

The Choice of National Symbols and Cultural Unity

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

This Resolution was proposed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and passed in the Constituent Assembly on 22 July 1947, just prior to India's Independence. Nehru continued his speech to suggest that there was no communal or religious significance to the flag. Instead it represented the spirit of the nation that has grown up through thousands of years of an immemorial past. He stressed two terms, i.e. the spirit of the nation and tradition, as these provided values to a country. Like individuals, the nation also cannot subsist solely in material terms. He referred to the flag as having been accepted by popular usage and explained the change for practical reasons from the chakra that symbolized the common man to the cakra that was an emblem of India's ancient culture.¹

In explaining the choice of the cakra or wheel, Pandit Nehru expressed his pleasure at the selection of the emblem and stated, "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 Aśoka, one of the most magnificent names not only in India's history but in world history.... Now because I have mentioned the name of Aśoka, I should like you to think that the Aśokan 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."²

My paper focuses on two aspects of this Resolution. The first is the cultural context of the national symbols and the generation and construction of knowledge of the past in nineteenth century India; and linked to this is the second that relates to the history of

¹ Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings) - Volume IV, Tuesday, the 22nd July 1947.

² S. Gopal edited, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Volume III: 71-2.

archaeological work at Sarnath located six kilometres from Varanasi and the unearthing of the lion pillar capital at the site. The larger question that I address relates to the theme of the seminar of cultural unity and the extent to which this is reflected in the unanimous choice of national symbols of Independent India. Was this choice an arbitrary decision made by the modern political thinkers of the country, such as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) or did this emerge from a broad-based consensus among the people steeped in traditional knowledge of the Epics and the *Purāṇas*?

Historians have often described the choice of Aśokan symbols, i.e. the cakra 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 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? What role did institutions related to the study of the past, such as the universities or the Archaeological Survey of India play in the popularization of the history of Aśoka and Buddhism? The larger issue that is of interest here is the extent to which the introduction of new disciplines, such as archaeology in 1861, created tensions in an understanding of the past that had traditionally been viewed through the perspective of the Epics and the *Purāṇas*. The core of the *Itihāsa Purāṇa* tradition dates back to the seventh century BC or even earlier and it continues to be alive and popular in the subcontinent. This tradition has been largely ignored by historians in favour of the so-called ‘scientific’ discipline of archaeology. How defensible is this neglect? I discuss these questions with reference to the national symbols and start with the flag.

The official Government of India version of the making of the flag traces its beginnings to the 1905 partition of Bengal,³ 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 Virmani. The history of the flag in fact starts much earlier, as the British Raj searched for representative symbols for its colonies. This history not only presents a parallel narrative, but also shaped the search for a national identity within the subcontinent. The cultural identity that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is being suggested here, supplanted religious identity and was at the core

³ Our Flag, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1950.

of national unity. This point will be elaborated later in my paper, but first, I present a brief overview of the history of the flag.

The East India Company had been authorized by the king to use the Union Jack in trade with India and in 1863, the design for a Star of India flag was proposed on the same lines as those used by other colonies, such as Canada and Australia. The search for a characteristic flag for India started in 1901 at the time of Queen Victoria's death and the coronation of her son, Edward VII not only to the throne of England, but more importantly as Emperor of India⁴ and as Emperor of British Dominions beyond the seas. This initiated an interest in a flag that could embody the idea of the unity of India with the British Empire. In her insightful book on the National Flag, Virmani suggests that the making of the flag was not merely a political event. Instead, its symbolism evolved from a new political culture produced during the national movement in the twentieth century.⁵

In the last decades of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century, an issue that confronted Indian leaders and thinkers was the kind of representation that would render the abstraction of India, as a nation, accessible and appealing to the public imagination. This question had no easy answers and the search went through a long process of trial and error. The period from 1920 to 1930s crystallized thinking on the colours of the swaraj flag proposed by Mahatma Gandhi but more importantly it shifted the parameters of the debate from associating these colours with religious identities to cultural identity. The adoption of the *carkha*, as the symbol of self reliance in the flag further consolidated this notion of cultural unity. Nehru's 1947 Resolution in the Constituent Assembly marked the culmination of this long process of public debate and discussion. By replacing the *carkha* with the *cakra* Nehru provided depth to the cultural context of the flag and national symbols. 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. He added five thousand years of India's cultural unity to the flag and successfully intertwined the symbols of the past such as the policies of the Mauryan king Aśoka with aspirations for the future of modern India.⁶

⁴ The bill declaring Queen Victoria as Empress of India was passed by the British Parliament on 28 April, 1876.

