

KESARIYA STUPA: RECENTLY EXCAVATED ARCHITECTURAL MARVEL

Ishani Sinha

Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Pune, Maharashtra, India

Abstract: The early Buddhist texts record that Buddha announced his approaching nirvana to the monks at vaishali. According to historical traditions, monks followed him as he departed from Vaishali after delivering the last sermon. Buddha persuaded them to return back and presented his alms-bowl to them as memorial. To commemorate that event a stupa was built there which is now identified with kesariya stupa (in Bihar) and which falls en route from Vaishali to Kushinagar (in eastern Uttar Pradesh) where Buddha attained nirvana. This stupa finds reference in the travelogues of Fa Xian and Xuan Zang, the two celebrated Chinese monks of fifth and seventh century CE respectively. Briefly mentioned by Alexander Cunningham in 1861-62, the stupa mound at Kesariya was subjected to meticulous excavation from 1997-98 onwards by Archaeological Survey of India which is still continuing. The unearthed brick stupa is datable to Gupta period (5th-6th century CE) although an earlier phase datable to Sunga-Satavahana period (1st-2nd century CE) was also traced below it. The stupa is a six terraced structure with a cylindrical drum atop and a group of cells, with intervening polygonal designs, on each terrace enshrining stucco image of Buddha. With an extant height of about 31.5 metres and a diameter of about 123 metres, it is undoubtedly one of the tallest and most voluminous stupas in India. But it is most notable for its unique architecture. It can also be compared, although in a very limited sense, with the Borobudur stupa of Java islands (Indonesia) in south east Asia. With many features hitherto not found elsewhere, this stupa provides ample scope of intensive as well as extensive research.

Keywords: Kesariya, alms-bowl, brick stupa, terrace architecture, stucco image.

Being the most sacrosanct structure in Buddhism, stupa has consistently received attention of its faithful ever since its origin about two and a half millenniums ago. Initially emerging as a small hemispherical earthen mound or tumulus, it gradually developed into domical, cylindrical or terrace forms. In the process, it exhibited variations in material, method and purpose of construction and also in the typology of form and ornamentation. Influence of contemporary regional construction ethics added to the morphological differentiation. As the principles and practices of religion received early and widespread public acceptance throughout the Asian continent specially in the south east Asia, stupa not only developed as a nucleus of Buddhist faith and worship, but eventually turned out to be the single most popular religious edifice in Asia with no close parallel in terms of symbolism, variety and magnificence. Each country has its own type of stupa architecture and even within its territorial limits, there are large regional variations specially in larger countries. As the land of its origin and development, India witnessed the emergence and growth of stupas of which a large number has already been exposed and studied. However, as a result of sustained archaeological investigations through exploration and excavation, many more stupas are coming out, some with their own distinct individual characteristics. One such stupa has recently come to light at Kesariya (Longitude 84° 51' 17" E, Latitude 26° 20' 02" N, Altitude 70 metres.), a small township in East Champaran district of Bihar state in east India. It is located about 110 kms. northwest of Patna, capital city of Bihar state. The excavation of this stupa is still underway with the structure only partially exposed so far. But it is amply clear by now that the stupa has its own unique individuality to the extent of suggesting a new class of stupa architecture. The Kesariya stupa is a centrally protected monument under Patna Circle of Archaeological Survey of India.

The significance of Kesariya stupa is itself very consequential. Buddha is said to have disclosed to his favourite disciple Ananda and other monks at Vaishali¹ about his impending mahaparinirvana after three months. According to historical tradition, moved by their affection and respect for Tathagat and realizing that this would be the last glimpse of their Master, people of Vaishali followed him as he departed for onward journey. When they reached the border of Vaishali, Buddha persuaded them to return back and presented his alms bowl to them as memorial². To mark the spot and commemorate that event, the Lichchhavis built a stupa there³ which is now identified with Kesariya stupa. This is very likely as Kesariya falls en route from Vaishali to Kushinagar, the place of mahaparinirvana. Relying upon this narration, Kesariya stupa is believed to be a paribhogik (memorial) stupa, not a Saririka (Relic) stupa. In his account of 5th century CE, Fa Xian mentions about a stupa which was built over Buddha's alms bowl. Although Kesariya is not mentioned therein by name, historians believe it to be the Kesariya stupa. Xuan Zang⁴ in his 7th century CE travelogue records that "nearly 200 li to the northwest of the city Vesali was an old city which had long been a waste with very few inhabitants. In it was a tope where Buddha had related to a great congregation". The distance of Kesariya from Vaishali is almost the same that is, about 50 kilometres. (200 li). The other inference that emerges from this travel account is that Kesariya was a deserted place when the Chinese monk traveler visited it in 7th century CE. This is in conformity with the chronology of stupa the last phase of which is datable to around 6th Century CE.

