returned to Vikramshila. In 1042 CE, he visited Tibet on the invitation of the king of Tibet and is considered the father of Tibetan Buddhism.¹²⁹

This chapter has thus shown that far from being degenerate or in a state of decline, the period from the sixth to thirteenth centuries CE was marked by an expansion of Buddhist monastic centers not only

¹²⁷ Hiram Woodward, 2004, Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35(2): 353.

¹²⁸ Ronald M. Davidson, 2003, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, Columbia University Press, New York.

¹²⁹ Ruth Sonam, translated and edited, 1997, *Atisha's Lamp for the Path*, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, pp. 7–17.

in the Indian subcontinent, but also at sites across the Bay of Bengal. Several concepts were shared across the ocean. Tārā was a popular deity in Orissa, especially at Ratnagiri, where she is found sculpted on 99 niches of monolithic stupas. She is invoked in several inscriptions, such as the Nalanda record of Vipula Śrīmitra dated to the first half of the twelfth century CE, as also the Kalasan inscription from Java. Though there were several similarities between contemporary sites, yet every site placed emphasis on certain images suggesting local preferences for cults and specific texts. A second issue that emerges is the need to appreciate the place of *Buddha dhamma* in a multireligious milieu. In contrast to the conventional linear development from Buddhist shrine to Hindu temple, recent research establishes that both the Buddhist shrine and the Hindu temple were contemporaneous and shared sacred space with other domestic, local and regional cults. It is this relationship between *Buddha dhamma* and other contemporary religions that we take up for discussion in the next chapter.



5

Buddhism in Memory and History



Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions . . .¹

Historical memory can be conceived of as an intentional attempt to store and reproduce knowledge of the past. In this conceptualization, monuments and rituals become two of the potent media for the storage and recycling of historical memory. Monuments enshrine many kinds of memories: memory of the vision of the builder, for example, the pillar edicts of the Mauryan king Ashoka (r. 272–32 BCE); memory acquired over time, either in the replication of the pillar form or through addition of later inscriptions; and finally, the created memory through transformation of the monument, either by partially destroying or by altering its context or form. Monuments also become sites for enactment of rituals, such as pilgrimages, for the reinforcement of memory and knowledge of the past.

Social carriers of memory are agents of reproduction and circulation of historical memory, and traditionally these have included itinerant story-tellers, singers or performers who narrate mythical and past events to a local audience. The social carriers changed with the advent of modernity when the past was discovered as a field of ‘objective’ truth. The charismatic position of these ‘myth-producers’ has now been taken by professional experts. The rise of the expert also affected the relationship between the experts and the lay audience and resulted in the demise

¹ D. Lowenthal, 1985, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 210.

of “public history.” “These experts can achieve an almost monopolistic position if they can avoid internal dissent and rely on the support of political power and reputed scholarship.”² It is this change with reference to Buddhism that this chapter documents. In this chapter, I focus on the continued presence of the Buddha and the ‘righteous’ king Ashoka in historical memory reinforced, no doubt, by the accounts of the ruler in Buddhist texts.

The political significance of the *dhammarāja* ideal was enormous in the past, as also in the present. In Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia, Ashoka was celebrated as the first king to have established a state based on Buddhist principles. From the fourteenth century CE onwards, several kings in Southeast Asia had the name Ashoka or *dhammarāja* among their royal titles. The policy of Buddhist socialism followed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia in the twentieth century was based on models for good conduct and national development provided by Jayavarman VII (1181–1220 CE) and Ashoka.³ He explained his concept of Buddhist socialism with reference to the edicts of Ashoka and wrote: “On the pillar which Emperor Ashoka had constructed for the edification of his subjects, one reads, ‘I consider the well-being of all creatures as a goal for which I should fight’ and adds his own comment: it is the goal of *Sangkum*,”⁴ roughly translated as “Popular Socialist Community.” In addition is the association of several sacred sites in Southeast Asia with the Mauryan ruler Ashoka. For example, in 1566, the Lao king SETHATHIRAT built the That (Dhātu) Luang, “the great stupa” in Vientiane to reinforce the *dhammarāja* concept of Lao kingship. The sacredness of the site stemmed from its association in popular memory with an ancient stone pillar containing relics of the Buddha and said to have been erected by Ashoka. It was believed that the sacred stone would acquire centrality as a religious center and by fulfilling this

² Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge, 2003, Historical Memory, in Gerard Delanty and Engin Fahri Isin, edited, *Handbook of Historical Sociology*, Sage Publications, London, p. 332.

³ Peter Gyallay-Pap, 2007, Reconstructing the Cambodian Polity, in Ian Harris, edited, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 79–80, 87.

⁴ John Marston, 2007, The Cambodian Hospital for Monks, in Harris, edited, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 114.

prophecy, Setthathirat linked “his new royal capital with the origins of Buddhism.”⁵

King Ashoka in Memory

Jawaharlal Nehru quoted H. G. Wells in his letters to his daughter and agreed that

amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan his name is still honoured. China, Tibet and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory to-day than ever heard [*sic*] the names of Constantine or Charlemagne.⁶

As the quote shows, the memory of Ashoka, the righteous ruler, has continued in history and memory into the present period. What made this long continuity possible?

Oral tradition and cultural associations of the Ashokan pillars partly reinforced the Buddhist textual traditions that developed around the figure of Ashoka. This included not only the second-century-CE Sanskrit text, the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvamsa* written in Pali, but also stories about him in several Asian languages, such as Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Burmese, Thai, and several others in Asia. Ashoka was the first king in India to inscribe his edicts on pillars, but certainly not the last. Not only did the pillars become a part of monastic architecture in the post-Ashokan period, but as shown in Chapter 3, Table 2, the pillars were shifted by later kings who often also inscribed them with their own records. In addition, the pillars were copied; found sculptural representation in reliefs at Buddhist sites; and were transformed into the *dhvajastambhas* or flagpoles associated with medieval temple complexes.⁷

⁵ Volker Grabowsky, 2007, Buddhism, Power and Political Order in Pre-twentieth Century Laos, in Harris, edited, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, pp. 127, 128.

⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, 1951, *Discovery of India*, third edition, Meridian Books, London, p. 115.

⁷ A. Ghosh, 1967, The Pillars of Asoka: Their Purpose, *East and West*, new series, 17(3–4): 273–75.

Two other Ashokan pillars were shifted to Delhi by Firuz Shah Tughlak in 1367 CE and a description of the removal of these pillars is given in a contemporary account, by *Shams-i-Sirāj*.⁸ One of these was brought from Topra in present-day Haryana by boat across the Yamuna river and installed on a three-storied building in front of the Friday mosque in Firuz Shah Kotla, Delhi, its place of origin being identified by Alexander Cunningham as Khizrabad on the bank of Yamuna located within the ancient region of Srughna. The pillar has two principal inscriptions and several minor records of pilgrims and travelers dating from the early centuries of the Common Era to the nineteenth century. The oldest of the minor records is the name Subhadramitra inscribed in letters of the fourth–fifth century CE, while another long epigraph was engraved by the Chauhan prince Visala Deva in 1163 CE. The three-storied structure and the mosque were designed by the Sultan and formed part of a complex. The second Ashokan pillar was brought from Meerut and set up in a hunting lodge on a hill, near the present Bara Hindu Rao hospital in Delhi. The surface of the stone pillar is severely damaged leading to defacement of the inscriptions.⁹ A third pillar is located in the town of Fatehabad, the Sultan's earliest urban construction built in the first year of his reign in 1551–52 CE. The bottom part of the pillar is probably of Mauryan origin, though the top section is of beige stone and carries an inscription referring to the Tughluq dynasty. Cunningham identified this pillar and a second one in the courtyard of a mosque in the city of Hissar, as made from reused Ashokan pillars.

The incorporation of a pillar in Islamic architecture is unique to India. Within the country, pillar has a long history going back to the sacrificial post or *yūpa* of Vedic texts. The Mauryan king Ashoka brought the pillars to center stage of Indian architecture as emblems of universal

⁸ J. A. Page, 1937, *A Memoir on Kotla Firoz Shah, Delhi, (with a translation of Sirat-i-Firozshahi by Mohammad Hamid Kuraishi), Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 52, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi; Anthony Welch, 1993, *Architectural Patronage and the Past: The Tughluq Sultans of India, Muqarnas (Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar)*, 10.

⁹ Alexander Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India: Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862–63–64–65*, vol. 1, Archaeological Survey of India, Simla, pp. 161–69.

order and the Buddhist notion of kingship. William Jeffrey McKibben remarks on Afif's views on the mythic origin of the pillar:

Both the Topra and Meerut pillars installed by Firuz Shah in his capital were believed to have had mythic origins. Afif notes that they were associated with the Pandavas, whose exploits are told in the epic Mahabharata. The author confesses to coming by this knowledge by reading historical works, but he neglects to identify them.¹⁰

No doubt, as the following verse shows, Firuz Shah marveled at the monumentality of the pillar:

This pillar, high as the heaven, is made of a single block of stone and tapers upward, being broad at the base and narrow at the top.

Seen from a hundred farsangs it looks like a hillock of gold, as the Sun when it spreads its rays in the morning.

No bird — neither eagle, nor crane — can fly as high as its top, and arrows, whether Khadang or KhaṂ, cannot reach to its middle.

If thunder were to rage about the top of this pillar, no one could hear the sound owing to the great distance.

O God! How did they lift this heavy mountain; and in what did they fix it that it does not move from its place?

How did they carry it to the top of the building which almost touches the heavens and place it [upright] there?¹¹

In addition to inspiring awe, the pillars also bore inscriptions of later periods. For example, in the fifth century CE, Gupta ruler Samudragupta inscribed the Allahabad-Kaushambi pillar of Ashoka with his *praśasti* or eulogy. The pillar also records the visit of Raja Birbal, a prominent courtier of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605 CE). Subsequently, his successor Jehangir (1569–1627 CE) added another inscription to this pillar recording his ancestry.

¹⁰ William Jeffrey McKibben, 1994, *The Monumental Pillars of Fīrūz Shāh Tughluq*, *Ars Orientalis*, 24: 111; Finnbar B. Flood, 2003, *Pillars, Palimpsests, and Princely Practices: Translating the Past in Sultanate Delhi*, *Res*, 43.

¹¹ Welch, 1993, *Architectural Patronage and the Past*, p. 319.

At Sarnath, the Ashokan schism edict, which threatened monks causing dissension in the Sangha with punitive action, had two later inscriptions, one referring to king Aśvaghōṣa dated to the early centuries of Common Era and the other written in fourth-century-CE characters.¹² An eleventh-century-CE pedestal inscription found at Sarnath records the restoration of the stupa of Ashoka at Sarnath and its *dharmacakra* by two brothers from Gauḍa in eastern India.¹³ An inscription on one of the doorways of an octagonal brick building raised on top of a stupa known as Chaukhandi mound at Sarnath records that it was built by Akbar in 1588 CE as a memorial to Humayun's ascent of the mound.¹⁴ It is significant that the monastic complex was visited in the sixteenth century CE and that the Mughal rulers left accounts of their visits, which perhaps saved the stupa from the depredations of brick robbers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the use and reuse of Ashokan pillars, it is evident that not only was Ashoka's *dhamma* kept alive within the Indic literary traditions, but the physical markers of his reign continued to be invested with social power to legitimize political rule.

Maharaja Sayajirao III (1863–1939), the ruler of Baroda, set up a *kirtistambha* in 1935 to commemorate 60 years of his rule. The pillar was made in imitation of the Ashokan pillar unearthed at Lauriya-Nandangarh in Bihar. The pillar has an inscription in praise of the ruler.¹⁵ Ashoka's legacy was by no means restricted to rulers in South and Southeast Asia, but was also adopted by the colonial state. A good example of this is the proclamation pillar set up in Minto Park in Allahabad to commemorate the site where Lord Canning held his Proclamation Durbar in 1858 on the occasion of the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown. The design of the

¹² F. O. Oertel, 1990, Excavations at Sarnath, *Archaeological Survey of India: Annual Report 1904–05*, reprint, Swati Publications, pp. 68–70.

¹³ J. Ph. Vogel, 1990, Buddhist Sculptures from Benares, *Archaeological Survey of India: Annual Rreport 1903–04*, reprint, Swati Publications, New Delhi, pp. 222–23.

¹⁴ Oertel, 1990, Excavations at Sarnath, pp. 74–75.

¹⁵ When Kirtistambha's Lion Foretold a Story, *The Times of India*, Vadodara, April 16, 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-04-17/vadodara/31354996_1_lion-erstwhile-baroda-state-sayajirao-gaekwad-iii (accessed on May 5, 2012).

pillar was adapted from the Ashokan pillar at Sarnath, the only difference being that on top of the four lions the British Crown was placed, instead of the *cakra*. The medallions of Queen Victoria and the King Emperor Edward VII were placed in the middle of the pillar with extracts from the Proclamation inscribed further down.¹⁶ In the post-Independence period, the practice of erecting pillars inspired by those of Ashoka continued and one was set up in Kamla Nehru Park in Bombay in early April 1957. The concrete pillar with an ornate lion capital was built through a donation by Messrs Devidayal and inaugurated by S. K. Patil, President of the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee.¹⁷

Certainly, the memory of Ashoka was carried on in the colonial and post-colonial periods and aiding this continuity were the several visitors and travelers to sites associated with the Mauryan king. Were these remains indicative of Buddhist associations as mentioned in the Ceylonese chronicles? This raises the larger question of the putative divide between distinctive religious identities between Buddhism and Hinduism — a theme that we next move on to.

Buddhism and Brahmanism

*In the past kings used to go out on pleasure tours during which there was hunting and other entertainment. But ten years after Beloved-of-the-God's (rājā piyadassi) coronation he went on a tour to sambodhi and thus instituted dhamma tours. During these tours, the following things took place: visits and gifts to brahmanas and ascetics, visits and gifts of gold to the aged, visits to people in the countryside, instructing them in dhamma, and discussing dhamma with them as is suitable (Major Rock Edict VIII of the Mauryan king Ashoka).*¹⁸

Ashoka's *dhamma* or religious doctrine clearly included both Brahmins and *śramaṇas* or ascetics of non-Brahmanical sects such as Buddhists and Ājīvikas in the third century BCE, and in a way set the tone for interaction between the two in later periods. It is this changing relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism that forms the central

¹⁶ Lord Minto: Proposed Indian Memorial, *The Times of India*, August 19, 1910: 7.

¹⁷ Asoka Pillar Unveiled, *The Times of India*, April 9, 1957: 3.

¹⁸ Richard Salomon, 1998, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Other Indo-Aryan Languages*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, p. 136.

theme of this section. The study of history of archaeology and art history is important to place in context some of the theories that emerged with regard to the relationship of *Buddha dhamma* with its contemporary religious doctrines in the nineteenth century and have continued to be repeated ever since. For example, the connection between architectural form and religious change was firmly established in nineteenth-century India and the quest for chronology securely rooted architecture within linear time. More importantly, this projected a linear development of Buddhist–Jaina–Hindu architecture and propagated notions of origins and decline and hostility between the different religions of the subcontinent, co-existence being ruled out. Exemplifying this line of thinking, James Fergusson and James Burgess stated:

The Western caves afford the most vivid illustration of the rise and progress of all the great religions that prevailed in India in the early centuries of our era and before it. They show how Buddhist religion rose and spread, and its form afterwards became corrupt and idolatrous. They explain how it consequently came to be superseded by the nearly cognate form of Jainism and the antagonistic development of the revived religion of the Brahmins.¹⁹

James Fergusson (1808–86) came to India to work for the family firm of Fairlie, Ferguson & Co. of Calcutta. Soon, his interest shifted from merchandizing to architecture and for about six years from 1836 to 1841, he traveled to various parts of India, studying and documenting Indian architecture. After returning to London in 1845, his sketches were lithographed and published in a book entitled *Illustrations of the Rock Cut Temples of India*, which consisted of 18 plates.

Fergusson's *History of Architecture* first appeared in 1855 as part of his well-known *Handbook*. A new edition, very liberally enlarged, appeared in 1862, also as part of a similar general *History of Architecture in all Countries*, while the third edition was published as *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* in 1876. In Fergusson's frame of reference, Indian architecture provided an important missing link in the development of architecture in the world, especially that in the twelfth–thirteenth-century Europe. Further, according to him, even though India could never reach "the intellectual supremacy of Greece, or the moral greatness

¹⁹ James Fergusson and James Burgess, 1969[1880], *Cave Temples of India*, reprint, Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, pp. 166.

of Rome,” architecture in India was still a living art, which could inform in a variety of ways about developments in Europe.²⁰

This was a significant remark, since, according to Fergusson, there was a lack of historical texts in India and the post-fifth-century-CE Indian history could only be comprehended through a study of monuments and inscriptions. Fergusson’s classification of architecture was essentially within a racial–religious framework. Fergusson drew a distinction between the Brahmanism of the Vedas and the idolatrous form of Hinduism that developed later. He argued that the architectural history of India commenced in around 250 BCE and all the monuments known to us for the next five or six centuries are Buddhist, with the Hindu temple emerging around the seventh and eighth centuries CE. He categorically denied the presence of Buddhism in peninsular India and stated that it did not gain a footing among the Dravidian races and that Hindu religion was probably always supreme in the Dravidian districts.²¹ The framework propounded by Fergusson has survived with extraordinary tenacity in the post-Independence period and has resulted in a general disregard for multireligious sites, shared architectural vocabulary and plurality of religious forms in the academic discourse.

The theme of relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism has been critically reviewed by J. Bronkhorst who does not share the generally held opinion that Buddhism was a reaction against Vedic Brahmanism. The two religious doctrines, he argues, originated in different areas of the subcontinent and Brahmins did not occupy a dominant position in the region where the Buddha preached. Buddhism emerged in the region to the east of the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna, a region not included in Āryavarta by grammarian Patañjali (150 BCE). A third group, coeval with the Brahmins and the Buddhists, were the Jains.²² The earliest cave inscriptions from Tamilnadu show that Jains were in that region at least from the second century BCE onwards and may have preceded the Buddhists in other regions as well. This would suggest that

²⁰ James Fergusson, 1910, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, vol. 1, revised and edited by James Burgess (Indian Architecture) and R. Phene Spiers (Eastern Architecture), John Murray, London, pp. 4–5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

²² J. Bronkhorst, 2011, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, p. 1.

the Jainas may have been the main competitors of the Buddhists rather than the Brahmins.

The Brahmanical vision of society based on *varṇa* hierarchy is largely absent from early South Asian inscriptions. This is true of the inscriptions of Ashoka and the Tamil inscriptions. It is equally true of the inscriptions in Kharoshthi judging by Sten Konow's index²³ and of most non-Sanskritic inscriptions in Brahmi that precede 150 CE. Among the exceptions we must count Nasik cave inscription 2 of the Sātavāhanas. Also, a number of Pallava inscriptions fall into this category, which credit the king with the task of maintaining harmony between the different *varṇas* in the kingdom.²⁴

Bronkhorst continues that in the competition between Brahmanism and Buddhism, the former had an advantage, as Brahmins had always been involved in the affairs of the state and were well prepared for counseling the king.²⁵ Thus, he introduces a critical element of affiliation to political power in the discussion, i.e., the relationship of Brahmanism and Buddhism with the king. This is a complex relationship as indicated by inscriptions and gifts made to the Sangha. An analysis of the inscriptions at the rock-cut caves of Nasik dedicated to the Sangha and dated to the early centuries of the Common Era indicates that vihara cave 3 was excavated in several phases. The first phase of work on the cave was finished perhaps during the 14th year of the Sātavāhana king Gautamīputra Sātakaṛṇi's reign. In the eulogy of his mother, Gautamīputra Sātakaṛṇi has been lauded as the Sātavāhana ruler who won back the territory lost to the Western Kṣatrapas under king Nahapāna (r. 55–100 CE) and re-established the *varṇa* hierarchy. The other inscription, inscribed in the 19th year of Puḷumāyi's reign, indicates that the cave was enlarged with the addition of a cell in the veranda shortly after the initial phase of construction.²⁶ Vihara 3 and vihara 10 are important for understanding royal donations to monks living at Nasik by the two rival dynasties of the Kṣatrapas and the Sātavāhanas. The competitiveness between the

²³ Sten Konow, edited, 1929, *Kharoshthi Inscriptions, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 2, pt 1, Calcutta.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁶ V. Dehejia, 1972, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples*, Thames and Hudson, London, p. 160.

two is also reflected in similarity in plans and construction of the two caves donated by them, i.e., vihara 3 and vihara 10.

Nor is royal generosity towards Buddhism limited to the early period. In the Jagjivanpur copper plate of Pāla ruler Mahendrapāla (Malda district, West Bengal, dated 840–46 CE), Vajradeva, a member of the royal family, is said to have built a vihara and granted tax-free land of Nandadirghika, for its maintenance. Ten years of archaeological excavation at Tulabhita mound at Jagjivanpur have brought to light remains of a square brick-built monastery. The origin of the monastery can be firmly dated to the middle of the ninth century CE on the basis of the copper-plate charter. In its plan, the monastery resembles the lay-out of Monastery 1 at Lalitagiri, Orissa, and Monastery 8 at Nalanda, Bihar. What is striking is the absence of stone in its architecture. Instead, the excavations yielded a rich hoard of 387 terracotta plaques representing gods, men, animals, and sacred objects.²⁷

These examples can be multiplied to show the continued presence of Buddhist monastic sites in the twelfth century CE and the support provided to them by the royalty. Thus, there does not seem to be a correlation between royal patronage and the ascendancy of the Brahmins. On the contrary, Buddhist monasteries continued to receive large grants well into the twelfth century CE. This is especially valid for eastern India where dynasties, such as the Bhaumakaras (r. c. 825–950 CE) in Orissa, the Candras (r. c. 850–1050 CE) of south-eastern Bengal and the Pālas (r. c. 750–1199 CE) of Gauḍa, provided patronage to Buddhist monastic complexes. The Candras and the Pālas used the *dharmacakra* as the seal on their charters and began their inscriptions with obeisance to the Buddha with epithets, such as *paramasaugataḥ* and *paramatathāgataḥ*, meaning “entirely devoted to the Buddha.” This in no way weakened the traditional commitment of Indian kings to the imposition and preservation of the caste-based brahmanical social order in which Śaivism was embedded. Alexis Sanderson thus proposes the co-existence of Śaivism and Buddhism under royal patronage in India, as was the norm in Southeast Asia as well, especially in the kingdoms of the Khmer, the

²⁷ Amal Ray, 2002, A Newly Discovered Buddhist Monastery at Jagajjivanpur, West Bengal, in Gautam Sengupta and Sheena Panja, edited, *Archaeology of Eastern India, New Perspective*, Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India, Kolkata.