⁵ Arundhati Virmani, *A National Flag for India: Rituals, Nationalism, and the Politics of Sentiment*, Permanent Black, 2008: 7.

⁶ Bhagwan Josh, *Aśoka, Historical Discourse and the Post-Colonial Indian State*, Olivelle, Patrick, Leoshko, Janice and Ray, Himanshu Prabha edited, *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and History*, Oxford University Press, 2012 (forthcoming).

In the Constituent Assembly the Resolution proposed by Nehru was accepted unanimously and even though three notices of amendments had been given these were not followed up by the parliamentarians involved. The Assembly spent the whole day listening to members from different political parties express their support for the Resolution. The discussion focussed largely on the colours of the flag and their symbolism for India. Speakers went at length to refute any link between the colours and religious affiliation. In a long article that appeared in the *Times of India* on August 15, 1947, Rev. H. Heras, Director of the Indian Historical Research Institute, Bombay discussed the significance of the wheel and its association with dharma or moral law. He traced its correlation with *ṛta* or eternal order of the universe in the *R̥gveda*. It was for this reason that Viṣṇu was represented holding the cakra. The unanimity was by no means limited to parliamentarians. In a sample of seventy letters to the editor carried in a special flag supplement issued by the *Hindustan Times*, readers showed a broad acceptance of the colours of the flag and of the cakra.⁷

The transformation of the carkha into the cakra as depicted on the Sarnath lion capital leads me to the history of the Mauryan dynasty and that of its best-known king, Aśoka. Aśoka is unique among ancient Indian rulers and was the first to propagate his dhammalipi or edicts on dhamma or dharma, which were engraved on pillars and rocks across the subcontinent. By bringing dhamma to the centre stage of political life, he redefined it by emphasising its ethical connotations, though long before Ashoka, dharma was connected with kings, especially with the divine king, Varuna in Vedic literature. Dharma is what gave power and legitimacy to the king to rule over society. Buddhism used the language of power and royal symbols, such as cakravartin or 'roller of the wheel' or universal monarch and the dharmacakrapravarttanāsūtra or the sūtra that set the dharma in motion to define its identity.⁸

Even though the Brahmi script of the edicts had changed and could not be read by later generations, Aśoka's pillar edicts continued to fascinate subsequent kings who often used them for inscribing their own records. It is also evident from later sources that many of the monastic establishments that grew up around the pillar edicts preserved the association of the Buddhist king Aśoka with the pillars. For example, an eleventh century pedestal inscription found at Sarnath records the restoration of the stupa of Aśoka at Sarnath and its

⁷ Arundhati Virmani, *A National Flag for India*, Permanent Black, 2008: 140.

⁸ Patrick Olivelle, *Language, Texts and Society*, Firenze University Press, 2005: 121-36.

dharmacakra by two brothers from Gauda, identified with eastern India.⁹ It is evident from this and other documents that Buddhist monastic complexes and texts continued to preserve the memory of the Buddhist king Aśoka well into the present. How did historical memory of this extraordinary king enter public discourse in nineteenth century India? A response to this question involves examining the history of archaeology in India and its relationship with the Buddhist textual tradition, especially the *Mahāvamsa* or the Sri Lankan Chronicle. Before we discuss the history of archaeology, it would perhaps be best to provide an overview of the writings on Aśoka and his dhamma.

Aśoka in Historical Memory

An issue that has continued to be debated is the nature of Aśoka's dhamma, especially since Buddhist writings have associated it with Buddha dhamma. As suggested earlier, Buddhist writings kept the tradition of Aśoka alive and a large corpus developed around the legend of *dharmarāja* Aśoka. Scholars have suggested that the portrayal of the third century BC Mauryan king Aśoka 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.¹⁰

The narrative on Aśoka occurs in several Buddhist texts, starting as early as the *Aśokāvadāna* written five hundred years after Mauryan rule in second century AD in Sanskrit. The text formed a part of the *avadāna* genre and was perhaps compiled in north-western India. Aśoka is eulogized in Buddhist writing for visiting places associated with the life of the Buddha and sign-posting them either with his pillars 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 forms the basic version of the Aśoka legend as it circulated in northwest 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.¹¹

A second text that popularized the story of Aśoka in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia was the fifth century Chronicle *Mahāvamsa* written in Pali. Though the general story of Aśoka is similar in the two traditions, there are major variations as well. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, Aśoka is said to have been born one hundred years after the

⁹ J.Ph. Vogel, *Buddhist Sculptures from Benares*, Archaeological Survey of India- Annual Report 1903-04, Swati Publications, Delhi (reprint) 1990: 222-3.

