

The Lion Capital of Sarnath

(A Review of its Estimations)

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The Pillars made by Mauryan king Aśoka have been discovered from many places in northern and eastern India and in the border areas of Nepal. Of these pillars, the pillar at Basārh Bakhīrā that carries a single lion at its capital and the pillar at Rāmpurvā which had a bull in its capital are non-edict bearing pillars. The pillar at Rummindei and Nigālī Sāgar bear dedicatory inscriptions while others at Delhi (Mirat), Delhi (Toprā), Lauriyā Nandangarh, Lauriyā Aurarāj, Allahabad, Saṅkīsā, Sarnath, Sanchi and Rāmpurva (with lion capital) bear edicts. In this connection, it needs to be mentioned here that not all the pillars were found with their capitals. Of the pillars, the pillars at Basārh Bakhīrā, Lauriyā Nandangarh are nearly intact and one pillar at Rāmpurvā were all originally endowed with a single lion capital seated on haunches. The Rāmpurvā second pillar had a standing bull in its capital. The pillars at Sanchi and Sarnath had in their capitals four lions seated addorsed. An Aśokan capital found at Salempur (Muzzaffarpur) is characterised by four addorsed bulls. To some, the pillar at Lauriya Araraj had most probably a Garuḍa and at Rummindei a horse (?).

Of the animal capitals of Aśokan pillars, the lion capital at Sarnath appears to have drawn the attention of highest number of scholars in the field. These scholars reviewed this unique capital from various angles and tried to interpret accordingly. A review of those interpretations are as follows :

Mr. F.O.Oertel, the executive engineer of the Archaeological Survey of India discovered the famous Lion Capital at Sarnath in 1904 when he was engaged in clearing the debris close to the western wall of the main shrine. He also laid bare some fragments of the shaft and the stump of the column *in situ*. His eventful discoveries were published by John Marshall in the Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1904-1905 in which Marshall gave a graphic description of the capital. The report runs thus :

'The capital measures 7' in height. It was originally one piece of stone but is now broken across just above the bell.... it is surmounted by four magnificent lions standing back to back and in their middle was a large stone wheel, the sacred

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Dharmacakra symbol. A few fragments of the rim found near the column and the smaller wheels below the lions enable the wheel to be restored with some certainty. It apparently had 32 spokes, while the four smaller wheels have only 24 spokes. The lions stand on a drum with four animal figures carved on it viz., a lion, an elephant, a bull and a horse placed between four wheels.'

Altogether this capital is undoubtedly, the finest piece of sculpture of its kind so far discovered in India. The high polish on it led Marshall to believe initially the stone being either granite or gneiss but soon, the stone proved to be sandstone from Chunar quarries, some twenty miles south of Varanasi.

Eversince its discovery, it attracted the attention of a large number of historians in general and art historians in particular who tried to interpret and reconstruct certain aspects of contemporary history and culture from this single piece of artistic excellence.

In 1908, T. Block in the journal ZDMG, LXII forwarded symbolical interpretation of the four animals on the abacus of this capital and to him, the horse, elephant, bull and lion represent theriomorphically the Brahmanical Hindu deities viz., Sūrya, Indra, Śiva and Durgā and these reflect the subordination of these Hindu deities to the Buddha and his Dharma. This interpretation was not subscribed by many scholars.

In 1911, V.A.Smith in ZDMG, LXV published an article entitled 'The Monolithic Pillars or Columns of Ashoka'. In this article, Smith came forward with a different interpretation for the four animals on the abacus of this column. To him, these animals represent the guardians of four quarters theriomorphically-Lion stands for Vaiśravaṇa, the guardian of north, the bull refers to Virūpākṣa, the guardian of west, the elephant delineates Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the guardian of east and horse stands for Virūḍhaka, the lord of south. He further noted that the wheel, symbolised the Good Law and the four lions above guard it against demons. They also proclaim the Law in whole world.