Cham and the Javanese.²⁸ However, unlike the kingdoms of Southeast Asia, those in India witnessed the emergence of Śaivism as the dominant religion.²⁹

The literary output of the Tantras involved the reworking and adaptation of existing material, as well as a conceptual re-elaboration of many of the ideas therein. What is extremely relevant here is that the Tantric period — the period between the third and ninth centuries CE marked by the development of rituals for worship of deities with mantras — is characterized by continued engagement between *Buddha dhamma* and Hinduism. Scholars have sought to explain this overlap of ideas between the two in a variety of ways, such as one borrowing from the other or adoption from a common substratum of beliefs and practices. For instance, Sanderson, explaining the relation of Tantras to Buddhism, states:

The term ‘Tantric’ is used here to denote a form of religious practice which is distinguishable from the rest of Buddhism principally by its ritual character, only secondarily by soteriological doctrine and hardly at all by specific theories of ultimate reality. The basic character of this Tantric ritual is that it entails the evocation and worship of deities (*devatā*) by means of mantras of which the visualized forms of the deities are transformations . . . It is necessary to undergo . . . and elaborate ritual of empowerment (*abhiṣeka*) during which the initiand is introduced to a particular mantra-deity and its retinue.³⁰

Tantric initiation in Buddhism was open to both monks and married laypersons, though the inclusion of several infringements of the Kāpālikas did not go unchallenged within the Buddhist doctrine. For example, the Tantric Master Atīśa (982–1054 CE) decreed that the sexual elements of Vajrayāna ritual were only appropriate for married householders. For monks, these were only permissible in their symbolic form.

²⁸ Alexis Sanderson, 2009, *The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period*, in Shingo Einoo, edited, *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, p. 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117–23.

³⁰ Alexis Sanderson, 1994, *Vajrayāna: Origin and Function*, in the Proceedings of the First International Conference on *Buddhism into the Year 2000*, Dhammakāya Foundation, Bangkok and Los Angeles, pp. 88.

Scholars have stressed that the overlap between *Buddha dhamma* and Hinduism was a two-way process, with reformulation of ideas from the former in the latter. One of the forms of Tārā called the Mahācīnakrama Tārā was adopted from an eleventh-century Buddhist Tantric *sādhana* into the thirteenth-century Hindu *Phetkārīnītantra* as Ugra Tārā, a popular goddess in north India. In her Buddhist form, the goddess bears Tathāgata Akṣobhya (one of the five wisdom Buddhas in the Vajrayāna) on her head, as she is considered to be one of his emanations, while in the Hindu context, the deity on the head is identified as Śiva.³¹

A different aspect of the dialogue between Buddhist and Hindu deities was explored by John Clifford Holt in his study of the Buddhist Viṣṇu in Lanka.³² His study shows the transformation of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu within Sinhala Buddhist literature and ritual in the medieval and modern periods. The beginnings of this development may be traced to a mention in the *Mahāvamsa* to Viṣṇu as the protector of the people of the island. Medieval Sinhala literature is replete with references to the beneficial nature of the deity, and in present popular conceptions Viṣṇu is invoked at the start of public rituals. At Polonnaruwa in central Lanka, images and shrines of Viṣṇu are among the conspicuous archaeological ruins of the eleventh–thirteenth-century-CE Sinhala Buddhist capital. The presence of temples to Śiva and Viṣṇu is sometimes explained as the result of Tamil incursions in the region, though this does not explain either the king Parākramabāhu's (r. 1153–86 CE) inclusive vision of the kingdom or references in the *Cūlavamsa* to several temples dedicated to Hindu deities constructed by him. Figures of Viṣṇu and Brahmā are also shown flanking the seated Buddha image at Gal Vihara at the site.³³

Sanderson has written of the impact of the Tantric Śaiva canon on the Buddhist *Yoginītantras*, which incorporate several passages from the former with little modification. There is, nevertheless, an underlying belief in the superiority of the Buddhist system and this is evident from the treatment of Hindu deities, such as the Buddhist deity Samvara

³¹ Gudrun Bühnemann, 1996, The Goddess Mahācīnakrama-Tārā (Ugra Tārā Tārā) in Buddhist and Hindu Tantrism, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 59(3).

³² John Clifford Holt, 2004, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious Transformation, Politics and Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–41.

trampling on Bhairava,³⁴ and others, such as Heruka and Vajrahunkāra, trampling upon Hindu divinities. “As to whether the Hindu deities are conceived of merely as being humiliated or as being dead, is difficult to determine.” The emphasis on magical spells would suggest that they are to be considered as corpses to be brought back to life through proper Buddhist rituals.³⁵

At the same time, there is evidence for the assimilation of several Hindu deities in the Buddhist pantheon either as minor figures in a *maṇḍala* or ritual diagram, or as companions to a major Buddhist divinity. Abhayākara Gupta’s eleventh-century-CE Buddhist Tantric text, the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, includes several Hindu deities, such as Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, etc., as guardians of the different quarters. An example is that of Avalokiteśvara who is conceived of as a supreme being with Hindu deities emanating from his body.

Further evidence for this appropriation and assimilation is evident through an analysis of the architecture of large Buddhist temples, such as Somapura Mahāvihāra in Paharpur now in Bangladesh, founded by Dharmapāla (c. 770–810 CE), a ruler of the Pāla dynasty in eastern India. In the center of its huge square monastery (281 × 280 m) is an imposing brick cruciform cult monument decorated with friezes of terracotta plaques and stone sculptures over 21.3 m high. The site was first noticed by Buchanan Hamilton at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and was later explored by Cunningham in 1879–80.³⁶ In 1919, Paharpur was declared protected under the Ancient Monuments Preservations Act and underwent a series of excavations and conservation campaigns from 1923 to 1934.

The basement, now partly buried, was ornamented with stone sculptures fixed in niches at irregular intervals and surmounted by a row of terracotta plaques at the eye level, about 2,000 of which were found on the monument and 800 in the debris. The 63 stone sculptures are

³⁴ Alexis Sanderson, 1988, Śaivism and the Tantric Tradition, in S. Sutherland, P. Clarke and F. Hardy, edited, *The World’s Religions*, Routledge, London.

³⁵ Thomas E. Donaldson, 2001, *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, p. 415.

³⁶ Alexander Cunningham, 1882, *Report from a Tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879–1880: From Patna to Sunargaong*, *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, vol. 15, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, pp. 117–20.

almost exclusively Hindu, while the terracotta plaques display a variety of secular and religious themes, including a few Buddhist and Hindu deities. A majority of the sculptures depict scenes from Kṛṣṇa's life. There are also representations of Śiva, the Dikpālas (guardian deities of quarters), Indra, Agni, Yama, Kubera, Gaṇeśa, Bṛhaspati, Candra, Manu, and Dvārapālas, as also scenes from the epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Though Paharpur is not unique in this respect as Nalanda Temple 2 provides further evidence of a Buddhist shrine decorated with Hindu icons, but the case of Paharpur is indeed striking.³⁷

S. K. Saraswati was one of the first scholars to write about the presence of stone plaques at Paharpur bearing Hindu deities and suggested that they may have been borrowed from earlier shrines at the site.³⁸ After a careful scrutiny of the sculptures, Frederick M. Asher dates them to the eighth century CE, thereby making it contemporary with the monuments at Paharpur and hence a part of the plan of the structure. He explains the presence of Hindu deities at Buddhist sites as a refec-tion of their being a part of canonical sanction at this time, as evident from texts, such as the *Niṣpanmayogāvalī*, which states that in the case of certain *maṇḍalas*, Hindu deities occupied the outer circle and were placed guarding the corners of the terraces. Nor is Paharpur the only site to follow this practice, as evident from the Shwehsandaw pagoda at Pagan in Burma datable to 1060 CE.³⁹

Tibetan sources refer to five great Mahāvihāras at Vikramshila, Nalanda, Somapura or Paharpur, Odantapura, and Jagaddala, known for their Vajrayāna preceptors. A fuller treatment of Nalanda will be done in the concluding chapter and a brief overview would suffice here. Excavations at Antichak in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar from 1960 to 1969 and from 1972 to 1982 have yielded remains of the huge Vikramshila monastery. It is square in plan, each side measuring 330 m with a series of 208 cells, 52 on each of the four sides opening into a common verandah. In the center was a cruciform stupa and a

³⁷ Sandrine Gill, 2007, Spatial Organisation of Paharpur Buddhist Establishment, in Himanshu Prabha Ray, edited, *Sacred Landscapes in Asia: Shared Traditions, Multiple Histories*, Manohar, New Delhi.

³⁸ S. K. Saraswati, 1962, *Early Sculptures of Bengal*, Sambodhi Publications, Calcutta, p. 47.

³⁹ Frederick M. Asher, 1980, *The Art of Eastern India 300 – 800*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 92.

cluster of votive stupas. To the north of monastery, a number of scattered structures, including a Tibetan and a Hindu temple, have been found. The entire spread is over an area of more than 100 acres. The excavations also uncovered a mix of Buddhist and non-Buddhist images (predominantly Śaiva), such as that of Śiva, Umā–Maheśvara, Śiva and Pārvatī, Bhairava, Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī, Cāmuṅḍā, Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, the Navagrha, Vṛṣabha, Viṣṇu, and Sūrya.⁴⁰

The finds of Hindu deities at Buddhist sites is by no means limited to the great monasteries of eastern India, but was a more widespread phenomenon. The site of Sarnath near Varanasi presents another example of changing religious dynamics. The first monument raised at Sarnath was a pillar erected by the Mauryan ruler Ashoka. After this political initiative, only a few additions were made in the next two centuries, including the dozen railing-pillars (dated to about first century BCE) discovered near the Dhamekh stupa and some inscriptions. In the early centuries of the Common Era, Sarnath seems to have been enriched with new monasteries as well as a number of images including the preaching Buddha in red sandstone installed by *bhikṣu* Bala of Mathura. However, it was between the fourth and sixth centuries CE that Sarnath reached a high watermark with a majority of the buildings dated to the middle of the first millennium CE, including also the gigantic Dhamekh stupa. Also ascribable to this period are a number of sculptures and inscriptions, as well as numerous renovations and restorations. Hence, over the centuries, an overall expansion occurred at the site of Sarnath and this continued well into the twelfth century CE.

The last historical record from Sarnath is the twelfth-century-CE inscription on a rectangular slab of sandstone written in Sanskrit. It consists of 26 verses and gives the genealogy of Kumāradevī, the queen of Govindacandra whose inscriptions range from 1114 to 1154 CE. Verse 21 mentions that the queen built a vihara at Dharmachakra or modern Sarnath and that she restored the image of *śrī dharmacakra* Jina or Lord of the Wheel of Law as it had existed in the days of *dharmarāja* Ashoka. The inscription was composed by the poet Śrīkunda and engraved by the mason Vāmana. This twelfth-century-CE reference to the memory

⁴⁰ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1974–75, p. 7; 1975–76, p. 7; 1976–77, p. 11; 1977–78, p. 15; 1978–79, p. 43; and 1979–80, p. 13.

of the Mauryan king Ashoka testifies to the longevity of the association of the king with major Buddhist sites in the Ganga valley.

Sarnath entered the discussion on Ashoka somewhat later in the colonial period, though a stone image of the Buddha inscribed with *ye dhamma hetu pabbāva* legend had been found, along with two urns near the Dhamekh stupa, as early as 1794.⁴¹ Several seasons of excavations were conducted at the site by Sir Alexander Cunningham (1835–36), Major Kittoe (1851–52), C. Horne (1865), F. O. Oertel (1904–5), Sir John Marshall (1907), H. Hargreaves (1914–15), and Daya Ram Sahni (1927–32). The Ashokan pillar and its capital were, however, discovered in excavations conducted there in 1905.

A remarkable aspect of Marshall and Konow's excavations was the unearthing of a number of Jaina and Hindu icons from Monastery 1, attributed to Kumāradevī, and at other locations at the site. These included a sculpture of a standing Tīrthāṅkara, as well as truncated heads of Tīrthāṅkaras with Nāga canopies and about 25 representations of Hindu deities.⁴² A colossal twelfth-century-CE image of Śiva killing the demon Andhaka was found in the debris at a height of 8 ft above the floor of Monastery 4. Another depiction of dancing Śiva was unearthed in the outer courtyard of Monastery 1, while images of Gaṇeśa, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī and the Vāmana avatāra occurred in archaeological deposits. Most of these sculptures are displayed in the archaeological museum at Sarnath and date from the tenth to twelfth centuries CE. It is important to stress that these icons were found in the archaeological deposit and date to a period when the monastic complex was flourishing and new monasteries were being established as evident from Kumāradevī's inscription. Marshall and Konow did not explain the presence of Jaina and Hindu images at Sarnath and these have generally received little attention in secondary writings as well.

Undoubtedly, the development of Tantras from about the third to the ninth centuries CE was a major area of overlap between *Buddha dhamma* and Hinduism,⁴³ but this is an issue that has yet to receive the

⁴¹ Jonathan Duncan, 1798, *An Account of the Discovery of Two Urns in the Vicinity of Benares*, *Asiatick Researches*, 5.

⁴² Daya Ram Sahni, 1914, *Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology of Sarnath*, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, pp. 164–66.

⁴³ Sanderson, 1994, *Vajrayāna*.

attention it deserves from archaeologists and art historians, who have generally been content to label monastic sites either as of Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna affiliation. Is it possible, then, to investigate the archaeological material beyond this perfunctory labeling? Can distinctive archaeological remains be studied with a view to identifying the specificities of practices adopted there? How does one reconcile the multiplicity of religious practices evident in the archaeological record with linear progression of sectarian doctrines presented in texts? There is increasing evidence to suggest the continued emphasis on the Śākyamuni Buddha, particularly from the tenth century CE onwards, and the places associated with events in his life as encapsulated in the *Aṣṭamahāpratihārya* image. From the eighth century CE onwards, pilgrimage came to be embodied in a new type of image in eastern India depicting the seated Buddha surrounded by eight scenes from his life. The practice of visiting the eight sites associated with the life of the Buddha developed into the cult known as *Aṣṭamahāpratihārya* which promised rebirth in the heavenly world as reward for pilgrimage to the eight sites. This image, both in stone and moulded clay, had a wide prevalence.⁴⁴ This is an image that presented the biography of Śākyamuni in a condensed form and continued to have popularity well into the twelfth century CE.⁴⁵ As Jacob N. Kinnard explains:

Buddhists in the early Pala milieu did not emphasize the future, the coming of Maitreya; and they did not emphasize the transcendent, cosmic present of the pure lands occupied by Aksobhya and the other *tathāgatas*. Rather, in the Pala milieu the focus falls squarely on the past, on Śākyamuni, and images such as the *Aṣṭamahāpratihārya* make this past available — allow the Buddhists of the present to participate in this past — in a condensed, visual sort of pilgrimage.⁴⁶

One of the problems that one has to contend with in this regard is the absence of information regarding placement of images in religious architecture. Generally, sculptures are discovered in archaeological

⁴⁴ John C. Huntington, 1987, Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of the Astamahpratiharya, *Orientalism*, 18(4 & 8).

⁴⁵ Jacob N. Kinnard, 1996, Reevaluating the Eighth-Ninth Century Pala Milieu: Icono-Conservatism and the Persistence of Sakyamuni, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 19(2).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

debris, bereft of all contexts that would be essential to understand the significance of their original placement. The adoption of plans and architectural schemes based on *maṇḍalas* nevertheless indicates the importance of Tantric practice to the builders. Geoffrey Samuel has referred to the *maṇḍalas* plan of the monastery at Paharpur with four ritual halls in four directions, perhaps harking to the *Yogatantra* and the four kinds of ritual action.⁴⁷ What is generally overlooked in secondary writings is the continued significance of the towering stupas at Buddhist sites well into the medieval period. In the next section, we discuss three large Buddhist sites from coastal Orissa in an attempt to highlight some of the possible strands of understanding *Buddha dhamma* in practice.

The Viharas in Orissa and the Development of Tantra

In Orissa, the major expansion of Buddhism took place from the fifth to thirteenth centuries CE and stupendous monastic complexes were constructed in the three hill ranges of Jajpur district. Ratnagiri is a 25 m high, isolated hill of khondalite formation of the Assia range bounded on three sides by the rivers Brahmani, Kimiria and Birupa. In the vicinity of Ratnagiri, the extensive Buddhist site of Udayagiri is located in the easternmost part of the Assia hills in a horse-shoe formation, while Naltigiri or Lalitagiri is not very far on the south bank of Birupa. The three monastic complexes form a triangle, with the distance between Ratnagiri and Udayagiri being 5.5 km as the crow flies and 3.5 km between Udayagiri and Lalitagiri.⁴⁸ None of these sites was visited by the Chinese pilgrims frequently quoted by Cunningham, though the Tibetan historian Tārānātha's *History of Buddhism* does refer to Ratnagiri as possessing the eight groups of *dharma* (schools) of Buddhism.

Excavations at Ratnagiri unearthed an impressive stupa surrounded by a large number of votive stupas of all dimensions, two quadrangular monasteries and remains of eight shrines. Varied deposits were found inside the structural stupas and included partly charred bones, as well as

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Samuel, 2002, Ritual, Technologies and the State: The *Maṇḍala*-Form Buddhist Temples of Bangladesh, *Journal of Bengal Art*, 7.

⁴⁸ Debala Mitra, 1971, *Buddhist Monuments*, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, p. 7.

reliquaries in the form of earthen vases, at least one of which contained a coin identified as a Ganga fanam dated to thirteenth century CE. Also associated with the main stupa were a large number of monolithic stupas, many of them with the Buddha or Buddhist deities carved in relief.

The monastery at Ratnagiri, comprising of a stone-paved central courtyard surrounded by a verandah and 24 cells with a shrine in the center of one of the sides, is the finest in the Indian subcontinent.⁴⁹ It had an upper storey and indicates two phases of repair and construction. Cell 17 in the monastery housed a large number of bronze images of the Buddha and other deities, as well as a metal seal and sealings reading *Śrī-Ratnagiri-mahā-vihāriyārya-bhikṣu-saṅghasya*. Two stone stele fixed to the eastern wall of the monastery record donations made by a *kāyastha* (member of the scribal caste) named Janananda from the Buddhist site of Nalanda in Bihar. These included the grant of two *pravara* (measures of paddy) from each *hala* (measure of land) to the monks residing in the complex at Ratnagiri.⁵⁰

Though Buddhist remains at Udayagiri were first recorded in 1870, it was only in 1985 that large-scale excavations were undertaken at this extensive site, which in many ways is different from that of Ratnagiri. At the base of the hill is a rock-cut well with 31 steps leading down to the water. A tenth–eleventh-century inscription in the rock records that it was dedicated by Rānaka Vajranāga. Excavations uncovered a stupa, an imposing monastery covering an area of 30 sq. m and a residential-cum-shrine complex, with a central shrine chamber housing the image of a seated Buddha in *bhūmiśparśa mudrā* or “earth-touching” posture, as also a massive water reservoir. Seals found in the excavations refer to the site as Mādhavapura Mahāvihāra. The southern section of the valley contained an apsidal shrine, monolithic stupas, a two-storeyed monastery and several other structures.⁵¹ Near the top of the western spur of the hill overlooking the river Birupa are a series of rock-cut images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas with a votive stupa in front. The first image

⁴⁹ Debala Mitra, 1981, *Ratnagiri (1958–1961), Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 80, vol. 1, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 152.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 213–14.

⁵¹ B. Bandyopadhyay, 2007, *Udayagiri – 2*, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.

is that of Avalokiteśvara and bears two inscriptions. One is a popular Buddhist *dhāraṇī* or ritual chant and the other records that the image was a gift of Simyaka. Peculiar to Udayagiri is the alignment of the eight Boddhisattvas forming a *maṇḍala* around a central figure.⁵²

As at Udayagiri, at Lalitagiri also a gallery of rock-cut Boddhisattvas has been found. Ramprasad Chanda recorded this when he visited the site in 1930.⁵³ In 1985, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) excavated the mound at the top of Landa hill and unearthed a stupa, which yielded three small relic caskets. In subsequent excavations, an apsidal chaitya was discovered. Forming an outer ring around the chaitya were small monolithic stupas, some with inscriptions of fourth–fifth century CE alternating with Buddha images. Further, four monasteries were unearthed, with Monastery 4 providing evidence of a shrine chamber with an image of the seated Buddha inside. A seal found in Monastery 4 had the Sarnath sign with a *cakra* flanked by deer and an inscription reading *śrī candrāditya vihāra samagra ārya bhikṣu saṅgha* indicating that the name of the establishment was Śrī Candrāditya Vihāra. Several pillars found in Monastery 3 are similar to those from Brahmanical temples in Bhubaneswar. Though the chaitya at Lalitagiri dates to second–third century CE, only a few images have been found dating from the early period. Unlike Udayagiri, however, four-armed images are the exception at Lalitagiri.⁵⁴ Thus, among the three neighboring sites there is no homogeneity either in the plans of the different structures unearthed or in the iconography of the images discovered. There is evidence instead for the co-existence of multiple religious practices. How does one term these monastic sites? Is the label Vajrayāna appropriate, since some images identified as “Tantric” were found during the excavations? How were these used and what was the nature of religious practices undertaken?

A. Ghosh published the text of an inscription found on a stone slab now in the museum at Cuttack, as also similar texts found on terracotta

⁵² Thomas E. Donaldson, 2001, *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, p. 64.

⁵³ Ramaprasad Chanda, 1930, Exploration in Orissa, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 44, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Donaldson, 2001, *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture*, pp. 53–56.

tablets from Nalanda written in Nagari characters dating from sixth to ninth century CE, as well as those from Paharpur and Bodh Gaya. Though Ghosh was unable to identify the text, it is now evident that the stone slab represented a short Sanskrit version of texts preserved in the Tibetan *Kanjurs*. Texts, such as the *Bodhigarbhālaṅkāralakṣa* and *Vimalośṇīṣa*, form a group of texts that were widely known and used for inscribing *dhāraṇīs* on terracotta plaques not only at sites in Orissa, but across the Buddhist world in Tibet, China as well as Sri Lanka.