¹⁰ John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, Princeton University Press, 1983: 34.

¹¹ Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*: 19.

parinirvāṇa of the Buddha, while in the *Mahāvamsa*, the Mauryan king was consecrated 218 years after the Buddha's passing away. The *Mahāvamsa* associates Aśoka with holding of the third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra and of cleansing the Sangha of false beliefs by defrocking at least sixty thousand monks. Another tradition that is repeated in the *Mahāvamsa*, but scarcely occurs in the *Aśokāvadāna* relates to the despatch of missionaries by Aśoka 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 also ensuring proper learning and knowledge of the Buddha vacana or words of the Buddha. It is no coincidence that notions of Buddhist kingship have played a major role in concretizing attitudes towards governance in countries of South and Southeast Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Burma, where Aśoka was and still is “portrayed as a paradigmatic ruler, a model to be proudly recalled and emulated.”¹² How did this memory find its physical manifestations and archaeological correlates? The link between Aśoka of Buddhist tradition and archaeology of the Mauryan king came to a head in the nineteenth century with the institutionalization of the discipline of archaeology under the newly established Archaeological Survey of India in 1861, as we discuss in the next section.

The Archaeology of Aśoka and the Pillar Edict at Sarnath

The most famous monuments associated with Aśoka are the free-standing pillars, which bear his inscriptions. Aśoka set up at least twenty pillars, including those inscribed with his edicts in Prakrit. 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 Kausambi near Allahabad, in the Meerut and Hissar districts and at Sanchi in central India. Unfortunately few of the pillar capitals survive and only seven complete specimens are known. Nevertheless it is abundantly clear from subsequent copies, later inscriptions engraved on many of the pillars, and the shifting of pillars to other locations that a rich oral tradition had emerged around these, which helped keep the memory of the Mauryan king alive throughout history.¹³ The aesthetics of the sandstone pillars and their polish brought them to the notice of early visitors and travellers,

¹² Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*: 39.

¹³ Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoshko and Himanshu Prabha Ray edited, *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2012 (forthcoming).

who not only described them in glowing terms, but also sketched and painted them, before photography became the norm.

The first pillar reported by a European was the one at Delhi, which had been moved in the fourteenth century by the Tughluq emperor to Ferozeshah Kotla. In 1615-16 the English traveller Thomas Coryat (1577-1617) walked through Turkey and Persia to the Mughal court at Agra and visited Delhi on his way to Gujarat, where he died at Surat. He described the pillar in the ruins of ancient Delhi. Initially Coryat assumed from its polish that it was made of brass, but on closer examination he realized it was highly polished sandstone with upright script that resembled a form of Greek.¹⁴ He credited Alexander with the setting up of the pillar to commemorate his victory over Porus.¹⁵

This attribution was by no means limited to Coryat. Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893), the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India also used the route taken by Alexander into the subcontinent to trace the archaeology of northwest India. Cunningham had an abiding interest in Buddhism, which he argued could only be understood through archaeology, as it was not mentioned in the *Purāṇas* or other Sanskrit texts. It was to identify sites associated with the historical Buddha who died in 543 BCE that Cunningham found the seventh century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's travels invaluable.

In the context of this paper, Cunningham is significant for establishing a connection between the Buddhist king Aśoka mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* and the several stupas that dotted much of north India. He opened the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath in 1835 and in early 1851, Cunningham and Lieutenant F.C. Maisey dug into the main stupa at Sanchi in central India. After his work at Sanchi, Cunningham concluded that “in the inscriptions found in the Sanchi and Sonari Topes, we have the most complete and convincing proof of the authenticity and history of Aśoka as related in the *Mahāvamsa*. In the Pali Annals of Ceylon, it is stated that after the meeting of the Third Buddhist Synod, 241 BC, Kāśyapa was despatched to the Hemawanta country to convert the people to Buddhism. In the Sanchi and Sonari Topes were discovered two portions of the relics of Kāśyapa, whom the inscriptions call the ‘Missionary to the whole Hemawanta’.”¹⁶ Thus Cunningham established the historicity of both the *Mahāvamsa* and Aśoka, as the builder of stupas in north India. We will

¹⁴ Dom Moraes, and Sarayu Srivatsa. *The Long Strider: How Thomas Coryate Walked From England to India in the Year 1613*. Penguin, New Delhi, 2003.

¹⁵ William Foster edited, *Early Travels in India 1583-1619*, London, 1921: 248.

¹⁶ Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes: Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith Elder and Co., London, 1854: vi-vii.

discuss the implications of this towards the end of this section, but first it is necessary to draw Sarnath into the picture.

