

DEVELOPMENT OF STUPA ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

The word Stupa is mentioned in the Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Vajasaneyi Samhita, Taittiriya Samhita, in the Panchavimsata Brahmana and the Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary 49 which says it a “knot or tuft of hair, the upper part of head, crest, top, summit, a heap or pile of earth or bricks etc.”

Rigveda refers to a Stupa raised by the King Varuna above the forest in a place having no foundation .The word ‘estuka’ is also used in the same sense in Rigveda, probably by then anything raised on the ground like a heap/pile might have been known as Stupa. However the Pali word ‘thupa’ is quite similar to the term ‘Stupa’. Thupa means a conical heap, a pile or a mound or a conical or bell shaped shrine containing a relic.

The Stupa is so linked to the Buddhistic life that they were not content to erect monuments alone: sculptors represented them on stones, and we find them abundantly represented on panels on the Stupa monuments itself, on the railings-balustrades surrounding it, on cave walls, structural, monolithic made out of varied material starting from clay, stone, wood, ivory, metals, terracotta etc. the study material is abundant and spreads over time and space.

The studies of the Mahavastu, Divyavadana and Kriyasamgraha have helped to evolve a chronology of the figurative Stupa in India from the second century BCE to fourth century CE, thus enabling us to step ahead in our knowledge of the indispensable monument of Buddhism.

According to M. Sivarammurti Stupa is regarded as a monument for veneration. But as Stupa seems to be associated with votive and commemorative and offering purposes; moreover Stupa was related to the ritualistic and commemorative with sectarian, affiliation with school of philosophical obligatory and was bound by aspects of social-economic life. The Buddhist texts like the Avadana Satakam, Mahavadana and Stupavadanam mentions about the commemorative

aspects of the Stupa even the Jaina literature like Raya Pasenaiya Sutta refers to it. Probably in the later period, due to deep desire of the common mass to worship the lord for the sake of salvation, Stupa acquired its votive character as well. Early Stupas were devoid of art maybe since Ashoka's time Stupa 50 architecture acquired prominence in the socio cultural life of the country and art began to develop around the Stupa structure.

Stupa can be classified into three categories:

1. Religious edifices or Stupa dedicated either to the celestial or the Adi-Buddha or to the mortal Buddha.
2. Funeral Stupa erected over the relics of mortal Buddha or over his disciples.
3. Stupa for commemorative Buddha.

Satapatha Brahmana mentions of raising a mound on the burial ground after cremation. The burial mound for the Devata should be square in shape. In the Jaina and Brahmanical texts in some places Stupa is termed as chaitya. In the Vedic, Post Vedic, Epics, Jaina and Buddhist literatures refers to the existence of chaitya-vriksha. These were mostly treated as sacred places but were not necessarily associated with burial. It is doubtful if any Stupas were erected during the life time of Buddha. Since he had declared that it was inappropriate to erect Stupa to enshrine his bodily remains while he was still alive, however the legend says that the Buddha gave a few strands of his hair (kasha asthi) to the merchants Tapassu and Bhallika, who had offered him the first meal after his enlightenment at Bodhgaya. They were said to have erected a Stupa over the hair relic so as to venerate them. Burmese Buddhist claims that these hair relics are enshrined in the Shwedagon Stupa at Yangon, though it is generally believed that the merchants hailed from ancient Kalinga. After the demise of Buddha and his cremation at Kushinagar and later the corporeal relics was distributed among eight Mahajanapadas, initially eight Stupas (Saririka Chaityas) were constructed at eight centres namely, Rajagrihya, Vaishali, Kapilavastu, Allakappa, Ramagrama, Vethadipa, Pava and

Kushinara. Drona the Brahmin who initiated the distribution, himself erected a Stupa to enshrine the urn that was used to divide the relics. The Moriyas arrived too late for a share of the relic and were given the wood ashes from the cremation pyre, and they too built a Stupa in their city of Pipphalavana. Thus all together ten Stupas were erected i.e. eight on corporeal relics and two on urn and over wood ashes by Drona and the Moriyas respectively. Jatakas mentions about the existence of Stupa but does not throw any light on the structural details of Stupa. The Sujata Jataka and the Bahiya Sutta describes Stupas as raised earthen mounds to commemorate the deceased. This indicates that most probably prior to Ashoka most of the 51 Stupas were made of clay Even the original Stupa at Sanchi and Bharhut are said to be made of clay. Archaeological excavations and findings proved that during Ashoka's reign use of bricks and stone for constructional purpose became popular. But we cannot deny the fact that the predecessors of Ashoka like Bimbisara and Ajatsatru both had constructed a number of Stupas in honour of the Buddha which contained relics of Buddha.