In her study of the inscriptions and images found at Ratnagiri, Nancy Hock has shown the wide range of texts and the type of texts that were in use at the site from seventh to thirteenth century CE. She makes a distinction between Mantrayāna, which relies on *kriyā* and *caryā* Tantras and an extensive use of *dhāraṇīs*, and Vajrayāna Tantras. The *kriyā* and *caryā* Tantras emphasized the maintenance and worship of stupas, and identical funerary and meritorious practices were prevalent in Mahāyāna, Mantrayāna and Vajrayāna texts. It is also evident that at least two Tantras of the Anuttarayoga group were in use at Ratnagiri by the ninth and tenth centuries CE, though a majority of the excavated images continued to be inspired by the *kriyā* Tantras CE.⁵⁵ Three inscribed texts excavated from the site included the Mahāyāna *Pratītyasamutpāda Sūtra* datable to the sixth century CE, the *Bodhigarbhālaṅkāralakṣa dhāraṇī* and the *Sarvaprājñāntapāramitāsiddhacaitya nāma dhāraṇī*, which extol the virtues of constructing stupas.

In addition, Ratnagiri has provided evidence for the presence of a very large number of female images, especially those of Cuṇḍā and Tārā, which sets it apart from other monastic sites in Orissa, viz., Udayagiri and Lalitagiri. Cuṇḍā does not figure in the large stone sculptures found at Ratnagiri, but she is repeatedly represented on votive stupas. Fourteen examples of Cuṇḍā are known, including both four-armed and two-armed forms.⁵⁶ Tārā was a popular deity in Orissa, especially at Ratnagiri, where she is found sculpted in 99 niches of monolithic stupas. The two stupendous standing life-size stone images of Tārā from

⁵⁵ Nancy Hock, 1987, *Buddhist Ideology and the Sculpture of Ratnagiri, Seventh through Thirteenth Century*, PhD thesis, University of California Berkeley, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Twenty-seven images of the goddess are carved in caves 10, 11 and 12 at Ellora in Maharashtra (Hock, 1987, *Buddhist Ideology and the Sculpture*, p. 116).

Ratnagiri are striking. In 1927–28, Ramaprasad Chanda, an official of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, visited Ratnagiri and other sites in Orissa to collect Buddhist sculptures for the Museum. He found a number of sculptures near the Mahākāla temple on the hill at Ratnagiri, including the *aṣṭamahābhaya* Tārā image, which is now in the Patna Museum.⁵⁷ The standing image is dated to eleventh century CE on the basis of a fragmentary inscription and graphically portrays the *jalārṇava-bhaya* or fear of drowning in a sinking boat.⁵⁸ A second image, now in the site museum at Ratnagiri, dated to the end of eighth century CE, shows Tārā flanked by scenes of the eight perils depicted in two vertical rows of four panels each.⁵⁹ A third eleventh–twelfth-century-CE seated image is fixed to the outer compound wall on the outskirts of Shergarh district in Balasore district. The *aṣṭamahābhaya* form of Tārā does find mention in one *sādhana* of the *Sāadhanamālā* as saviour from the eight perils, though in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika Sūtra* and the western Deccan caves, it is the Avalokiteśvara who is revered as the saviour. Clearly, the practice of *Buddha dhamma* drew not just from contemporary and earlier textual traditions, but also from the requirements of communities which provided patronage to the Sangha.

In the next section, we discuss the question of the relationship between *Buddha dhamma* and its contemporary religions through its archaeological constructs at sites, such as Nagarjunakonda in Andhra and Ellora in Maharashtra. Both these sites are multireligious. It is also important to emphasize the fact that large Buddhist monastic centers, such as at Sarnath and those in Orissa described in this section, continued to prosper and maintain their separate religious identity even after eighth century CE when the *Purāṇas* and epigraphic sources first present the Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu, as discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Nagarjunakonda: The Multireligious Landscape

A region, which provides crucial archaeological data on the religious landscape from third millennium BCE when it housed the earliest

⁵⁷ Mitra, 1981, *Ratnagiri*, vol. 1, p. 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 428.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 444–45.

Neolithic settlement to sixteenth century CE, is the secluded Nagarjunakonda valley in the present-day state of Andhra, bounded on three sides by offshoots of the Nallamalai Hill Range. Relics found in the archaeological excavations conducted at the site in the 1920s had been given to the Mahabodhi Society for re-enshrinement in the Mūlagandhakuṭī at Sarnath, as was discussed in Chapter 3.⁶⁰ In the 1950s, a dam was proposed to be built on the Krishna river, which when completed would irrigate two million acres in Andhra and a million acres in Hyderabad.⁶¹ However, its construction threatened to inundate the site and joint meetings of engineers and archaeologists were held to find a solution.⁶² Jawaharlal Nehru informed the Rajya Sabha of the government's decision to allow archaeologists to carry out excavations at the site from 1954 to 1959 and to reconstruct the remains on a safe higher ground, which would become an island after submergence.⁶³ While laying the stone for the museum at the new site, Humayun Kabir, the then Minister for Cultural Affairs, stated that “ancient India had anticipated by centuries the principles which governed the Constitution of modern Republican India” and that the peaceful co-existence of Hinduism and Buddhism in the valley had lasted for centuries.⁶⁴

More than 30 Buddhist establishments, 19 Hindu temples and a few medieval Jaina shrines were unearthed in several seasons of archaeological excavations conducted at the site after its discovery in 1920 until its submergence after the construction of the Nagarjunasagar Dam in 1960. The Mahācaitya at Nagarjunakonda is the earliest monument at the site and is dated to 146–56 CE. Early Buddhist religious architecture appears throughout the valley, while Hindu temples were located mainly along the banks of Krishna and around the citadel area. It is significant that religious edifices of both Hindus and Buddhists were built on diverse ground plans and used the apsidal form. Site 3 was the

⁶⁰ Relic of Buddha Excavated, *The Times of India*, August 4, 1938: 4.

⁶¹ Beginning Work on Nandikonda, *The Times of India*, February 27, 1954: 7.

⁶² Nandikonda Dam Site: Excavations Delay Selection, *The Times of India*, February 9, 1954: 5.

⁶³ Preserving Monuments at Nagarjunakonda, *The Times of India*, March 23, 1957: 9.

⁶⁴ Co-existence Enshrined in India's Traditions, *The Times of India*, February 1, 1959: 8.

biggest monastic unit at Nagarjunakonda and consisted of a stupa, two apsidal shrines, a vihara with central *maṇḍapa*, a large hall with three chambers and a urinal. Unlike the stupas of north India built of solid brick work or mud filling, the stupas of Nagarjunakonda were built in emulation of the form of a wheel with a hub and spokes — all completely executed in brick.⁶⁵

At Nagarjunakonda, the apsidal shrine with a stupa in its apse is either associated with the Mahacaitya (Sites 1 and 43) or forms a part of a residential enclosure for Buddhist monks (Site 38), and in the latter case no stupa was found in the apse, leading to the suggestion that it may have enshrined either a Buddha image or Buddhapāda found in its vicinity.⁶⁶ In another case (Site 9), the apsidal shrine located near the citadel formed a part of the monastery and was meant for housing the image of the Buddha. Site 85 was also situated close to the southern rampart wall and the monastic complex contained two *caityagrhas* — one oblong and the other apsidal — both enshrining images of the Buddha.⁶⁷

H. Sarkar and B. N. Misra suggest that apsidal shrines (Sites 1 and 43) located in the vicinity of the main stupa or Mahācaitya were later additions to the Buddhist establishment at Nagarjunakonda.⁶⁸ Inscriptions on the floor of the shrines record the history of their foundations. The lay devotee Bodhisiri built the apsidal *caityagrha* for the welfare of her husband, his family and her maternal family at the vihara of Culadhammagiri for the benefit of monks from several regions, such as Sri Lanka, China, Kashmir, Gandhara, and so on.⁶⁹ The other apsidal shrine was also built for the benefit of monks from the different countries, but the donor in this case was Chamtisiri, the sister of the Ikṣvāku ruler Vāsithiputa Siri Chāṃtamūla.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ K. V. Soundararajan, 2006, *Nagarjunakonda 1954–1960, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 75, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 157–58.

⁶⁶ H. Sarkar, 1993, *Studies in Early Buddhist Architecture*, 2nd edition, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, pp. 77–78.

⁶⁷ H. Sarkar and B. N. Misra, 1999, *Nagarjunakonda*, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 34–36.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶⁹ J. Ph. Vogel, 1929–30, *Prakrit Inscriptions from a Buddhist Site at Nagarjunikonda*, *Epigraphia Indica* 20: 22, no. F.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21, no. E.

Another apsidal shrine was found in the north-eastern part of the valley (Site 24) and, in addition to its proximity to the monastery, shows two new features: one, a circular image shrine and the other, a memorial pillar raised in honor of the king's mother.⁷¹ The sculpture on the pillar depicts a lady seated on a high stool with a female attendant standing nearby. Thus, variations in apsidal shrines connected to Buddhist monastic complexes are evident and no single pattern prevailed.

Similarly diverse are the ground plans of the Hindu brick temples at Nagarjunakonda, which may be broadly categorized as single shrines, shrines with pillared halls and the palace-temple of Sarvadeva designated as *prāsāda* in inscriptions (Site 99). The apsidal form appears both as a single shrine and as a complex of either double apsidal shrines or one rectangular and the other apsidal structure.⁷² The Aṣṭabhujaśvāmin Viṣṇu temple (Site 29) built in the third century CE had two shrines, one oblong and the other apsidal, each with a pillared hall in front and a larger pillared hall at the back. An inscription indicates that the temple enshrined a wooden image of eight-armed Viṣṇu and the name of the deity was also found inscribed on one of the several conch shells discovered at the site. Other structures include a *dhvaja-stambha* or flagstaff and two exquisitely carved pillars.⁷³ The apsidal shrine clearly formed a part of the large temple complex surrounded by a brick enclosure and was dedicated to Viṣṇu.

A second temple complex was dedicated to Śiva as evident from the inscription on the *dhvaja-stambha*, which refers to Mahādeva Puṣpabhadrasvāmin enshrined in an apsidal temple (Site 34) built during the 14th regnal year of king Ehuvala by his son Vīrapuruṣadatta and Ehuvala's wife Kupanāsiri.⁷⁴ A large stepped tank built of masonry with a pavilion on the west was situated close to the shrine.⁷⁵ Another large complex (Site 78) comprised of apsidal shrines in a row surrounded by an oblong enclosure with a rail, besides several shrines, and a pillared *maṇḍapa*. The affiliation of this complex, however, remains uncertain,

⁷¹ Sarkar and Misra, 1999, *Nagarjunakonda*, p. 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁴ D. C. Sircar, and K. G. Krishnan, 1960–61, Two Inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda, *Epigraphia Indica*, 34.

⁷⁵ Sarkar and Misra, 1999, *Nagarjunakonda*, p. 26.

though the excavators suggest that it is more likely to be a Hindu temple complex on account of its location along the banks of the river.⁷⁶

Nagarjunakonda is unique in that it provides a large corpus of inscriptions associated with both Hindu and Buddhist architecture that allows insights into several aspects of interaction between the community and religious architecture. The Ikṣvāku dynasty is prominently represented in the epigraphs, but royal patronage is indicated for only three of the 19 Hindu temples, patronage for the other temples being provided by the community in general. An analysis of these records of donations indicates that in a majority of the Buddhist inscriptions the motive for donation as stated by the donor is the attainment of *nirvana* by the donor, and the welfare and happiness of the world at large. A similar desire is evident in the inscription from the Puṣpabhadrasvāmin temple, which was established by the king's wife and son for his long life and victory.⁷⁷

Thus, the data from Nagarjunakonda clearly establishes the intersection of diverse religious traditions, some associated with communities settled earlier in the region and others drawn in by movements of trading and artisanal groups, Buddhist clergy as well as internal dynamics associated with the emergence of the site as a center of political power. Nagarjunakonda, as is evident from the archaeological record, participated in both coastal trading networks as well as overland trading activity. It is also unusual in the varied secular architecture preserved at the site, including a citadel, an elaborate water system, a residential complex and what has been termed an amphitheatre. The region was home to a multilayered society, which continued to absorb and introduce new elements in keeping with its needs. The site seems to have been deserted sometime in the medieval period, and at the time of its discovery Nagarjunakonda was a wild and desolate place. Yet, in historical writing the current view suggests that the apsidal shrine was originally Buddhist and where we see the apsidal form used in the Hindu temple we are to interpret it as an originally Buddhist shrine converted into a Hindu temple. Sarkar also reiterates this link between the apsidal structures and

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁷ Anita Rupavatham, 2003, *An Archaeological Study of the Temple in the Eastern Deccan: 2nd Century BC to 8th Century AD*, MPhil dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, tables 30–31.

Buddhist religious practice in an otherwise comprehensive study of early architecture.⁷⁸ The shared architectural vocabulary between Hindu and Buddhist shrines was by no means an exception at Nagarjunakonda, but was instead more widespread and indicated a much deeper connection in terms of ritual practice as evident from the 34 rock-cut caves at Ellora in the Aurangabad district of the present-day state of Maharashtra.

Ellora: Harmony in Stone

The earliest cave excavation at Ellora began in the late sixth century CE and was dedicated to Śiva, followed by Buddhist and Jaina caves over the next several centuries until the tenth century CE.⁷⁹ The location of the shrines of all three religious sects contrasts sharply with contemporary textual accounts of rivalry and contestation between the different traditions, as discussed earlier. Both the form and the content had relevance and meaning rather than presenting an appearance of superficial harmony. It is also important to locate Ellora within the larger network of Buddhist sites, such as Kanheri on the west coast, Aurangabad in Aurangabad district and Valabhi in Gujarat, though the form of Buddhist sculpture at Ellora was no doubt unique.

The sanctity of the Ellora caves is most often defined by its Śaiva monuments, particularly Cave 29 and Cave 16. A majority of excavated caves at Ellora are dedicated to Śiva. The two exceptions are Caves 14 and 25 which appear to have been temples to Durgā and Viṣṇu (or possibly Sūrya), respectively. Cave 16, famous as the monolithic rock-cut Kailāsanātha temple dedicated to Śiva is admired for its conceptualization and sculptural exuberance.

Cave 29, also known as the Dhumar Lena, is carved from an outcrop of basalt and is one of the earliest and largest cave-temples at Ellora.⁸⁰ It is strategically located near the Vale Ganga waterfall whose sanctity is recorded in a mid-eighth-century-CE land grant issued at Ellora.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Sarkar, 1993, *Studies in Early Buddhist Architecture*, p. 23.

⁷⁹ Geri H. Malandra, 1996, The Maṇḍala at Ellora/Ellora in the Maṇḍala, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 19(2).

⁸⁰ Walter Spink, 1967, Ellora's Earliest Phase, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Banaras*, 1.

⁸¹ S. K. Dikshit, 1939–40, Ellora Plates of Dantidurga: Saka 663, *Epigraphia Indica* 25: 25–31.

According to this record, the Rāṣṭrakuṭa king Dantidurga purified himself by bathing at the Guheśvara *tīrtha*, the sacred pilgrimage place of the “Lord of the Cave.” The name Guheśvara is also significant as Ellora is recognized today as the *tīrtha* of Ghṛṣneśvara, one of the 12 *vyotirliṅgas* of Śiva identified with the village, which is the site of a modern temple about 1.5 km from the caves. This record clearly shows the important role of the cave and its waterfall in establishing Ellora as an important Śaiva *tīrtha*, though the antiquity of these associations needs further investigation. Ellora was not visited by the Chinese pilgrims and is mentioned neither by Faxian nor by Xuanzang, though references in an old Marathi text, the *Lilācaritra* of 1278 CE, attest to its importance as a site of pilgrimage. From the sixteenth century CE onwards, the caves were visited by European travelers and by the end of the eighteenth century CE they had been described in detail and studied.

The excavation of Jaina cave-temples was conducted during the ninth and tenth centuries CE, a time when the Rāṣṭrakuṭas had attained paramount sovereignty in the region. Although the ASI has categorized the Jaina monuments into five separate cave complexes (Caves 30–34), there are in fact 23 individual cave-temples, nearly all of them containing a shrine and a rock-cut Jina image.

How are the Jaina temples to be understood within the framework of what is generally perceived to be an ascetic religion? From the ninth to the sixteenth century CE, manuals of Digambara lay practice were written for the most part by monks, which present ideal forms of religious behavior and describe lay activities including image worship, the taking of vows, gift-giving, and service to the community.⁸² The shared architectural vocabulary that developed at Ellora indicates similarities between Śaiva and Jaina ritual practices. Recent studies by Lawrence A. Babb highlight significant structural commonalities between Śaiva Siddhānta and Jain worship particularly with regard to the role of the worshipper in ritual performances.⁸³

⁸² Lisa Nadine Owen, 2010, *Absence and Presence: Worshipping the Jina at Ellora*, in Himanshu Prabha Ray, edited, *Archaeology and Text: The Temple in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

⁸³ Lawrence A. Babb, 1998, *Ritual Culture and the Distinctiveness of Jainism*, in John E. Cort, edited, *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History*, State University of New York Press, Albany; Lawrence A.

The Śaiva caves shared several architectural features with the 12 Buddhist caves at Ellora, which were excavated from 600 to 730 CE. They document the development of Buddhist imagery from the simple delineation in Cave 6 to the elaborate forms of Cave 12. As a center of rock-cut caves, Ellora has preserved the in-situ arrangement of images, which present many new and unique features of the seventh-and-eighth-century-CE Buddhism. Geri H. Malandra has suggested that the *maṇḍala*, which is considered central to Tantric Buddhist practice was the unifying and integrating principle at the site. Carved on the cave walls, the *maṇḍala* also provides the basis for the arrangement of sculptures sculpted in the caves in high relief.⁸⁴ However, the focus of worship in every shrine continued to be the image of the Buddha generally depicted in the preaching posture or *dharmacakrapravartana mudrā* (“turning of the wheel of law”), while by the eighth century CE the focus of worship had changed to the Buddha shown in *bhumisparśa mudrā*.

Three kilometers from the caves at Ellora is Khuldabad, known as the valley of saints as it is said to contain the graves of 1,500 Sufi saints, as well as the tombs of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, his sons and his generals. Marking the Chisti establishment at the site are the tombs of Sayyad Burhan-al-din, a Sufi Saint who died in 1344 CE and the mausoleum of Sayyed Zain-ud-din, another saint highly revered by the Muslims. On the east side, the mausoleum contains a number of verses inscribed from the Quran and also gives the date of the saint’s death as 1370 CE. These tombs are important markers of the fourteenth-century Sufi tradition of Nizam-ud-din Auliya that went from Delhi to the Deccan and established itself in Khuldabad. Ellora is by no means the only example of religious pluralism in South Asia, but is instead one of the many sacred places that preserve diverse historical memories.

Thus, it is easy to agree with Charles Hallisay, when he states that the contrast between Hinduism and Buddhism was largely based on the presence or absence of ritual in the Orientalist construction of the latter:

It remains typical for Buddhism in South Asia to be studied as a thing apart from the rest of the intellectual and cultural history of India, although it is becoming

Babb, 1996, *Absent Lord: Ascetics and Kings in a Jain Ritual Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

⁸⁴ Geri H. Malandra, 1985, The ‘Archaeology’ of a Maṇḍala, *Ars Orientalis*, 15.

increasingly apparent how artificial the separation is, especially with respect to the study of ritual. Not only does all Buddhist ritual including early Buddhist ritual appear thoroughly Indian, as we see when we compare Buddhist ordination and consecration rituals with Hindu initiation rituals and image preparation ceremonies, but much of India appears very 'Buddhist'. This becomes apparent when we consider the patterns associated with worship (*pūjā*) in the various Hindu devotional movements, as well as when we consider the more philosophical ideas associated with Hindu schools of thought like Advaita Vedānta.⁸⁵

These overlaps and shared traditions were ignored in the colonial period as Buddhologists and archaeologists searched for "pristine" Buddhism and contrasted it with the contemporary forms of esoteric Buddhism. One final issue needs to be addressed in this chapter relates to a corresponding shift in the Purāṇic tradition that regarded the Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu.

The *Itihāsa Purāṇa* Tradition

The core of the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition comprising of the epics and the *Purāṇas* dates back to the seventh century BCE or even earlier and it continues to be alive and popular in the subcontinent. The *Purāṇas* are generally dated from 400 to 1000 CE with *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* being close to the earlier date and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to the latter.⁸⁶ The *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition has three main constituents: myth, genealogy and historical narrative. The remote past was described as myth, the more immediate past was recorded in the form of genealogy, while historical literature provided narrative history. In the past this tradition has been largely ignored by historians on account of its largely mythological content. However, Indian tradition has always claimed both antiquity and authority for the *itihāsa purāṇas*, which provide valuable insights into how the past was viewed at various points of time.⁸⁷ Not only that,

⁸⁵ Charles Hallisay, Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism, in Jr. Donald S. Lopez, edited, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 46.

⁸⁶ Klaus K. Klostermaier, 2007, *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York Press (SUNY), Albany, pp. 59–72.

⁸⁷ Romila Thapar, 1979, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Orient Longman Pvt Ltd, Hyderabad, p. 256.

the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition has influenced the imagery and vocabulary of numerous rewritings in several Indian languages, as also many films and dramas on the subject. They, thus, represent the popular religious traditions that circulated in their oral form and were not subjected to codification in the same way as the Vedic texts were.

The *Purāṇas*, such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Skanda Purāṇa*, are often criticized for describing the Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu who deluded the Asuras into believing in anti-Vedic doctrines. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, one of the oldest *Purāṇas*, the Buddha is introduced as one of the many forms of *māyā-moha* or the delusive power of the deity. Buddha's atheism is placed in the same category as that of the materialists or the preachers of the Cārvāka doctrine.⁸⁸ As Klaus K. Klostermaier opines:

In all probability it was the orthodox Mīmāṃsakas who were the originators of these teachings in the *Purāṇas*. In their more technical writings they carry on extensive polemics with Buddhists. Kumarila Bhatta, one of the most famous defenders of Hindu orthodoxy in the eighth century CE, faults the Buddhists for their rejection of the authority of the Veda.⁸⁹

It is around the same time that Śaṅkarācārya, an exponent of Vedānta, wrote the *Daśāvatāra Stotra* that recognized the Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu identified as a *yogin* or sage, seated in meditation.