Sarnath entered the discussion on Aśoka somewhat later, though a stone image of the Buddha inscribed with the *ye dhamma hetu pabhava...* legend had been found along with two urns near the Dhamekh stupa in 1794.¹⁷ 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 Aśokan pillar and its capital were, however, discovered in excavations conducted there in 1905. Unknown in the nineteenth century, they were thus not part of the initial re-discovery of Aśoka although Sarnath had long been important.

Thus by the early twentieth century, *dhammarāja* Aśoka of early Buddhist Pali texts entered historical discourse as the first emperor whose control and authority extended not only over the entire subcontinent, but who also sent missionaries to other countries. He was credited with the setting up of pillars and stupas to mark sites associated with the life of the Buddha and thus established Buddhist sacred geography. More importantly, the Buddha himself had been established as a ‘historical’ figure.

In the nineteenth century an idea that had firmly established itself in European academic circles was the notion of a historical Buddha who had lived and preached in India in the sixth and fifth century BC. It is significant that the Buddha and Buddhism are rarely mentioned in Graeco-Roman texts and it was through early Christian writing that some information about Buddhism filtered into Europe.¹⁸ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as European missionaries travelled to Asia, they discovered a new religion that they labelled *baudhamatham* or Buddha’s point of view. In addition, missions travelled to Tibet and Siam and the resulting accounts exposed Europe to writings of Buddhism. The term ‘Buddhism’ seems to have arisen around the beginning of the nineteenth century and was marked by attempts to characterize ‘authentic Buddhism’ defined as being the teachings of the historical Buddha who lived and preached in the sixth-fifth centuries BC.¹⁹ There was a significant

¹⁷ *Asiatick Researches* V, 1798: 131-3.

¹⁸ “We can thus safely conclude that early Hellenistic literature knew hardly anything about the Buddha” Klaus Karttunen, *India and the Hellenistic World*, Helsinki, 1997: 63.

¹⁹ Historians date the life of the Buddha from [circa 563 BC](#) to [483 BC](#), though some scholars have recently suggested dates around 410 or 400 BC for his death, but there is little consensus on the latter view. L. S. Cousins, *The Dating of the Historical Buddha*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 6.1, 1996: 57-63.

increase in the editing and publishing of many Pali works from 1877 onwards, especially after T. W. Rhys Davids established the Pali Text Society in 1881.²⁰

The appeal of Buddhism also lay in the European perception that the Buddha had been an opponent of Hinduism, and the vast majority of Victorians easily comprehended this antagonism. The image of the Buddha as a social reformer who led a crusade against Hinduism not only looms large in Victorian writings, but through Cunningham these ideas found their archaeological manifestation and continue to be repeated to the present. Cunningham sought to divide religious architecture on the basis of dynastic history, such as that of the Mauryas, though his primary concern remained the study of Buddhism. In the final section of this paper, I discuss the extent to which archaeological work transformed Sarnath into a Buddhist site.

Constructing the Buddhist Landscape of Sarnath

Cunningham wrote in 1854 that Buddhism started its decline in India 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.”²¹ 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 is here that the Director-General’s ‘creative’ archaeology came to a head. No published data is provided to support the statement and instead Cunningham quotes ‘personal communication’ with Major Kittoe, as evidence. As will be shown below, excavations at Sarnath have continued well into the twentieth century and have radically altered the understanding of the site from the time of its first discovery by Cunningham who visited it in 1835-36.

At that time, Sarnath was a huge mound of brick and stone remains ‘about half a mile long and nearly a quarter of a mile broad’. 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 Varāhi and the other Guronpur or village of the teachers. An antelope reserve existed in the

²⁰ Rhys Davids taught Pali and Buddhist literature at University College, London and was instrumental in the setting up of the School of Oriental Studies. He was also the first to hold the chair in comparative religion at the University of Manchester (1904-1915).

²¹ Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2009 (reprint): 88-9.

vicinity indicating perhaps the ancient name of the site as *mṛgadāva* or deer park. Also present at Sarnath was a Jain temple to Parsvanath.²²

In 1905, F.O. Oertel, an engineer in the Public Works Department of the United Provinces undertook excavations at Sarnath and it was during these operations that an Aśokan pillar was unearthed in a broken and damaged condition along with the lion capital measuring seven feet in height.²³ The lion capital carved out of a single block of sandstone comprised of four magnificent lions standing back to back surmounted on a drum with four animals carved on it placed between four wheels. Oertel not only exposed the main shrine, discovered the Aśokan pillar and its capital but he also re-examined Chaukhandi mound and unearthed a large number of sculptures and inscriptions including the famous image of the Buddha preaching his first sermon dated to the Gupta era.