Stupa architecture can be compared with different stages of man's life. He observes " putting of the relics in covered casket indicated stage of conception; putting of casket in a stone box indicates birth; covering of the box by a brick structure as infancy; the rise of the structure above the ground (medhi) as childhood; oval shaped (anda) that of adolescence; the chatravali and in compassing it by a stone railing keeping guard that of youth and coronation; the lion statues guarding the approaches are that of manhood; erection of ornamental archways and completion of sculptural representations that of maturity and victory; the addition of an outer railing and construction of the flights of steps that of decline and old age. After Ashoka none of the Mauryan ruler showed any interest in propagating Buddhism. Then the Sungas gave a new dimension to the Stupa architecture. They ruled over north, central and western India between one hundred and eighty five BCE to 70 BCE Sunga and Kanva gave

ample opportunity to fine art reflected the cultural and traditional life of the larger section of the people in the society i.e. the bas reliefs on the railings of the Stupa at Bharhut. During Sunga and Ekshakus period enlargement and additions were made in the existing Stupas of Sanchi, Bharhut and Amravati.

Sungas were followed by a spate of Yavanas invasions – the Bacterians, Greeks, Saka and Kushana on India. The Sakas took over Saurashtra and probably Taxila and Mathura. The Kushanas extended their empire from Kabul to Kashmir in the north-west to the whole of northern India. Kanishka (78 -120 CE) and Huviska (120 – 140 CE) contributed significantly to the Buddhist architectural movement. During Kanishka's reign a number of Stupas were constructed at Taxila, rock-cut Stupa architecture was introduced by him. It is recorded that Kanishka erected a Stupa to enshrine a scripture called Vibhasas at the end of the fourth Buddhist council . Gandhara and Mathura art flourished during Kushana period. Both these schools of art introduced iconic representations of the Buddha. There are also Stupas, which do not hold any reliquary object inside. These are commemorative Stupas, which are erected at places associated with Buddha's life or that of his renowned disciple. The architectural movement in the south (Andhra) flourished under Satavahanas (100 BCE – 200 CE). Rock cut architecture of Hinayana sect became more prominent. There is very little information regarding the history of the development of Stupa architecture in north. The Gupta period is considered as the golden age of Indian history. Guptas were Vaishnavites but were tolerant towards Buddhism. It is said that the Stupa at Sarnath was built during the Gupta period. Unfortunately in India all the later structural examples of stupas are in ruins, the upper portions having decayed and disappeared. But a few good specimens belonging to this period still survive in the form of Votive stupas of stone and metal, literature, and specimens in Ceylon and Burma.

Symbolism of the Stupa

The Stupa is one of the ancient symbols of the Buddha because of its association with his Buddha himself and is honoured as such. This devotion is expressed in the Mahavastu Avadana of the Lokuttaravadins "He who having turned his thoughts to the enlightenment for the sake of all living things, reverentially salutes the tope of the saviour of the world, becomes everywhere in all his lives as he fares on the way to enlightenment, mindful, thoughtful, virtuous and assured" Stupa also symbolises Buddha's enlightened mind and his teachings and few Stupas were built to enshrine Buddhist scriptures. Furthermore the architectural elements of a Stupa are symbolic of the doctrine and may vary with tradition. In some Theravada traditions the parts of the Stupa represents the divisions of the noble eight-fold path (ethical conduct, concentration, wisdom and nirvana). The Buddhist Stupas are of three kinds, saririka Stupa raised over the relics of Buddha or Arhants. The existence of such Stupas is archaeologically proven in several places like Sanchi, Taxila, Vaishali, Piprahwa, Bhattiprolu and Nagarjunikunda. Paribhogika Stupas are the Stupas which enshrine the objects which have been used by the Buddha such as robe, bowl or walking staff. Fa-hsien and Hsuan-tsang the Chinese pilgrims reported seeing Stupas enshrining such relics but archaeologically it has to be proven. Uddesika Stupas were erected just for worshipping and contained no relics or to enshrine scriptures. The Stupa raised by Ashoka in the Lumbini garden visited by the emperor on his twentieth regnal year accompanied by his teacher Upagupta. Another example is when King Kaniska had built a magnificent Stupa to enshrine the Vibhasas (commentaries of the Sarvastivada tradition) at the end of the fourth Buddhist council. The Vajrayana tradition attributes the components of the Stupa to each of the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and space). These elements represent the different stages in the transformation of psycho-spiritual energy in the path to enlightenment. Hence being an object for devotion, the Stupa also became an instrument for meditative visualization.

Evolution of Stupa as seen from Archaeological remains

Amongst all the religious monuments of the world, the stupa has the largest uninterrupted historical development spanning more than 3 millenniums. In India all most all the early structural Stupas were in ruins, most of which were destroyed in due course of time by weather and treasure hunters or have lost its original shape due to subsequent renovations (Whenever an old Stupa was repaired it was renovated according to the style prevalent during that period. For instance, the present form of the great Stupa at Sanchi is after the renovation done in the second century BCE, but within its core are the remains of another Stupa built more than 100 years before i.e. belonging 57 to the Ashoka period. Similar instances are found in the Stupas at Taxila and Nagarjunakonda), making it difficult to describe the shape of the earliest Stupas. For this one has to fall back on sculptural representations of them in order to form a correct idea of their appearance when complete; fortunately there are plenty of materials for this purpose.

