

The Luminous Kāśī : Through Epigraphs

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काश्यां हि काशते काशी काशी सर्व प्रकाशिका।
सा काशी विदिता येन तेन प्राप्ता हि काशिका॥

"In Kāśī, Kāśī itself is luminous; Kāśī illuminates everything.

He only attains Kāśī who understands this Kāśikā."¹

Kāśī and Vārāṇasī are synonymous terms and both are used for the city of that name as well as for the 'kṣetra' or 'janapada' or district. This is one of the oldest living cities in the world.

Unfortunately it is not possible to trace its history in any detail because of meagre sources. With the help of Buddhist and Puranic literature it is possible to reconstruct only an outline. The chronological scheme adopted in archaeological excavations is of little help because it does not recognise dynasties of pre-Maurya period; not even the period of the Great Buddha.

So far as the epigraphical wealth of ancient cities of north India is concerned Kāśī stands next to Mathura only. Right from Aśoka's time till the end of the Gāhaḍavāla period hundreds of inscriptions have been discovered from the area besides many more from other regions that refer to Kāśī or Vārāṇasī. We will take up only those inscriptions that come from Kāśī and Sarnath.

Before we start our narration from inscriptions it will be interesting to look at its historical background known from the Purāṇas and the Buddhist literature.

In the Buddhist literature Kāśī and Kosala are often mentioned together. From the Jātakas we gather that in the pre-Buddha period there was a long drawn struggle between Kāśī and Kosala. In the beginning the Janapada of Kāśī (Kāśī-ṛaṭṭham) was more powerful. The Brahmadata kings of Kāśī often invaded and captured Śrāvastī, the capital of Kosala.

The Kāśī-Kosala Struggle

V. Pathak² has arranged the Jātaka stories to give a possible history of Kāśī-Kosala conflict. He observes : "Since it is well nigh impossible to make out any chronology of the Kāśī-Kosalan conflicts from the stories of the Jātakas, they may be divided into two heads. Some of them denote the upper hand of Kāśī, while

others show the superiority of Kosala. Thus for example, we are told by the Mahāvagga and the Kosāmbī Jātaka that king Brahmadata of Kāśī, robbed Dīghīti, king of Kośala, killed him, and forcibly occupied his kingdom. The Dīghītikosala Jātaka informs that prince Dighāvu, the son and successor of Dīghīti, tried to wrest back his kingdom. He was once able to catch hold of the king of Kāśī and forced the latter to give him back the Koslan kingdom. It is told in that context that the ruler of Kāśī had to make friends with Dīghāvu by giving him the hands of his daughter. This was undoubtedly a political and diplomatic friendship not unmixed with considerable political adroitness.

"The Kuṇāla Jātaka tells us that Brahmadata, the king of Kāśī, slew the Kosalan king, and occupied his kingdom and carried off his queen as chief consort for himself. Another Jātaka informs us again that a king of Kāśī lead a vast army against Kosala, reached Śrāvastī, and, after giving a battle, entered the city and took the Kosalan king a prisoner. The Kosalan prince, Chatta by name, was able to secure his escape, went to Takṣaśilā and turned an ascetic leader over 500 other ascetics. In the meantime, the king of Kāśī, having got all the kingdom of Kosala into his possession, set up loyal officials as governors and himself having collected all their available treasure, returned with his spoil to Benaras. Prince Chatta of Kosala, however, was not long incoming back. He seized upon the treasure of his father that had been taken to Vārāṇasī and came to Śrāvastī. He also captured the officials of the kingdom of Kāśī posted there and occupied the kingdom and made it immune and impregnable against the attack of any hostile king."

As Jātaka stories inform, the kingdom of Kāśī was at its zenith during the reign of king Manoja who not only subdued Kosala but also conquered Magadha, Aṅga, Assaka and Avanti etc. and became an All India Sovereign. The Soṇa-Nanda Jātaka calls him 'Aggarāja' i.e. foremost king of his time. Pathak says 'It looks like the acme of political and imperial power and prestige of Kāśī.' But, from this point the downfall of the kingdom of Kāśī starts as it had created many enemies who combined and destroyed it.

Kāśī goes under Kosala

But it is not that the kings of Kosala never attempted to invade Kāśī. Pathak holds 'In the final rounds of the contest between the two kingdoms Kosala got the upper hand.'³ He is, perhaps right; but as the Jātaka stories cannot be arranged chronologically it is impossible to determine which was the final round. Most

probably the rivalry continued for generations in which we find that during the time of the Buddha Kāśī was a part of the kingdom of Kosala and, it or its revenue of one lakh, was presented twice to the kings of Magadha; first to Bimbisāra and then to Ajātaśatru. This historical legacy continued till the time of the Mauryas which is confirmed by the Sarnath pillar inscription of Aśoka as well as his Ahraura Minor rock Edict. But before we come to our main discussion it will be relevant to complete the story of amalgamation of Kāśī into the kingdom of Kosala.

The Alīnachitta Jātaka informs about the invasion of a Kosala king over the king of Kāśī which was a failure and the former was captured by the active help of the people and the superior elephantry of Kāśī. Later he was released. Similarly the Asātarūpa Jātaka speaks of a king of Kosala who attacked Kāśī and killed its king and made the queen his own consort. But the prince of Kāśī could manage escape through drainage and blockaded his own capital city, killed the king of Kosala and wrested his kingdom.

But all was not well with Kāśī. The arrogant kings maltreated and insulted their ministers who sided with the Kosala kings and brought the down fall of the kingdom of Kāśī. "Such is the theme of at least the Mahāsīlava, Ghaṭa, Maṇikuṇḍala, and Ekarāja Jātakas. It is invariably said that the Kosalan kings were invited by the disgruntled elements to attack Kāśī. They dispossessed its kings, some times imprisoned or penalized them, but on many occasions restored them to their kingdom and made treaties."⁴

Decidedly before the advent of the Buddha Kāśī had become a part of the kingdom of Kosala. According to H.C. Raychaudhury "the final conquest of the latter kingdom (i.e. Kāśī) was probably the work of Kaṁsa, as the epithet, Bārānasīgahho, i.e. 'Seizer of Banaras' is a standing addition to his name." This Kaṁsa of Kosala might have flourished not long before the Buddha.

Kāśī goes to Magadha

In the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. Haritamāta and Vaddhakīsūkara Jātakas tell us that the Kosala king Mahākosala, the father of Pasenadi (Prasenajita) married his daughter Mahākosalā to Bimbisāra, the king of Magadha and gave away the 'Kāsīgāma' with an income of one hundred thousand kāhāpaṇas as 'nahāna-cunna' or pin-money. At the same time Bimbisāra married his sister to Prasenajita. Later Ajātaśatru, the son of Bimbasāra, imprisoned his father and killed

him. Enraged with this Prasenajita, the king of Kosala stopped sending the revenue of Kāśī to Magadha. A feud started between Magadha and Kosala. Initially Prasenajita was defeated but later he captured Ajātaśatru. Finally the matter was settled by marrying the Kosalan princess Vājirā with Ajatasatru and the revenue of Kāśī Grāma was restored to Magadha. According to *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa Vārāṇasī*, Vaiśālī and Aṅga were included in the kingdom of Magadha. The legacy was inherited by the Mauryas as proved by the Sarnath pillar inscription.

Epigraphic Wealth of Vārāṇasī

As indicated above Vārāṇasī is rich enough in its epigraphical wealth; and perhaps it stands next to Mathura in north India. Vārāṇasī is richer in early mediaeval inscriptions while Mathura is prominent in the epigraphs of the Kushan age. But as the whole of north India had to face iconoclast rule for more than five centuries nothing but wreckage and ruins have remained in the fate of archaeologist and Indologist. Lithic inscriptions have almost lost or damaged but metallic or copperplate inscriptions have escaped destruction; because perhaps, either they were not icons or were hidden under ground.

Hundreds of inscriptions on stone, many of them damaged, and on metal like copperplates as well as seals on clay etc. have been recovered. So far as our present knowledge goes it was Aśoka who started the practice of writing on hard material like stone in India. As we will see Benaras is fortunate enough to have his earliest record.