Before its revelation as a Buddhist stupa through excavation, the Kesariya mound was traditionally known as "Raja Ben Ka Deora" or "Raja Ben Ka Garh" implying that it was a fort or temple of King Bena. According to legend Bena was believed to be a generous "Chakravarti raja" or universal monarch" gifted with supernatural powers. According to Alexander Cunningham, this tradition of Chakravarti raja preserves the story of Xuan Zang⁵ who mentions about Buddha's "former existence here as a universal sovereign by name Mahadeva who had given up his kingdom to become a bhikshu". This account agrees with the Makhadeva Jataka of Pali collections. It is interesting to review the location of Kesariya stupa in the light of these facts read with a scriptural prescription described in succeeding lines. Buddha had once said to his favourite discipline Ananda that "For a Chakravarti raja, they build the thupo at a spot where four principal roads meet"⁶. In conformity with it, Kesariya stupa is located at the cross roads of two arterial routes – One running from Chhapra north east ward to Motihari and the other from Patna northward to Bettiah and Nepal.

Prior to excavations, the only visible structure was the cylindrical tower atop the mound, the rest structures being totally concealed underneath the mound as can be seen in a sketch published in 1835 by B.H. Hodgson⁷ which is the earliest available survey account of the site. The only intrusive investigation conducted earlier was cutting of a gallery on the east side of drum believed to have been conducted by Kashi Nath Babu probably under orders from Lt. Col. Mackenzie of Madras Engineers around 1814. But in tune with the contemporary ethics, it was in the nature of a treasure hunt only. In 1861-62, Cunningham gave a somewhat detailed account of the site but he refrained from digging the mound although he excavated, to a very limited extent, a nearby small mound known as Raniwas which eventually turned out to be a monastery site.

Meticulous excavation of the stupa mound was commenced by Archaeological Survey of India⁸ through its Patna Circle in 1997-98 and was subsequently taken over by its Patna Excavation Branch in 2018-19 which is still continuing. By rough approximation about half of the structure has been exposed. On one side the structure has been completely exposed giving a clear picture of the elevation. Undoubtedly it is one of the highest, most voluminous and elaborate stupas in India (Plate I). But it is more notable for its unique architectural features manifest in the high number of terraces, presence of many cell shrines on each terrace, varied geometrical patterns between group of cells, stucco images in all cells, etc.

The Kesariya stupa is a 31.5 metres high terraced circular stupa admeasuring 123 metres in diameter at the base. It rises up in six terraces with a cylindrical drum atop which is a solid brick work having the extant height of about 10 metres and a diameter of about 22 metres. Excavations conducted during 2018-19 has now revealed a 4 metre thick wall running along the circular base of stupa at a distance of about 18 metres. Although this circular

wall has so far been exposed to a limited length only in the north side, there are clear indications that it runs all along the circumference. In that case the diameter of stupa gets revised to about 167 metres. At present the wall has been exposed to a depth of about one metre but no horizontal surface represented through rammed floor is traceable up to now. The stupa's height therefore is at least 32.5 metres though determination of final height awaits discovery of the related floor in the ongoing excavations of 2018-19. Similarly, as a result of current year's excavation there stands a revision in the number of terraces bringing it up to seven. The earlier excavations (1997-2001) indeed indicated the possibility of another terrace below through features like presence of two group of three cells on north and west side at the ground level in alignment of those at the terraces higher up and the lower contours of the surroundings all around the stupa. Current year's (2018-19) excavation appears to confirm it. However, exposure of two votive stupas, on the north east side, too close to the current base of stupa somewhat challenges the inference of another terrace as votive stupas are not expected over a terrace, they are invariably found only exterior to the body of main stupa. This throws another possibility that the newly emerging circular wall may be an after thought for extension of or construction of convenient circumambulatory space and therefore a little later in date than the original construction. A similar situation can be observed at Lauriya Nandangarh stupa, about 100 kms. north west to Kesariya.