Nearly same interpretation was maintained by Smith in his book *History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon* published in 1911. He suggested that the capital in question, was made late in the reign of Aśoka between 242-232 B.C.E. and to him it marked the spot where Gautama Buddha first turned the Wheel of Law. Smith had, however, all praise for this capital for he noted that 'it would be difficult to find in any country an example of ancient animal sculpture superior or even equal to this beautiful work of art which successfully combines the realistic modelling with ideal

dignity and is finished in every detail with perfect accuracy. He further observed that the design, while obviously reminiscent of Assyrian and Persian prototypes is modified in Indian sentiment, the bas-reliefs being purely Indian. He categorically discarded the notion of John Marshall who found Asiatic Greek impact on this capital. To Smith, the ability of the Asiatic Greek to represent Indian animals, so well, appeared doubtful.

Daya Ram Sahni's '*Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology at Sarnath*' with an introduction of Dr. J.Ph.Vogel, was published in Calcutta in 1914. Sahni referred that this black spotted buff coloured sand stone pillar capital along with the column was over thrown sometime about 10th-11th or 12th century CE. "That this ruthless act perpetrated by a determined iconoclast is shown by the fact that the column was destroyed down to the floor which surrounded it at that time. To him, the four animals on the abacus are merely decorative." He further informed that when discovered two of these animals were intact and the heads of the other two were detached and refixed. He also discovered three holes on the axels of the wheels of the abacus and he concluded that the axels were covered by metal caps. In his preface, Dr. Vogel made an oblique remark as to the pillars's proposed connection with Turning of the Wheel of Law. He said that it was somewhat surprising that in the accompanying edict at least in the preserved portion, no reference, whatsoever, was made to the great event which supposed to have taken place on the spot where the column was erected.

In *Cambridge History of India* (Vol. I, 1922), Sir John Marshall offered an artistic analysis of this capital. He found Hellenistic influence particularly in the modelling of the living forms on the Sarnath capital. He said that, 'so far as naturalism was his aim, the sculptor has modelled his figures direct from nature and has delineated their forms with bold, faithful touch but he has done more than this; he has consciously and with purpose, infused tectonic conventional spirit into four lions so as to bring them in harmony with architectural character of the monument and in the case of the horse on the abacus, he has availed himself of a type well-known and approved in western art.'

Marshall also drew the attention of scholars indicating the technical differences between Greek sculpture and the piece in question. In early Greek sculpture, it was the practice to compress the relief between two fixed planes, the original front plane of the statue and the plane of the background. In the reliefs of Sarnath capital, there is no trace, whatever of this process; each and every part of the animal is modelled

according to its actual depth with the result it presents the appearance almost a figure in the round in which he cut in half and then applied to the background of the abacus.

D.R.Bhanderkar delivered the Carmichael Lectures on Aśoka in 1923 in the University of Calcutta which were subsequently compiled in a book. While discussing the Sarnath capital, he emphatically ignored the impact, if any, from the Hellenistic culture. He found in this capital Assyrian influence that reached India through Iran. He said that "Indian pillars are free standing and there is nothing to connect these with the Ionian and Corinthian ones. The floral devices on the abacus such as 'honey suckle' were originally Assyrian and were adopted through Hellenistic tradition".

R.P.Chandra, in his *'Beginnings of Art in Eastern India'* published in the Memoires of Archaeological Survey, No. 30, 1927, observed that the column reflects a 'happy adaptation of Achaemenid models. He believed that Aśoka used these pillars for his Buddhist propaganda or rather in his broadly syncretistic spirit associated Brāhmaṇical symbols with Buddha's preaching of the Law.

Rene Grousset, in her book *'The Civilizations of the East'* published in 1932, mentioned that Sarnath capital was influenced by Achaemenid Persia which drew its inspiration firstly from Assyrio Babylonian art which influenced the representation of the animals and afterwards Egyptian art which affected the column while even the Greek art of Ionia had its effect upon the technique of bas-reliefs. She maintained that the lions of Sarnath and particularly, the execution of their muscles, the treatments of their muzzles and paws were reminiscent of Khorsabad and Persepolis. She observed that the vigour and dignity of Assyrio Persian tradition were adopted in India with genuinely indigenous element. The poetry of Jatakas, the Buddhist tenderness to our animal brethren affected a transformation in the art imported from the Middle East by softening its Assyrian violence, at the same time restoring into it, the dry Achaemenid forms, a new fullness and freshness of life.