Names : Vārāṇasī and Sarnath

Names Vārāṇasī and Kāśī are found in inscriptions as well as in literature. But Sārnātha, usually spelt as Sarnath is not known either through inscriptions or from literature. Bhikṣu Dharmarakṣita⁵ thinks that the name Sarnath cannot be older than two hundred years. He may be right. But we can trace the origin of this name in Migadaya. A synonym of Miga or Mṛga is Śāraṅga. Śiva, the presiding deity of Kāśī or Vārāṇasī is also known as Paśupati. Thus it is possible that Śiva, as Sāraṅganātha, was accepted as the main deity of Mṛgadāya also. It was later simplified as Sāranātha. Cunningham⁶ also traces this name from Sāraṅganātha Śiva. A temple of Sāraṅganātha exists there. But it is, however, not possible to determine when the name Sarnath came into vogue.

Other Names of Sarnath

The Sarnath pillar inscription of Aśoka does not name the place; rather the first two letters of the partly damaged 3rd line have been interpreted as Pāṭa[liputra].... that indicates the historical truth that its administration was controlled from Pataliputra. However, in inscriptions, the place or the whole campus of Sarnath is often mentioned as Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭī. The earliest inscription, assigned to the Śuṅga period on palaeographic grounds, mentions a gift of a lamp by Sulakṣamaṇā to Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭī of Bhagavata Buddha.⁷ The Bodhisattva pillar inscription of Bhikṣu Bala, dated in the 3rd year of Kaniṣka, calls the place as 'the Caṅkam of Bhagavat (Buddha) at Bārāṇasī'.⁸ The name 'Mūlagandhakuṭī' is found in a Gupta period inscription also.⁹ It appears that in latter times the name Dharmacakra or Saddharmacakra became more popular. Two clay seals in Gupta Brāhmī refer the place as '*Śrīsaddharmacakre Bhikṣu' Saṅghasya'* and '*Śrīsaddharmacakre Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭyāṃ Bhagavataḥ*'.¹⁰ A Pāla period inscription mentioning the Pāla king Mahīpāla (988-1038) dated in VS 1083 (A.D. 1026) states that there was a great teacher (*guru*) Vāmarāśī in Vārāṇasī. With his grace the king Mahīpāla caused to be made hundreds of temples at Vārāṇasī including those of Īśāna (Śiva) and Citraghaṇṭā (Durgā). The two Pāla brothers, named Śrī Sthirapāla and his younger brother Śrīmān Vasantapāla renovated Dharmmarājika along with Dharmacakra, and created a new Aṣṭamahāsthānaśailagaṇḍhakuṭī. Thus Dharmacakra and Mūlgandhakuṭī appear to indicate the Buddhist complex of Sarnath. The stone slab inscription of Kumāradevī, the queen of the Gāhaḍvāla king Govindacandra, mentions that 'this Śrī-Dharmacakraśāsan was attached with the Jambukī pattalā, foremost among all the pattalās'.¹¹

Thus it is clear that whole complex was remembered for centuries by the incident of Dhammacakka-pavattana by the Buddha. But perhaps this complex was also included in the general name Vārāṇasī. The Bodhisattav image inscription of Bhikṣu Bala indicates the Sarnath was considered to be within Vārāṇasī.

The Sarnath Epigraphs

The earliest inscriptions, palaeographically assignable to the Śuṅga period are mostly votive like those on the *stūpas* of Sāñchī and Bhārhuta. Mainly pillars (*thabho*) or coping stone (*ālambana*) were gifted to the main *stūpa* at Sarnath. It will not be fair to form any idea about the dimensions of the *stūpa* in this complex

by the extant remains because several cart loads of them are said to have been thrown in the Ganga while building the Rajaghat Railway Bridge, and, also taken away by Jagata Singha for the construction of the Jagatganja Mohalla. But this was nothing if we compare the destruction caused by the invading Muslim army after the death of Jayachandra in 1193 in the battle of Chandwar. The Muslim historians relate that at Banaras 'nearly 1000 temples were destroyed and mosques were raised on their foundations';¹² and we cannot exclude Sarnath from this fate of 'Banaras'. They did not discriminate between Hindu and Buddhist, all were slaughtered. Those Bhikṣus who escaped death fled in all directions; some went to Tibet through Bengal and Nepal, others to Lanka via Ajanta, etc. Such incidents occurred during almost every Muslim rule during last five or six centuries.¹³ It will be out of place to go into any details; but suffice to say that luckily no Mosque was raised on the ruins of Sarnath. It is left to our imagination to speculate about the massiveness of the ruins of Sarnath.

From the extant epigraphs we gather that at least four lamps (*pradīpāḥ*) were dedicated to the Buddha; two during the Śuṅga period and two in the Gupta period.¹⁴

We find the famous *Four Āryasuttas* engraved in Kushan script at Sarnath. It runs as :

- 1.1 चत्तारिमानि भिक्खवे अ[रियसच्चानि
- 1.2 कतमानि [च]त्तारि दुक्खं ति भिक्खवे अरियसच्चं
- 1.3 दुक्खसमुदयो[रि] अरियसच्चं दुक्खनिरोधो अरियसच्चं
- 1.4 दुक्खनिरोधगामिनी [च] पटिपदा अरि[य] सच्चं।

This *sutta* is found at more than one place in the Pali Tripiṭakas.¹⁵

About eight inscriptions are there which proclaim the famous Buddhist formula '*Ye dharmma hetu prabhava.....*' etc.' the earliest one being engraved in the script ascribed to 3rd century A.D.¹⁶

At least two Buddhist sects are mentioned in the inscriptions of the Gupta period. 1. The Ācāryās of Vajiputtaka Sammitīya sect. This is engraved on the Aśoka's pillar. 2. The Ācāryas of the Sarvāstavādi sect. This is engraved in the Gupta Brāhmī on the coping of the Aśokan railing to the south of the main temple.¹⁷

It is an interesting study to know the names of some donors. One belonging to the 11th century C.E. claims to be *Mahāyānānuyāyī Paramopāsaka Māgadhiya*

Śri Śamaṅka.¹⁸ He seems to be a pilgrim from Magadha and donated a beautiful image of Tārā. One *Viṣayapati*, administrator/governor of a province named Suvātra, donated a statue of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Palaeographically he is assigned to the fifth century A.D.¹⁹ Similarly in 11th century A.D. one Revenue Officer (*Āṣapaṭalika*, i.e. *Akṣapaṭalika*), whose name is now lost, claims to be a *Paramopāsaka* son of donated an image.²⁰ A stage actor (*Sūtradhāra*) donated a votive *stūpa*, now damaged.²¹ This reminds us of a Mathura inscription in which the sons of stage actors (*śailālakānām*) of Mathura who donated a statue of Dadhikarṇṇa Nāga.²²

On a clay seal the maxim *Apramāda* is found; meaning 'negation of negligence or carelessness'. This is found in some stone seals from South-East Asia with many other such maxims.²³ The Besnagar Garuḍa Pillar inscription of Heliodoros also has an appendix of a two line *śloka* referring to *Dama*, *Tyāga* and *Apramāda*. This *śloka* is said to be found in the *Mahābhārata* and *Dhammapada*.²⁴

Some other interesting names found from the Sarnath inscriptions are also noteworthy. On the Aśoka's pillar we get a one line inscription, the preserved portion of which is exactly one metre long. It announces the gift of king Aśvaghōṣa in the year 40, in the first half of Hemanta on the 10th day, etc. J. Ph. Vogel translates it as "[In the fortunate reign] or Rājan Aśvaghōṣa, in the fortieth year, in the first fortnight of winter, on the tenth day." Dharmarakṣita puts him in the Kṣatrapa period.²⁵ But Vogel rightly holds that "It is more likely that the date refers to the era of Kaniṣka, and that the name of the local ruler of the time was added to the Genitive according to the established custom."²⁶ He further informs that "It is curious that the name of Rājan Aśvaghōṣa occurs again on the fragment of a stone slab (height 16.5 cm.) which Mr. Oertel discovered, almost at the surface, some 70 feet to the north-east by east of the *vihāra* which formed the centre of his explorations."²⁷

Now we intend to discuss two Aśokan inscriptions from Vārāṇasī and its vicinity. These are well known to the scholars since long but the real history behind their engraving has hardly attracted the attention of scholars earlier. In this respect my earlier papers may also be referred to.²⁸ But to go into any detail we must discuss the chronological background of Aśokan Edicts.

Chronology of Aśokan Edicts

Aśoka is credited to begin the tradition of writing on hard material like stone in India. He was the most dynamic king in the whole ancient world with several innovative ideas. He devised a new kind of writing system, different from the existing ones, which modern historians have named Brāhmī; he popularised the Buddha worship by providing *stūpas* in almost every part of his empire; he sent missionaries to propagate Buddhism all over the known world; he caused his spoken words to be engraved on hard material like stone, now known as Edicts; in administration he created the service of the Mahāmātras that can be compared with the British ICS and present IAS cadre. Besides this his heartfelt compassion and love for his subjects makes him greatest among the Great kings. According to H.G. Wells 'the name of Aśoka shines and shines almost alone a star'.²⁹ In this sense he was a king with revolutionary ideas. He was different from other kings in the sense that he saw his ideas of universal benevolence translated into action.