The drum and upper two terraces have been cleared fully from all around exposing 80 cms. wide staircase on the south west corner connecting the upper two terraces. This staircase is concealed by the polygonal designs between the group of cell shrines and is not prominently visible in the general view of the stupa. On the same pattern, each of the six terraces is connected to the next upper or lower terrace through small staircases which are placed at different locations for different terraces. Such spatial distribution of staircases, their limited dimensions and concealed placements help in retaining aesthetic overview of the monument.

The stupa is built up of bricks laid in a very thin layer of mud mortar. As the stupa rises from the ground, there is a single line of plain moulded bricks with rammed mud plaster around it although only small traces of this plaster were found. The stupa rises upwards in a curvilinear fashion with the brick courses leaving a receding offset of about 5 cms. after every two courses. The tread of the terrace is veneered by 4 to 5 layers thick bricks over mud filling. All the terraces have space for circumambulation with a rammed floor of brick jelly in lime surkhi mortar. Traces of lime plaster have also been noticed at places. Moulded and decorative bricks have been used to create attractive patterns on elevation.

The lower three terraces contain groups of three cells at regular intervals. The spatial distribution of these groups suggests that probably they are eight, four on the cardinal directions and four on their intersections. The gap between the groups of cells have been aesthetically filled up with stellate or serrated patterns which add elegance to the architecture. In respect of attractive polygonal designs, the stupa is comparable to that at Lauriya Nandangarh, a Buddhist stupa of Gupta period situated about 100 kms. away in the adjoining West Champaran district. However, no terrace is designed for movement at Lauriya Nandangarh, the polygonal pattern being simply elevation decoration provided without intervening cells like at Kesariya.

On the fourth terrace the flanking two cells in the group of three are smaller in size compared to the central cell while on the fifth terrace there are no flanking cells, a single cell replaces the group of three. This was perhaps necessitated in view of space constraints due to reduced perimeter at higher terraces. Another adaptation to address space issue is the placement of cells on the four cardinal directions only, dropping the four corner groups to avoid congestion which otherwise would have compromised aesthetic beauty of the structure. On the sixth terrace there is no cell, only the cylindrical drum stands which, in shape, is comparable to the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath and Giryek stupa at Rajgir.

The cells have an average size of 2.20 x 1.80 metres with an entrance of 70 to 90 cms. though these openings are sometimes secondarily reduced to about 60 cms. accompanied by raising of floor levels inside the cells as well as on the terrace outside. The full height of the cells is not extant at any place now but they must have been of

low height as the next higher terrace which can reasonably be taken to be in line with the roof of cells, leaves a vertical space of 2.25 metres only for the rise of cells. The outer face of the cells contains the kumbha type moulding and decorative niches, a characteristic feature of the Gupta period.

Each cell contains a stucco image of Buddha (Plate II) in padmasana place over a low pedestal attached to the back wall of the cell. The pedestal measures 1.80 x 1.0 x 0.25 metres and contains lime plaster over it. There are niches on either side of the rise of pedestal sometimes containing lion figures within it which can stylistically be dated to the Gupta period. However, these niches were, at times, plastered over in subsequent period covering those lion figures. In some cells there are other clay images, seated or standing, one each attached to the two side walls. All the images have been found in heavily damaged condition which is due to the nature of composition materials and their regular exposure to the vagaries of nature. The images are made up of clay matrix containing lime, brick jelly, husks and sand. To this core, a smooth layer of lime plaster has been imparted over which there is a lime wash, white or red. Sometimes there is also an evidence of a recoat of lime plaster representing a phase of repair which is also supported by raising of rammed floor within the cell shrine as well as over the terrace outside and reduction in the width of entrance. The materials used in making the main Buddha image is relatively more durable and better proportioned as compared to the highly fragile nature of materials in the side images. For these reasons, the side images have practically been lost with only traces of it left now. Even the main Buddha figure is preserved in the lower part only – waist and legs with signs of lower garments and hands placed on legs. The upper part is invariably lost, understandably due to collapse of overlying structures, consistent exposure and other erosional factors – natural or human induced.