Joseph Pryzluski in 1932 published an article entitled, 'Le Symbolism du Pillar de Sarnath'. Pryzluski did not think that the Sarnath capital was inspired by Buddhism. He was wondering that why the lion which was said to represent theriomorphically the Lion of Śākya-race, was shown on the abacus as well as on its top. He was not sure why the wheel at the top was carved with 32 spokes and the wheels on the abacus had only 24 spokes! Pryzluski noted that by introducing 'dhamma thambani' Aśoka introduced a new type of 'Universal Kingship'.

Achyut Kumar Mitra contributed an article in 1933 entitled 'The Mauryan Lāṭs

or Dhvaja-stambhas : Do they constitute an independent order? 'This was published in the *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* (New Series), Vol. XXIX in which he used also the materials used in his two earlier articles, viz., 'The Origin of Bell-capital' published in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, June 1931 and 'The Dhvaja or Standard in India, published in Patna Edition of *Morning Star*, May-June 1932. In all these articles, he raised a question for those who believed that Mauryan columns imbibed inspirations from Indian metal and wooden prototypes. He said that evidence were lacking to conclude that Aśokan pillars had their prototypes in the earlier standards found mentioned in literature.

Stella Kramrisch published her book *Indian Sculpture* in 1933 in which she took Mauryan art as the Gangetic aftermath of the art of Indus Valley and thereby, she tried to hint upon the inspiration of Indus valley in the treatment of animals on abacus of Sarnath lion capital, besides on other sculptures of the period.

One of the most precise and comprehensive artistic analysis of Sarnath Lion Capital was made by Niharranjan Ray in his book *Maurya-Sūnga Art* published in 1945. Refuting the hint of Kramrisch, Ray said that, 'Indus Valley may have bequeathed but distant and faint memories'. To him, the treatment of four semi-lions is schematic, though from the consideration of technique, clever and efficient...their seeming tenseness and bold delineation appear lifeless...decorative and ornamental. Compared to Dhauli elephant, the elephant of Sarnath abacus looks like a wooden toy. The horse of the Sarnath abacus recall the horses in reliefs on the sarcophagus of the Amazons. The modelling has nothing in common with Medo-Achaemenian sculptures; on the contrary, its accents definitely belong to Hellenistic plastic tradition as practised by the Greeko-Bactrian artists.

In the *Age of Imperial Unity*, the second volume of *The History and Cultural of Indian people*, Chapter XXB, S.K.Saraswati while discussing the sculptural art of the period observed that in the Sarnath capital, the sculptor found a successful solution of a problem with relation to the crowning animals with other elements in other capital which confronted the Mauryan artists from the very beginning. In Sarnath, 'the art is fully developed and appears conscious and sophisticated'.

Rai Krishnadasji published his Hindi Book *Bharat Ki Mūrtikalā* in 1952. He said that the artist at Sarnath intentionally avoided to present terryfying and violent look of Panchanan in the animals but at the same time, the sculptor maintained the royal grandeur of the king of beasts (*mrigendrattva*). He quoted from

Keśava's *Rāma Candrikā* where he found described the four animals on the four cardinal points of the palace of Rāma Candra and he also discovered a 20th century Kanthā of Bengal, in four corners of which these traditional four animals are shown in stitched forms in the rectangular quilt.

In 1953, Benzamin Rowland's book '*Art and Architecure of India*' was published. Rowland recorded that the animals placed back to back, originally supported an enormous disc, the Wheel of Law, the instrument of Aśoka's world conquest. He took this idea of addorsed lions as Persepolitan. The extremely lustrous finish of the stone is again a borrowing from the technique of the carvers of palaces of Darius and Xerxes. The mask like face, the muzzles of incised parallel lines and the triangular formation of eyes are met in the Iranian lion forms.