Besides many minor epigraphs three major groups of Aśoka's Edicts are recognised: 1) the set of 14 Rock Edicts, 2) the set of 18 Minor Rock Edicts^{29a}, and 3) the set of his Seven Pillar Edicts. We have postulated in above mentioned papers that Aśoka's Minor Rock Edicts are his earliest records, and the Ahraura one is the first among these. Now while writing this paper for the Seminar on 'Celebrating Kashi- The Eternal City' I feel it necessary to elaborate some points raised in above papers.

Dr. D.R. Bhandarkar has given some thought about the chronology of Aśokan inscriptions.³⁰ He dwells mainly on the chronology of *engraving* of the Aśokan inscriptions rather than tracing the development in his thinking about Dhamma, about which he was so excited by the success of his First Pilgrimage of 256 night-halts which he called **Dhamma-Yātrā**. Once we get a clue to his thinking process it will be immaterial how and when they were engraved throughout his empire on different mediums. viz. hills (*pavatesu*), rock (*silā*), pillars in buildings/caves (*sālā-ṭhabhe*), free-standing pillars (*silā-ṭhabhe*) and stone tablets (*silā-phalaka*) etc.³¹

Bhandarkar is right to some extent when he asserts that the first six pillar edicts were the first ones to be engraved. "There can be no doubt that together they form one *ensemble*. For in the first place, PE. VII is found engraved only on one column, viz., on Delhi-Toprā. Secondaly, that it is a subsequent addition may

be seen also from the fact that the letters of this epigraph are in an entirely different hand from that of the preceding six, as we have already observed in our notice of this Pillar. Now it is worthy of note that PEs. I and IV begin and PE. VI ends by informing us that they were *likhāpitā* in the twenty-sixth year of Aśoka's reign. Of course, it is natural to say that here *likhāpitā* means 'written, drawn up'. But about the close of PE II we have *etāye aṭhāye iyaṃ dhammalipi likhāpitā (I) hevaṃ anupaṭipajāntu cilathitīkā ca hotū ti. ...* Putting all these facts together, it seems that every one of the first six of these edicts was drawn up and promulgated in the twenty-sixth year of Aśoka's reign and that the six afterwards arranged in their present order into one *ensemble* and also engraved on the pillar in precisely the same year. *There can thus be no doubt as to the first six of the Seven Pillar Edicts being inscribed in the twenty-sixth year of Aśoka's reign. As to PE. VII we know it was likhāpāpitā or written in the twenty-seventh year.*¹³² (Emphasis added)

Bhandarkar, after some discussion concludes by saying *"This shows that all his Rock Edicts, whether they are the Fourteen Rock Edicts or the Minor Rock Edicts, must have been engraved when the work of inscribing the seven Pillar edicts came to an end.*"¹³³

Here we beg to differ with the great savant on two points. Firstly, as we have indicated above, the most important thing is the preparation of the draft of these Groups of Edicts at the capital Pataliputra under the guidance of the king; not their engraving. No one can expect that these edicts could have been engraved on Rocks or Pillars at one specified time in the whole Empire extending almost over the whole subcontinent from Afghanistan to Mysore. Secondly, the Minor Rock Edicts are of different nature, and they can not be clubbed together with the Fourteen Rock Edicts, which were, perhaps, the latest among all Aśokan Edicts. The Minor Rock Edicts, as we shall see, are the earliest ones. And the Ahraura was the first among all these that gave the idea of engraving the account of the successful eight and a half month long *dhamma-yātrā* or pilgrimage of Aśoka from Bodh-Gaya to Sarnath, Vārāṇasī.

It is only the Ahraura MRE that mentions the worship of the relics of the Buddha after placing on a platform. It is again the Ahraura MRE that does not mention of getting this incident engraved in the whole of Asoka's Empire on *pavatesu*, *sālā-ṭhabhesu* and *silā-ṭhabhesu*. The idea of engraving the sermon of Aśoka, delivered during this pilgrimage, and, perhaps also at Sarnath including

the desire of increase of Dhamma at least one and a half times, came to his mind later; and as a result we find the contents of the Ahraura Edict in the form of other Minor Rock Edicts engraved all over the Empire with suitable variations. Although these are discovered only engraved on rocks we should not doubt that these might also have been engraved on pillars that we have not been fortunate enough to find.

While discussing the Ahraura Edict we have ventured to identify the spot of dilapidated Dharmarājikā *stūpa* as the place where the Relics of the Buddha were placed for worship by Aśoka, and later deposited to build a *stūpa* over it. We have also pointed out the present Dhamekha *stūpa* as the place from where he delivered his first sermon. This is named Dhamekha (or Dharmekṣā) because Aśoka expressed his desire for the increase of *dharma* from a platform erected at this spot. That this *stūpa* has no relics deposited inside is proved by the hole cut by Cunningham in 1835.

Aśoka's Sarnath Pillar Edict must have been written some time later when the king felt that some mendicants were causing dissensions in the Saṅgha. But it is important to note that due to historical reasons specified above, administratively Vārāṇasī was under Pataliputra and not under Śrāvastī, i.e. Kosala. This Pillar Edict is addressed to [the Mahāmātras of] Pāṭa(liputra); while that of Kosambi was addressed to the Mahāmātras of Kosambiha (Kauśambī). The Sohgaura plate inscription is addressed to the Mahāmātras of Śrāvastī.

The Ahraura Minor Rock Edict :

The discovery of a Minor Edict of Aśoka at Ahraura, a few kilometres south of Vārāṇasī, was announced in 1961 through newspaper by Prof. G.R. Sharma of Allahabad University; but the first article on it was published by Prof. A. K. Narain of Banaras Hindu University.³⁴ Dr. D.C. Sircar contributed an elaborate article in *Epigraphia Indica*.³⁵ He took cognisance of all the papers published till then and it will be convenient to discuss the considered opinions expressed by Sircar.

Sircar notes: 'To these facts pointing to Aśoka's initiation into the Buddhist faith, we have now to add his statement that the relics of the Buddha had been installed [by him] on a platform apparently for worship immediately *before he set out* on a long tour of pilgrimage about the latter half of his twelfth regnal year.' He further adds 'According to Buddhist tradition, Aśoka built the Aśokārāma at Pataliputra and no less than 84,000 Buddhist monasteries in various cities within

his empire. It is of course difficult to say *whether the relics of the Buddha stated to have been installed by Aśoka in the edict under study were enshrined in the Aśokārāma; but the possibility is there.*³⁶ (Emphasis added)

Here we beg to differ and wish to submit that it was *at the end* of his 256 day long tour, not *before* the relics of the Buddha were placed on a platform. Secondly, it was not Aśokārāma at Pataliputra but Sarnath where the ceremony was performed. Here Aśoka delivered his famous sermon, full of hope and vivacity that *dhamma* will increase one and a half time. There can be no doubt that this ceremony was performed in the vicinity of the find place of the Edict. There also can not be a better place than Sarnath. The last lines of the Ahraura MRE relate the incident in the following manner :

एस सावने विवुथेन दुवे सपंना लाति सति अं मंचे बुधस सलीले आलोढे ति।³⁷

"This sermon (= *sāvana*) (was delivered by me. i.e. Aśoka) from the camp (= *vivuthena*) after two hundred and fifty-six nights (halts) and these (= *am*) **relics** (= *salīle*) of the Buddha (= *Budhasa*) were placed (= *āloḍhe*) on the platform (= *mañce*)."

This is the first record of Aśoka in which he gives a retrospect of his pilgrimage of 256 night-halts. But here Aśoka does not give any instruction whatsoever about its incision on rocks etc. The idea occurred to him later and the contents of it were promulgated throughout the empire with minor changes here and there. As we will see below he narrates the background of his *dharma-yātrā* in his RE VIII, as retrospect.

