Land of Stupas: Sarnath

(This news analysis is based on the article “Stupa-hopping in Sarnath” by art historian Rana Safvi which appeared in The Hindu on 3rd February, 2019.)

Sarnath, Varanasi is known for two things: **Buddha gave his first sermon** and for the **Ashoka Pillar**.

- In ancient times, this place was known by many names — **Rishipatana**, **Mrigadava** and **Mrigadaya**. The word Sarnath comes from a corruption of the name **Saranganatha** (lord of deer).
- The ashes of the Buddha were buried in stupas built at locations associated with important events in the Buddha’s life including:
    - **Lumbini** (where he was born), **Bodh Gaya** (where he achieved Enlightenment), **Deer Park at Sarnath** (where he preached his first sermon sharing the Four Noble Truths (also called the dharma or the law), and **Kushinagara** (where he died).
- The choice of these sites and others were based on both real and legendary events.

Stupas at Sarnath

- Two hundred years after Buddha, the **Mauryan emperor, Ashoka**, fought the battle of Kalinga and, disgusted by the bloodshed, became a Buddhist.
- Ashoka built many beautiful stupas and monasteries in Sarnath.
- **Sir Alexander Cunningham (First Director-General of Archaeological Survey of India)**, excavated the **Dhamekh**, **Dharmarajika**, and **Chaukhandi** stupas along with a monastery and temple between 1834 and 1836.

- According to an **inscription at Chaukhandi stupa**, **Humayun** sought **refuge in Sarnath** when he was escaping from the **battle of Chausa**.
- **Note**: The **battle of Chausa** was fought between the **Mughal emperor**, **Humayun**, and the Afghan, **Sher Shah Suri in 1539** at **Chausa** (**modern-day Bihar, India**).

- Many excavations followed these, the most famous among them being the 1904-05 excavation by **Friedrich Oscar Oertel** of the Ashoka Pillar, including **the Lion Capital**.

Invasions and Restorations

- **Dharmarajika stupa** is the one said to have been **built by Ashoka to commemorate Buddha's first sermon**.
- After Ashoka, the other rulers who added to Sarnath's glory were the **Kushans**, the **Guptas** and **Harshavardhana**.
- Under the Guptas, the **Dhamekh stupa** (synonymous with Sarnath) was **encased with stone-carved floral designs**.
- Sarnath suffered from the **Huna invasions**, but **Harshavardhana** later restored some of the earlier buildings. The Chinese pilgrim **Hiuen-Tsang (602-664)** left detailed accounts of the **Dharmarajika stupa** and **Ashoka's lion pillar**.
- Sarnath also suffered when it was attacked by **Mahmud of Ghazni** in the 11th century. After that, **Mahipala**, **the Pala king**, restored the monuments.
- The last great monument of Sarnath, a monastery named **Dharmachakra Jina Vihara** was built in the **11th century by Kumaradevi**, wife of **Govindachanda** of the **Gahadavala dynasty**.

State Emblem

- The **state emblem of India** is an adaptation from the **Sarnath Lion Capital of Ashoka**.
- In the original, there are **four lions**, standing back to back, **mounted on an abacus** with a frieze carrying sculptures in high relief of an **elephant**, a galloping **horse**, a **bull** and a **lion** separated by intervening wheels over a bell-shaped lotus.
- Carved out of a **single block of polished sandstone**, **the Capital is crowned by the Wheel of the Law (Dharma Chakra).**
- In the state emblem, **adopted by the Government of India** on **26 January 1950**, only three lions are visible, the fourth being hidden from view.
- The wheel appears in relief in the centre of the abacus with a bull on right and a horse on left and the outlines of other wheels on extreme right and left.
- The bell-shaped lotus has been omitted.
- The words **Satyameva Jayate** from **Mundaka Upanishad**, meaning '**Truth Alone Triumphs**', are inscribed below the abacus in **Devanagari script**.

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