In 1954 appeared the book entitled '*The Wonder That was India*' by A.L.Basham. Basham noted that 'if we did not know that the possibility of western influence existed, we might suggest the animal sculptures of the columns were those of a school directly descended from the engravers of Indus seals which also show realistic treatment very unusual for so early a civilization. The abacus of the capital, perhaps show native influence more than the crowning figures'.

The two volumes of *Art of Indian Asia* by Henrich Zimmer came through the press in 1955. Regarding the columns of Aśoka in general, he said that the art, as such, was a provincial reflex of a period; a heraldic style developed in Persia at the court of Achaemenian king of kings. The four addorsed lions are 'a sort of hieroglyph denoting kingly power dominating the four quarters. He further observed that the lions were not familiar part of the daily experience of the Hindu artists; their representations, therefore, lack spontaneous viour.....they never move into the sphere of reality but remained in the category of conventionalised iconography. In contrast, the bull, horse and elephant of this pillar are live. They are a link between the early animals of the Indus Valley and the later at Ajantā and Māmallapuram. The beasts of four quarters give us the sense of the column as the mid point of the world, for it symbolised the world rulership of Aśoka and so, was the cosmic axis. He took Sarnath pillar as a time and space symbol typifying the Sun's yearly round through the heaven and the concept of the axis and four directions including the whole structure of the universe a symbol of universal extension of power of Buddha's Law as typified by the Sun that dominates all space and time.

S.K.Saraswati's book, '*A Survey of Indian Sculpture*' was published in 1957.

He observed that in this capital of Sarnath, the flexible naturalism which permeates every form in the entire capital is Indian in spirit and breathe, so to say the tender sympathy for animal kind which is inculcated by the doctrine of 'Ahimsā' (non-violence) preached by the Buddha. He, however, noticed in it 'a general indebtedness to Achaemenian forms' but he continued to say that 'in Indian hands and in Indian atmosphere, the dryness and aridity of Persian tradition became softened and imbued with fullness of life and form'.

H.C.Roychaudhuri in his book '*Studies in Indian Antiquities*' published in 1958 included an essay entitled, 'The Aśoka Cakra-its symbolism'. In this, Roychaudhuri analyses in detail each and every aspect of lion capital with the help of inscriptions, textual references, travellers records and he concludes that 'the Sarnath capital stands as a harmony between two opposing ideas. It blends into its story structures the story of the birth of a new religion (the *Dhammacakkappavattana* of Buddha) as well as that of the Dhammavijaya of historical Buddhist Cakravartī'.

In 1959, another equally interesting and analytical article was published by Kalyan Kumar Ganguly in the Journal of the Department of Letters (New Series) Vol. II, Part II published by the University of Calcutta. In his article 'Art of Aśoka', Ganguly discussed in detail various aspects of the symbolism and artistic achievements expressed in this capital. He wrote that 'the wheels on the abacus of the capital are given a flat surface but the areas, on which animals are shown are convex in shape'. On such a circular shape, cut in cross section, certain problems appeared before the sculptor which he could overcome easily by making the animals appear taking a turn while in motion, a clever device revealing a maturity in handling any given surface. He also pointed to the modelling of the animals on the abacus which appear to have been modelled with the influence from modelling of clay objects turned out of moulds. To him, here the styles in wood and clay were closely imitated in stone.

Ganguly further observed that 'the Indian lion was a creation of Indian mind which has for long been adept in transforming the nature of not only a man but also of animals by a touch stone which elevated the animal to a nobler, higher and more dignified level. According to Indian conception, the animals thus transformed, though basically the same animal as nature had ordained him to be, yet by efforts that had been long cultivated, he conquers the inherent nature and transcends into a super conscious existence where his face is no longer the face of animal but a mask. The

lion of Aśoka is not the animal of nature but a symbol and hence, does not conform to the appearance ordained in nature.