Now it will be interesting to look at the background of this pilgrimage of Aśoka to Vārāṇasī

Background of Aśoka's *Dharma-Yātrā*

Aśoka recalls in his 13th Rock Edict that in the 8th year of his reign he conquered Kalinga, and in this war 'hundred thousand people were killed and one and a half times of these hundred thousand were displaced.' His heartfelt grief over this misery of people and futility of conquest by war is recorded in this RE.³⁸ This is again reflected in his administrative instructions given to the Mahāmātras of Tosali, later called Tanasuliya by Kharavela, and Samapa, modern Jaugada, in two Separate Rock Edicts in Orissa. These give a glimpse of his mind over this tragedy and measures taken by him. Perhaps Tosali was the provincial capital of Kalinga.

Khārvela, in his Hāthīgumphā inscription, confirms this historical conquest of Kalinga by Aśoka when he says that three hundred years ago 'Nandarāja' excavated a canal at Tanasuliya, i.e. Tosali.³⁹ Here Nandarāja of Kharavela has been equated with Aśoka by us because his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya is repeatedly called *Nandānvaya* in the *Mudrārākṣasa* drama.⁴⁰

Aśoka took almost two years to contemplate about his future steps after this stirring mishap in Kalinga. Of course he was heavily leaning towards spiritualism, and, at last he found solace in the teachings of the Buddha. But as a king he felt his duties towards his people instead of his personal spiritual gains. He made several changes in his personal life style and eating habits. In the tenth year of his reign he went to Bodha-Gaya, and, with this started his *dhamma-yātā*. i.e. the religious tour or pilgrimage.⁴¹ Perhaps this was the starting point of his long tour that lasted for 256 night-halts, as mentioned in all his Minor Rock Edicts (MREs). On calculation we find that it comes to 8 months and 16 days. i.e. 17 fortnights or *uposathas*. From Bodh-Gaya he started his pilgrimage that can be counted as the first *uposatha* day and ended on the 18th *uposatha* day at Sarnath.

D.C. Sircar observes about the Ahraura Edict "...that Aśoka began to promulgate his edicts relating to *dharma* twelve years after his coronation, i.e. in the thirteenth year of his reign, and that Minor Rock Edict I was one of the earliest edicts, if not the earliest one, issued by the Maurya emperor. Thus the present edict was issued in Aśoka's thirteenth regnal year when he was away on a pilgrimage which had already lasted 256 days, i.e. a little over eight and a half lunar months, or nearly three-fourths of a lunar year of three hundred and fifty four days." Thus it is clear that Sircar could not visualise the religious importance of 17 fortnights i.e. 18 *uposatha* days and tries to connect it with lunar year.

Sircar holds that "'Minor Rock edict I is the only inscription of Aśoka which states that he set out on a long tour of pilgrimage, in the course of which the edict was promulgated, and the *Ahraura version of the edict is the only Aśokan record which states that the pilgrimage was undertaken immediately after the installation of the relics of the Buddha on a platform no doubt for worship.*"⁴² (Emphasis added).

But he never indicated which of the 12 versions of MRE he considers the first MRE. He enumerates 12 versions of the MRE and the Ahraura, according to him, is the thirteenth one. All of these vary in minor details but never neglect to

mention three things: 1) Aśoka's association with Buddhism since last two and a half years and his *effort* towards it, i.e. his pilgrimage. 2) People were taught about *dharma* by the king himself and 'during this period, however, men who were unmixed were caused to be mixed, with gods throughout Jambudvīpa.' He was so ardent with this achievement that he mentioned in his sermon (*sāvana*) that the small and the great, all can increase *dharma* by at least one and a half times. 3) This sermon was delivered by him while he was on 256 night-half pilgrimage.

Thus all his MREs contain the report of his 256 days long pilgrimage. Under these circumstances how one can assert that 'the pilgrimage was undertaken immediately *after* the installation of the relics of the Buddha.' In fact the Ahraura MRE clearly states that the 'relics of the Buddha' was ceremoniously installed on the platform at the end of his 256 night-halt pilgrimage when he delivered the famous sermon about *dharma*. As we will see it was a planned pilgrimage or *Dhamma-Yātā*, as he calls it in his Rock Edict VIII.

Aśoka enumerates five purposes behind this *dhamma-yātā* in his RE VIII:1) To have *darśana* of the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Śramaṇas* and give *dāna* to them; 2) have *darśana* of the elders, i.e. *Theras* and arrange funds for their livelihood; 3) to meet the people (*janas*) of the *janapadas*, 4) to instruct them in *dharma*; and, 5) to answer their queries (about *dharma*).⁴³ During this pilgrimage of eight and a half months Aśoka seems to have addressed the assemblies of, perhaps, the general public as well as the Buddhist monks. This memorable event was recorded in almost all of his MREs all over the Jambudvīpa, i.e. Aśoka's Empire.

In the Rūpnātha MRE he relates it in his own words :

"Devānāmpīya said thus: Since last two and a half years I am (Buddhist) *upāsaka*. I could not do much effort. But now more than a year have lapsed I came in the fold of the Saṅgha and am doing much effort. During this period, however, men who were unmixed were caused to be mixed, with gods throughout Jambudvīpa. This is the result of effort (achieved by me in the field of religion). It is not that only big people can achieve this; even small people can get abundant *svarga* through effort. For this purpose *sāvanas* (sermons) are arranged so that big and small should do effort; the bordering people should also know that the results of this effort are ever lasting. Thus purpose (of *dharma*) will increase; It will increase one and a half times. [He desires that] it should be written on the hills, (*pavatesu*, or rocks) accordingly. Where there are building pilalrs (*sālāṭhabhe*) [in stone buildings or in caves or in houses] and stone pillars (*silāṭhabhe*) [free standing] it should be written. With this sacred draft (*dhammalipi*) you should send an officer on tour (on

encampment) all over the area of your operation. This sermon was delivered (by me, the King) while on tour of 256 (nights' encampment), or living out of home (*vivāsa*)."⁴⁴

It specifically says that the sermon was delivered during the 256 days pilgrimage but it could have been recorded only after the conclusion of the tour. The **Ahraura MRE** is more specific in its last sentence. It records "*Era sāvane vivuthen duve sapaṁnā lāti sati aṁ maāche Budhasa salīle āloḍhe ti*", i.e. 'this *sāvana* (sermon) was delivered (by me, the King) while on a tour of 256 night-halts, and the relics of the Buddha were placed on the platform."⁴⁵

Sircar has noted that there are many speculations about this number 256. Some believe that, 1) the proclamation was made or engraved when 256 years of an era (usually identified with the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* era) had elapsed; 2) that 256 offices were dispatched along with the proclamation to different centres of the empire; 3) that message was proclaimed 256 times; 4-5) that the edict was proclaimed by the dispatch of 256 copies of it or of 256 missionaries; etc.⁴⁶ But now in the light of the Ahraura Edict none of these views can be entertained.

The **Ahraura MRE** unequivocally states that the place where the relics of the Buddha were placed for the purpose of worship, a platform (*mañca*) was erected. We venture to suggest that certainly it was Sarnath in Vārāṇasī where the Lord preached his First Sermon. In this light it requires no imagination to postulate that the last encampment of Aśoka, on the eighteenth *uposatha* day, i.e. 256th night-halt was planned at Sarnath. As we have seen, Kāśī came under Pataliputra since the time of Bimbisara and Ajātaśatru. Thus it is certainly a plausible proposition that his eight and a half month long pilgrimage that started from Bodh-Gaya, Aśoka had planned to conclude it at Sarnath most probably on a *uposatha* day or on Buddha *Pūrṇimā* day. As the king wished, the account of this pilgrimage and the summary of his lecture with its effect on the people, was engraved on the nearest available rock hill at Ahraura.