The clay or stucco images of Kesariya stupa are comparable to those placed in the stupa shrine at Vikramshila and Nalanda in content, posture and state of preservation, although the Kesariya images are much smaller in size. Chronologically the Kesariya images are later than the Gupta period images of Nalanda stupa shrines (Temple Site 12, 13 & 14) but earlier than the Pala period images of Vikramshila stupa shrine. Nevertheless, these resemblances suggest that the stucco art tradition was active in this region over the period range of 5th to 10th Century CE.

At one place in north side on the first terrace level, it was noticed that the rear part of the cells and petal designs are placed over a circular structure of earlier period (probably Sunga-Satavahana) characterized by larger bricks and better workmanship. But front portion of cells and the petal designs are projected beyond the old brick structure lying underneath. This part has a tendency to subside or sink apparently because of poor sub-structural support to the projected parts, which hang over the circumambulatory passage. In all probability, an earlier stupa of low height was expanded, horizontally as well as vertically, during the Gupta period. To confirm it and read the pattern, a section cutting to the centre of stupa is desired.

Chronology

The first phase of plain circular brick wall belongs to Sunga Kushana period which is visible at one place on the first terrace level below the over lying Gupta structures and shrines. Bricks associated with this phase are 36x21x6cms. in size and are without mouldings. It was a stupa of low height.

The second phase, the most dominant at the site, belongs to the Gupta period which marks the extensive expansion and elaborate ornamentation of the stupa with characteristic mouldings of Gupta period. The bricks are 32x16x5cms. in size, slightly smaller in dimension compared to the previous phase. This phase is marked by abundant use of moulded as well as decorated bricks. This phase witnessed the introduction of shrine cells housing stucco images of Buddha.

A third phase of major repairs during Gupta or late Gupta period can also be identified at places in the form of recoating of stucco images, secondary reduction in the width of cell and its entrance, raising of floor levels on terraces as well as in cells, etc. Construction of votive stupas and creation of a new circular wall also happened in this phase.

Another phase, though archaeologically insignificant, is the repair of the cylindrical drum at the top during British period, when bricks of 20x10x5cms. size were used. This possibly represents the conservation work of Spooner in 1911-12.

General remarks

The dimension and distinguishing features of Kesariya stupa specially its multi terrace character with large number of cell shrines on it containing stucco images of Buddha has no known parallel elsewhere in the world. Undoubtedly, therefore, Kesariya stands as a class of its own in terms of stupa architecture. To some extent the tiered Kesariya stupa has broad architectural similarity with the 8th century CE stupa at Borobudur in middle Java island of Indonesia in south east Asia which, although square on the plan, has a system of concentric ascending corridors with sculptured galleries terminating in a finial shrine. The height of these two stupas are also remarkably close to about 32 metres. It is too early to suggest Kesariya influence on Borobudur (which is later in date) or a common inspiration for both but certainly a debate needs to be initiated to explore the mutual linkage, if any, resulting out from centuries of cultural contact which was undisputedly there between India and south east Asia. It cannot be outrightly ruled out that the Borobudur stupa architecture may have drawn inspiration from the preceding Indian Buddhist tradition manifest at Kesariya.

It requires further research to fix the position of Kesariya stupa in the evolutionary sequence of Buddhist stupa architecture. It also needs to be probed as to what were the factors, social, religious or economical, that led to the development of architectural features so typically noticed at Kesariya and whether these characters have any linkage with any other stupa in any way whatsoever. These comparisons should not be limited only to the Indian stupas. The study should also explore stupas abroad specially in south east Asia which is known to have prolonged mutual cultural interaction. Needless to say the recent unraveling of Kesariya stupa has generated ample scope of further research on multiple issues.

References

- Rahul Sankrityayan & Jagdish Kashyap (Tr.), *Digha Nikaya (Mahaparinibban Sutta)*, (Delhi, 2010), pp. 225-226
D.R. Patil, *The Antiquarian Remains in Bihar*, (Patna, 1963), p. 201
M.A.H. Kuraishi, *List of Ancient Monuments Protected under Act VII of 1904 in the Bihar and Orissa Province* (Calcutta, 1931), p. 4.
Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Vol. II, (Delhi, 1996) p. 72
Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Vol. II, (Delhi, 1996) p. 72
Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, Vol.I, 1861-62, (Delhi, 1994), p. 66.
Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1835), p. 121 and plate VII
Indian Archaeology - A Review for 1997-98, 1998-99, 1999-2000 and 2000-2001.

Acknowledgment

Archaeological Survey of India for providing photographs and information on measurements.