Louise Fredric's book *'Indian Temples and Sculptures'* was released in 1959 from London in which he wrote that 'the four lions, back to back and facing the four cardinal points represent, possibly, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. The Cakra or solar disc, is supposed to represent the Wheel of Law, the endless cycle of birth and rebirth'. He also said that the Government of India adopted this capital as national symbol with the motto 'Satyamevajayate' (There is nothing higher than truth).

Sherman E Lee in his book *'A History of Far Eastern Art'* also took note of this capital. To him Aśokan lions have parallels in the lions of Persipolis and Susa. The stylisation of face, particularly of nose and whiskers on the upper part of the jaw, the careful rhythm and the neat barbaring of the mane, the representation of the forelegs by long sinewy indentations and specially, the stylisation of claws with deep valley in between them and slightly haunched posture of the animals-all these elements are to be found in the representation of the lions at Persepolis.

Perhaps, the most elaborate, exhaustive symbolical analysis of this capital was forwarded by V.S.Agrawala in his work entitled *Chakradhvaja : The Wheel Flag of India*, published in 1964. The book was dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our Nation. He analysed in great detail the symbolical aspects of the lower element in the capital which takes as representing '*pūrṇa-ghaṭa*', he appears to have consulted all possible textual references to offer the interpretations of these elements as best as he could. Following year in 1965, his another work called *Indian Art* was published. He maintained that the Sarnath capital was the product of a supreme religious symbolism in which each part denote conscious conception in the aggregate. He said that the greatest virtue of this capital lies in the meaning and symbolsim of it. He took the four *cakras* on four directions as representing the wheels of a *Cakravartī* king rolling in four directions upto the end of the earth. The four-fold creations as visualised by the principle of *Dharma* on an ideal *Cakravartī* king, is exemplified by the elements on the abacus. The four lions above are illustrative of the royal power of a *Cakravartī* emperor like Aśoka himself. The Buddha also combined in himself two ideals viz., that of a *Cakravartī* and *yogin* and both of them are juxtaposed in this capital.

In 1965, A.K.Coomaraswamy's book *'History of Indian And Indonesian Art'* was published in which he declared that 'it is impossible to regard the Aśokan lotus or bell capital as a copy of Persian form. The two types are to be regarded as parallel,

derived from an older form current in Western Asia'. In 1966, Osamu Takata published his book the *Art of India*. He said that such a piece as the Sarnath capital, is unrivalled by all the carved figures of animals produced in the ancient world including those of Greece. He further noticed that in the pillar, by the reign of Emperor Aśoka, all the foreign artistic elements brought into the empire had been assimilated creating something characteristically Indian.

The journal *Marg* brought out its volume No. XXIV, No. 4, 1971 as a special issue on Persepolis. In this 'special number', Sir Mortimer Wheeler contributed an interesting article called, 'The Transformation of Persepolis Architectural Motifs into Sculpture Under the Indian Mauryan Dynasty'. He referred that 'the selection of independent pillar was certainly a native and not imported habit in India, the use of the wooden memorial pillar is equally early if not earlier in date'. In Indian cosmology, the shaft landed to present the cosmic axis between heaven and earth. He further commented that the central ideas of the Aśokan pillars were through and through Indian. Like many other scholars he took the whole expression of this pillar as 'derivative' (Achaemenid Persian). Even the unfluted column of Aśoka followed the unfluted shaft of Pasargardae. But he concluded his article by saying that 'the Sarnath capital, with all its close affinity with Persian modes, is having traces of local (Indian) idiosyncrasy and this is detected in the softening of the muscular form that may be ascribed to the Indian pupil rather than to Persian master'.

While discussing the Lion Capital at Sarnath, C.Sivaramamurti in his book *Indian Sculpture* published in 1971 mentioned that 'the numerous bell shaped capitals are executed in manner which combines in itself a varying element of realistic study with strong traditional stylisation'. The workmanship is bold and massive and is marked by a high polish derived from Persian Art.