The spot of *mañca* for the placement and wroship of the relics (*salīla*) of the Buddha was selected to the south of the Mūlagaṇḍhakutī (the place of *Dharma-cakra-pravarttana* and later the *Kuṭī* of the Lord). Now this can be identified as the dilapidated site of Dharmarājikā Stūpa of Sarnath, where the relics were later ceremoniously enshrined and a *stūpa* was built. There can be no doubt that the relics found by the men

of Jagata Singh from this *stūpa* and later immersed in the Ganga were that of the Buddha. The container is said to be deposited in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

But the story of the Dhamekha Stūpa is quite different. No relic was found inside this *stūpa* at the lowest level except large Mauryan bricks by Cunningham. Therefore it can be said that the purpose of erecting this *stūpa* must have been different from that of the Dharmarājika one. There are many explanations about the origin of the word 'Dhamekha'. But Dr. Venis is right when he says 'The modern name Dhamekh is derived from a Sanskrit word *dharmekṣa* meaning 'The pounding of the law'.⁴⁷ We would like to suggest a more appropriate meaning of the word '*dharmekṣā*' (*dharma+ikṣā*) as 'Desire for (increase of) *dharma*'. See it in the context of the sermon delivered by Aśoka where he expressed his desire that 'Dharma will immensely increase, and it will increase at least one and a half times'. The location of the Dhamekha *stūpa* is also significant. This *stūpa* directly looks at Dharmarājika in the west where the relics of the Buddha were first placed on a platform for worship by Aśoka. Moreover, while coming from Vārāṇasī after crossing Varana one first reaches the spot of Dhamekha *stūpa*. No other spot could be more suitable than this for the Emperor to address the gathering on the occasion. The place to the north of the Dharmarājikā must have been marked by the Buddhist ascetics even before the visit of Aśoka, as the holy spot of Dharmacakra Pravarttana or/and the place where the Buddha used to live at Sarnath. In later times it became famous as Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭī. This place also must have been renovated by Asoka at this time. We have noted that in the earliest inscriptions the complex was known as 'Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭī'; later as 'Saddharmacakre-Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭī'; and still later as 'Sri-Saddharma-cakra-vihāra', etc. The Aśokan pillar with his edict stood at the back of this Mūlagaṇḍhakuṭī.

The core of the Dhamekha Stūpa was built in the Maurya period as is proved by large size bricks at the lowest level. In the beginning it was, perhaps spherical. It must have been repaired and enlarged several times subsequently. At present it is 33.53 metres high and circumference at the base is 28.50 metres. The lower portion is dressed with beautiful designs on stone assigned to the Gupta period. The upper portion is dressed with bricks. Cunningham cut a vertical hole from top of the *stūpa* in 1835 and found an inscribed stone piece containing the Buddhist *mantra* '*Ye dharma hetu prabhava* etc.' in the sixth-seventh century script. It must have been deposited at that time during its enlargement. At the bottom he got

remains or brick made *stūpa* of Maurya period. No relics were found. Thus the purpose of this *stūpa* was different from that of the Dharmajjikā Stūpa where relics are reported to be found. This fact combined with the name Dhamekha, i.e. *dharmekṣā*, goes to strengthen our suggestion given above. It is wrong to call it 'Dharmacakra-Stūpa'.⁴⁸

The Kushan Period

Buddhist activities at Sarnath must have continued after the disintegration of the Maurya Empire. During the second and first centuries B.C.E. and in the first-second centuries C.E. a large number of inscriptions from Mathura show that there was intense religious and economic activity by Indians and foreigners. This was because Mathura had become an international trade centre as well as capital of ruling princes. So far as Sarnath is concerned, it did not become a trade centre or capital of kingdoms like Mathura, and, therefore the activities here were restricted to religion only. Therefore Sarnath is not as rich in its variety of epigraphical wealth as Mathura is. However when the Gāhaḍavālas made Vārāṇasī their capital, its epigraphical wealth increased immensely. Sarnath has a very significant place in the whole Buddhist world and the epigraphical remains here are quite numerous to give a fairly good glimpse of religious activities.

Inscriptions on Bodhisattva images of the Kushan period tell us that a Buddhist Bhikṣu Bala and a Buddhist Nun Buddhāmitrā from Mathura planned to establish three statues of Bodhisattva at Kosambi, Sarnath and Śrāvastī. All these statues, sculpted at Mathura, were brought to these places and were established with inscriptions on them; and describe the event with date. Inscriptions from first two places are more or less decipherable while that from Śrāvastī is partly damaged. Dates on the first two have been read as the year 3 of the reign of the Kushan king Kaniṣka while that on the Śrāvastī image it is obliterated. The date on the Kosambi Bodhisattva has been read as year 2 by some scholars but we prefer Sircar's reading as year 3 of Kaniṣka's reign.

The Kośambī inscription records that 'Bodhisattva was established at the Caṅkama of the Buddha (at Kosambi) by Bhikkhunī Buddhāmitrā, expert in Tripiṭakas, on the 8th day of the second month of Hemanta (i.e. 8th Pauṣa) of 3rd (regnal) year of Mahārāja Kaniṣka.'⁴⁹

At Sarnath we are fortunate in having three sets of records on the occasion. This Bodhisattva image was established on 22nd day of the third month of Hemanta

(i.e. 22nd Māgha) of 3rd (regnal) year of Mahārāja Kaniṣka. This means that there is a gap of 44 days, or roughly one and a half months between the Kosambi and Sarnath events, which provides reasonable time to travel from Kosambi to Vārāṇasī with the image. If we read the date on the Kosambi image as the year 2, there will be a gap of one year and one and half months, which is exceptionally long period for travel between Kosambi and Vārāṇasī. The Vārāṇasī Bodhisattva was consisted of three pieces: 1) the Bodhisattva image, 2) the umbrella and 3) the shaft on which the umbrella was placed.

The first inscription in 10 lines, written on the shaft, records that 'On the 22nd day falling in the 3rd month of the winter (season) of the 3rd year of Mahārāja Kaniṣka, [this image of] Bodhisattva and the umbrella-shaft were erected at Bārāṇasī, the Caṅkama of the Bhagavata (Buddha) by the monk Bala, an expert in Tripiṭakas, who was a (junior) *vihāra* colleague of Bhikṣu Puṣyabuddhi, along with his parents, with *upādhyāyas* and *āchāryas*, with (other) *vihāra* fellows and residents, with Buddhāmitrā, expert in Tripiṭakas, with the Kṣatrapas Vanaspara and Kharapallāna, with four pariṣadas (i.e. monks, nuns, male and female *upāsakas*) for the benefit and pleasure of all being.'⁵⁰

The second epigraph is engraved on the front of the pedestal of the standing statue of the Bodhisattva. Here it runs as '[This image of] the Bodhisattva of Bhikṣu Bala, the Trepīṭaka, was set up by Mahākṣatrapa Kharapallāna with Kṣatrapa Vanaspara.'⁵¹ Here the change in designation of the Kṣatrapas is noticeable.

The third epigraph is recorded on the back of the image between the feet. This runs as '[This image of] Bodhisattva and the umbrella-with-staff was set up by Bhikṣu Bala on 22nd day of the 3rd month of the winter season in the 3rd year of Mahārāja Kaniṣka.'⁵²

Thus all the three records assert that the Bodhisattva and the Umbrella with Staff were the donations of Bhikṣu Bala. The local Kushan governors, Kharapallāna and Vanaspara, were also associated, perhaps on account of their official position and local assistance. Some scholars think that they have financially assisted the Bhikṣu in preparing these statues. But it seems unlikely. It should also be noted here that at that time these Bodhisattva statues were novel things not only in the three places where they were established, but perhaps in the whole of Buddhist world.

The Gupta Period

Of the Gupta period Bhikṣu Dharmarakṣita has listed 39 inscriptions from Sarnath in different states of preservation, and we have already discussed some of them. But two or three statues of the Buddha donated within three years, during the reign of two Gupta emperors, Kumāragupta II⁵³ and Buddhagupta,⁵⁴ dated in the G.E. 154 (C.E. 473) and G.E. 157 (C.E. 476), are noteworthy. The person responsible for the donation of these statues was Abhayamitra. He seems to be a sculptor also. It is to be noted that in excavations conducted in 1914-15 these three Buddha statues of the Gupta period were unearthed. Among these, two statues of the time of Buddhagupta were recovered having similar inscriptions, but much mutilated. With the help of the two records a restored draft runs like this: 'After the expiry of 157 years of the Gupta kings, when Buddhagupta is ruling the earth, on the 7th day of the dark half of Vaiśākha, in the Mūla *nakṣatra* this statue (i.e. Buddha) was made by Abhayamitra, adorned with the staff, umbrella and the Lotus-Seat. It is divine like the son of god, ornamented according to the rules. Whatever *puṇya* I earn from the creation of this statue may go to my mother, father and *guru*, and, to all beings.'⁵⁵ The earlier inscription on the Buddha statue of the time of Kumāragupta II also is not much different from this one except that here Abhayamitra calls himself a *yatī*. Another inscription of the time of Buddhagupta, dated in the G.E. 159 (C.E. 479) from Rajghat is also reported. It was engraved on a pillar that was donated by one Dāmasvāminī in the memory of her father Māraṇḍa and mother (?) Sābhātī. There are some very important inscriptions on pillar and seals of the Gupta period from Bhitari, but we are not going into their description because they do not directly shed light on Vārāṇasī.