The next set of excavations, conducted under John Marshall and S. Konow, commenced in 1907 in which a large portion of the area in the northern and southern sections of the site was covered. Marshall and Konow unearthed a large and imposing monastery, of the twelfth century AD extending over more than 760 feet from east to west. The open courtyard was paved with sandstone slabs and the entrance to the east had richly carved bastions and a neatly constructed structure, which the excavators identified as a ‘gate-keeper’s lodge.’ Further east was a more spacious courtyard and a second massive gateway more elaborate in its proportions. Underneath this twelfth century complex three monastic buildings of an earlier period were excavated, which the excavators dated to the late Kushana-early Gupta period.²⁴

H. Hargreaves continued with the excavations to the north, east and west of the Main Shrine in 1914-15. Among his significant discoveries were included the dated inscriptions of Kumaragupta II and Budhagupta. 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 were conducted under Daya Ram Sahni for five field seasons commencing in 1917-18. The focus of these was the area between the Dhamekh stupa and the Main Shrine and Monastery II, while further repairs were carried out on a number of monuments like the Kumaradevi monastery. During the course of his work at

²² Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India Report volume I*, Archaeological Survey of India, 1871: 105-7.

²³ F.O. Oertel, *Excavations at Sarnath*, Archaeological Survey of India – Annual Report 1904-05, Swati Publications, Delhi 1990 (reprint): 68-70.

²⁴ His excavations were conducted over two seasons of fieldwork and the report may be found in the *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report of the Years 1906-07 and 1907-08*.

Sarnath, Sahni exposed a number of structures including numerous votive stupas, the 162-ft long promenade in front of the main shrine and a small temple.²⁵

From this brief overview of the site it is evident that the first monument raised at Sarnath was a pillar erected by the Mauryan ruler, Aśoka. After this political initiative, only a few additions were made in the next two centuries, including the dozen railing-pillars (dated to about the 1st century BC) discovered near the Dhamekh stupa and some inscriptions. In the early centuries of the Christian era, Sarnath seems to have been enriched with new monasteries as well as a number of images including the red sandstone preaching Buddha established by bhikshu Bala of Mathura. However, it was in the fourth to sixth centuries AD that Sarnath reached a high watermark with a majority of the buildings dated to the middle of the first millennium AD, 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.

The last historical record from Sarnath is the twelfth century inscription on a rectangular slab of sandstone written in Sanskrit. It consists of twenty-six verses and gives the genealogy of Kumaradevi, the queen of Govindachandra whose inscriptions range from 1114 to 1154 AD. 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 Aśoka. The inscription was composed by the poet Srikunda and engraved by the mason Vamana. This twelfth century reference to the memory of the Mauryan king Aśoka indicates the longevity of the association of the king with major Buddhist sites in the Ganga valley.

A remarkable aspect of Marshall and Konow's excavations were the number of Jain and Hindu icons that were unearthed from monastery I, attributed to Kumaradevi, and at other locations at the site. These included a sculpture of a standing Tirthankara, as well as heads of Tirthankaras with Naga canopies and about twenty-five representations of Hindu deities.²⁶ A colossal twelfth century image of Śiva killing the demon was found in the debris at a height of 8 feet above the floor of monastery IV. Another depiction of dancing Śiva was

²⁵ Dayaram Sahni, *Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology of Sarnath*, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1914; *Guide to the Buddhist Ruins of Sarnath*, Superintendent, Government of India Press, Simla, 1923; Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *The Wheel Flag of India: Chakra-dhvaja*, Banaras Hindu University Press, Varanasi, 26th January 1964.

²⁶ Daya Ram Sahni, *Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology of Sarnath*, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1914: 164-6.

unearthed in the outer courtyard of monastery I, while images of Ganeśa, Mahiṣāsūramardini 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 century AD. 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 Kumaradevi's inscription. The only structure dating to the post-twelfth century period is a sixteenth century octagonal brick tower that was constructed on top of Chaukhandi stupa by Govardhan, son of Raja Todarmal to commemorate Humayun's visit to the place. An inscription recording the event refers to it as a lofty tower reaching to the blue sky.²⁷

Marshall and Konow did not explain the presence of Jain and Hindu images at Sarnath and these have generally received little attention in secondary writings. One of the major issues that has confronted historians of ancient India is the so-called decline of Buddhism in India in the twelfth century, as suggested by Cunningham and the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism in general. In order to place this issue in proper perspective it is important that the archaeology of Sarnath be discussed with reference to Kashi or Varanasi, often described as the oldest living city, also referred to in the later Vedic Samhitas and described at length in the Kāśī khaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa.