The earliest inscription mentioning the Buddha as an *avatara* appears in the Ādivarāha cave at Mahabalipuram on the Tamil coast dedicated to the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu. Although the temple was dedicated to Viṣṇu, Śiva images also appear, such as on the descent of Ganga and Durgā panels. Of the inscriptions found in the cave, the earliest is an eighth-century-CE Sanskrit record listing the 10 *avataras* of Viṣṇu⁹⁰ above the Harihara panel representing the combined image of Viṣṇu and Śiva. Another inscription on the floor of the cave dates to the ninth century CE and gives the name of the place as Mamallapuram, while

⁸⁸ Klostermaier, 2007, *A Survey of Hinduism*, p. 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁹⁰ ... *nārasimhaśca vāmanaḥ rāmo rāmaśca rāmaśca buddhaḥ kalkī ca te daśa* (H. Krishna Sastri, 1945, Two Statues of Pallava Kings and Five Pallava Inscriptions in a Rock Temple at Mahabalipuram, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, vol. 26, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 5).

yet another eleventh-century-CE epigraph on the rear wall endorses the worship of Śiva.⁹¹

The relationship between the different religious traditions of the subcontinent was complex and no simple explanations can be given. In Orissan sculpture, from tenth century CE onwards, the Buddha is depicted seated in *dhyāna mudrā* (“meditative” posture) as one of the *avatars* in the *daśāvatāra* panels on the back slab of Viṣṇu images. He wears the robes of a monk and has elongated ears. With the emergence of the Jagannātha cult in the thirteenth century CE, the Buddha is often identified with Jagannātha. In the late *daśāvatāra* panels, either the Buddha or Jagannātha may appear as the ninth *avatara* of Viṣṇu. An inscription on the Someśvara temple at Ranipur Jharial in Orissa refers to Buddha as one of the four deities enshrined in the temple, the others being the Śiva liṅga, Kārttikeya and Gaja-Lakṣmī.⁹²

The Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu was further popularized in Orissa by the Sanskrit poet Jayadeva who lived around 1200 CE. Several legends relating to Jayadeva associate him with the Jagannāth temple at Puri, which was built under the patronage of the Gaṅgā kings of coastal Orissa. His famous *Daśāvatāra Stotra* recounted the 10 *avatars* of the deity including the Buddha. By linking the Buddha’s condemnation of Vedic ritual with his compassion for the animal victims, Jayadeva provided a positive perspective to the inclusion of Śākyamuni. This *Stotra* or verse became very popular and was recited and sung along with Jayadeva’s other epic creation, the *Gīta Govinda*. The *Gīta Govinda* was composed specifically for dance performances in the honor of Lord Jagannātha worshipped as the supreme form of Viṣṇu in the temple at Puri and initiated a trend for the inclusion of dance and music in temple veneration.

Jayadeva’s composition quickly found a pan-Indian audience. A stone inscription of Mahārājā Sāraṅgadeva Vaghela opens with Jayadeva’s invocation of the 10 forms of Kṛṣṇa. An inscription in Oriya language on the left side of the Jayavijaya doorway of the Jagannāth temple dated 1499 CE prescribes the performance of the *Gīta Govinda*. Dance was to be performed before the deities at the time of *bhoga* or food

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹² Donaldson, 2001, *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture*, pp. 409–14.

offerings and was to continue from the time of their evening meal to their bedtime meal.⁹³

In India, as elsewhere, religious texts were part of a performative tradition.⁹⁴ Recitation, writing and representation on monuments continued side by side. The performative tradition of the ancient past is lost to us, but I would argue that it can be retrieved at least partially through a meaningful engagement with a society's monumental remains and sculptural representations. Thus, it is important to factor in the evidence from religious architecture and sacred landscapes, and in this book, both hills and locations of monuments are seen through the *longue durée* of cultural continuity.

Was the Buddha an *avatara* of Viṣṇu or was he a historical figure? This was a question constantly raised in the nineteenth century, as shown by Philip C. Almond, though there were no unambiguous responses.⁹⁵ In the nineteenth century, however, several European authors negotiated between the Buddha of the *Purāṇas* who was an *avatara* of Viṣṇu and the historical Buddha. One way out of this problem was to accept the theory of two Buddhas, as was done by Sir William Jones in 1790 — one was the founder of Buddhism and an *avatara* accepted by the *Purāṇas*, while the other was the reformer of Buddhism. Cunningham wrote of the Ādi Buddha, the “First Cause of all things” and to his emanation, the mortal Buddha of whom the most celebrated was Śākyamuni who died in 543 BCE.⁹⁶ The matter was finally resolved in 1844 by Eugène Burnouf, Sanskritist at the Collège de France in Paris. Burnouf had a more nuanced approach and did not agree with the generally held view of Buddha as a social reformer, among the European scholars, since this view was not based on any Indian Buddhist sources.⁹⁷ The “Indian” Buddhist sources that Burnouf considered important were the Sanskrit

⁹³ Barbara Stoller Miller, translated and edited, 1977, *Love Song of the Dark Lord, Jayadeva's Gītagovinda*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 6.

⁹⁴ Ray, edited, 2007, *Sacred Landscapes in Asia*.

⁹⁵ Philip C. Almond, 1988, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 15–16.

⁹⁶ Alexander Cunningham, 1854, *The Bhilsa Topes: Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith, Elder and Company, London, p. 8.

⁹⁷ Eugène Burnouf, 2010, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, translated by Katria Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 17.

manuscripts found in Nepal. On the basis of his reading of these texts, he considered the Buddha to be a historical figure.⁹⁸

A disregard for historical memory marked the study of Buddhism in the nineteenth century has been detailed in this chapter. The continued sanctity of religious sites, such as Ellora, or the sharing of sacred geography as at Nagarjunakonda, clearly indicates the alternative worldview of the worshippers, a view that was lost in the focus on texts or in linear histories of religious structures that developed with the introduction of “scientific” disciplines, such as art history and archaeology. Perhaps, it is time to re-focus on the multilayered histories of religious sites and the dynamic interaction between them. This is a theme that I continue in the next chapter especially with reference to the developments in history-writing in the twentieth century.



⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

6

Buddhism and the Birth of a Nation



The first concern of newly independent peoples is to establish, in their own eyes, and in those of the world, their national identity and *raison d'être*. As a person desires to be distinguishable from his fellows by his singular personality, so newly created nations are concerned with their nationality. India was no exception to this.¹

Granville Austin, an independent historian and an authority on the Indian Constitution goes on to suggest that the paintings in the Constitution of India were a part of the vision to establish the new nation's exclusivity. The framing of the Constitution as a political document and India's long and distinguished past occupied different periods of time and different levels of reality. The makers of the Constitution were aware that they "could not transform the India of today into the India of Rigvedic times" as articulated by the distinguished parliamentarian Seth Govind Das (1896–1974) in Hindi, but at the same time there was a need to underscore that "the civilization and culture which is the heritage of our early history . . . should not be rejected by us."² The visuals helped introduce a different level of reality into the modern political document; they provided a cultural context to the guiding principles of independent India; and most of all they restored the balance between the past and the present.

¹ Granville Austin, 1966, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 319–20.

² *Constituent Assembly Debates*, vol. I, part 5, p. 59, <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/lb/debates/debates.htm> (accessed October 5, 2012).

Historians have often described the choice of Ashokan symbols, i.e., the *chakra* and the Sarnath lion capital with an additional legend from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* reading *satyameva jayate* or “truth alone triumphs”, as a “creation” of a non-sectarian past to suit national expediencies, particularly after the Partition of India along religious lines on August 15, 1947. Who was instrumental in creating this non-sectarian past: was it the historians in the universities and colleges of India or was it the political parties, such as the Indian National Congress? How did the public react to the decision to adopt the national symbols or did they have any say at all?

How India’s past was understood and presented at the time of Independence is of central importance to this chapter. How was the understanding of the archaeology of Buddhism factored into the Indian Constitution through the adoption of national symbols and visual imagery? Did archaeological discoveries discussed in earlier chapters popularized through the print media have an impact on political thinkers? These questions are important to the discussion in this chapter, as I trace the representation of the cultural context of the Indian Constitution by focusing on the principal contributors, their perceptions of the history of Buddhism and the extent to which they attempted to forge a consensus on issues of the national symbols and the flag (see Plates 6.1 and 6.2).

The original signed photolithographed copy of the Constitution is important for this study on account of Nandalal Bose’s (1883–1966) 22 paintings on subjects from archaeology and history that illuminate the text. Bose was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). These visuals range over a long timespan including the third-millennium-BCE Harappan seal on the opening page (Plate 6.3); the temples of Orissa; the sculpture of Nataraja³; and the portraits of medieval rulers like Akbar⁴ and Shivaji, the tenth Sikh guru Guru Gobind Singh⁵ and modern leaders like Subhash Chandra Bose⁶ and Mahatma Gandhi.⁷ Noteworthy examples are those drawn from archaeology, such as the bull that appears on the

³ Government of India, *Constitution of India*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2010, p. 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 154.

Plate 6.1: Postage stamp with the Sarnath lion capital issued on Independence Day of India, August 15, 1947



Source: Courtesy of Department of Philately, Government of India. Reproduced with permission.

Plate 6.2: Postage stamp showing Indian flag



Source: Courtesy of Department of Philately, Government of India. Reproduced with permission.

Harappan seals,⁸ the representation of the Buddha,⁹ Lord Mahavira,¹⁰ the third- and second-century-BCE Mauryan period and Ashoka's spread of Buddhism,¹¹ Gupta art,¹² the ancient university of Nalanda,¹³ the descent of Ganga panel from Mahabalipuram¹⁴ and representations of the boat from Mohenjo-daro, and the ship-panel from Borobudur in central Java¹⁵ which represented India's maritime heritage.

This chapter proposes that the themes were not merely a matter of personal preference, but drew from the larger national imagination that had pan-Indian appeal. The inclusion of topics from history and culture in a political document encapsulating a vision for modern India underscores the importance given to an understanding of the past by the founding fathers. Of interest to this study are the sites of memory and the material world represented in Nandalal Bose's illustrations.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

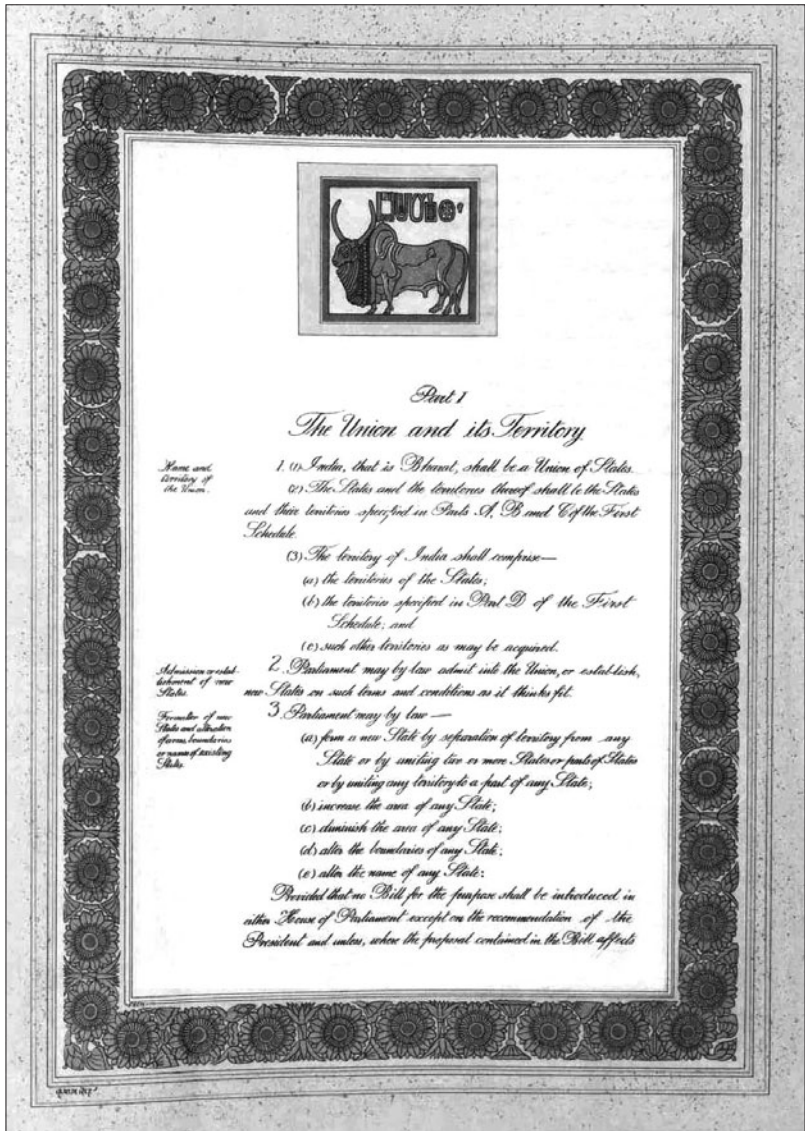
¹² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Plate 6.3: Page from the Constitution of India with a Harappan seal



Source: Government of India, 2010, *Constitution of India*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, reprint.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the emergence of new scientific disciplines, such as archaeology and history, changed the landscape in colonial India of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Monumental stupas now marked sites associated with the Buddha and conservation laws demarcated protected enclaves around heritage sites, such as at Nalanda in Bihar. How did these changes impact the visualization of India's past in the Constitution? The latter part of this chapter draws in another feature of the public discourse, viz., the extent to which the common people participated in debates and discussions over heritage and protection of Buddhist monuments, and the case that I focus on is that of the monastic complex at Nagarjunakonda in Andhra.

A striking characteristic of India's political leaders was that they also wrote extensively about the world around them and have left a large corpus of writings providing insights into their thinking as they campaigned for Independence from colonial rule.¹⁶ Of importance to our narrative is the trinity of Indian politics, viz., Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) who had evolved a commitment to history and particularly that of the Buddha, Mohandas K. Gandhi who thought deeply about the relationship of Buddhism and Hinduism, but for whom the *Bhagavad Gītā* was the cornerstone of his non-violence or *ahiṃsā* and B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) who approached the past as a means of building a better future for the depressed classes. In addition to these political leaders, Rabindranath Tagore and the Principal of his art school, Nandalal Bose, also need to be drawn into this discussion as the two brought culture and art into politics and governance.

We are at the end of an era and possibly very soon we shall embark upon a new age; and my mind goes back to the great past of India, to the 5,000 years of India's history . . . All that past crowds around me and exhilarates me and, at the same time, somewhat oppresses me. Am I worthy of that past? When I think also of the future, the greater future I hope, standing on this sword's edge of the present between this mighty past and the mightier future, I tremble a little and feel overwhelmed by this mighty task.¹⁷

Nehru made this connection about the significance of past in shaping the future while moving a resolution for a sovereign Indian republic

¹⁶ Ramachandra Guha, edited, 2011, *Makers of Modern India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

¹⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru to the Constituent Assembly, 13 December 1946, in *Constituent Assembly Debates*, Official Report, vol. 1, 1946, December 9–23, 1946, pp. 55–62.

at the Constituent Assembly. He was indeed unique in engaging with issues, such as the vitality of India that helped her survive over millennia and the idea of India and its cultural inheritance.

The Constitution of India was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949, and came into effect on January 26, 1950, announcing India's birth as a republic. Two-hundred-and-eighty-four men and women involved in framing the Constitution signed the document, which incorporated 90,000 words in calligraphic writing in both English and Hindi. Though the Congress Party had a majority in the Legislative Assembly, the Constituent Assembly was a diverse body and included several members who did not accept the Congress ideology, such as Ambedkar who had frequent disagreements with Congress leaders; K. M. Munshi (1887–1971), who had left the party; S. P. Mookerjee (1901–53), the Hindu Mahasabha leader, and Saiyad Mohammad Saadulla, Deputy Leader of the Muslim League and a prominent member of the Drafting Committee. Gandhi was a notable absentee as he was traveling across the country to douse the fires of communal frenzy that had erupted over the division of the country along religious lines. Ambedkar was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee and played a prominent role along with other leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Sarojini Naidu, and Abdul Kalam Azad. The Constituent Assembly met for the first time on December 9, 1946, and would meet for three more sessions over the first half of 1947 before it became the Legislative Assembly of independent India at midnight on August 14, 1947. The Constitution is undoubtedly a landmark document in the history of modern India and one that found a rare unanimity among legislators.

The official Government of India version of the making of the flag traces its beginnings to the 1905 partition of Bengal,¹⁸ when Surendranath Banerjee hoisted the national flag in the compound of the proposed Federation Hall on Upper Circular Road, though this may perhaps be only half the story, as shown by Arundhati Virmani. Virmani suggests that elaboration of a new symbolic language allowed the creation of an innovative political culture produced during the national movement.¹⁹ It is important to realize that the adoption of national symbols, such

¹⁸ Government of India, 1950, *Our Flag*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division, New Delhi.

¹⁹ Arundhati Virmani, 2008, *A National Flag for India: Rituals, Nationalism and the Politics of Sentiment*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, p. 7.

as a flag, required a broad-based consensus and was not merely an act of either the Legislative Assembly or the political elite. Contemporary newspaper reports underscore the consensus that emerged around the tricolour, which was indeed striking. The beginnings of the movement for a national symbol may be traced to Nagpur Congress session in 1923 when a *satyagraha* or force of truth was organized around the flag, which transformed it into a central element of the national movement.²⁰

The idea of the wheel symbol was not entirely new, having already been proposed in 1931 when the Flag Committee set up by the Congress had initiated a public debate and large-scale mobilization of public opinion on the national flag. The seven members of this committee were Pattabhi Sitaramayya, Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, D. B. Kalelkar, and N. S. Hardikar.²¹ Mahatma Gandhi accepted that “the more the National Flag is gaining in importance, the nicer become the questions that are being raised about its colours, size, the carkha, symbol, etc. It should be remembered that the National Flag has become national only by convention and not by any Congress resolution.”²²

It was this urge to arrive at a trans-religious consensus both at the political and at the national levels that resulted in the setting up of a nine-member flag committee under the chairmanship of the President of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad. The committee included representatives of all communities: Muslim (Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad), Hindu (C. Rajagopalachari, Sarojini Naidu, K. M. Panikkar, K. M. Munshi, B. R. Ambedkar, S. N. Gupta), Christian (Frank Anthony), and Sikh (Sardar Ujjal Singh).²³ Interestingly, the Buddhist community was not represented separately, as Ambedkar embraced Buddhism much later in 1956. This second committee considered the earlier discussions, and it would seem that there was an agreement on continuing with the tricolour flag adopted by the Congress in

²⁰ Arundhati Virmani, 1999, National Symbols under Colonial Domination: The Nationalization of the Indian Flag, March–August 1923, *Past and Present*, 164: 171.

²¹ Virmani, 2008, *A National Flag for India*, p. 150.

²² The National Flag, *Young India*, February 27, 1930: 70.

²³ B. Shiva Rao, edited, 1966, *The Framing of India's Constitution: Select Documents*, vol. 1, Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), New Delhi, p. 492.

1931, with the replacement of *carkha* or spinning wheel because of its complicated design, lack of symmetry and the lateral inversion problem between the two sides of the flag. Instead, S. D. Kalelkar suggested the use of a navy blue wheel design with 24 spokes as represented on the abacus of the Sarnath lion capital of Ashoka. This idea was ascribed to Badr-ud-Din Tyabji who had been President of the Madras session of Indian National Congress in 1887.²⁴ Badr-ud-Din Tyabji himself was a civil servant (ICS officer), artist and art connoisseur and in this latter capacity was attached to the Constituent Assembly. Nehru explained the choice of the *cakra* in the following terms:

But what type of wheel should we have? Our minds went back to many wheels but notably one famous wheel, which had appeared in many places and which all of us have seen, the one at the top of the capital of the Ashoka column and in many other places. That wheel is a symbol of India's ancient culture. It is a symbol of the many things that India had stood for through the ages. So we thought that this Cakra emblem should be there, and that wheel appears.²⁵

To what extent was Nehru's vision shared by his contemporaries? Prof. S. Radhakrishnan, who later became the second President of India (1962–67), praised the choice of *cakra* as the symbol on the flag, as it represented the “Wheel of Law — the Dharma, which was perpetually moving, indicating that there was death in stagnation, while there was life in movement.”²⁶ Father Heras, Director of the Indian Historical Research Institute, Bombay, referred to the enthusiasm among all sections of the society that greeted Nehru's motion on India's national flag and termed it unprecedented. He traced the beginnings of the *cakra* to the *Rgveda* (I.164.47–48) as a symbol of *ṛta* or eternal law.²⁷ Thus, in the conceptualization of the flag and the Constitution, several political figures played an important role, starting with Jawaharlal Nehru. Tracing the background of each would help in understanding their individual approaches towards the archaeology of Buddhism in India.

²⁴ Badr-ud-Din Tyabji, 1988, *Memoirs of an Egoist 1907–1956*, vol. 1, Roli Books, New Delhi, pp. 172–73.

²⁵ Constituent Assembly of India, vol. 4, 22 July, 1947, <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol4p7.htm> (accessed on July 7, 2013).

²⁶ Symbol of Freedom, *The Times of India*, January 26, 1950: B5.

²⁷ Free India's Flag, *The Times of India*, August 15, 1947: 8.

The Idea of History

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964)

The only son of an affluent barrister, Jawaharlal Nehru had an English education first at Harrow, then at Cambridge and the Inner Temple finally qualifying for the Bar. He returned to India in 1912 and tried to understand India's past "via the West." What distinguished his quest was his extensive reading, his visits to archaeological sites, such as Mohenjodaro in present-day Pakistan, Buddhist monuments at Ajanta, Sarnath and Ellora, and his participation in religious festivals like the Kumbh Mela. He then tried to communicate his understanding of the idea of India through his writings, such as the *Glimpses of World History* and the *Discovery of India*.²⁸ This was not merely an intellectual exercise in comprehending India's past and its conceptualization, but an emotional experience for Nehru.

