Stupa-hopping in Sarnath

In the land where Buddha gave his first sermon and the Ashoka Pillar was found

WHERE STONES SPEAK

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In the 6th century BCE, a young man left the comforts of his royal home in search of truth. For six years, he followed extreme ascetic practices and became totally emaciated. It was then that he realised that this was not the way to nirvana. He eventually found enlightenment under a tree in Bodh Gaya. Prince Siddhartha became Buddha, or the Enlightened One.

Teachings of Buddha

From Bodh Gaya, Buddha went to the Deer Park (Mrigadava) in Sarnath, where the five monks who had been with him during his ascetic phase were staying. It was there that he gave his first sermon, an event known as the Dharma Chakra Pravarttana, or turning of the wheel of law. In ancient times, this place was known by many names – Rishipatana, Mrigadava and Mrigadaya. The word Sarnath comes from a corruption of the name Saranagatha (lord of deer).

In his first sermon to these five companions, Buddha spoke of the Four Noble Truths and the eightfold path that frees people from suffering. He said that there are two ways of life: one is to indulge in all the pleasures of the world and the other is to deny oneself these pleasures. The middle path is the way to achieve nirvana, he said.

It is in Sarnath that Buddha laid the foundation of his sangha, or organisation of monks. He had 60 disciples, who he sent to different parts of the country to spread his teachings. He also established an order of female monks, which was joined by his wife.

Two hundred years after Buddha, the Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, fought the Battle of Kalinga and, disgusted by the bloodshed, became a Buddhist. It is to him that we owe many of the beautiful stupas and monasteries in Sarnath. We also owe a huge debt to Sir Alexander Cunningham, who excavated the Dhamekh, Dharmarajika, and Chaukhandi stupas along with a monastery and temple between 1834 and 1836. Many excavations followed these, the most famous among them being the 1904-05 excavation by Friedrich Oscar Oertel of the Ashoka Pillar, including the Lion Capital.

Invasions and restorations

I have visited Sarnath many times, and each visit is as magical than the previous one. Entering the gate the first thing one sees are the remains of excavated monasteries. As I walked beyond that, I saw a huge group of devotees sitting around in prayer at the Dharmarajika stupa. It was an enchanting sight, for they were oblivious to the sun beating down on them and chanted their sacred texts.

This stupa is the one said to have been built by Ashoka to commemorate Buddha’s first sermon. Today it is just a low and flat platform as it “was pulled down in 1794 by one Jagat Singh of Banaras,” says B.R. Mani in Sarnath: Archaeology, Art and Architecture. He says, “Jagat Singh, the Diwan of Raja Chet Singh of Banaras, dug the stupa mound in 1793-94 for the purpose of obtaining building material, both stones and bricks, for the erection of a market place in the city after his name.”

On top of the Ashoka pillar in Sarnath was the the Lion Capital and the Dharmachakra, but the Lion Capital is now housed in Sarnath museum, while the pillar remains where it was originally. The Lion Capital was adopted as the national emblem of India in 1950.

With remains of excavated monasteries on both sides, I walked up to the Dharmekh stupa, which is synonymous with Sarnath. After Ashoka, the other rulers who added to Sarnath’s glory were the Kushans, the Guptas and Harshavardhana. Under the Gutas, the Dharmekh stupa was encased with stone-carved floral designs. Sarnath suffered from the Huna invasions, but Harshavardhana later restored some of the earlier buildings. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang (602-664) left detailed accounts of the Dharmarajika stupa and Ashoka’s lion pillar. He found 1,500 monks living there.

Sarnath also suffered when it was attacked by Mahmud of Ghazni. Mahipala, the Pala king, restored the monuments. Architect James Fergusson, in History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, remarks on the similarity between the sculptured band on the central part of the Dharmekh stupa, which has “geometric patterns of great intricacy”, and the carvings done on the two earliest mosques in Delhi and Ajmer. The calligraphy on the screen of Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque, built by Qutbuddin Aibak in the Qutub complex in Delhi, does bear resemblance to the stupa. I have often wondered at the presence of the eternal knot associated with Buddhism in this complex.

The last great monument of Sarnath, a monastery named Dharmachakra Jina Vihara, was built in the 11th century by Kumaradevi, wife of Govindachanda of the Gahadavala dynasty.

Sarnath’s importance as a Buddhist centre diminished with time. But there are many other interconnections between historical characters which never cease to amaze me. According to an inscription at Chaukhandi stupa, Humayun sought refuge in Sarnath when he was escaping from the Battle of Chausa.