Sarnath and the Archaeology of Varanasi

The 1940 trial excavations by Krishna Deva of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), during the construction of the Kashi railway station, resulted in the recovery of a temple hall supported on twelve pillars and other brick structures along with large quantities of black pottery later identified as the Northern Black Polished Ware. A sealing dated to the Gupta period bearing the legend *vārāṇasyadhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇasya* confirmed the identity of Rajghat with the ancient city of Varanasi. Subsequent excavations in the 1960s pushed back the beginnings of the site to 800 BC and established its continuity till the medieval period.²⁸ More recent archaeological work at several sites around the present city of Varanasi, such as at Akhta, Ramnagar, Tilmanpur, Kotwa and Asapur has provided evidence for a continuous and multi-dimensional growth of the settlement, "as a result of which the city earned the

²⁷ Archaeological Survey of India – Annual Report 1904-05, Swati Publications, Delhi 1990 (reprint): 74.

²⁸ T. N. Roy, Rajghat, A. Ghosh edited, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1989: 360-2.

reputation of being a seat of learning and centre of Indian traditions.’²⁹ Excavations at Aktha (2002-2004) located 2 km south-east of Sarnath date the earliest habitation to circa eleventh/twelfth centuries BC and have thus pushed back the antiquity of the city.

On the basis of the archaeological deposit found in the excavations, the vast culture zone of Varanasi in the middle Ganga valley has been divided into two. The Kashi – Varanasi area stretches along an east – west axis along the left bank of the Ganga until its confluence with the Varuna, while the second forms a rough north – south axis between the Kashi – Rajghat bank of the Ganga and Sarnath. The ancient city developed and expanded along the banks of the river Ganga, though smaller settlements, some of them being religious in nature grew along the north – south axis, Sarnath being a good example of this. Sarnath did not develop in isolation, but was instead closely linked to Varanasi, as is evident from the Jataka narratives many of which are located in the region of Benares and have been listed by Jayaswal in her report.³⁰ In spite of this recent expansion of archaeological knowledge about the cultural region of Varanasi, gaps remain in our understanding of early religious architecture from the area, though much has been written about the history of the city.³¹

Prithvi Agarwal has documented several loose sculptures from Varanasi dated to about 800 AD onwards and these include a rectangular slab carved on both sides, which was found near the Lakshmi Kunda. One side shows *śeṣaśāyī* Visnu, while the other has five elephant-headed figures representing the *pañca-Gaṇeśa* form of the deity Ganapati. Other sculptures found in the area include a miniature shrine, which is stylistically dated to about 900 AD. The shrine replica (ht. 96.5 cm; square in plan, 35.5 cm), is carved on all the four sides, giving in elevation a view of the walls and spire of a Brahmanical temple. One side represents the *garbhagr̥ha* entrance and the other three walls portray Vaisnava and Saiva themes. The long horizontal slab of the entablature shows the multiple forms of Gaṇeśa and of significance here are the five elephant-headed figures similar to the *pañca-Gaṇeśa* of the Lakshmi Kunda slab. There are four figures of four-armed Ganapatis seated in a row, with the fifth figure in its elephant form appearing at the extreme end. Besides these examples from Varanasi, other specimens are known from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Agarwal then goes on to record two-faced and three-faced Ganapati images from Varanasi. At least two specimens of the five-faced form of Gaṇeśa known as *Heramba* in iconographic treatises

²⁹ Vidula Jayaswal, *Ancient Varanasi: An Archaeological Perspective*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2009: 1.

³⁰ Jayaswal, *Ancient Varanasi: Chapter II*.

³¹ Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983.

are still under worship in the city of Varanasi and are dated to the 16th-17th century.³² This brief overview of the early sculptural finds from Varanasi indicates their correspondence with those found in the excavations at Sarnath and requires an explanation.