This interplay of the past, present and future emerges strongly in Nehru's prose. Elsewhere, Nehru observed: "The future that took shape in my mind was one of intimate cooperation between India and the other countries of the world. But before the future came, there was the present, and behind the present lay the long and tangled past, out of which the present had grown. So to the past I looked for understanding".²⁹ While writing on the Buddha, Nehru referred to his fascination with Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* and his visits to several Buddhist sites located in the United Provinces (the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh), as also to countries where Buddhism was a living faith. There was much that he disapproved of, such as the rituals and the ceremonies that overlay what he termed the Buddha's "metaphysical doctrine." For him, the conception of the image of Buddha symbolized the "whole spirit of Indian thought . . . And the nation and the race which can produce such a magnificent type must have deep reserves of wisdom and inner strength."³⁰

Jawaharlal Nehru served as the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee from 1926 to 1928, declared India's Independence on January 26, 1930, in Lahore (now in Pakistan) and hoisted the flag of free India in a large public convention on the banks of the river Ravi. It was in those tumultuous years that he visited the archaeological

²⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, 1934, *Glimpses of World History*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay; 1946, *Discovery of India*, Signet Press, Calcutta.

²⁹ Nehru, 1946, *Discovery of India*, p. 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–32.

site of Mohenjo-daro in 1931 and wrote to his 13-year-old daughter about the 5,000-year old past of India:

Only three weeks ago, I went to see the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus valley in Sind. You were not with me there. I saw a great city coming out of the earth, a city of solid brick houses and wide thoroughfares, built they say, 5000 years ago. And I saw beautiful jewellery and jars found in this ancient city. I could almost imagine men and women, decked out in gay attire, walking up and down its streets and lanes, and children playing, as children will, and the bazaars bright with merchandise, and people buying and selling, and the temple bells ringing. For these 5000 years India has lived her life.³¹

Nehru visited Mohenjo-daro again in 1936 and was dismayed at the fact that not only had archaeological work stopped on account of lack of funds, but also there were no attempts at conservation of the excavated structures. The officer of the archaeology department complained that he had practically no funds or other help to preserve the buildings. He caustically remarked: “lack of funds was pleaded, although there was never any lack for the display of imperial pomp and splendour.”³²

He subsequently wrote of his journeys and visits to ancient sites that made him appreciate an unbroken cultural tradition of the country over the last 5,000 years:

At Sarnath, near Benares [present Varanasi], I would almost see the Buddha preaching his first sermon, and some of his recorded words would come like a distant echo to me through two thousand five hundred years. Ashoka’s pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though an emperor, was greater than any King or emperor.”³³

This thought of India possessed him and was one that he sought to come to terms with: “There seemed to me something unique about the continuity of a cultural tradition through five thousand years of history . . . Only China has had such a continuity of tradition and cultural life.”³⁴ This panorama of the past merged with the unhappy present of India being a slave country and an appendage of Britain and provided him with renewed vigor to carry the burden of the present.

³¹ Nehru, 1934, *Glimpses of World History*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, p. 55.

³² Nehru, 1946, *The Discovery of India*, p. 48.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Two issues relating to the past emerge repeatedly in Nehru's writings: first, the question of the unity of the country; and second, the vital life-giving quality of the past, which necessarily meant that a distinction had to be made between an integrated vision of life and the deadwood of the past. In a paper published in the January 1938 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Nehru addressed the issue of whether India would be able to hold together once British rule was withdrawn. He argued that in the absence of developments in transport and communication, a viable political unity could not be achieved in the past, though the idea of the political unity of India persisted. He also contrasted the religious intolerance of Europe with a wider tolerance prevailing in India throughout the historical period: "Ashoka indeed achieved it [political unity] two thousand years ago and built up an empire far greater than that of Britain in India today. This empire stretched right into Central Asia and included Afghanistan."³⁵

Nehru accepted that though Buddhism had extended its influence to large parts of Asia, it had ceased to be a dominant force in the land of its birth and its teachings had been assimilated through successive periods. "Buddhism more than anything else laid the foundation of Greater India and established cultural unity of an abiding value between India and many parts of Asia. A free India can worthily strengthen and revitalize those contacts."³⁶

In a speech given on the occasion of the re-enshrinement of the relics of the Buddha's disciples at Sanchi, Nehru hoped that neighboring countries, such as Burma and Lanka, would co-operate in spreading the teachings of the Buddha and in establishing peace in the world. As the Prime Minister of India, he reiterated:

[T]he selection of the Ashoka cakra (wheel) for the National Flag and the adoption of the Ashoka Lions for the National Emblem was not merely a matter of chance. It was deliberately done because these signs denoted a sincere desire for peace and would work as a constant reminder to the people to continue to make incessant efforts in that direction.³⁷

Representatives of several countries, such as Burma, Cambodia, Lanka, France, Japan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Thailand, attended the opening ceremony of the new vihara at Sanchi.

³⁵ S. Gopal and Uma Iyengar, edited, 2003, *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 710.

³⁷ Relics Re-enshrined at Sanchi, *The Times of India*, December 1, 1952: 1.

In the letters written to his daughter, Nehru refers to visits to Ajanta, Ellora, the Elephanta caves, and other archaeological sites both in India and overseas that gave him an insight into the past along with the background readings that he did. “To a somewhat bare understanding was added an emotional appreciation, and gradually a sense of reality began to creep into my mental picture of India.”³⁸ He visited the excavated remains at Nalanda and was struck by the extent of the site and the huge scale on which it was planned, though Nehru repeated the identification of the site as that of a university on the basis of accounts by Chinese pilgrims. He accepted that Indian art was intimately associated with Indian religion and philosophy and “that it is difficult to appreciate it fully unless one has some knowledge of the ideals that governed the Indian mind.”³⁹ In this he made common ground with Gandhi and Nandalal Bose.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948)

Born in Gujarat in 1869, Gandhi studied law at London and briefly practiced as a lawyer in Bombay and Rajkot before leaving for Durban in South Africa in 1893. He returned to India after two decades, having already acquired the status of a leader of the Indian diaspora in South Africa. Gandhi was not a member of the Constituent Assembly, though the tricolour flag that Nehru proposed was an adaptation of the one first suggested by Gandhi in 1920. The *swaraj* or self-government flag first proposed by Gandhi had three colors: saffron, white and green, but with a *charkha* or spinning wheel in the center, as discussed earlier.⁴⁰

Two other issues may be relevant here: one, Gandhi’s attitude to the past; and second, his understanding of Buddhism. Regarding the first, Gandhi published his initial political tract, *Hind Swaraj*, in 1909, and it is unusual that the political tract was mainly about Indian civilization and not about Hindu civilization. Indian civilization, according to Gandhi, encompassed different streams of culture regardless of religious denomination. In a chapter titled “What is civilization,” Gandhi contrasted what he considered to be true Indian civilization with the

³⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, 1951, *Discovery of India*, third edition, Meridian Books, London, p. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Virmani, 1999, National Symbols under Colonial Domination.

“materialistic” civilization of Europe. Gandhi virtually subordinated the political agenda before India to the cultural agenda. He argued that India possessed civilizational accord long before the British brought about administrative unity.⁴¹ Before Gandhi wrote of India as a civilization, Rabindranath Tagore had also articulated the idea of syncretism in a 1902 essay titled “History of Bharatvarsha,” which was reproduced many times during the Swadeshi agitation in Bengal from 1905. In the essay, Tagore wrote:

We can see that the aim of Bharatavarsha has always been to establish unity amidst differences, to bring diverse paths to a convergence, and to internalize within her soul the unity within severalty, that is to say to comprehend the inner unity of externally perceptible differences — without eliminating the uniqueness of each element.⁴²

Writing in *Hind Swaraj* about the historicity of the practice of non-violence, Gandhi stressed that “we have evidence of its working at every step. The universe would disappear without that force,” i.e., the force of the soul or truth. He explained the Gujarati meaning of history as “it so happened” or *itihāsa* and contrasted it with the European notion of history as being a record of the doings of kings and emperors, of wars and battles and other events that have interrupted the course of nature.⁴³

Gandhi admitted that he had been introduced to the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Buddhism through the books of Edwin Arnold, *Song Celestial* and *The Light of Asia*, by two Theosophists he met during his stay in England.⁴⁴ In 1924, he presided over the Buddha Jayanti celebrations held under the auspices of the Buddha Society of India. The gathering was non-political and was attended by several persons who held political positions very different from that of Gandhi. The speakers extolled

⁴¹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 2011, *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in the Indian Nationalist Discourse*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 49–52.

⁴² Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 2008, Kosambi and the Discourse of Civilization, *The Hindu*, July 31, <http://www.hindu.com/2008/07/31/stories/2008073155850900.htm> (accessed on July 7, 2013).

⁴³ Guha, edited, 2011, *The Makers of Modern India*, pp. 139–44.

⁴⁴ M. K. Gandhi, 1983[1927], *Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, Dover Publications, New York, p. 59.

Gandhi as the living exponent of Buddha's teachings. Gandhi acknowledged that his knowledge of Buddhism derived mainly from Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a book that several Indian scholars of *Buddha dhamma* did not hold in high regard, as it did not present an authoritative account of the life of the Buddha. For Gandhi, "Buddhism was a part of Hinduism and [he] repudiated the belief that India's downfall dated from her acceptance of Buddha's teachings."⁴⁵

Gandhi made no distinction between the essential teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism and regarded the latter as nothing but Hinduism reduced to practice in terms of the masses. In his address to the Mahabodhi Society of India, Calcutta, in May 1925, he stated that he regarded himself as one of the humblest Hindus, "but the deeper I study Hinduism the stronger becomes the belief in me that Hinduism is as broad as the Universe and it takes in its fold all that is good in the world."⁴⁶ He did not regard Buddhism as having been banished from India. On the contrary, "every essential characteristic of Buddhism I see, is being translated into action in India much more perhaps than in China, Ceylon and Japan, which nominally profess Buddhism. I make bold to say that we in India translate Buddhism into action far better than our Burmese friends do."⁴⁷ Gandhi's version of Buddhism drew from the *itihāsa purāṇa* tradition discussed in the previous chapter and one that continued to be influential well into the twentieth century. As I have suggested earlier, it formed a viable parallel tradition to the "scientific" discoveries of the nineteenth century.

B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956)

In addition to his association with the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar stands out for the Navayana or Neo-Buddhist path forged by him on the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's *parinirvāna* or passing away. Ambedkar came from a Mahar family from the village of Ambavade in Ratnagiri district of Konkan. The family was of some standing in the village and enjoyed the privilege of keeping the palanquin of the

⁴⁵ Mr. Gandhi on Buddha, *The Times of India*, May 19, 1924: 10.

⁴⁶ Mahatma Gandhi on Buddhism, in Rupali Rupasinghe, edited, *The Maha Bodhi Centenary Volume, 1891–1991*, vols 98 and 99, The Maha Bodhi Society of India, Calcutta, p. 222.

⁴⁷ Mahatma Gandhi on Buddhism, p. 223.

village goddess.⁴⁸ The Mahars formed a part of the Bombay Army of the East India Company and Ambedkar's grandfather Maloji Sakpal was a military man. His son Ramji Sakpal was a trained teacher and served as a headmaster in the military school with the rank of Subedar-Major in the Second Grenadiers. Bhimrao was the youngest of his 14 children and adopted the surname Ambavadekar from the name of their village. This was later changed to Ambedkar after the name of a teacher in the High School that he went to. The teacher took a fancy to the boy and made the change in the school records.⁴⁹ In 1913, Sayajirao Gaekwad, the Maharaja of Baroda (1863–1939) sponsored his higher studies at Columbia University, where he obtained a post-graduate degree for his thesis titled "Ancient Indian Commerce." After a successful stint at Columbia University, Ambedkar left America in June 1916 for London and joined the Gray's Inn for studying law and the London School of Economics for studying economics.⁵⁰ In 1923, he submitted his thesis titled "Problem of the Rupee" and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science. That same year he returned to Bombay and started life as a barrister. In 1924, he founded the Society for the Benefit of the Excluded Classes or the Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha.

The Constituent Assembly's recommendations for the adoption of Buddhist symbols are often viewed in secondary writings as owing to Ambedkar's personal convictions, though as discussed in an earlier section the adoption of national symbols, as also the flag, was a more complex process of public debate and consensus at the national level. It is important to factor in local developments relating to Buddhism in western India here, as these probably influenced Ambedkar, and one person who stands out is Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi (1876–1947).

Kosambi had converted to Buddhism and spent his life studying Sanskrit and Pāli, besides authoring 11 books on Buddhism and Jainism. His single cherished goal was to popularize the Buddha's message in Maharashtra and to achieve this, he published extensively in Marathi.⁵¹ In 1902, he was initiated into the Buddhist monastic order in

⁴⁸ Dhananjay Keer, 1954, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, p. 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵¹ Meera Kosambi, edited, 2010, *Dharmanand Kosambi: The Essential Writings*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, p. 4.

Lanka, traveled to the pilgrimage sites in India and, in 1904, ordained as a monk in Burma. In 1906, he gave up monkhood and joined academic life at Calcutta University at the behest of scholars, such as Manmohan Ghosh (brother of the philosopher Shri Aurobindo Ghosh) and Justice Ashutosh Mookerjee (Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University from 1906 to 1924), where he introduced the study of Pāli. It was at this time that he met Sayajirao Gaekwad, Maharaja of Baroda, who offered him a monthly stipend to work in Maharashtra and write books on Buddhism. After settling in Maharashtra in 1908, Kosambi joined the Prarthana Samaj, which had been established in 1867 to work for religious and social reform.

In 1909, Kosambi delivered five lectures on Buddhism at Baroda at the invitation of Sayajirao Gaekwad and the next year (1910) three of these were published in Marathi in Bombay by the Nirnayasagar Press under the title *Buddha, Dharma and Sangha*. This was the fourth book to appear on the Buddha in Marathi. Of the other three, one was G. N. Kane's 1894 adaptation of *Light of Asia* and, like the other two, written by an author with no first-hand knowledge of either Pāli or Buddhism. As mentioned by a reviewer in *Subodh Patrika*, February 5, 1911, Kosambi's book contained "information about Buddhism culled from the original religious texts and packed into a little over a hundred pages" and reading it would certainly dispel "the erroneous statements made about Buddhism by many English writers because of misunderstanding, false pride, or other reasons."⁵² A second work by the author was a play titled *Bodhisattva* which was published posthumously in 1949 by Dharmanand Smarak Trust. Writings and lectures on Buddha and Buddhism struck a popular chord in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and this was true not only for Maharashtra, but for all regions of the country. It is within this milieu that the contribution of Ambedkar needs to be understood.

Ambedkar's search for appropriate religious course of action to be pursued started in 1935, as he was convinced that institutional religion of some kind was essential for human society. It was the same year that he declared that he would not die a Hindu.⁵³ From May 1950

⁵² Ibid., p. 12.

⁵³ Trevor Ling, 1980, *Buddhist Revival in India: Aspects of the Sociology of Buddhism*, St. Martin's Press, New York, pp. 82–86.

onwards, he openly exhibited his preference for Buddhism, as he visited Colombo and Rangoon, the latter to attend the Third World Buddhist Conference in December 1954. Finally on October 14, 1956, he took Buddhist *dīkṣā* (initiation) along with his followers and forged a new version of Buddhism, which was largely of his own conception, as described in his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, published posthumously in 1957.⁵⁴

Unlike Nehru and Gandhi, Ambedkar redefined Buddhism as a social system and rewrote its tenets for his followers in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In the introduction to the book he raised four problems with the traditional doctrine of Buddhism. He argued against the generally accepted view of Siddhartha's renunciation of the world after seeing a dead man, a sick man and an old man, stating that the explanation was not logical. Similarly, the four noble truths could not have formed a part of the original teachings of the Buddha, as they were too pessimistic and disallowed hope to man for improvement. Third, the Buddha denied the existence of the soul, while re-affirming the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth. These appeared contradictory to Ambedkar. Finally, he raised the question of the need to create the *bhikkhu* or monk. He believed that the usefulness of the *bhikkhu* lay only in his ability to provide service to the society.⁵⁵

It is suggested that Ambedkar drew upon Indian cultural resources, as well as "Orientalist" interpretations of Buddhism and Indian nationalism, in order to create a community, which was ideologically co-existent with Hinduism, though not subordinate to it.⁵⁶ Ambedkar's primary focus seems to have been not so much to change the Brahmanical system, but to "use a polemical critique of Brahmanical religio-social dominance as the foundation upon which to develop an Indic based alternative to the Brahmanical social order."⁵⁷ Ambedkar's Buddhism had little in common with traditional forms of the religion that existed in Asia. This is further evident from reviews of his book in the journal of

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

⁵⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, 1974, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Siddharth Publication, Bombay, p. xlii.

⁵⁶ Anne Blackburn, 1993, Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar's Vision of a Moral Community, *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 16(1).

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 5.

the Mahabodhi Society, which stated that Ambedkar had used Buddhist texts to substantiate his own views on Buddhism and hence the title of the book should be changed to *Ambedkar and His Dhamma*.⁵⁸

Addressing a meeting organized by the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1950, Ambedkar, then the Law Minister of Independent India, reiterated his interest in Buddhism since his childhood. The similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism, he suggested, were the result of the two religions existing side by side. At the same meeting Dr V. M. Kaikini, a surgeon, said that modern-day Hinduism was nothing but a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism with some special beliefs, rituals and caste system added to it.⁵⁹

Ambedkar had deliberated for two decades after his 1935 declaration to abandon Hinduism and choose another faith, before he converted in 1956. Several inducements were offered to him, including 50 million rupees by the former Nizam of Hyderabad “for the wholesale delivery of Untouchables to Islam.”⁶⁰ The Secretary of the Mahabodhi Society also sent a letter welcoming him to the fold of Buddhism. The final decision was made after much research, soul-searching and reflection.

Ambedkar’s use of the Pāli canon and his redefinition of the tenets of Buddhism raise the familiar question of hermeneutics and the dynamics of interpretation and innovation so essential to the making of religious traditions. Scholars increasingly accept that the Buddhist tradition was progressively reformulated to accommodate changes in the Sangha. Within this long history, “Ambedkar’s hermeneutics of Buddhist liberation may be seen as an example of these patterns.”⁶¹ These new interpretations notwithstanding, Ambedkar reiterated the biography of the historical Buddha,⁶² his birth in Kapilavastu,⁶³ identified with the

⁵⁸ *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society*, December 1959: 353.

⁵⁹ Advocacy of Buddhism, *The Times of India*, July 26, 1950: 9.

⁶⁰ Christopher S. Queen, 1996, Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation, in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, edited, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, State University of New York Press, New York, p. 51.

⁶¹ Queen, 1996, Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation.

⁶² Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 2–398.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

present-day village of Piprahwa, his first sermon at Sarnath,⁶⁴ his travels to different places to preach,⁶⁵ his farewell to Vaishali⁶⁶ about 60 km from Patna, his final sermon at Kusinārā,⁶⁷ and the distribution of his ashes. He did not specifically refer to new archaeological discoveries or debates over the identification of places associated with the Buddha.

For Ambedkar, the issue was one of social justice and there was little room in it for the stupendous monuments of the past. In the post-Ambedkar period, however, there is little doubt that his followers took pride in and claimed the enormous output in stone of Buddhist art and architecture in the subcontinent, starting with the edicts of Ashoka and continuing well into the thirteenth century CE.⁶⁸ Tartakov has discussed the use of the new imagery from ancient sites that now adorns private and public places of worship of the new Buddhists:⁶⁹ “The architecture and pictorial imagery adopted by this new Buddhist movement reveal a process by which ancient symbols have been reinterpreted and given meaning in a new and different social context.”⁷⁰ The most pertinent example of this is the site of Ambedkar’s funeral pyre on the beach at Dadar in Mumbai, which is marked by a domed memorial in a garden, reminiscent of the stupa. Gateways similar to those from sites, such as Sanchi, adorn its entrance. Unlike the ancient stupas built in brick and stone, the modern structures are in concrete and hollow inside and are staging sites for the future progression of the new Buddhism.⁷¹

The Mahabodhi Society had already initiated a new style of architecture for its buildings in Calcutta and at Sarnath which replicated older archaeological models. This was also the case with the images of the Buddha that imitated earlier forms. The stones used for the construction of the new vihara at Sanchi, for example, were the same as used by the ancient builders and were obtained from Akpura, Nagori and the hills of Udaigiri. “The architecture of the temple retains the ancient dome similar to the great stupa 200 feet away. On the walls of the vihara are

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 82

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 385–86.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 390.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 398.

⁶⁸ Debala Mitra, 1971, *Buddhist Monuments*, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta.

⁶⁹ Gary Michael Tartakov, 1990, Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery, *Art Journal*, Winter.

⁷⁰ Ibid.: 409.

⁷¹ Ibid.: 413.

five paintings of the Buddha from five different countries of Asia and banners from Tibet.”⁷² Compared to Ambedkar, Rabindranath Tagore was born to an affluent family of scholars, social reformers and entrepreneurs and is known not only for his poems, plays, songs, and short stories for which he received world-wide acclaim, but more so for the institutions of learning and art that he established in Bengal.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

“What is needed is eagerness of heart for a fruitful communication between different cultures. Anything that prevents this is barbarism.”⁷³ Tagore had a major influence on both Gandhi and Nehru. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya demonstrates in his book that Tagore’s writings on the nature of Indian civilization are complex and underwent a change from 1902 when he wrote a seminal essay on the syncretic nature of Indian civilization until 1941 when he expressed his disillusionment with the growing conflict in the subcontinent along caste and religious lines.⁷⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tagore founded a school for children at Shantiniketan and this later became the nucleus of a university, Vishvabharati. On December 23, 1921, Vishvabharati became a registered public body and the institution chose for its motto the Vedic text, *yatra viśvam bhavatyekanīdam* (“where the world makes a home in a single nest”). In addition to being a center of learning, the university attracted intellectuals and thinkers. Guiseppe Tucci (1894–1984) spent a year at Shantiniketan from November 1925. He had been sent there by the Italian government to introduce the study of Italian language. Tucci wrote of the great attention paid to Buddhism in the curriculum and Chinese and Tibetan were given the same importance as was Sanskrit. He wrote:

At that time, Shantiniketan was perhaps the only place in India, where one could pursue comparative researches in Buddhism, because there one was able not only to meet Chinese and Tibetan scholars, or to discuss with the most learned Indian pundits, but could also find books not available elsewhere.⁷⁵

⁷² Relics Re-enshrined at Sanchi, *The Times of India*, December 1, 1952: 1.