The original Italian version of the *Monuments of Civilization* by Maurizio Taddai came through the press in 1972. Taddai found both Achaemenid and Hellenistic impact on the Sarnath capital. To him, the large wheel at the top expressed a complex symbolism with religious references that were both astronomical as well as Buddhist. He discovered in this capital Aśoka's own propaganda. Ludwig Bachhofer's *Early Indian Sculptures* Vol. I was published in 1973. Bachhofer thinks that the Sarnath column was executed later in the twenty eighth year of Aśoka's reign. He thinks that the crowning cluster was surely intended to symbolise the Lion of the Śākya Race who is turning the Wheel of Law.

Bachaspati Gairola in his book in Hindi entitled, '*Bharatiya Samskriti Aur Kala*' published in 1973 takes the Sarnath lion capital as a purely Indian achievement in art in which the artist conveyed the Buddha's Turning of the wheel of Law and at the same time it symbolised Aśoka's attitude of religious toleration and his interest for the welfare of mankind.

D.B.Pandey's book, '*The Dharmacakrapravartana in Literature and Art*' published in 1978 concludes that the Wheel at the top of the Lion capital symbolised Wheel of Law and the roaring four lions stood for the Buddha preaching his *Dharma* (delivering his first sermon) in huge congregation of divinities. His voice reached every quarter of the world.

S.P.Gupta in his book '*The Roots of Indian Art*' published in 1980 analysed afresh the symbolism of Sarnath pillar capital. He declared that it (Lion Capital) cannot be correctly understood if we dissociate it from the inscriptions incised on it for these alone provide the immediate contextual material for the rationale of its uniqueness. He further comments that the pro-Buddhist Aśoka assumed the role of a reformer and the protector of the *Sarīgha*. He wanted to re-establish its unity and credibility. Aśoka thought it could be done best through the planting of the *Dharmastambha* firmly at the place where the Dharmacakra was first moved. Gupta found the difference between the wheel at the top and wheels on the abacus. To him, the wheels on the abacus represent chariot wheels made with usual hubs and spindles which the wheel at the top does not show. He concludes that the *Dharmacakra* at the top of the capital is being carried on chariot wheels of Time. Time moves forward and the clockwise movement of Time Endless is thus befittingly reflected through the wheel, and animals on the abacus.

John Irwin delivered Lowell Institute Lectures in Boston in March-April, 1974 under the title '*Foundation of Indian Art*' which was published in parts in the four volumes of Burlington Magazine Nos. CXV (1973), No. CXVI (1974), No. CXVII (1975) and CXVIII (1976), with a different title '*Aśokan Pillars : a Reassessment of the Evidence*' in which he claimed to have come forward with a radically new approach. He began his discussion with the description of the Sarnath Pillar as the most famous monument attributed to Aśoka. In trying to pin point the quality which gave it universality and timelessness of appeal as a work of art, Irwin defined it as denoting 'worldly authority idealised. To him, it represents the culmination under

Aśoka a much more ancient tradition, unique in India, yet deeply rooted in our universal human heritage'.

'*The Mauryan and Post-Mauryan Art*' of Niharranjan Ray was published in 1975 in which Ray revised his earlier views published in his book *Maurya Śuṅga Art*. In a very carefully phrased words, Ray says that Mauryan lions represent the stage of exhaustion of the art of the Indus Valley in the natural process of dissipation of the art form that we have evidenced in the seals of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. He says that, 'I am rather doubtful about it not because that the art of Indus Valley remains chronologically unrelated and unexplained but because the two arts belong to two different aesthetic vision and imagination. The dynamism that it interprets, the pent up energy in the Indus Valley animals has nothing to connect itself with the stagnant compactness of the treatment of the Aśokan lions. While the life flows in sinuous rhythm in one, it stands still in meaningless tension in another; the two seem to belong to two different worlds of vision and imagination'.