It is evident that the Buddhist monastic complex at Sarnath coexisted with Jain and Hindu temples and formed an important part of the diverse cultural milieu of the Varanasi area by the mid first millennium AD. This cohabitation was not limited to architecture, but was also present in icons and reliefs. For example, in a relief from Sarnath dated to the late Gupta period depicting the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, Gaṇeśa is shown with his *vāhana*, the mouse along with Kārttikeya, the navagrahas and other deities. Alice Getty concludes that “it is of special interest to find him in this Buddhist sculpture because it furnishes a transition stage between his Hindu and Buddhist representations.”³³

Gaṇeśa is also present along with the *saptamātrkāś* and three Buddhas seated in *dhyānāsana* in cave 6 at Aurangabad in Maharashtra dated to around the sixth century AD.³⁴ Also of interest is a Pala period sculpture of Bhrikuti Tara now in the Dhaka Museum, which shows Gaṇeśa on the pedestal.³⁵ Nṛtta Ganapati and Heramba Ganapati are depicted in Buddhist paintings in India, Nepal and Tibet. As in the Hindu tradition, in Buddhism also Gaṇeśa or his prototype, Vinayaka was originally a creator of obstacles or *vighnakartā*, but was eventually transformed into *siddhīdātā* or one who gives success. *Maṇḍalas* play an important role in Buddhist ritual, especially in Vajrayana Buddhism and Gaṇeśa is prominently represented in Vajradhātu *maṇḍala*. Representations in stone of *sādhana* no. 204 of the *Sāadhanamālā* show the deity Aparājitā trampling over Gaṇeśa, here signifying his Vinayaka aspect. In the Buddhist monasteries of Nepal, Gaṇeśa along with Mahākāla occurs as one of the guardian figures and in the Tibetan pantheon, the elephant-headed deity is incorporated as Sīta Ganapati, Rakta Ganapati and Pīta Ganapati.³⁶ Thus Gaṇeśa figures prominently in his Buddhist *avatāra*.³⁷

How does one theorize these shared attributes of deities, such as Gaṇeśa, as also the existence of diverse sacred spaces in what is often described as the holy abode of Śiva?

³² Prithvi K. Agrawal, *Some Varanasi images of Gaṇapati and their Iconographic Problem*, *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1977: 139-155.

³³ Alice Getty, *Ganesa: A Monograph on the Elephant-Faced God*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1971 (first published 1936): 37.

³⁴ Pia Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad: Transformations in Art and Religion*, Brill, Leiden, 2011: 202-3.

³⁵ N. K. Bhattasali, *Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929: plate xix.

³⁶ Lokesh Chandra, *Buddhist Iconography*, New Delhi, 1988: 159-61.

³⁷ Yuvraj Krishan, *Gaṇeśa: Unravelling an Enigma*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1999: 109-111.

Cunningham emphasised the decline of Buddhism at Sarnath, but the data presented here shows a picture to the contrary. Buddhism was thriving well into the twelfth century when new viharas were constructed at great expense. What needs to be taken into account is the changing relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism from the middle of the first millennium AD 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 as that of the materialists or the preachers of the Cārvāka doctrine.³⁸ It is around the eighth century that Śankarācārya, a theologian of Hinduism wrote the *Daśāvatāra* stotra that recognised the Buddha as an avatar of Viṣṇu identified as a yogin or sage seated in meditation. The earliest inscription mentioning the Buddha as an avatār appears in the Adivaraha cave at Mahabalipuram on the Tamil coast dedicated to the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu. Although the temple was dedicated to Viṣṇu, Śiva images also occur, such as the descent of Ganga and Durga panels. Of the inscriptions found in the cave, the earliest is an eighth century Sanskrit record listing the ten avatārs of Viṣṇu³⁹ above the Harihara panel representing the combined image of Viṣṇu and Śiva. Thus the relationship between the different religious traditions of the subcontinent varied over time and to simplify it to mere confrontation or antagonism, as often suggested by colonial authors, such as Cunningham is not substantiated by the evidence. It is also important to include both archaeological data, as also that presented by monuments for an understanding of the cultural memory of Aśoka as it survived into the present.

Cultural Memory and the Diverse Sacred Landscape

Historical memory can be conceived of as an intentional attempt to store and reproduce knowledge of the past. In this conceptualization, monuments and ritual 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; memory acquired over time; and finally, the created memory through transformation of the monument, either through its destruction or by altering its context or form. Monuments also become sites for enactment of rituals such as pilgrimage for the replenishment of memory and knowledge of the past. Social carriers of memory are agents for the reproduction and circulation of

³⁸ Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007: 39.

³⁹ ...*nārasimhaśca vāmanah rāmo rāmaśca rāmaśca buddhah kalkī ca te daśa*. H. Krishna Sastri, *Two Statues of Pallava Kings and five Pallava Inscriptions in a Rock Temple at Mahabalipuram*, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, volume 26, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1945: 5.

historical memory and traditionally these have included story-tellers, singers or actors who narrate mythical and past events to a local audience.