⁷³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachnabali*, vol. 11, p. 1094, quoted in Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2005: 13.

⁷⁴ Bhattacharya, 2011, *Talking Back*, pp. 67–83.

⁷⁵ Guiseppe Tucci, 1961, *Recollections of Tagore*, in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume 1861–1961*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, pp. 59–60.

Tagore was perhaps the most widely traveled Indian of his generation and his travels provided him with a more nuanced understanding of India's place in the world. Of interest here are his travels to China, Japan and Southeast Asia and his vision of Buddhism as it spread across the Bay of Bengal. In 1916, he embarked on his voyage to Japan via Burma and Southeast Asia, eventually crossing the Pacific to reach North America. In 1927, he traveled to Indonesia on a private visit at the invitation of a cultural society for the promotion of literature and arts, the *Kunstkring* (Art Circle) in Batavia.⁷⁶ The industrial houses of the Birlas and Bajoria provided funding for the trip and the party was warmly received in Indonesia by the Indian business community who also gave generous contributions for *Vishvabharati*. The party was enthralled by the trip to Bali and Tagore wrote:

Along every village road processions of men and women were arriving with multifarious offerings. Some puranic age seemed to have come back to life before our very eyes, some picture from the Ajanta caves came out from the realm of art into the realm of life to revel in the sunshine.⁷⁷

From Bali, the party traveled to Surabaya, Surakarta and Jogjakarta, home to the Borobudur stupa and Prambanan temple complex. The stupa at Borobudur, however, left Tagore cold and he wrote:

It is so cut up in galleries, one above the other, and its pinnacle is so disproportionately small that in spite of its size, it lacks in dignity. It looks like a mountain with a diminutive stone cap. It was perhaps intended as a mere repository for the stone figures – hundreds of Buddhas and sculpted pictures representing the Jataka stories – like a huge tray with these sculptures heaped thereon. For, when taken up one by one, they are extraordinarily good. I specially liked the Jataka pictures – crowds of pictures depicting the multifarious play of the daily life of the times, but nowhere tainted with obscenity of vulgarity. In other temples I have seen images of gods and goddesses, or scenes from the sacred epics. But here we have life in its work-a-day aspect, be it king or beggar.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Arun Das Gupta, 2002, Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia: An Experiment in Bridge-Building, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 158(3): 460.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 462.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 471.

This was really the last stop for Tagore and his party, though they did make brief stops at Bandung and Batavia on the way back.

Tagore described the journey as a pilgrimage “to see the signs of the history of India’s entry into the universal.”⁷⁹ It was at this time that the Greater India Society was established in Bengal. The term “Greater India” had been used at least from the mid-fifteenth century onwards by Europeans, but now it acquired the sense of an Indic cultural sphere. Tagore was accompanied on his three-and-a-half month journey to Southeast Asia by the philologist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the artist and photographer Surendranath Kar, and the painter and musician Dharendra Krishna Deva Varman. A detailed record of the trip is available in Chatterji’s diary and Tagore’s letters written in Bangla. In Java, Tagore addressed different audiences and “established contact with Dutch and Indonesian archaeologists in order to work out a plan for an exchange of scholars and artists between Indonesia and his university at Santiniketan.”⁸⁰ The planned exchange program did not work out, though some sporadic visits did take place. Summing up the Indonesian experience for Tagore, the historian Arun Das Gupta concludes that Tagore “could not shake off his Indian bias. He was constantly looking to India for comparison on major and minor points, and in the process gained a fuller understanding of his own culture.”⁸¹ This also leads me to the final figure in the section on political thinkers who shaped the national vision on the representation of symbols that had been adopted.

Nandalal Bose (1882–1966)

The task of translating the idea of the past to imagery fell to the national painter and teacher Nandalal Bose, who visualized the cultural underpinnings of the making of the Constitution into a set of paintings. By presenting scenes from history and especially Buddhism, Bose provided a new meaning to the conceptualization of the past in providing the foundation for future.

⁷⁹ Sugata Bose, 2006, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, p. 235.

⁸⁰ Das Gupta, Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia: 458.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 475.

Bose is often hailed as the father of Indian modernism and one of the patriarchs of India's cultural revival.⁸² The first truly modern genre of Indian art emerged in the 1920s and 1930s with the works of Tagore and the new directions pioneered by Bose. More importantly for this study, Bose, through his art, participated actively in a public discourse on the past and the historical monuments, as evident from the visuals that he provided for the various Congress sessions.

Bose was born in Bihar, India, in 1882 and moved to Calcutta in 1897 for his high school studies. He joined the School of Art in Calcutta in 1905–6, which had been set up by E. B. Havell, a British teacher and art historian. He trained under Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), and Surendranath Ganguly was a close associate of his at the Calcutta school. At the beginning of his career, Bose was one of many artists and visionaries who sought to revive the spirituality and cultural authenticity of Indian art after 50 years of colonial rule and westernization. In 1907–8, he visited several ancient and historical sites of art starting with Patna and Benares and then moving to Gaya. Sometime later he went to Puri, Bhubaneswar and then Madras. In 1909, Lady Herringham (1852–1929), a British artist, copyist and art patron, sponsored his visit to Ajanta to make copies of the paintings. In January 1921, 12 years after his visit to Ajanta, Bose spent two months copying the murals at Bagh in central India and wrote about the deplorable state of the cave paintings. It was no coincidence that two of the walls at Nandan, the museum in Vishvabharati at Shantiniketan were adorned with paintings from Ajanta and Bagh. In 1924, Tagore invited him to join him in a tour of China and Japan.⁸³

In 1919, Bose became the first Director of the art school at Vishvabharati. For the following three decades, he experimented with a variety of Indian, Japanese and Chinese techniques. His work consisted of scenes of nature and tribal and village life, as well as religious subjects. In the 1930s, he became closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi, who saw in Nandalal's work a respect for the common man

⁸² Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 2005, *Lineages of the Modern in Indian Art: The Making of a National History*, in Kamala Ganesh and Usha Thakkar, edited, *Culture and the Making of Identity in Contemporary India*, Asiatic Society of Mumbai, Mumbai.

⁸³ Dinkar Kowshik, 1985, *Nandalal Bose*, National Book Trust, New Delhi.

and the richness of India's traditions that reflected Gandhi's own ideals. In 1930, he produced a print to visually conceptualize Gandhi's march to the sea protesting against British taxation on salt. The print, a portrait of Gandhi, achieved enormous popularity. Cheap to reproduce, it became the most widely circulated image of the leader of the Indian freedom movement.⁸⁴

Bose had first met Gandhi in 1920 when the latter visited Shantiniketan. In 1936, Gandhi asked him to prepare suitable visual displays for the Lucknow session of the Congress. Bose showcased a historical panorama of Indian art ranging from copies of paintings of Ajanta and Bagh caves to medieval paintings and modern works of Abanindranath Tagore and his disciples. He continued to work for the Congress at Gandhi's behest and provided the visuals for the 1936 and 1938 sessions at Faizpur on the Bombay–Itarsi railway line in Maharashtra and Haripura near Bardoli respectively. For the Faizpur session, Gandhi wanted a township to be built of local materials and the exhibits to be designed by local artists, while for the Haripura session in Gujarat, Bose produced a set of 84 paintings depicting the daily life of villagers, such as a tailor absorbed in his work, a mother feeding her child and musicians playing a variety of instruments.⁸⁵

Buddhist themes were of particular interest to Bose: he depicted the Buddhist nun Sanghamitrā in a life-size calligraphic line drawing in 1929.⁸⁶ Sayajirao Gaekwad was impressed with his posters for the Haripur Congress session and commissioned him to paint the murals in the central assembly hall of Kirti Mandir, a mausoleum built in 1838 to honor the Gaekwad family. On the east wall, Nandalal produced a multi-scene tableau based on Tagore's dance drama titled *Natir Puja* that drew on a Buddhist story of the sacrifice of a dancer in the court of king Ajātasātru who is said to have prohibited the worship of the Buddha.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, edited, 2008, *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose*, San Diego Museum of Art, California.

⁸⁵ Quintanilla, *Rhythms of India*, pp. 98–99, cat. nos 46–52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 131, cat. no. 14; National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 3803.

⁸⁷ Quintanilla, *Rhythms of India*, pp. 200–1, cat. no. 78.

The relationship between the past, present and future did not end with the visuals represented in a copy of the Constitution, but continued in the mural paintings commissioned for the outer corridor walls of the Indian Parliament. The idea was first proposed by the Speaker of the lower house of Parliament, the Lok Sabha, in 1951 and a committee was formed to draw up a detailed plan for the 58 panels that were to decorate the walls. Dr N. P. Chakravarti, the then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), was involved in the planning of the murals. Starting with the seal from Mohenjo-daro and the bronze dancing figure, the panels present vignettes from Indian history until Independence in 1947. It is no surprise that 11 of the panels depict scenes related to Buddhism. These include Māra's temptation, Buddha turning the *dharmacakra* or the wheel of law, Ashoka sending out missionaries, the Indo-Greek king Menander in discussion with the Buddhist monk Nāgasena, the Buddhist Council convened by Kaṇiṣka and so on.⁸⁸ Another large canvas depicting the 'Journey of India: Mohenjo-Daro to Mahatma' was painted by well-known painter and sculptor Jatin Das, to mark the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence.

Thus, the fascination with what may be termed the ancient Buddhist past among political leaders in the early twentieth century is evident. It is also apparent that Buddhism was perceived very differently by Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, and it is important to bear these distinctions in mind as they continue to impact the public discourse to date. For Gandhi, Buddhism was a cohesive force — *dharmā*; for Nehru, it was a catalyst for change — a progressive force; and for Ambedkar, it was the path to a caste-less society. These three perspectives are also important for this book. Nehru often wrote of his fascination for the Buddha and his teachings. Much of Nehru's approach drew from his visits to archaeological sites associated with the Buddha and to countries where Buddhism was practiced.⁸⁹ We would like to consider in some detail the impact that these new discoveries had on Bose and his art in the next section.

⁸⁸ Mural Paintings in Parliament House, <http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/p18.htm> (accessed on January 25, 2011); B. G. Verghese, 1955, Depicting History of India in Murals in Parliament, *The Times of India*, January 22: 9.

⁸⁹ Nehru, *Discovery of India*, pp. 130–32.

Archaeology and the Constitution

Nandalal Bose was an avid student of the wall-painting tradition of India as enshrined in the 31 rock-cut caves at Ajanta in western India dating from the second century BCE onwards and discovered by John Smith, a British army officer, in 1819. Major Robert Gill was commissioned by the Royal Asiatic Society to copy the paintings and his work covered about 30 large canvases from 1844 to 1863. These were displayed in the Indian Court of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, but most were destroyed in a fire there in 1866. In 1872, the Government of Bombay Presidency commissioned John Griffiths, the principal of the Bombay School of Art, to make a new set of copies. It took 13 years to complete the project at a cost of £30,000. Griffiths finally published the paintings in 1896.⁹⁰

As mentioned earlier, Bose visited Ajanta and other early Buddhist sites and copied the paintings there. Much of his work during 1909–10 was inspired by the mural painting tradition of the Buddhist caves. This influence is particularly marked in an episode from the *Mahābhārata* titled *Jātugryha Dāha* or “Burning of the Lacquer House.”⁹¹ Ajanta murals provided him with a form of monumental expression as also a form of public art, and in this his vision was very different from those of Rabindranath or Abanindranath Tagore.⁹² As Pramod Chandra and Sonya Rhie Quintanilla opine:

The illustrations Nandalal created for India’s Constitution are based on a history of Indian art from the time of the Indus valley civilization up to independence in 1947, each drawing upon a specific style from a historical phase; this indicates that he saw the very essence of the nation as being irrevocably intertwined with its artistic history.⁹³

⁹⁰ John Griffiths, 1896–97, *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave Temples of Ajanta, Khandesh, India*, W. Griggs, London.

⁹¹ National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 4798; Quintanilla, edited, 2008, *Rhythms of India*, p. 20.

⁹² Sugata Bose, 2008, Universalist Aspirations in a “National” Art: Asia in Nandalal’s Imagination, in Quintanilla, edited, *Rhythms of India*, p. 106.

⁹³ Pramod Chandra and Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, 2008, Nandalal Bose and the History of Indian Art, in Quintanilla, edited, *Rhythms of India*, p. 38.

After the depiction of the lion pillar capital from Sarnath on the frontispiece, unearthed during F. O. Oertel's excavations at the site in the early twentieth century, the first painting on page 1 is that of a seal from Mohenjo-daro showing a humped bull in profile with wide-curving horns and a heavy dewlap and letters in the Indus script. This majestic zebu bull, perhaps one of the most impressive motifs found on the Indus seals, appears almost exclusively at the largest cities of the Indus Valley Civilization, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.

A second painting drawing on the Harappan civilization appears on page 181: on the top of the page is the drawing of a terracotta boat model recovered from Mohenjo-daro and at the bottom, a two-masted sailing ship that appears on a sculpted panel of the Buddhist monument of Borobudur in central Java. The former replicates a water vessel probably made of bundled reeds with lashings, with a crescent-shaped hull and a box-shaped structure in the middle of the deck on a rectangular stone seal from Mohenjo-daro.⁹⁴ A similar craft with a small cabin in the center of the deck is depicted on a clay tablet also found in Mohenjo-daro.

This emphasis is not surprising, since the unearthing of the Harappan civilization was perhaps the most notable achievement of the ASI in the early twentieth century. On September 20, 1924, John Marshall had announced the discovery of a new civilization that was older than any known civilization of the subcontinent to the world dating probably between 1000 and 400 BCE in the *Illustrated London News*. It is interesting that Marshall suggested that the Indus Civilization was unique to the Indus valley, just as other Bronze Age river valley civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia were distinctive to the region where they emerged. In 1931, Marshall published his three-volume study of the Indus Civilization⁹⁵ including the results of the excavations at the Buddhist stupa and the monastery area on the highest mound in the north-west corner of Mohenjo-daro. Nearly 2,000 coins were also recovered from the stupa mound, 338 of which were of the Kuṣāṇa ruler Vāsudeva I with standing royal figure on obverse and Śiva on the reverse, while a majority of the 1,823 coins were uninscribed cast copper

⁹⁴ E. J. Mackay, 1938, *Further Excavations at Mohenjodaro*, Manager of Publications, New Delhi, pp. 340–41.

⁹⁵ John Marshall, 1931, *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization*, Arthus Probsthain, London.

coins dated to the early centuries of the Common Era. Another nine had fire altar on the obverse and a crude figure on the reverse.⁹⁶ Although subsequent investigations suggest a break between the end of the Indus occupation and the Kuṣāṇa phase, it is unlikely that the site was ever totally abandoned due to its high position on the plain and the protection it afforded against floods.

As with Mohenjo-daro, Borobudur is a unique Javanese monument built between 730 and 860 CE and consisting of terraces of decreasing size that rise above the Kedu plains. Exquisitely carved with 1,460 stone panels, Borobudur contains more than 500 life-sized Buddha images set around the monument. In the middle of each of the four sides, a stairway leads from the ground to the uppermost terrace, a climb of nearly 26 m.⁹⁷ In the lower register of the walls of the first gallery at Borobudur, a series of four panels illustrate the life of the Bodhisattva as a sea captain and how he and his sailors had been shipwrecked on the island inhabited by female ogres. Sea travel is prominently represented in the narratives of *Maitrakanyaka Jātaka*; *Suparaga Jātaka*, where the Bodhisattva is born as a navigator who saves his ship from a storm and a monster; and the *Kacchapāvādāna*, where a giant turtle saves shipwrecked merchants on his back.⁹⁸

It was perhaps the first major monument that drew the attention of the British in Southeast Asia, almost 47 years before the French naturalist Henri Mouhot (1826–61) brought the ruins of Angkor to the attention of Europe. In 1814, when Java was under British rule, Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) first showed evinced interest in the stupa at Borobudur located on a hill at the confluence of two rivers, Elo and Praga, in the fertile Kedu plains that forms the geographic center of Java. He sent a Dutch engineer H. C. Cornelius to explore and document the stupa. Cornelius cut down trees, cleared the area around the monument and made some drawings, which Raffles used to illustrate his *History of Java*. Bose's familiarity with Borobudur no doubt came

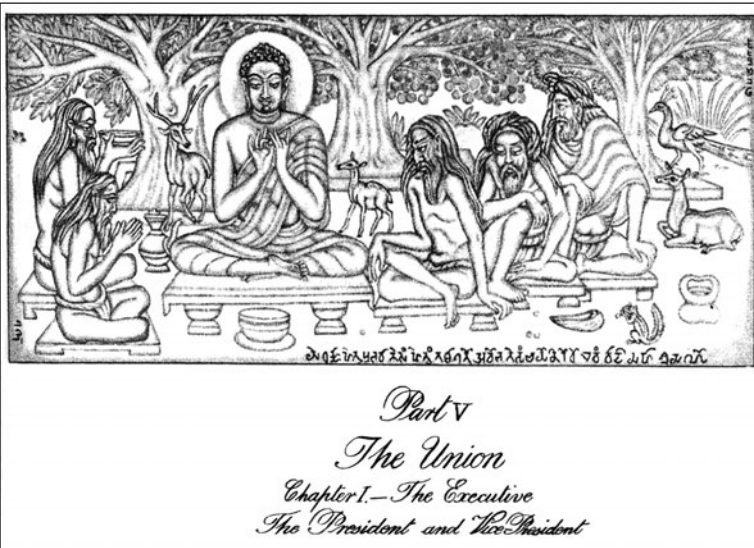
⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28.

⁹⁷ John Miksic, 1990, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddhas*, Periplus editions, Berkeley, CA, and Singapore, pp. 127–29.

⁹⁸ A. J. Bernet Kempers, 1976, *Ageless Borobudur*, Servire, Wassenaar, pp. 110–19.

from his association with Tagore who had traveled thrice to Southeast and East Asia. Nandalal accompanied him on his second trip to Burma, China and Japan in 1924. Clearly, the imagery that Bose used drew on the then recent archaeological discoveries and reflected the importance of Buddhism in the choice of national symbols. One of the first pictures relating to Buddhism in the Constitution of India is that of the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath (page 20), an image, which was known since the early eighteenth century (Plate 6.4). The Buddha is shown seated under a tree in the preaching *mudrā* surrounded by five ascetics, the location of the deer park being indicated by the presence of the deer and a peacock. At the bottom of the frame is an inscription that perhaps mirrors the find of an inscribed slab from inside the Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath by Alexander Cunningham in 1835 with the inscription *ye dhammā hetu pabbavā* dating to the sixth century CE. As mentioned earlier, the verse is almost universally recited by devotees and has been found enshrined in votive stupas or on slabs at stupa sites. Its juxtaposition with the visual of the preaching Buddha is an ingenious method of underscoring the continued practice of the doctrine first promulgated

Plate 6.4: The First Sermon at Sarnath

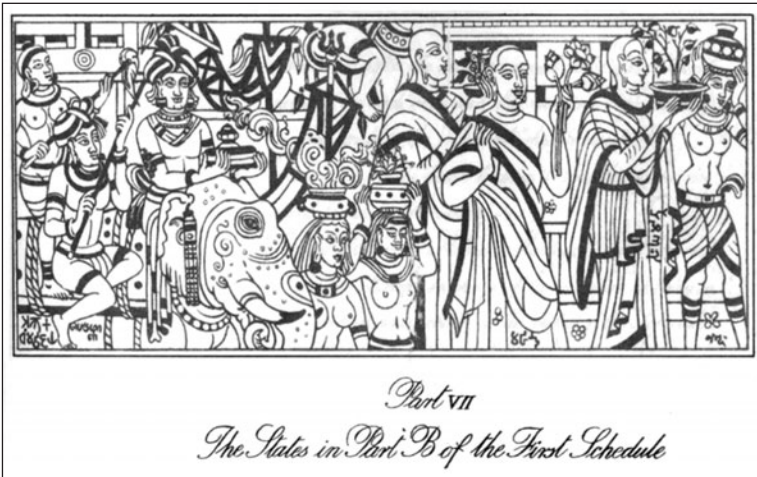


Source: Government of India, 2010, *Constitution of India*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, reprint.

by Śākyamuni. Bose visited Sarnath in 1907–8, as a part of a study tour of north India, which also included Patna, Varanasi, Agra, and Bodh Gaya. The sketches made during the tour included several ones of the Dhamekh Stupa and the railings discovered at Bodh Gaya.⁹⁹

The second painting on page 98 in the Constitution shows Ashoka spreading the *Buddha dhamma* (Plate 6.5). He is shown seated on an elephant surrounded by flag bearers and women carrying gifts. He is accompanied by two disciples, presumably Sanghamitta and Mahinda — the former carrying a sapling of the Bodhi tree. This aspect of the propagation of Buddhism, as discussed in Chapter 3 was often invoked in the colonial period. On page 102 is a scene from one of the paintings at Ajanta under the title “scene from Gupta art,” while on page 105, the monastic complex at Nalanda is represented with the excavated and conserved structures in the background and monks in the foreground.

Plate 6.5: Ashoka spreading the Buddhist *dhamma*



Source: Government of India, 2010, *Constitution of India*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, reprint.

The remains at Nalanda were found in north-eastern Bihar near the village of Bargaon and surveyed by Francis Buchanan in 1812.

⁹⁹ Kowshik, 1985, *Nandalal Bose*, p. 14.

In 1861, Cunningham identified the place as an important Buddhist center on the basis of the extraordinary profusion of sculptures that he encountered. Archaeological excavations carried out from 1916 to 1938 unearthed 15 monastic structures and led to a large collection of artefacts. The claims for the historicity of Nalanda are based on literary and epigraphical sources, which identify it as the birth-place of Buddha's disciple Sāriputta. Ashoka is said to have built a temple in the third century BCE and the site owes its popularity as a university to the archaeologist Hasmukh D. Sankalia's (1908–89) book *University of Nalanda* published in 1934 and largely based on textual sources.¹⁰⁰ The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang describes his stay at the Nalanda Mahāvihāra (great monastery) for five years and travels from there to neighboring places (Plate 6.6).