The Pāla Period

A three line inscription on the pedestal of a Buddha statue⁵⁶ mentions that in V.S. 1083 (C.E. 1026) two Bengali brothers, Sthirapāla and his younger brother Vasantapāla, by their fruitful scholarship (*saphalīkṛt pāṇḍityau*) renovated the whole complex of Dharmacakra along with Dharmarājika (*Dharmmarājikām sāṅgam Dharmmacakram punarnavam*). They also constructed a 'new Aṣṭamahāsthāna Śailagaṇḍhakuṭī' (*naviṇ=asṭa-mahāsthāna-śaila-gaṇḍha-kuṭī*). It is also alluded that, perhaps these Pāla brothers were instrumental in the construction of hundreds of temples like that of Īśāna and Citraghaṇṭā in Kāśī by

the Gauḍa king Mahīpāla at the instance of 'Guravaśrī Vāmarāśī of Vārāṇasī. We do not know whether these Pāla brothers did this work in the capacity of officers of the Pāla king Mahīpāla or in their private capacity. It is noteworthy that this was the period of decline of the Pāla kingdom of Gauḍa which was mostly confined to the southern parts of Bihar and they were not in a position to conquer Vārāṇasī. It should also be noted that this was the period of political confusion in the mid-Ganga valley, the Pratihāra kingdom was breathing its last and the Gāhaḍavālas were about to establish the last Hindu empire in North India. It is not unlikely that the Pāla kings performed the said construction work after occupying Vārāṇasī. But there is no other source to confirm this assumption. It is very likely that temples at Banaras and religious structures at Sarnath were made by proxy. Outside dynasties need not occupy holy places like Vārāṇasī etc. for religious constructions.

The Kalachuri Period

In the early eleventh century C.E. the Kalachuri Gāṅgeyadeva and his son Lakṣmī-Karṇa were prominent in north India, and Varanasi was under their rule. Buddhist activities at Sarnath are known from a fragmentary inscription of the time of Karṇadeva dated in Kalachuri Era 810 (C.E. 1058). This inscription informs us about one Māmakā, wife of Dhaneśvara, a devout worshipper of Mahāyāna who caused to be written a copy of *Aṣṭasāhasrika-prajñā*, and donated it to the Order of Venerable Monks at the Saddharma-cakra-pravartana-vihāra.⁵⁷

The Gāhaḍavāla Period : Queen Kumāradevī

The Gāhaḍavāla Queen Kumāradevī, in a stone slab inscription recovered from Sarnath, informs us about the construction of a *Vihāra*.⁵⁸ According to Sten Konow "The object of the inscription is to record the construction of a *vihāra* by Kumāradevī, one of the queens of Govindachandra of Kanauj." He accepts that "The wording of the verse 21-23, in which her gift is mentioned, *is not quite clear*. We are first told, in verse 21, that a *vihāra* was constructed, which apparently contained an image of the goddess Vasudhārā. The following verses *are not quite clear*. Rai Bahadur V. Venkayya has suggested the following explanation, which I think is very plausible one. Jambukī drew up a copper-plate, in which she represented to Kumāradevī that the Dharmacakra-Jina originally set up by Dharmāśoka required to be repaired or set up again. This copper-plate must have

contained information about the original setting up of the Dharmacakra-Jina and further details about its maintenance and repairs. Kumāradevī, who was apparently a stranger to the country round Benaras, accepted her representation and raised her to the rank of the foremost of pattalikās". (Emphasis add) "Moreover, she restored the Jina or set up a new one and placed it in the *vihāra* built for Vasudhārā, or in another one constructed for purpose, and the wish is expressed that the *Śrīdharmacakra-Jina*, which is said to have existed in Darmāśoka's time, was an image of the Buddha, and that *vihāra* built by the orders of Queen Kumāradevī for him, was a shrine, a *gaṇḍhakuṭi*.⁵⁹

It appears that this conclusion was on account of misunderstanding of some terms like '*nava-khaṇḍa-maṇḍala-mahī hāra*' and '*Jambuki Pattalika*' etc. by Sten Konow: Firstly, according to Indian tradition this earth (India or Jambudvīpa) is divided into nine segments (*khaṇḍas*), and earlier scholars, unaware of it, mistakenly translated the phrase '*nava-khaṇḍa-maṇḍala-mahī*', verse 21, in a different way. Actually the verse means 'By seeing this Vihāra, which is an ornament of the whole earth with all its nine segments, i.e. India or Jambudvīpa, and the (beautifully) ornamented image of **Tāriṇi-Vasudhārā**, even the Creator (Viśvakarmā) himself was taken with wonder which is accomplished with highest skill in applying of wonderful arts and looking beautiful.'

The next verse (No. 22) was also mistaken by the term '*Jambuki*' which was believed to be a personal name. Sten Konow, the editor of the inscription seems to have confused with the use of word '*pattalikā*' in feminine gender. But this is due to the Sanskrit usage. Actually this was used for the *pattala* (an administrative unit today known as Tahsīla) called Jambukī. Jambukī has been identified with the village 'Jamuī' in which Sarnath Buddhist complex was situated.⁶⁰ The verse says that 'Jambukī, the foremost among the pattalas, attached with the rule (*śāsana*) of Śrī-Dharmacakra-Jina' (i.e. the Buddha) (*Śrī-Dharmacakra-Jina-śāsana-nibaddham sā Jambukī sakala-pattalik=āgrabhūtā*). The next half of the verse informs that 'it was duly granted through a copper-plate charter to last till the sun and the moon endure'. It may also be taken to mean 'Jambukī, the foremost among all the pattalas was granted to the realm (*śāsana*) of Śrī-Dharmacakra-Jina through a copper-plate charter to last till the moon and the sun endure', But. however, we think that the Jambukī pattalā was attached to the Buddhist complex at Sarnath since long and it was only renewed during the Gāhaḍavāla period through a

copperplate; perhaps on account of the efforts of Kumāradevī. However some other copperplates of the period show that it was simply a formality to renew old grants after the change of the governments.

In the light of the above discussion it is not difficult to interpret the verse 23. It informs us about the making an image of Śri-Dharmacakra-Jina, which existed since the time of King Dharmāśoka and his *vihāra* was renovated (*punara-yañcakre*) even more wonderfully (*tatopy-abdhutam*) by Kumāradevī. It was wished that 'this Vihāra of that Sthavira (the Buddha), so diligently constructed and dedicated to Him shall endure till the moon and the sun last'.

Thus, the Gāhaḍavāla Queen Kumāradevī constructed at least two *vihāras* at Sarnath. One of them was for Tāriṇi-Vasudhārā and the other was the main *vihāra* of the Buddha. This latter was not a new construction but renovation of the existing *vihāra*, which originally was known to have been constructed by the Maurya king Aśoka. This might have been renovated many times during these centuries because it is improbable that a construction lasted for one and a half millennium, since the time of Aśoka in the 3rd century B.C.E. But the memory of its association with Aśoka continued till at least 12th century C.E. We have already noted above that about 1026 C.E. it was renovated by the Pāla brothers from Bengal.

Kumāradevī is said to have come from a family with Buddhist faith. The Gāhaḍavālas claim themselves to be Vaiṣṇavas and devotees of Śiva, but certainly they were also worshippers of the Buddha. Besides Kumāradevī, we know of another queen of Govindachandra, named Vasantadevī, who was an *upāsikā* of the Mahāyāna Buddhism. The colophon of a Nepal manuscript of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* runs as follows :

Śrī-śrī-Kānyakubjādhipaty=aśvapati-gajapati-narapati-rājyatrāyādhipati-Śrīmad-Govindchandradevasy pratāpavasataḥ Rājñī-Śrī-pravara-Mahāyāna-yājinyaḥ paramopāsikā rājñī Vasantadevyā deya-dharmoyam! It seems that like other Hindu families, the royal family, specially the womenfolk in ancient India, was worshipper of all sects without discrimination

In conclusion we can say that religious activities of the followers of the Buddha went on unobstructed till the commencement of the Muslims in this country. In the 24th verse of her inscription Kumāradevī says: 'Kumāradevī salutes them with reverences who protect this work (*Kīrti*) of her; but O Bodhisattvas!

You are the witness; if any fool does otherwise he will face the wrath of the Dikpālas.' Alas! The whole Buddhist complex at Sarnath as well as temples at Banaras were razed to the ground by Muslim invaders after the defeat of Jayachandra in 1193.

Vārāṇasī of the Gāhaḍavāla Kings

Our description of Vārāṇasī in Epigraphic records will not complete if we do not give some glimpses of Vārāṇasī of the Gāhaḍvālas. It were the Gāhaḍvālas who made Vārāṇasī the capital of an empire in the eleventh and twelfth centuries after more than one thousand years. After them it lost this position for ever.