Two aspects of the historical memory in India are striking: one the diversity; and second the interconnectedness through pilgrimage. Diversity encompasses a wide variety of groups with distinctive ethnicity, language, religion and culture and is nowhere more marked than in the range and variety of religious architecture in the subcontinent from the third-second centuries BC onwards. A shrine not only functioned as a place of worship and ritual, but also a centre for religious festivities and discourses on ethics and moral values. The rulers and other members of elite groups often used it as a platform to further their own agenda by making lavish donations and often inscribing these within the precincts of the shrine. The shrine undeniably was at the core of the cultural life of a community and the focal point of a range of followers, from the lay devotee to the ritual specialist and from the patron to the architect. Poets and scribes engraved their writings in praise of the deity or the genealogy of the patron on temple walls.

The variety and religious affiliation of shrines in India is extraordinary and ranges from open air tree shrines to elaborate temples, monumental stupas and colossal mosques. Similarly remarkable is the sanctity accorded to certain locations, which continue to be revered by devotees of different religions. An appropriate example of this is the site of Ellora, in the Aurangabad district of the present state of Maharashtra in India. The earliest cave excavation at Ellora began in the late sixth century and was dedicated to Śiva, followed by Buddhist and Jaina caves over the next several centuries until the tenth century CE. Though a majority of Ellora's Hindu excavations 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 Kailasanatha temple dedicated to Śiva is admired for its conceptualization and sculptural exuberance. The Śaiva caves shared several architectural features with the twelve Buddhist caves at Ellora, which were excavated from 600 to 730 CE. They document the development of Vajrayāna imagery from the simple delineation in Cave 6 to the elaborate forms of Cave 12. Much of the excavation activity for the Jain cave-temples was conducted during the ninth and tenth centuries, a time when the Rāṣṭrakūṭas had attained paramount sovereignty in the region. Although the Archaeological Survey of India has categorized the Jain monuments into five separate cave complexes (Caves 30-34), there are in actuality twenty-three individual cave-temples, nearly all of them containing a shrine and rock-cut Jina image.

3 kilometres from the caves at Ellora is Khuldabad, known as the valley of saints as it is said to contain the graves of 1500 Sufi saints, as well as the tomb of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, those of 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 and the mausoleum of Sayyed Zain ud din, another saint highly revered by the Muslims. On the east side it 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 Nizamuddin 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.

One of the issues that we mentioned above was that of mobility in the region and interconnectedness of religious shrines. Buddha dhamma permeated across ethnic and political boundaries in South Asia. Aśoka was perhaps the first pilgrim, as his edicts refer to his *dhammayāta* or religious travel for visiting sites associated with the Buddha. Obligatory pilgrimage and rituals thus provided identity and laid the foundation of an extensive cultural ethos extending across the region. Within the broader canvas of South Asia, dhamma was localised through monastic institutions and shrines, as we have already discussed.

What is relevant for our purpose is the reception of these archaeological discoveries by modern political thinkers who prepared a blueprint for independent India's cultural unity. Jawaharlal Nehru's (1889-1964) quest for understanding India's past was characterized by extensive reading, his visits to archaeological sites, such as Mohenjo-daro in present 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*.⁴⁰ This was not merely an intellectual exercise in comprehending India's history and its conceptualization, but an emotional experience for Nehru. While writing on the Buddha, Nehru referred to his fascination with Edwin Arnold's 1879 publication *Light of Asia* and his visits to several Buddhist sites located in the United Provinces (the present state of Uttar Pradesh), as also to countries where Buddhism was a living faith.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) also accepted that he had been introduced to the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Buddhism through the books of Edwin Arnold, Song

⁴⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, Asia Publishing House, 1934; *Discovery of India*, The Signet Press, Calcutta, 1946.

Celestial and Light of Asia by two Theosophists he met during his stay in England.⁴¹ 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.”⁴² Thus while the two disagreed on the issue of the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism, they nevertheless recognised the country’s diversity of cultures and continuity of its living traditions. For an appreciation of both these aspects of the ancient past, it is important that professional historians uncover the nineteenth and early twentieth century layers that obscure the theoretical frameworks adopted in the colonial period under the guise of the ‘scientific discipline’ of archaeology. Many of these have continued to be repeated and adopted in the post-Independence phase. In this paper, my focus was on the excavations at Sarnath that transformed the area of ancient Kashi into a linear history of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain enclaves. It is hoped that an understanding of the construction of knowledge about history in the nineteenth and twentieth century would help address issues of cultural unity that bind the diverse traditions across the country, but which also provide vibrancy to a study of the ancient past.

⁴¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, Dover Publications, 1983: 59.

⁴² Mr. Gandhi on Buddha, *The Times of India*, May 19, 1924: 10.