The Stupas in ancient India were generally composed of three parts

1. The base or drum.

2. The dome (anda) which resting on the drum, demarcating a terrace called medhi and in Ceylon, pupphaddhana, a Pali word meaning "place for depositing flowers". The relics are kept in the hollow space in the interior of the dome of a Stupa. The relic casket is generally made of precious metal in the shape of a miniature Stupa.

3. The upper part is made up of a square structure called harmika (meaning Pavilion), into which the shaft (yupa) bearing the umbrellas (chatra) is inserted. The term harmika is not available in the Mahavamsa, and this part of the Stupa is called caturassa-caya meaning quadrangular enclosure. In Ceylon, it is also called devata kotuwa, "citadel of Gods. The Stupa comprising of the above three parts was

generally surrounded by a railing, this space was used by the devotees for performing pradikshina, a rite of worship. The pradikshinapatha (circumambulatory passage) of the Stupa was often paved with stone panels bearing votive inscriptions. In the Mahavamsa this railing is called pada-vedika: railing at the foot or ground railing around the Stupa. The vedika reminds of the ancient wooden railings, it is made up of a plinth (alambana), upright (stambha) in to which cross-bars (suchi) are fitted followed by a coping stone (usnisha). According to Coomarswamy, this part of the vedika is called usnisha "turban", it is "due to its relationship to the Stupa which it encircles, like a turban or ribbon encircles the head of the person wearing it". It is generally cut by one or four doorways. The toranas are built up of two large pillars linked by two or three lintels. Close to the toranas are isolated lat pillars holding various 58 symbols above a capital. Hiuen-tsang mentions the existence of these columns erected in front of Stupas in his writings. According to him, one was erected to recall the circumstances of the death of the Buddha, another one with inscription, to mark that it was here that the relic was divided. He mentions one more whose surface is polished and were we can constantly see the shadow of the Buddha. Generally the bigger Stupas were constructed of bricks, some small ones were made of soap stone or blue schist, etc. The bigger ones were plastered which is mentioned in the texts: for example, in the Mahavastu it is said that a Stupa was built 'too big nor too small, covered with clay (mrttika) and stucco (sudha)'; the same word is found in the Mahavamsa. Wood was also used in construction; it is thus that a story from the Sutralamkara mentions a tree which was used as a beam for supporting a Stupa. In the earliest phase the Stupa was always in the shape of a large hemisphere resting on a drum. It is only after the fifth century CE (Intermediate period) that it underwent two important modifications: basement on the one hand, and the crown on the other, concurrently increasing their importance to the detriment of the dome which earlier constituted the entire structure. The later versions in contrast, were tall, often resting on a higher platform with the

surmounting structures such as the chatra becoming more elongated (Late period) and spire-shaped . The early Stupas such as at Sanchi and Bharhut, only the railings were decorated with motives and symbols later doors and domes became covered like them with bas-reliefs representing scenes from the Buddha's life and from jataka. Hence a Stupa worked like a book in stone offered for mediation to the devotees who came to circumambulate around the Stupa. The images of the masters appeared only in the first century CE till then his presence was represented only as symbols.

Nagarjunakonda

Nagarjunakonda is located in Palnad Taluk of the Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh in South India. It was a secluded valley about 23 sq km in area and was surrounded on three sides by a group of hills which were offshoots of the Nallamalai range. The river Krishna flowed in the northeast associated with the celebrated teacher Nagarjuna of second century CE. A.H. Longhurst, the then superintendent of the A.S.I, conducted full scale excavation from 1927-31; most of the monuments at the site was constructed in third-fourth century CE. During the reign of the kings of the Ikshvaku dynasty remains of more than thirty Buddhist establishments were found. The great Stupa is the oldest and most central sacred monument at Nagarjunakonda. Inscription date the Stupa around 246 CE but archaeologist believed that the Stupa could be older i.e. earlier to 246 CE The complex was built by Charntamula, and mother-in-law of the second king Virapurushadatta. The great Stupa is one of the largest structures in the city of Vijayapuri. It has a diameter of 28m but its original height is not known as the upper part of the Stupa had been destroyed. The Stupa is made of bricks and its interior is not solid brick work but consist of a system of walls arranged in the form of a wheel, with a rim and spoke radiating from a central hub because of its large size, additional support was given by adding two further concentric ring around the central core. The design of

concentric and radial walls forms three rows of cells in the interior of the Stupa (eight in the inner, sixteen each in the middle and outer). The external surface of the Stupa was coated with a plaster of lime. A.H.Longhurt in 1929 made a significant discovery of bone relics paled in a gold reliquary with a few gold flowers, pearls and pieces of garnet and crystal kept inside 65 a silver casket in one of the outer most north-western cells. An inscription at the site states that this is the great Stupa of the blessed one, hence archaeologist infer that the bone relics are those of the Buddha. Both the sets of Buddha's bone relics found from Taxila and Nagarjunakonda were presented by the Director General A.S.I to the Mahabodhi Society in 1931 for their safe custody and veneration and thus enshrined within the newly constructed Mulagan Kuti Vihara at Sarnath, since corporeal relics of the Buddha are highly venerated by the Buddhists as they are seen as symbol of the Buddha's presence.