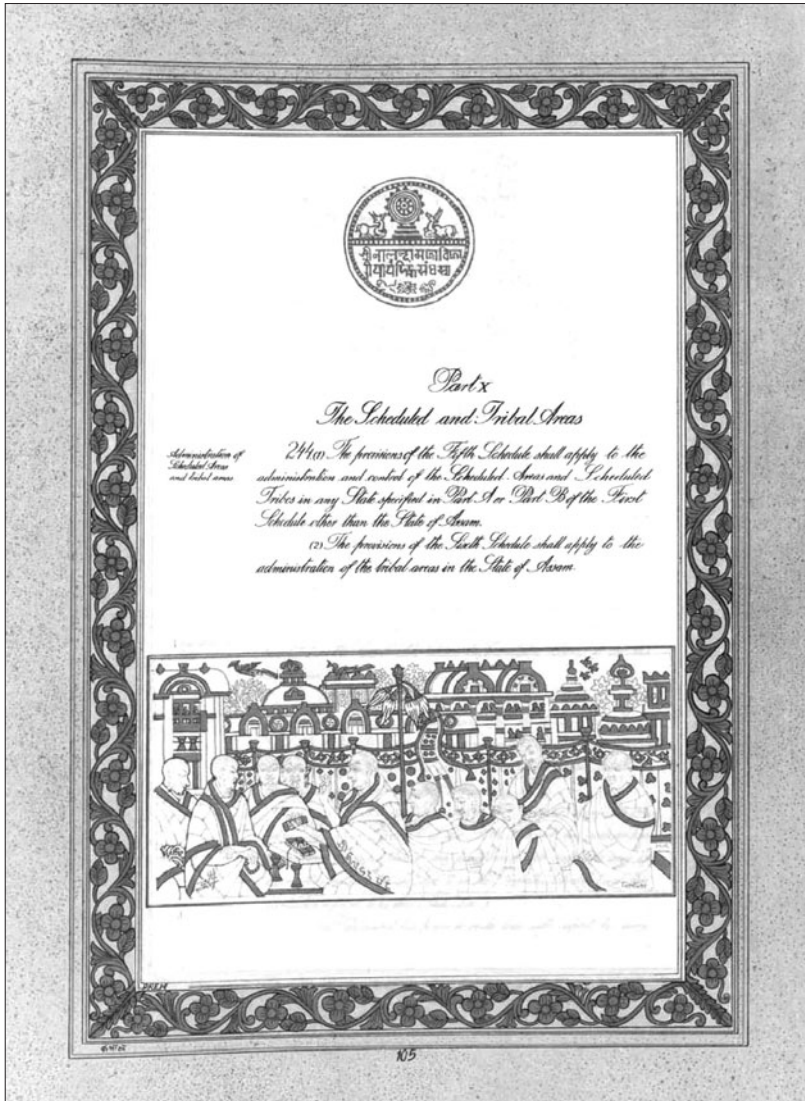
The association of Xuanzang with Nalanda was reiterated in more recent times. In 1956 that the India–China Friendship Communication between the then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai and his Indian counterpart Nehru had approved the construction of Xuanzang Memorial Hall, located barely a kilometer away from the excavated site of ancient Nalanda University. On January 12, 1957, Nehru received Xuanzang's relic along with a cheque from the Dalai Lama for the construction of a memorial for Xuanzang at a function organized at the Nav Nalanda University. The relic comprising of the skull bone of the Chinese pilgrim was first kept in the Patna Museum.¹⁰¹

The Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing unveiled a larger-than-life statue to the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang on February 12, 2007 at Nalanda. For the occasion, an appropriate Sino-Indian cultural ambience was created, as the image was “surrounded by Chinese mother-of-pearl murals, a virgin-white mural of the Maitreya Buddha built by Chinese artisans as the backdrop,” the ceiling murals painted in the Ajanta style and all of it encased in an enormous hall with Chinese architectural characteristics. A huge stone tablet with the Buddha's

¹⁰⁰ Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 1934, *University of Nalanda*, B. G. Paul and Company, Madras.

¹⁰¹ Pranava K. Chaudhary, 2006, Nalanda Gets Set for Relic, *The Times of India*, Patna, December 27, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2006-12-27/patna/27786722_1_relic-xuanzang-memorial-hall-patna-museum (accessed on July 7, 2013).

Plate 6.6: Page from the Constitution of India illustrated with painting of Nalanda



Source: Government of India, 2010, *Constitution of India*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, reprint.

footprint was displayed on one side, while on the other side, “in a glass case, a beautifully burnished, miniature gold Tibetan *chhorten* (Buddhist temple), inside which in another glass bowl lay a piece of the skull, the relic of Xuanzang” was exhibited. The relic had been obtained from the Patna Museum for the occasion.¹⁰² Clearly, history was being created in Nalanda on the occasion of the unveiling of the image of the Chinese pilgrim!

On the occasion of an exhibition of paintings of Bose at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay when the artist was almost 70 years old, an art critic praised his style: “Even a casual visitor to the exhibition cannot but be struck by the fragile charm of Nand Babu’s work. There is a delicacy of feeling, a subdued lyricism and an almost Chinese economy of means in most of his brush-and-ink drawings.”¹⁰³ Almost in the same breath, the artist was castigated for not developing an individual stamp that could leave a mark on every picture that he painted. His style was critiqued for an over-abundance of decorative details that dwarfed the central core in his ambitious murals, such as the Descent of the Ganga. “It is not that mythological or religious themes are taboo in painting. They are only far more difficult. They deal with events which have already been invested with a deep meaning in people’s minds, which the plastic arts cannot always cope with.”¹⁰⁴

It would be erroneous to judge Bose merely as a painter irrespective of the enormous public appeal that his work had and one that he worked hard towards creating. Ratan Parimoo rightly categorizes the period of the early twentieth century as one of transformation and struggle for the artist — and a struggle for national identity as well.¹⁰⁵ Gandhi had enormous influence on Bose who first met him in 1920, during the former’s visit to Shantiniketan. Nandalal’s preference for indigenous

¹⁰² Beijing’s Man — 14 Centuries on, Hieun Tsang Returns as Red China’s Link with Nalanda, *The Telegraph*, March 8, 2007, <http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.htm> (accessed July 18, 2013).

¹⁰³ Life and Letters: Search for a Style, *The Times of India*, February 13, 1953: 6.

¹⁰⁴ Life and Letters: 6. Nandalal Bose, *The Times of India*, January 20, 1957: 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ratan Parimoo, 1971, The Evolution of Indian Painting from 1850, *The Times of India*, June 20: 8.

colors, paper and other art materials owed much to Gandhi's steadfast support for Swadeshi and Khadi.

Bose's art works at the Lucknow, Faizpur and Haripura sessions of the Congress brought his art into the public domain and deepened his association with the Congress. There was no pecuniary benefit involved as he saw it as service to the cause of the freedom struggle. It also allowed him to experiment with social education and the ways in which people could be sensitized to the history of Indian art and painting. "It was an opportunity for creating art with a social relevance."¹⁰⁶ To get insights into the public image of the country's Buddhist heritage, we examine their perception of Buddhist monuments.

Preserving the Nation's Heritage

The overall impression given in secondary writings is that all memory of Buddhism had been lost in its land of origin. To what extent can this line of reasoning be sustained? What is the evidence for the knowledge of Buddhism in the nineteenth century prior to Arnold's *The Light of Asia*? To address this question, movements of people between Andhra and Burma need to be taken into account, especially after the introduction of regular steamer services in 1870. These migrations were largely from coastal Andhra and were seasonal, as much of the requirement for manpower was in rice mills and agricultural operations. There were also movements across the Bay of Bengal in response to food scarcity and famine. As early as 1865–66 there is evidence for large-scale movement of people from the coastal district of Vishakhapatnam in Andhra to lower Burma to escape the famine raging in the former area.¹⁰⁷ These travels across the Bay of Bengal brought about familiarity with Buddhism, a living religion in Burma, but did it translate into action to save the Buddhist heritage of Andhra? This may be best answered through the examples of two Buddhist sites in coastal Andhra, viz., Amaravati (discovered in 1798) and Nagarjunakonda (unearthed in 1920).

Both the sites are located along the river Krishna in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh and are often cited as Buddhist sites of the early

¹⁰⁶ Kowshik, 1985, *Nandalal Bose*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁷ S. Adapa, 2001, *Birds of Passage: Migration of South Indian Labour Communities to South-East Asia; 19–20th Centuries, A.D., Changing Labour Relations in Asia (CLARA) Working Paper 11*, Amsterdam, pp. 12–13.

centuries CE, in spite of the fact that there is a large corpus of inscriptions and sculptures which establishes that the Buddhist Mahācaitya at Amaravati continued to flourish from the second century BCE until the fourteenth century and that a temple to Amareśvara or Śiva was built about half a kilometer from the stupa at the edge of Krishna in the tenth century, which co-existed with the Buddhist establishment, as discussed in Chapter 5. As no structures have survived and the sculptures were removed by the nineteenth-century colonial antiquarians, the context of the religious architecture at Amaravati has been lost forever, except from whatever data may be gleaned from inscriptions and stray finds of statuary. Nagarjunakonda narrowly escaped a similar fate, largely because it was discovered more than a century later in the 1920s at a time when the changed social milieu made it relatively difficult for the colonial government to either dismember religious sites or remove sculptures to museums.

Colin Mackenzie removed several sculpted panels from Amaravati in 1817 followed by depredations by several others, such as Walter Elliot, Commissioner of Guntur, whose activities in 1845 led to the largest haul of sculptures from the site. In 1859, some 121 pieces of the “Elliot Marbles” were shipped to London, while others were removed to local and regional museums. Some of these were finally shifted to Madras Museum in 1883, where they were cased in cement so that they could not be removed at all! Amaravati suffered serious damage in the nineteenth century and its sculptural treasures were systematically carted away.¹⁰⁸

At the time of its discovery in 1920, Nagarjunakonda was an isolated forested place almost shut in by a ring of the rocky Nallamalai range. The nearest railway station was in Macherla, 20 km from the site, and the remaining distance had to be traversed by bullock cart and then on foot. The other alternative was to use the river for getting in and out of the valley. The hamlet of Pullareddigudem was located at the center of the valley and was inhabited by Telugu Hindus and tribal groups,

¹⁰⁸ Upinder Singh, 2004, *Documentation and Destruction: The Case of Amaravati (1797–1886)*, in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Carla Sinopoli, edited, *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*, Indian Council for Historical Research and Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

such as Lambadis and Chenchus.¹⁰⁹ Given these problems of transportation and communication in and out of the valley, the archaeologist A. H. Longhurst found it easier to store the sculptures in a special enclosure at the site itself, after his excavations, than to remove them and suggested that a museum be constructed to house the antiquities. In 1938, a museum was being constructed there at a cost of 27,000 rupees, but this decision was met with criticism from the committee headed by Leonard Woolley, the British archaeologist known for his excavations in Mesopotamia, which was set up to examine the working of the ASI.¹¹⁰

In 1939, Woolley, in his report on the working of the ASI, seriously questioned the wisdom of retaining sculptures at a site as inaccessible as Nagarjunakonda, which did not even have a motorable road connecting it.

According to Woolley, a collection of magnificent stone sculptures of a type not represented in any museum in India was kept out of public sight at Nagarjunakonda, an almost inaccessible place.¹¹¹ He further argued that both the excavations and the sculptures had been kept open for public viewing, but apart from officers of the Archeology Department, he was the first person to visit the museum in two years. In 1944, the newly appointed Director-General of the ASI, Mortimer Wheeler, supported this view and suggested that the sculptures from the site be removed either to the Indian Museum, Calcutta, or to the Government Museum, Madras, so that they can be seen by wider audiences.

Officers within the ASI, such as G. C. Chandra, Superintendent (Southern Circle), and Dr A. Aiyapan, Superintendent (Government Museum, Madras), resisted this suggestion on the grounds that in the best interests of on-site study at site and conservation, all stone sculptures should remain at the site of the archaeological museum at Nagarjunakonda.¹¹² Aiyapan drew Wheeler's attention to the government

¹⁰⁹ A. H. Longhurst, 1938, *The Buddhist Antiquities of Nagarjunakonda, Madras Presidency, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 54, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Archaeological Survey of India File no. 27D/1/44: Distribution of Antiquities from Nagarjunakonda.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Archaeological Survey of India File no. 27D/1/44, letter no. 103-C/153 dated 14 March 1944.

order regarding the regulation of antiquities and their distribution.¹¹³ Wheeler responded by arguing that the government orders did not apply in this case, since the building at Nagarjunakonda was not and could not be a “museum” in the proper sense of the term. In any case, the order in question “may be regarded as a dead letter,” since in his opinion, it had no relevance for Nagarjunakonda.¹¹⁴ What Wheeler did not anticipate was a strident criticism of his decision that came from an unexpected quarter.

On October 1, 1944, the Working Committee of the Guntur District Andhra Mahasabha held a meeting at Sattenapalli and passed a resolution emphatically disapproving any move to shift the sculptures from Nagarjunakonda to Calcutta or to any other museum. Agitation and angry protests at several levels, including in the Legislative Assembly, followed this resolution and copies of 14 resolutions passed by various bodies condemning the removal of antiquities were sent to Wheeler. In addition, daily newspapers, such as *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* (Madras), *Andhra Patrika*, and *Deshabhimani* (Guntur) covered the protests and published the statements made.

On November 20, 1944, K. S. Gupta raised a series of questions relating to the removal of sculptures from Nagarjunakonda in the Legislative Assembly and pointed out that the colonial government had already presented the tooth relic of the Buddha discovered at Nagarjunakonda to the Mahabodhi Society and he feared that the Nagarjunakonda finds would follow the Amaravati sculptures to London. He stressed the importance of Nagarjunakonda both in the history of the Andhras as well as a center of pilgrimage.¹¹⁵ Dr M. Rama Rao, Professor of History at Hindu College, Guntur, and Secretary of the Andhra History Committee, spearheaded the protests at the academic level. It was also resolved that in case the ASI was unwilling to run the museum, it should hand it over to a local body in Guntur District.

¹¹³ Archaeological Survey of India File no. 27D/1/44, letter no. 154 dated 26 April 1944.

¹¹⁴ Archaeological Survey of India File no. 27D/1/44, DO 5315 dated 8 August 1944.

¹¹⁵ Archaeological Survey of India File no. 13/4/1944: Assembly questions regarding the removal of antiquities from Nagarjunakonda.

On Wheeler's instructions, the Superintending Archaeologist (Southern Circle) undertook a detailed analysis of the expenditure incurred at Nagarjunakonda and calculated that 19,064 rupees had been spent on the excavations, which had aroused interest among local groups, and that 1,600 visitors went to the site museum annually averaging 4.5 persons daily.¹¹⁶

These protests had the desired effect and forced Wheeler to travel to Guntur in March 1945 to pacify local groups. In his meeting with them, he gave them two years in which to get together a suitably guaranteed Andhra museum. This discussion clearly indicates the strength of public opinion in the preservation of heritage even in pre-independence India. As a result, the finds from the excavations at Nagarjunakonda were not only preserved at the site, but the ASI also conducted salvage archaeology during 1954–60 before the submergence of the site under the waters of the Nagarjunasagar dam. The ASI also brought out several publications highlighting the beginnings of human settlement in the valley and the plans of different monuments and religious structures. Thus, the discovery and preservation of Nagarjunakonda presents a marked contrast to that of Amaravati, largely because of the dissemination of information about the site in the press and the interest generated in academic and local communities to protect it and to insist on the in-situ preservation of its antiquities.

It is clear that there was no seamless transition in an understanding of Buddhism from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. Instead, within the political milieu of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the parameters and frameworks for interpreting the past were transformed, with the development of new post-Enlightenment disciplines, such as archaeology and history. The agency for comprehending the complexities of the study of religion rested not only with European philologists and institutions, such as the ASI, but also with political leaders and the informed public.



¹¹⁶ Archaeological Survey of India File no. 27D/1/44, no. 165, November 5, 1944.

7

In Retrospect



In the final analysis, how does one assess the colonial legacy of the archaeology of Buddhism in post-Independence India and the ways in which it continues to be invoked? What are the complexities involved in the reworking of this heritage? This enquiry will be undertaken through two strands: one relates to identifications established in the colonial period and which have continued to be accepted and popularized since then; and the second is the extent to which archaeological discoveries over the last six decades have led to the making of new paradigms. We hope to establish this through a case-study of Nalanda and its identification as a university. We suggest that the archaeology of Buddhism is a promising field for interdisciplinary study that continues to be under-researched, though it can provide deeper insights into the history of *Buddha dhamma* in South Asia. The issues of significance include the horizontal linkages and networks of religious sites, which were often provided arbitrary boundaries in the colonial period; and the antecedents of these networks that played no role in the colonial understanding of Buddhism.

The International University at Nalanda

A major international project that has captured headlines relates to the revival of the university at Nalanda, a site idyllically depicted in the paintings in the Constitution of India and described in early Chinese writings. The project is also an evocative example of the continued survival of the legacy of nineteenth-century archaeology and forms a fitting conclusion to this study of the modern history of Buddhism. As Jeffrey E. Garten opines:

Founded in 427 in northeastern India, not far from what is today the southern border of Nepal, and surviving until 1197, Nalanda was one of the first great

universities in recorded history. It was devoted to Buddhist studies, but it also trained students in fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics and the art of war . . . Nalanda was also the most global university of its time, attracting pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey.

The university died a slow death about the time that some of the great European universities, including those in Oxford, England, and Bologna, Italy, were just getting started, and more than half a millennium before Harvard or Yale were established . . . The final straw was the burning of the buildings by Muslim invaders from what is now Afghanistan.

But Nalanda represents much of what Asia could use today — a great global university that reaches deep into the region’s underlying cultural heritage, restores many of the peaceful links among peoples and cultures that once existed, and gives Asia the kind of soft power of influence and attraction that it doesn’t have now. The West has a long tradition of rediscovering its ancient Greek and Roman roots, and is much stronger for that. Asia could and should do the same, using the Nalanda project as a springboard but creating a modern, future-oriented context for a new university.¹

This write-up that appeared in the *New York Times* and was written by a professor in international business and trade at the Yale School of Management encapsulates the fascination with the international project in close proximity to the archaeological site at Nalanda in the state of Bihar. Though the project was conceptualized in the 1990s, it received widespread attention in 2006 when the then Indian President, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam set about establishing an international “mentoring panel” chaired by Amartya Sen and including, among others, Singapore’s Foreign Minister, George Yeo. The reference to the discovery of ancient cultural roots to plan for a better future is reminiscent of the twentieth-century discussions in the Constituent Assembly.

The quest for an international Buddhist university probably started in 1934 when the Dhammapala Memorial Committee approached the Government of the United Provinces to set up one at Sarnath.²

As mentioned earlier, Francis Buchanan visited the remains at the site in 1812 and the credit for identifying them as those of a Buddhist

¹ Jeffrey E. Garten, 2006, Really Old School, *The New York Times*, December 9, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/09/opinion/09garten.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed on July 7, 2013).

² Buddhist Varsity in UP: Scientific Subjects Too, *The Times of India*, April 12, 1934: 12.

establishment on the basis of inscriptions and accounts of Xuanzang goes to Alexander Cunningham. Faxian, the fourth-century-CE traveler described his visit to the birth-place of the Buddha's disciple and mentioned the presence of a stupa at the site, but made not of an educational institution. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) purchased the site in 1916, almost a hundred years later. Given the very extensive nature of the remains, the area purchased was limited due to insufficient funds that had been budgeted for the acquisition. Over the next two decades, archaeological work continued at the site, from 1916 until 1937 and, in the post-Independence period, from 1974 to 1982 and 2004–05, though with interruptions. As a result of recent negotiations on the international university, the ASI has agreed to print all the published and unpublished reports from earlier excavations.³ The ASI will also carry out explorations and survey the land that has been allotted to the international university by the Bihar government. Hopefully, this revisiting of the archaeology of Nalanda will also include rigorous research to build on and improve the knowledge generated through the archaeological work done since the 1860s. This would, no doubt, initiate fresh engagement with the archaeology of Nalanda in its local and regional contexts.

The site dates from the sixth century CE onward and excavations have exposed extensive remains of six major brick temples and 11 monasteries arranged on a systematic layout and spread over an area of more than a square kilometer. A 30-m wide passage runs in a north–south axis with a row of temples on the west and that of monasteries on the east of it.⁴ The monasteries are almost identical in general layout and appearance. A central courtyard, row of cells all around with a common courtyard, a secret chamber for keeping valuables, a staircase(s) for reaching the upper stories, kitchen, well, granary, a single entrance, and common place for prayer or meeting, etc., are some characteristic features of almost all the monasteries at Nalanda. The main temple site 3 is

³ Akshaya Mukul, 2011, Nalanda International Varsity Seeks Reports of Past Excavations, *The Times of India*, February 24, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-02-24/india/28627592_1_excavation-asi-archaeological-survey (accessed on July 7, 2013).

⁴ J. Kamini, Malatesh Kulkarni, V. Raghavaswamy, P. S. Roy, and P. K. Mishra, 2007, Cartosat – 1 Views the Nalanda Buddhist Ruins, *Current Science*, 93(2), 25 July.

the largest and most imposing structure at the southern extremity of the row of temples and is surrounded by votive stupas. Originally it had four corner towers out of which two are extant and decorated with rows of niches containing beautiful stucco images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas which are fine specimens of Gupta art. A temple, different in character and not conforming to the general layout of the remains, is represented by temple site 2. The interesting feature of this temple is the dado of 211 sculptured panels over the moulded plinth. Another mound called 'Sara Tila', very close to the monastery complex, has revealed ruins of a temple with murals and the feet of a colossal stucco image of the Buddha. Four water tanks are located on the periphery of the monastery in the four cardinal directions. Further, remote sensing imagery shows the presence of several unexcavated mounds around it.

The excavations have unearthed, other than structures, many sculptures and images in stone, bronze and stucco. Significant among the Buddhist sculptures are Buddha images in different postures — Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Tārā, Prajñāpāramitā, Mārīcī, Jambhāla, etc. — and a few images are of Hindu deities like Viṣṇu, Śiva-Pārvatī, Mahiṣāsūramardinī, Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, etc. Other noteworthy discoveries in the course of excavations are murals, copper plates, inscriptions, sealings, plaques, coins, terracotta, potteries, etc. The ASI report of the site describes it as the birthplace of Sāriputta, a disciple of the Buddha. Several dynasties are linked to the site as patrons, many of them with emblems on seals showing Hindu deities, such as Lakṣmī, Gaṇeśa, Śivaliṅga and Durgā.⁵ It is said to have been destroyed by the Muslim general Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in the twelfth century, though the Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin is known to have visited it in 1234 CE and found monks and pundits still staying there. The king and queen of Bengal repaired many of the structures at the site in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There was a change in the Buddhist presence at the site soon thereafter, but Hinduism and Jainism continued to thrive.⁶ This account of the monastic complex shows the continued survival of Nalanda well into the fifteenth century.