Inscriptions and literature indicate that Vārāṇasī was the centre of all sorts of activities that one can expect from any imperial seat. The Gāhaḍavāla kings had diplomatic relations with Chola king in the far south, Chālukya king Jayasīmah Sidharāja of Aṇahilapāṭaka, as well as with Kashmir kings in the north. Vārāṇasī was the first capital of the Gāhaḍvāla kings; Kānyakubja was their capital of prestige. Out of 82 copperplates issued by six kings 46 were issued from Vārāṇasī or Kāśī besides the Sarnath lithic inscription of Kumāradevī. Several ghāṭas on the Ganga and temples are mentioned in these copperplates. The temple and ghāṭa of Ādhikeśava is mentioned with utmost reverence. Ādikeśava appears to be their family deity. Avimukta-kṣetra and Vedeśvara-ghāṭa, Trilochana-ghāṭa, Koṭi-tīrtha, and Śaurinārāyaṇa as well as Deva-śri-Lolārka etc. are to be included in this list. Some of these temples and ghāṭas have gone out of vogue because they are now known by different names. Besides the name Vārāṇasī and Kāśī we find Vijaya-Vārāṇasī also, named after Vijayachandra. One copperplate of Vijayachandra and six of Jayachandra mention Vijaya Vārāṇasī; but the location of it is difficult to decide.

Two Notable Families of Vārāṇasī

1. Paṇḍita Dāmodaraśarmā :

We have been able to recognise the copperplate grants to two well known literary personalities who are famous for their work since long. Paṇḍita Dāmodaraśarmā who wrote *Ukti-vyakti-Prakarāṇa* on the linguistics of the Gāhaḍavāla period lived in the Bhadaini mohalla of south Vārāṇasī. Here three copperplates were "found by a contractor at Benaras near the Bhadaini temple at a depth of about five feet from the surface in the course of excavation for the

water-works conducted in the spot in April 1899."⁶¹ Bhadaini is traditionally renowned as a mohalla of the Brāhamaṇas. One copperplate grant was issued to Dāmodaras'armā him by Govindachandra himself and the other two by his *yuvarāja* Asphoṭachandra and Mahārājakumāra Rājyapāla. Perhaps the last two were the disciples of Dāmodaras'armā. His great-grand-father was Guṇapāla, grandfather was Lokapāla and father was Madanapāla.

2. The Family of Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara :

The other great personality is Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara, the writer of *Kṛtyakalpataru*, a digest on Dharmaśāstra. He was the Mahāsāndhivigrahika of Govindachandra and claims that his able assistance and counsel helped the king in his path of glory. The colophon at the end of the Vyavahāra-kāṇḍa records that Lakṣmīdhara was commanded by Mahārājādhipāya Govindachandra to write the *Kṛtyakalpataru*. His father Bhaṭṭa Hṛdayadhara also was a Mahāsāndhivigrahika. It was curious that no copperplate issued to this illustrious family was recognised by the epigraphists so far. Writing an Introduction to the 8th book "Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍam of *Kṛtyakalpataru*, its editor K.V. Rangawami Aiyangar noted "Among the host of grantees who received royal gifts the name Lakṣmīdhara and his father Hṛdayadhara do not figure, though from their birth, learning and reputation for orthodoxy, their fitness for *pratigraha* must have been well established."⁶² He seems true. While editing the Inscriptions of the Gāhaḍavāla period we found that this family had issued no less than seven grants. A copperplate of Vijayachandra was issued in VS 1217 (C.E. 1161) to one Mālhaṇaśarmaṇa, the grandson of Ṭhakkura Śri Lakṣmīdhara, son of Ṭhakkura Śri Gaṅgādhara. But Jayachandra issued not less than six copperplate grants to Ravidhara the great-grandson of Lakṣmīdhara, grandson of Gaṅgādhara, son of Mālādhara (Mālhaṇa of the previous grant). This Ravidhara was mentioned as the Mahāsāndhivigrahika and Bhāṇḍāgārika of Jayachandra. Thus five/six generations of Lakṣmīdhara served the first five generations of the Gāhaḍvāla kings.

1. Bhaṭṭa Hṛdayadhara: King Chandradeva and king Madanapāla
2. Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara: King Madanapāla and king Govindachandra
3. Ṭhakkura Gaṅgādhara: King Govindachandra and king Vijayachandra
4. Ṭhakkura Mālādhara: King Vijayachandra and king Jayachandra
5. Rāuta Ravidhara: King Jayachandra

6. **Vidyādhara**, perhaps the son of Ravidhara, is also known to have served as Minsiter of Jayachandra till latter's defeat.⁶³

It is to be noted here that Ravidhara is designated as Mahāsāndhivigrahika and Bhāṇḍāgārika only in two grants of VS 1232 but simply Rauta in all the four grants issued in VS 1233.⁶⁴

Can we assume from this that Ravidhara was Mahāsāndhivigrahika and Bhāṇḍāgārika only for the year 1232 and he was demoted next year? It should also be noted that Rāuta is a higher status than Ṭhakkura and Bhaṭṭa. Lakṣmīdhara calls him simply Bhaṭṭa that is still a lower status. This paradox can be solved on the basis of social and political conventions in the medieval period. We know for certain that these posts mostly were hereditary in ancient India. Non mention of the official designation does not mean removal from the office. If Lakṣmīdhara and his father Hṛdayadhara were Mahāsāndhivigrahika on the one hand and his great-grandson Ravidhara also held that office, we can safely assume that the intervening generations also might have held the same office. As regards the titles Bhaṭṭa, Ṭhakkura and Rāuta, there certainly was a hierarchy in assending order. Rāuta was almost like a rājā with higher status. Ṭhakkura was a common title for royal officials. Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas are also known to have the title Ṭhakkura; perhaps on this count.

As these copperplates were sold to the State Museum Lucknow by a firm of Banaras no record is available about their find spot. Thus it is not possible to speculate Rajghat area, as majority of the copperplates were recovered from there, we could assume that they lived in the fort area. But it is more likely that these were found from the Bhadaini area of Vārāṇasī where there is still a concentration of the learned Brāhmaṇas.

Different Schools of Vedic Studies

Kāśī was a city of learned Brāhmaṇas proficient in different branches of vedic studies. Prāṇācārya Paṇḍita Khonaśarman of Sāṅkhyāyanaśākhā.⁶⁵ Guṇachandra of the same śākhā,⁶⁶ Tutaliyakaśarman⁶⁷ and Anantaśarman⁶⁸ of the Chāndogyaśākhā, Dāmodaraśarman⁶⁹ of Vājasaneyīśākhā, Paṇḍita Vyāsa⁷⁰ of the same śākhā, Praharājaśarman⁷¹ of Yajurvedaśākhā are notable learned personalities of the period.

Other Literary Personalities

Besides Dāmodarśarmā and Lakṣmīdhara there were several other literary personalities in the court of the Gāhaḍavālas. The famous poet Śrīharṣa, writer of *Naiṣadhacaritam* wrote this work at Vārānasī in the court of Jayachandra. His father Hīrapaṇḍita came to the court of the above mentioned king from Kashmir but we do not know about his literary creations. Śrīharṣa mentions about nine works by him in the *Naiṣadhacaritam* on Vedānta, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, philosophy and a variety of other subjects.

The Learned Gāhaḍavāla Kings

The Gāhaḍavāla kings themselves were men of literature. Chandradeva, the founder of the dynasty was a learned king and it is most likely that some portions of his copperplate inscriptions were composed by him. The second king of the dynasty Madanapāla is credited to have written a book on science of medicine known as *Madana-Vinoda-Nighaṇṭu*.⁷² Govindachandra also seems to be a learned person who is called in inscriptions *Vividha-vidyā-vicāra-vācaspati*. No literary work is known from him. The Gāhaḍavālas maintained the tradition of the learned kings of India. Many of Indian kings are known to the tradition for their excellent literary compositions. Very few people know that the Gupta king Samudragupta, eulogised by "*kāvya-kkriyābhiḥ pratiṣṭhita-kavirājaśabdasya*" in his Allahabad inscription, is credited to have written a poem called *Kṛṣṇacarita*.⁷³

The Eternal City

After the fall of the dynasty of Chandradeva Vārānasī and Sarnath were plundered and down trodden by the armies of Kutubuddin Aibak in 1193; later he founded his dynasty at Delhi in 1206 A.D. It is said that over 1000 temples were razed to ground in Banaras alone. Sarnath also was not spared. However, although Vārānasī was abandoned for ever as an administrative capital but its place as a great cultural capital of India remained undisturbed.