K.K.Thaplyal published an article on 'The Symbolism in Sarnath Lion Capital and Its Purpose' in the journal of the U.P. Historical Society (New Series), Vol. VIII. Thaplyal found in this capital 'a cosmopolitan character of animal symbolism' which is supported by Aśoka's edict (P.E.III). Aśoka's concern for all religious sects is also apparent from the fact that he urges his people to show proper treatment and liberality both to the Brahmanas and Sramanas (RE IV, P.E. VII, R.Es. III, VIII, IX and XI). Thaplyal thinks the four animals on the abacus may refer to Buddha, Jaina Tīrthaṅkaras and Hindu deities. These animals, he thinks, may stand also for certain secular symbolism. These animals inspire people to learn and have certain qualities from them; from elephant one can have personality and power, from bull one may have the sense of vigour, patience, power etc., from horse one can get the character of swiftness and strength, while valour and prowess proceeds through the lion. Thaplyal explains the word *Dhamma* with the help of pillar edict I. The word *Dhamma* includes protection by *Dhamma*, administration by *Dhamma*, causing happiness by *Dhamma* and guarding by *Dhamma*. C.B.Pandey in his book. '*Mauryan Art*' (1982) mostly used earlier interpretations and systematically explored the various sources for understanding the capital with particular reference to Sarnath Lion Capital.

Karl Khandalavala contributed a thought provoking article entitled 'Heralds in Stone : Early Buddhist Iconography in the Aśokan Pillar and Related Problems' in the book called '*Buddhist Iconography*' published in 1989 by Tibet House, Delhi.

Khandalavala thinks that the wheel on abacus, at once, symbolise the wheel of truth that was set rolling onwards by the blessed one at Sarnath (He based his interpretation on the references in the *Maha Sudassana Sūtra*) and the Wheel of *Dhamma* turned by Aśoka. He has his own reservation to take the animals on the abacus as representing the four events of Buddha's life. To him, the grouping of these animals appears disconnected, arbitrary and incoherent. The galloping horse on the abacus is taken by many to represent 'The Great Departure' (*Māhabhiniṣkramaṇa*). But Khandalavala says that in early Buddhist sculpture always this event was shown with a horse saddled and bridled which is conspicuously missing on Sarnath abacus. He wonders why? The four animals in the abacus, to him, are guardians of Four Quarters and the four *Cakras* represent the wheel of Law that rolled to all the four quarters of Aśoka's empire. To him, the wheels on abacus are more elegant and proportionate than the wheel at the top. The number of spokes that differed these wheels was due to aesthetic requirements of the design. Khandalavala strongly favours the notion of alien impact on this pillar capital. He said that 'no Indian wood sculptor could have carved any of the Aśokan stone animal capital where sculptural skill to obtain outstanding dignity, majesty, pictorial effect and particularly, balance was essentially required.'

During 1990-91, the U.P. Archaeological Organisation brought out its journal called "*Prāgdhārā*". Vol. I in which P.C.Pant and Vidula Jaysawal contributed a paper on 'Ancient Stone Quarries of Chunar : An Appraisal'. In this article the above mentioned scholars informed about the discovery of ancient stone quarries in the vicinity of Baragaon, four km. south of Chunar railway station. These quarries laid bare a number of unfinished, semi-finished and finished blocks of stone, a few of which bear inscriptions. The script being Aśokan Kharoṣṭī, it has been surmised by the said scholars that there was no archaeological evidence for the use of stone medium for sculpture and building activities prior to Aśoka who had no other alternative but to call experts from western countries for technical advice for quarrying stone as well as chiselling the blocks into cylinders. It was also noticed by the above scholars that the cylinders that are still lying there around the quarries, favourably measure in length and thickness with the size of Aśokan Lion Capital of Sarnath. Indeed, it has been perhaps, the latest and quite sensational discovery which has strong bearing on the lion capital of Sarnath.

Maruti Nandan Tiwari in his paper presented at National Seminar on *Contribution of Buddhism to Varanasi* held at Jñāna Pravāha, Varanasi in August 2006

proposed that the bigger wheel atop the lion figures with 32 spokes (suggesting 32 *Mahāpuruṣa Lakṣaṇa*) represents Buddha himself in aniconic form while four adorsed lions reveal the royal authority of Aśoka and his earnest desire to spread the preachings of Buddha in all the directions.

