

Exposition of the Sacred Relics of Lord Buddha

Buddha's Life:

The birth of Sidhartha, who was born to king Suddhodhana, the ruler of Kapilavastu (identified with Piprahwa, Distt. Basti, Uttar Pradesh) and Mayadevi in about 563 BCE, was a significant event in the history of mankind. At the age of twenty-nine, he renounced the pleasures of this earthly life and set out in a tireless quest for salvation. Seated under a Pipal tree, with an intense desire, which he expressed in his own words. "...*I will not stir from this seat until I have attained supreme and absolute insight,*" he received enlightenment and was called Guatama (his *Gotra*) Buddha (the enlightened one). Thereafter, during forty-five years of his illustrious life he visited many places on foot teaching his doctrine (*Saddharma*), converting people and organizing them into a community (*Sangha*). In one of his last utterances, Buddha named the chief places of Buddhist pilgrimage: Lumbini (Place of birth), Bodhgaya (place of his enlightenment), Sarnath (the place of his first sermon) and Kushinagar (Place of his death and cremation). Buddha's life scenes as well as scene from few of the five hundred and fifty *Jataka* tales (stories of his previous life) from an important part of the entire gamut of the early Buddhist sculptural art.

Distribution of the Sacred Relics:

When he was eighty, Buddha died in Kushinagar Distt. Deoria of Uttar Pradesh. The Mallas of Kushinagar cremated his body with ceremonies befitting a universal king. His relics, from the funeral pyre were collected and divided into eight shares and were distributed among Ajathsatru of Magadha, the Licchavis of Vaishali, the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, Mallas of Kushinagar, Bullies of Allakappa, the Mallas of Pava, the Koliyas of Ramagrama and a Brahmana of Vethadipa for erecting stupa over the sacred relics. Two more stupas came into existence, one over the urn in which the relics had been collected and the over the embers. Thus, stupas erected over the bodily relics of Buddha (*Saririka stupas*) are the earliest surviving Buddhist shrines. It is stated that Ashoka (circa 272–232 BCE) being an ardent follower of Buddhism, open up seven of these eight stupas, and collected major portion of the relics for enshrinement within innumerable (84000 stupas) built by him in an effort to popularize Buddhism as well as the cult of the stupa.

Kapilavastu Piprahwa:

The mound at Piprahwa reveals the secret in identifying it with the ancient Kapilavastu. Discovery of an inscribed casket in 1898 at this stupa site, was an epoch-making discovery. The inscription on the lid which refers to the relics of Buddha and his community, the Sakya, runs thus:

*‘Sukiti bhatinam sa-bhaginikanam sa-puta-dalanam iyam salila nidhare Bhaddhasa
bhagavate sakiyanam.’*

“It’s meaning, according to Rhys Davis is: "this shrine for relics of the Buddha, the August One, is that of the Sakyas. The brethren of the distinguish One, in association with their sisters and with their children and their wives.”

The discovery was followed by many explorations. A further excavation of the stupa, partly dug by Peppe, by the Archaeological Survey of India (1971-77) apart from revealing three stages of the construction brought to light two more steatite relic caskets, one each from the northern and southern chambers containing a total of **twenty-two sacred bone relics** and are now under the care of the National Museum. This was followed by the discovery of more than forty terracotta sealings from different levels and spots in the eastern monastery at Piprahwa with the legends, ‘*Om Devaputra Vihare Kapilavastusa Bhikshu Sanghasa*’, meaning ‘community of Buddhist monks of Kapilavastu living in Devaputra Vihara’ and ‘*Maha Kapilavastu Bhikshu Sanghasa*’ in Brahmi character of 1st and 2nd centuries CE which have provided adequate evidence to establish that Piprahwa was the ancient Kapilavastu. Finally, the remains of the main township of Kapilavastu were unearthed at Ganwaria, which has its beginning in the eight century BCE where a few centuries’ later monasteries were constructed to enable the monks to stay.