The Pāli *Dīgha* and *Samyutta Nikāyas* refer to Nalanda as one of the places where the Buddha halted, while the Jaina *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* mentions

⁵ H. Scharfe, 2002, *Education in Ancient India*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, pp. 149–50.

⁶ B. N. Mishra, 1998, *Nalanda*, vol. 1, B. R. Publishing Co., New Delhi, pp. 213, 378.

that Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha, spent a rainy season at Nalanda.⁷ The crest for Nalanda that also appears in Nandalal's painting was a wheel flanked by two deer symbolizing the first sermon. A copper-plate grant of the Sumatran king Balaputradeva related to the Śailendra rulers of Java records the grant of land to the monastery. The inscription, dated to 860 CE and written in Devanagari and proto-Bengali script, states that a king of Suvarṇadvīpa (Sumatra) named Balaputradeva gave an endowment for Nalanda. The claims for Nalanda as a university arise from inscriptions,⁸ and textual accounts,⁹ but have so far found little support from archaeological data.

An influential work in popularizing the notion of Nalanda as a university was Hasmukh D. Sankalia's Master's thesis submitted to the University of Bombay in March 1932 and published in 1934 with a grant from the University. Sankalia stands out among Indian archaeologists on several counts, not the least of which is his contribution in developing one of the few academic institutions for archaeology within the university system, viz., the Department of Archaeology, Deccan College. The College also established a museum for the display of antiquities unearthed during archaeological excavations, but more significantly as a collection for the purpose of teaching. Another contribution of Sankalia was the popularization of archaeology in the public domain, as well as in the field. He was known to have given regular lectures to villagers and students at excavation sites, and in addition he wrote extensively in newspapers and magazines in Hindi, English, Marathi, and Gujarati.

Sankalia, more than anyone else, was aware of the shortcomings of his Master's thesis and in a preface to the updated 1972 edition, he neatly summed up the lacunae:

This book is not a history of Nālandā, as a critic then expected. This history, whenever it is attempted, would largely be archaeological. Had the excava-

⁷ Mary L. Stewart, 1989, *Nalanda Mahavihara*, British Archaeological Reports International Series 529, Oxford, pp. 67–68.

⁸ Hirananda Sastri, 1942, *Nalanda and Its Epigraphic Material*, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 66, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.

⁹ Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 1934, *University of Nalanda*, B. G. Paul and Company, Madras.

tions, some sixty years ago, been conducted on modern lines, then they would have helped to recreate at least some aspects of the daily life of the vihāras and saṅghārāmas.¹⁰

Sankalia's book stands out in tracing the meaning of the word *university* to its Latin original, which roughly meant a community of teachers and scholars and then comparing its development in Europe with that in India. He stressed the Upaniṣadic foundations of the approach to knowledge in India. In course of time, this knowledge was transferred through several systems, such as that of the *āśrama*, *maṭha* and vihara. Nalanda embodied a large monastic complex that became the center for instruction and education. On the testimony of the Chinese pilgrim Yijing, Sankalia refers to two categories of students: one, the white-robed laymen termed *mānava* or children who studied Buddhist scriptures with the objective of taking the monastic vows; and *brahmacārin* or students who were interested in secular literature only.¹¹ A sixth-century-CE stone inscription described Nalanda as being dotted with temples and the pleasant abode of the learned and the virtuous Saṅgha resembling the residence of the Vidyādharas (semi-divine beings).¹² According to Tibetan accounts, the place was renowned for its library. Where were the books kept? Is it possible to identify the different structures in the archaeological record?

Over the years, a large number of monasteries and temples have been unearthed and the corpus of stone and bronze sculptures has grown,¹³ as also the number of inscriptions. These discoveries are, no doubt, expected given the scale and the time span of the monastic complex. What remains un-researched is the interaction between Nalanda and the wider network of other Buddhist sites. What were the physical manifestations of the “university” at Nalanda and how did it distinguish itself from other contemporary monastic sites, such as Vikramashila,

¹⁰ Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 1972, *University of Nalanda*, Oriental Publishers, New Delhi, p. x.

¹¹ Sankalia, 1934, *University of Nalanda*, p. 34.

¹² Hiranand Sastri, 1929–30, Nalanda Stone Inscription of the Reign of Yaśovarmmadeva, *Epigraphia Indica*, 20.

¹³ A. J. Bernet Kempers, 1933, The Bronzes of Nalanda and Hindu-Javanese Art, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, Deel 90.

Sompura Mahavihara or Paharpur (Bangladesh)? And lastly, how did this institution of learning redefine the history of early medieval India and its relationships with other Buddhist communities?

It is important to view monastic sites not as stand-alone isolated centers, but as units within a larger network linked through the movement of teachers and lineages. Several studies, including that by Susan Huntington, have highlighted the artistic identity of Buddhist centers, as also linkages between them: for example, influences from Sarnath in both stone and stucco sculptures are evident in the statuary at Nalanda.¹⁴ Janice Leoshko has shown the distinctive sculptural programs of Bodh Gaya, which is, in turn, linked to the unique aspects of its Buddhist practice. In contrast to Nalanda, large-sized Buddha images distinguish the collections from Bodh Gaya and may be linked to public worship and the meaning of the site as a place where one obtains Buddhahood.¹⁵ By contrast, only the images of Avalokiteśvara and Tārā appear at Bodh Gaya.

The sculptural wealth of the region is abundantly clear from the erstwhile Collector of Bihar, A. M. Broadley's nineteenth-century collection of 686 sculptures from Nalanda district¹⁶ and Cunningham's detailed report of his visits to several districts in southern Bihar. The site of Nalanda encompassed several modern villages, such as Jagdishpur, about 2 km away from the site, where an image of the Buddha was found; Kapatya village which yielded a dated image of Vāgīśvarī; and Hassanpur village in Rajgir from where a seated Buddha image was retrieved.¹⁷ Juafar Dih which lies 2 km from Jagdishpur and 4 km from Nalanda is a rich site where archaeological excavations were undertaken, while surveys conducted at Keur and Telhara also show promise.

The ancient monastery of Uddandapura mentioned in Tibetan accounts has been identified with remains located in the neighboring town of Bihar Sharif, about 10 km from Nalanda. The monastery

¹⁴ Susan Huntington, 1984, *The Pala-Sena Schools of Sculptures*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1984.

¹⁵ Janice Leoshko, 1987, *The Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of the Pala and Sena Periods from Bodh Gaya*, PhD thesis, The Ohio State University, p. 16.

¹⁶ Frederick M. Asher, 1970, *The Former Broadley Collection, Bihar Sharif, Artibus Asiae*, 32(2/3).

¹⁷ Huntington, 1984, *The Pala-Sena Schools of Sculptures*, p. 116.

achieved acclaim from eighth to twelfth century. Cunningham has recorded finds of votive stupas, fragments of sculptures and an inscription of the fourth–fifth century CE.¹⁸ Ghosrawan village lies about 12 km east of Nalanda and 10–11 km south-east of Bihar Sharif. Several important sculptures were found there, such as a life-size four-armed standing image of Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.¹⁹ An inscription was found at Ghosrawan in 1878, which refers to several places of importance for *Buddha dhamma* in the eighth–ninth century CE. These included Kaṇiṣka vihara in the Kabul valley, Vajrasana or Bodh Gaya, Indrasila hill identified with Giriyeek hill in Rajgir, and Nalanda vihara.²⁰ Near Giriyeek hill recent surveys have revealed a huge mound at Ghorakatora, 19 km from Nalanda on the river Panchane.²¹ Excavations conducted from 2007 to 2009 have brought to light a cultural sequence from 600 BCE to 1200 CE. Did these extensive connections from the Kabul valley to Rajgir provide distinctiveness to Nalanda? Three kilometers north of Ghosrawan is a large tank and a mound covered with extensive remains of brick-built monasteries at Tetrawan. Cunningham recovered a colossal Buddha image from the site.²² Thus, the immediate network around Nalanda is evident, but also significant is its wider linkage.

Fifty kilometers from Nalanda is the site of Bodh Gaya. Unlike Nalanda, Bodh Gaya's beginnings stretch much farther back in time and of prime importance is the *āsvattha* or peepal tree at the site associated with the Buddha's Enlightenment. The present tree dates to the nineteenth century, but is said to be a descendant of an ancient one. King Ashoka is credited in Buddhist sources, such as the *Asokāvadāna* of the early centuries CE with erecting a temple to enclose the tree. This association led Cunningham to date the site to the Mauryan period.

¹⁸ A. Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India: Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862–63–64–65*, vol. 1, Archaeological Survey of India, Simla, p. 37.

¹⁹ Huntington, 1984, *The Pala-Sena Schools of Sculptures*, p. 119.

²⁰ Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India*, pp. 38–39.

²¹ Pranava K. Chaudhary, 2008, Bid to Find Main Gateway to Nalanda, *The Times of India*, Patna, January 8, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-01-08/patna/27777678_1_excavation-nalanda-mahavihara-ware (accessed on July 7, 2013).

²² Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India*, pp. 39–40.

Reliefs from Bharhut and Bodh Gaya dated to the first century BCE show a structure encircling the tree indicating the revered status that the tree had attained at the beginning of the Common Era.²³ The stone railing and pillars from the site are dated to the second and first centuries BCE. These were subsequently supplemented or replaced by similar pillars, but of a different stone in the fifth century CE. Around the sixth and seventh centuries CE building activity at Bodh Gaya increased. As discussed in Chapter 2, inscriptions from the site show that it was an important center of pilgrimage and enjoyed wide patronage not only in South Asia, but also in Tibet, Burma and China. Thus, in terms of longevity, the imagery with an emphasis on Buddha's *bhumisparśa mudrā* and the architectural setting of Bodh Gaya with the predominance of the brick temple presents a marked contrast to the site of Nalanda, though there are several similarities in artistic production from sixth to twelfth century CE.

As is the case with Nalanda, Bodh Gaya also has several important sites in its vicinity. The 11 m high stupa at Bakraur near Bodh Gaya is located on the right bank of the river Niranjana and in local memory is associated with Sujātā who is said to have offered milk-rice to the Buddha. Excavations revealed that the stupa had been built in three stages, the last dating to the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. It is more difficult to date the beginnings, though the excavators have proposed a date of second and first centuries BCE.²⁴ Kurkihar is a village atop a mound, about 22 km from Gaya. In 1930, it yielded a hoard or 128 bronzes including images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and ritual objects. Stone sculptures and votive stupas are still to be seen around a large tank in the village.

At this point, Rajgir, located 11 km north of Nalanda, should be brought into the discussion. Rajgir is situated at an average elevation of 73 m, surrounded by hills, and is described as the ancient capital of Magadha, before it was shifted to Pataliputra on the banks of river Ganga about 90 km to the south of Rajgir. It is prominently associated

²³ J. C. Huntington, 1985, *Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism*, part I [Lumbini and Bodhgaya], *Orientalism*, 16(11).

²⁴ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1973–74, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 9–10.

with the life of the Buddha by the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang and was also sacred to the Jainas. Cunningham visited Rajgir in 1861 and described the remains in his report.²⁵ A continuous and bastioned dry-stone fortification wall with a circuit of about 40 km runs over the top of the hills. Outside the fortification is New Rajgir, and a Buddhist complex comprising of stupas, viharas and a tank have been identified at Venuvana between New Rajgir and the hills. Jaina and Śaiva temples were built on Vaibhara hill, which also has a row of six caves identified as Saptaparni caves. At the foot of the hill are two rock-cut caves of the fourth century CE. To the west of Rajgir and about 20 km from Gaya are the Barabar caves, which are dated to the Mauryan period. Within the valley in Rajgir is a unique, hollow brick structure of brick. It is 3 m in diameter and has been identified as a shrine of Mañi Nāga on the basis of an inscription dated to the early centuries of the Common Era.²⁶

Further south, about a kilometer away is a square stone enclosure identified as a prison where Bimbisāra is said to have been kept by his son king Ajātaśatru. Excavations were conducted further east of the site and two large elliptical halls were unearthed with subsidiary rooms within a compound wall believed to represent Jivaka's monastery.²⁷ Thus, Rajgir, its hills and its valleys have multiple associations and legends, which make it very popular on the pilgrimage and tourist circuit at present. But, what do we know of its beginnings? A trench was dug across the fortification wall revealing the pre-rampart levels which yielded radiocarbon dates of third–second century BCE.²⁸ Clearly, Rajgir continued to grow and expand from the post-Mauryan period onwards and was a contemporary of Nalanda, though somewhat less distinguished in terms of the number of resident monks and teachers.

²⁵ Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India*, pp. 20–27.

²⁶ A. Ghosh, edited, 1989, *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, vol. 2, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, pp. 362–63.

²⁷ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1953–54, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 9; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1954–55, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 16.

²⁸ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1961–62, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 7; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1962–63, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 5.

This extensive Buddhist landscape was by no means restricted to the region south of Ganga, but encompassed several important sites north of the river as well, such as Kumrahar, 5 km east of Patna railway station where D. B. Spooner had excavated a large pillared hall in 1912 and identified the site as ancient Pataliputra; Vaishali in Muzaffarpur district, about 60 km north of Patna; Kesariya, the highest stupa in the subcontinent in Motihari district, about 110 km from Patna; and Vikramshila near Antichak in Bhagalpur district, 252 km east of Patna on Ganga.

Renewed excavations at Kumrahar in the 1950s helped trace a monastic health complex or *ārogyavihāra* that continued in use from 150 BCE to 600 CE.²⁹ Excavations to the west of the *ārogyavihāra* provided evidence for an apsidal shrine. When the apsidal structure with its stupa collapsed, a new stupa, square in plan and apparently with a circumambulation path, was built to its east.³⁰ Excavations conducted at Vaishali near the tank revealed remains of a mud-built stupa, dated to the pre-Mauryan period with enlargements in Mauryan and post-Mauryan times.³¹ About 5 km north of Vaishali lies the site of Kolhua which has yielded an Ashokan pillar with a lion capital said to be an ancient copy of another Ashokan pillar. Excavation carried out in and around the Ashokan pillar locally known as Bhim Sen ki lathi, exposed the remains of a stupa, tank, two monasteries and a cluster of votive stupas of various shapes and sizes, all of burnt brick dating from first century BCE to seventh century CE.³² Excavations were carried out by the ASI at Kesariya from 1998 to 2001. The site had been visited in 1861 by Cunningham who had commented on the enormous height of the

²⁹ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1953–54, pp. 9–10.

³⁰ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1954–55, pp. 18–19.

³¹ *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1957–58, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 10–11; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1958–59, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 12.

³² *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1976–77, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, p. 13; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1989–90, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 11–13; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1991–92, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 5–6; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1992–93, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 5–6; *Indian Archaeology: A Review*, 1993–94, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, pp. 9–10.

mound with a mass of solid brick stupa on top. This led Cunningham to suggest that the brick stupa dated from 200 to 700 CE and was possibly built on the remains of a larger earlier structure.³³

Perhaps, the most stupendous site was that of Vikramashila, which was identified after excavations at Antichak in Bhagalpur district from 1960 to 1969. The extensive mounds around the village cover an area of 10 sq. km. Though it was a small-scale excavation, it exposed a brick stupa, cruciform in plan with chambers and antechambers on all four sides. Further excavation was conducted by the ASI from 1972 to 1981 which exposed a monastic complex with the remains of 208 monastic cells. The central stupa of this mahāvihāra had four chambers in the four cardinal directions in which colossal clay images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas were installed, which were subsequently replaced with brick and stone images. A cluster of votive stupas were exposed on the both sides of the main gate. Further 500 m east of the main monastery, the remains of a fortress constructed with brick and other construction material from the mahāvihāra was unearthed.

This brief overview of the archaeological remains unearthed in an area covering a corridor of about 100 km from Ganga in northern and southern Bihar belies the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's claim that *Buddha dhamma* was in a state of decline in the seventh century CE. Not only were extensive monastic complexes flourishing from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries, but it is also evident that these sites were in contact with each other and with those from other parts of the subcontinent and beyond. Bodh Gaya and Nalanda were popular destinations of Tibetan pilgrims visiting the holy sites of the Ganga plains starting from at least the tenth century CE onward. Some travelers entered India via Nepal Himalayas and the foothills descending into the Terai region, while others entered the Ganga plains through the present states of Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir.³⁴

Where was the boundary of Nalanda university when the monastic site was flourishing? At present, it covers the area declared "protected" by the ASI. Did the ASI create an artificial boundary for the monastery that was based on its ability to purchase land around it? Clearly, this is the case as we have shown earlier.

³³ Cunningham, 1871, *Archaeological Survey of India*, pp. 64–65.

³⁴ Toni Huber, 2008, *Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 66.

In Chapter 4, we referred to Atīśa's wide-ranging travels in the sub-continent, across the seas to Sumatra, and to Tibet. What were the commodities that he carried with him? Some information on this question is available in Tibetan sources. Dromton, Atīśa's Tibetan disciple and biographer, recorded that at his departure from Vikramshila monastery, Atīśa carried with him 60 packs of goods loaded on 30 horses and was accompanied by 20 attendants. No detailed lists are available, but it may be assumed that his baggage included sacred texts in the form of manuscripts and ritual objects of meditation and devotion, such as bronzes and sculptures.³⁵

We may draw analogies with an illustrated palm-leaf manuscript of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* now in the collection of the Asia Society, New York. The manuscript carries two inscriptions: one in the 15th regnal year (1083 CE) of the Pāla king Vigrahapāla; and a re-dedication in the 8th regnal year (1151 CE) of king Gopāla. In addition are the three Tibetan inscriptions that provide fascinating details regarding ownership of the manuscript.³⁶ One of them records the name of the scribe who wrote the manuscript at Nalanda; the second describes the lineage of ownership from the twelfth to the fourteenth century CE; while the third refers to the dedication of the book for the benefit of a deceased individual. The paintings in the manuscript indicate two different styles and the re-dedication suggests that the manuscript may have been repaired and some leaves added.

Thus, any revival of the ancient heritage of Nalanda would be incomplete without taking into account its interlinkages, as also the travels of scholars and monks from India and Tibet in maintaining these networks. Acknowledging the Tibetan connection may not be geopolitically correct, but is based on sound archaeological and historical evidence, as discussed in Chapter 4. Marginalizing this important link would perpetuate the colonial paradigm established by Cunningham's identifications of decontextualized sites based on the accounts of the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang.³⁷

³⁵ Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, 1990, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its international Legacy*, Dayton Art Institute in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, Washington and Dayton Ohio, p. 291.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 187–99.

³⁷ "Mr Sen was yesterday asked about reports that claimed the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist leader who has lived for more than 50 years in the Indian

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In the final analysis, this book has adopted perspectives different from those available in secondary writings. First, we have made a distinction between *Buddha dhamma* or practice of *dhamma* as indicated by the archaeological record and “Buddhism” that was discovered, and framed by Europeans in the post-seventeenth-century period. We have argued that *Buddha dhamma* was a continuing tradition in India, which was, no doubt, marked by transformations in the post-twelfth-century period, such as the acceptance of Buddha as an *avatara* of Viṣṇu.

Second, several authors have written about the role of ASI established in 1861 and its first Director-General Alexander Cunningham (1814–93) in identifying sites associated with the life of the Buddha.³⁸ This study has shifted the focus from Cunningham to Jean-Baptiste Ventura (1792/3–1858) and Claude-Auguste Court (1793–1861) who were employed in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab who ruled from 1801 to 1839. The first archaeological excavation in 1830 of the stupa site of Manikyala was undertaken in the Punjab, a region marginalized in Cunningham’s writings. By the end of the nineteenth century, Cunningham had succeeded in demarcating a Buddhist sacred landscape with emphasis solely on the Ganga valley. This distorted an understanding of regional variations, especially in areas such as Punjab, foothills of the Himalayas, eastern India, and the peninsula south of the Vindhya, all of which were significant for the development of *Buddha dhamma* in the country.

town of Dharamasala, had been deliberately omitted from the project to avoid antagonising potential Chinese investors and officials. He replied: ‘He is heading a religion. Being religiously active may not be the same as [being] appropriate for religious studies’” (Andrew Buncombe, 2010, Oldest University on Earth is Reborn after 800 Years, *The Independent*, August 4, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/oldest-university-on-earth-is-reborn-after-800-years-2042518.html> [accessed on July 7, 2013]).

³⁸ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., edited, 1995, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London; Janice Leoshko, 2003, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia*, Ashgate, Aldershot; Upinder Singh, 2004, *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*, Permanent Black, New Delhi; Huber, 2008, *Holy Land Reborn*.

The twentieth century was marked by horizontal excavations undertaken by the ASI in several parts of the country; the promulgation of laws for the protection of monuments; acquisition of land around the sites; and the establishment of control over the newly created national heritage. No doubt, John Marshall, the Director-General of ASI under the Viceroy Lord Curzon is lauded for his vision of preserving the country's heritage.³⁹ An issue generally neglected is the reception of these archaeological discoveries in the public domain as popularized by the print media and apparent in the writings of many of our national leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru?

The case study of Nalanda discussed in this concluding chapter has shown the enormous potential of the archaeology of Buddhism that continues to be under-researched in South Asia. Almost every year, a large number of Buddhist sites are explored and excavated generating a large corpus of artefacts that need documentation, categorization and study. Clearly, nineteenth- and twentieth-century frameworks are inadequate for an understanding of *Buddha dhamma* in the twenty-first century. It is hoped that this study will initiate fresh engagement with micro-histories and regional contexts of monastic centers in order to highlight intra- and inter-site connections. These linkages are crucial for an appreciation of the local contexts of *Buddha dhamma* within the overarching scope of its expansion and spread across South Asia.



³⁹ Nayanjot Lahiri, 2004, Sanchi: Destruction, Restoration, Restitution, in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Carla Sinopoli, edited, *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*, Indian Council for Historical Research and Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

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