Besides epigraphic records, Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang appears to be the earliest who left a description of this pillar. He noted that pillar marked spot in Deer Park at Sarnath to the north of Varanasi where Buddha turned the Wheel of Law. He described the pillar being 70' in height and it glistened like jade.

Ever since its discovery, many historians came forward with their respective interpretations for the Lion Capital. These interpretations are in most cases contradictory and at times confusing.

One scholar says that the edict on the shaft does not mention the event i.e. The turning of the Wheel of Law and therefore, he is hesitant to co-relate it with Buddha. While another scholar says that the edict provides the immediate contextual references i.e. The Turning of the Wheel of Law.

The scholars do not at all appear unanimous in interpreting its symbols and artistic analysis. For instance, the wheel at the top of the pillar denotes a solar disc according to some. To others, it represents Good Law; it is taken by some as symbolising Wheel of Law. Some scholars take this wheel as aniconic symbol of the Buddha and its 32 spokes represent 32 *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇam*. There are still others who consider it as symbolising the cycle of time, cycle of birth and rebirth and finally, according to some, it denotes simply the world conquest of Aśoka.

The four adorsed lions just below this wheel, likewise, are explained in various ways. One takes them to denote the representations of four 'Noble truths' which the Buddha had preached. One thinks these four lions are theriomorphic representations of the Buddha himself who with a roar preached his sermons to a huge congregation spread on four sides. These opened mouth lions are taken as preaching the sermons of the Master to the four cardinal points of the world. To some, they constitute a lion throne on which the Buddha, as a symbol of wheel, is shown seated.

The presence of four animals on the abacus viz., the bull, elephant, horse and lions, likewise are endow with a number of explanations to some, they bear definite Buddhist association : The Buddha was born in zodiac Taurus (Bull), his mother Māyādevī had a dream of a white elephant before his conception, the Gautama had his great departure riding on the back of a horse (Kanthaka) and the Buddha was called

'Śākya Simha', the lion among the Śākya. To one, these animals stand for Śiva, Indra, Sūrya and Durgā. These animals can also be associated with mounts of four Jaina pontiffs viz., Ṛṣabhanātha, Ajitanātha, Sambhavanātha and Mahāvīra. These animals, according to others, stand for the four Dikpālas; Virūpākṣa (guardian of north) and Dhṛtarāṣṭra (guardian of east). To some, the four animals have no connection with any religion at all. They are secular and simply they are there to draw the chariots of a *Cakravartī* ruler. The four wheels on the abacus, since they have hubs and spindles and probably had metal caps, they simply represented the chariot wheels.

The element at the bottom has been taken by some as a bell while some takes this element as a sacred pitcher covered with lotus petals (*pūrṇa kumbha*), it is not a bell since it has a double carved contour.

Regarding its artistic estimation, scholars differ. To some, the capital was strongly influenced from the art of Achaemenid Persia and are related to the capitals and pillars of Persepolis, Susa and Pasargadae. To others, its inspiration came from Assyria through Achaemenid Persia. While one view is that the shaft of the pillar was influenced from Egyptian art, the four adorsed lions were Achaemenid in spirit while the animals on the abacus bear Hellenistic influence. To one scholar there is nothing Medo-Persian on this capital, its accent is purely Hellenistic. There are scholars who feel that alien impact if any, were Indianised and finally, there are some who think the capital was product of purely Indian mind. Some scholars tried to connect the animals on the abacus with the animals on the seals of Indus Valley but certain scholars differ on this issue.

And what does the pillar, after all, stand for? Is it a copy of early '*dhvajastambha*' or is it a *Dharmastambha* or does it show the mid points of the world (axis mundi)? Is it a time and space symbol or simply a symbol of universal kingship where worldly authority was idealised. With all these paradoxes, the Lion Capital remains somewhat puzzling and mysterious even today.

Among the untold million stone sculptures in ancient India, this lion capital of Sarnath by an unknown artist perhaps commanded the highest amount of admiration from people belonging to all walks of life, including the honourable members of our Parliament who unequivocally accepted this as our State Symbol. This is, therefore, considered also as a significant contribution of Buddhists to Varanasi.