The Kāśī Pañcaka of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya

We wish to end with Kāśī Pañcaka of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya which is the best tribute to eternal Kāśī.

मनोनिवृत्तिः परमोपशान्तिः सा तीर्थवर्या मणिकर्णिका च।

ज्ञानप्रवाहा विमलादि गङ्गां सा काशिकाहं निजबोधरूपा ॥ 1 ॥

यस्यमिदं कल्पितमिन्द्रजालम् चराचरं भातिमनोविलासम्।
 सच्चित्सुखैका परमात्मरूपा सा काशिकाहं निजबोधरूपा ॥ 2 ॥
 कोशेषु पञ्चस्वधिराजमाना बुद्धिर्भवानी प्रतिदेहगेहम्।
 साक्षी शिवः स्वगतोऽन्तरात्मो सा काशिकाहं निजबोधरूपा ॥ 3 ॥
 काश्यां हि काशते काशी काशी सर्वप्रकाशिका
 सा काशी विदिता येन तेन प्राप्ता हि काशिका ॥ 4 ॥
 काशिक्षेत्रं शरीरं त्रिभुवनजननी व्यापिनी ज्ञानगङ्गा
 भक्तिः श्रद्धा गयेयं निजगुरुचरणध्यानयोगः प्रयागः।
 विश्वेशोऽयम् तुरीयः सकल जन्मनः साक्षिभूतोऽन्तरात्मा
 देहे सर्वं मदीये यदि वसति पुनस्तीर्थमन्यत् किं सति ॥ 5 ॥

Kāśī the Luminous and Vibrant City will remain the Eternal City for all times to come.

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3. *ibid.* p. 208.
4. *ibid.* p. 209.
5. Bhikshu Dharmarakshita, *Sarnath kā Itihāsa*. Varanasi, 1961, p. 6.
6. A. Cunningham. *Archaeological Report*, 1861-62 A.D., p. 196-07.
7. *A Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology at Sarnath*, Ed. by Sten Konow, p. 211 No. D (a)
15. All the references of inscriptions are cited from "*Sarnath kā Itihāsa*" by Bhikṣu Dharmarakshita.
8. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, volume I, p. 137.
9. *Sarnath kā Itihāsa*, p. 142, no. 5/3.
10. *ibid.* p. 150, nos. 5/33 and 5/34.
11. *ibid.* p. 159, verse 22.
12. Roma Niygo, *The History of the Gāhaḍavāla Dynasty*, Calcutta, 1959, p. 111.
13. See Bhiskhu Dharmarakshita, *op. cit.* pp. 98-102.
14. *ibid.* Nos. 2/4 and 2/5 (Śuṅga period) and 5/3 and 5/28; pp. 137 and 148 respectively.
15. *ibid.* p. 140, fn. 3. See also J. Ph. Vogel, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. VIII, pp. 291-92.
16. J. Ph. Vogel, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. IX, p. 293.
17. *ibid.* pp 141: nos. 5/1 and 5/2, respectively.

18. *ibid.* p. 154. no. 6/9.
19. *ibid.* p. 148, no. 5/26.
20. *ibid.* p. 155, No. 6/13.
21. *ibid.* p. 155. No. 6/17.
22. Heirich Luders, *Mathura Inscriptions*, No. 27, p. 62.
23. A.H. Dani, *Indian Palaeography*, OUP, 1963, p. 228.
24. D. C. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 89, fn. 5.
25. *op. cit.*, p. 138.
26. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. VII. p. 172.
27. *ibid.* p. 172.
28. Refer to my article 'Varanasi as Gleaned from its Inscriptions' *Jñāna-Pravāha*; Buṭetin No. 8, 2004-2005, pp. 129-134. And also my paper presented for the Seminar on Buddhist Contribution of Varanasi entitled 'Buddhist Inscriptions from Varanasi Region'. (Unpublished).
29. Quoted in D.R. Bhandarkar's *Aśoka*, p. 216.
- 29a. Now the number of Aśoka's MREs is 18 with the recent discovery of Ratanpurwa Minor Rock eidct of Aśoka (See T.P.Verma in *Itihas Darpan*, vol. 14(1), Varshapratipoda issue, 2009, pp. 62-68. At the time when D.C.Sircar published his article, only 12 MREs were known.
30. D.R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka: The Carmichael Lectures*, 1923. University of Calcutta 1955, pp. 244-253.
31. Cf. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, vol. I, p. 48-49. Dr. Sircar has corrected the reading *Sālāṭhabhe* to *Silāṭhabhe* in foot-note No. 17 on p. 48.
32. D.R. Bhandarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 248-49.
33. *ibid.* p. 251
34. *Bhāratī*, Research Bulletin of the College of Indology, Hindu University, Banaras, No. 6, part I, 1961-61, pp. 97-105.
35. *Ep. Ind.* volume 36 pp. 239-48, and plate.
36. *ibid.* pp. 245-46.
37. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, vol. I. p. 517.
38. RE XIII, D.C. Sircar, *op. cit.* p. 35.
39. Cf.T.P. Verma, 'Can Aśoka be identified with Nandarāja of the Hāthīgumphā Inscription of Khāravela'. *Prāgdhārā*, No. 6, Journal of the U.P. State Archaeological Organisation, pp. 185-188.
40. *ibid.* p. 187.
41. Re VII, सो देवानंप्रियो पियदसि राजा दसवर्साभिसितो संतो अयाय संबोधिं।
42. *Ep. Ind. vol. 36, p. 245.*

43. *ibid.* तेनेसा धंमयाता। एतयं होति ब्राह्मणसमणानं दसणे च दाने च थैरानं दसणे च हिरंण पाटिविधानो च जानपदस च जनस दस्पनं धंमानुसस्ती च धंमपरिपुछा च तदोपया।
44. D.C. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 48, Dr. Sircar has suggested the reading of *salāṭhabhe* for *sālāṭhabhe* on foot note 17.
45. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 517.
46. Sircar, *Ep. Ind.* vol. 36, p. 244.
47. Bhiskhu Dharmarakshita, *op. cit.*, p. 170, fn. 1
48. *Sarnath* (Hindi), Archaeological Survey of India, 1992. p. 19
49. D.C. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 135-36.
50. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, vol. I, p. 136.
51. *ibid.* p. 137.
52. *ibid.* p. 138.
53. *ibid.* p. 328-29.
54. *ibid.* p. 331.
55. *ibid.* p. 331.
56. Bhikṣu Dharmarakṣita. *Sarnath kā Itihāsa*, (Hindi), Varanasi, 1961, pp. 153-54.
57. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. IV, part I, pp. 236-50.
58. Sten Konow, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. IX, pp. 319-28.
59. *ibid.* p. 320.
60. Moti Chandra, *Kāśī kā Itihāsa*. (Hindi), p. 132.
61. F. Kielhorn, *Ep. Ind.* no. 14, p. 149. fn. 2.
62. *Kṛtyakalpataru* of Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1942, Introduction, p. XV.
63. See Roma Niyogi in *A Comprehensive History India*. vol. IV, part I, p. 403.
64. D.C. Sircar, *Ep. Ind.* vol. XXXV, pp. 201-220. In our scheme these are numbered as Nos. 55, 67, 68, 72, 73, 74 and 75.
65. F. Kielhorn, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. VIII, pp. 153-54.
66. F. Kielhorn, *Ind, Ant.* vol. XVIII, pp. 14-15.
67. D. R. Sahni, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. XVII, p. 220.
68. F. Kielhorn, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. V, p. 117.
69. F. Kielhorn, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. VIII, pp. 153-54.
70. F. Kielhorn, *Ep. Ind.*, vol. V, pp. 109-10.
71. *ibid.*
72. *Saranath kā Itihāsa* by Bhikṣu Dharmarakṣita, p. 94.
73. A fragmentary work '*Kṛṣṇacarita*' was brought to the notice in 1941 discovered from Gondal in Kathiawad. Its colophon runs as "श्रीविक्रमाङ्क महाराजाधिराज परमभागवत श्रीसमुद्रगुप्त कृतौ कृष्णचरिते"। I have discussed the question in detail in my forthcoming work '*Inscriptions and Times of the Gāhaḍavālas*'. However, Dr. D.C. Sircar considers it a recent forgery which is not acceptable.