

Historical Perspective

The Buddhist *stūpas* at Sanchi (District Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh) were rediscovered by Gen. Taylor in 1818 when they were in a remarkably good state of preservation. Since then they have attracted the attention of the scholarly world on account of their having tremendous wealth of figural and decorative carvings. They are, in MARSHALL's words, "the most imposing and the best preserved of all the monuments that early Buddhism has bequeathed to India". Apart from their artistic, religious and iconographic interest the early sculptures at Sanchi are "an almost inexhaustive mine of information in regard to contemporary civilization."²

The ancient name of Sanchi, as recorded in the early inscriptions at that place, was *Kākaṇāva* or *Kākanāya*³ which, under Chandragupta II became *Kākanādaboṭa*⁴ and still later in the 7th Cent. A. D. *Boṭa-Srīparvata*⁵ which has been identified by MAJUMDAR with the *Srīparvata* mentioned in Bhavabhuti's *Mālatī-Mādhava*.⁶

The *stūpa* at Sanchi is said to have existed even before Aśoka the Great on the basis of a story in the *Mahāvamśa*.⁷ However, it is believed to have been originally constructed by Aśoka⁸. It was later said to have been mutilated by Puyamitra Sunga⁹. The additions such as the balustrades and the *harmikā* were made during the Sunga regime. But the best additions to this remarkable *stūpa* were made under the Satavahana rule. These consist of the elaborate and richly carved gateways (*torāṇas*) in the four cardinal directions and are undoubtedly the crowning glory of the *stūpa*. In the chronological sequence they can be placed in the following order : Southern, Northern, Eastern and Western. However, all the *torāṇas* are almost similar to each other in their construction and design and differ only in their decorative details and it is probable that not more than two or three decades intervened between

(1) (Sir) John Marshall and Alfred Foucher, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, 1940, Vol. I, p. I.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. ii.

(3) *Ibid.*, Inscription nos. 7, 17b, 394, 396 & 404.

(4) *Ibid.*, Inscription nos. 833 & 834.

(5) *Ibid.*, Inscription no. 842.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

(7) Geiger, p. 88 (Pali Text Society)

(8) Marshall and Foucher, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 18.

(9) *Ibid.*

the building of the four gateways¹, for the inscriptions engraved on them show that the right pillar of the Western Gateway was donated by the same person as the middle architrave of the Southern Gateway, viz. "by Balamitra, the pupil of Arya-chuḍa" and the south pillar of the Eastern Gateway and the north pillar of the Western Gateway were also the gifts of the same donor, viz. Nāgapiya, a banker of Achavada, the native of Kukara.²

The best preserved of them all is the Northern Gateway. Each gateway was composed of two square pillars surmounted by capitals which, in their turn, were crowned by a superstructure of three architraves with volute ends. These pillars and the architraves have been profusely adorned with carved reliefs. Among them the important from the point of view of the present study are the scenes depicting some of the former lives of the Buddha as they are helpful in building up a picture of the contemporary life.

As regards the period of the gateways we have to depend on inscriptional evidence. On the Southern Gateway is carved a donative inscription³ which records the gift of one of its architraves by a certain Ānanda, an architect of the Satavahana king Sri Satakarni who has been identified with Satakarni II who was reigning about the middle of 1st Cent. B. C. As already noted, no more than two or three decades intervened between the earliest and the last gateways. They can therefore be dated to about 50 to 20 B. C. Thus it is the work of a generation or so. This is all the more important from the point of view of our study as it can be said with reasonable amount of certitude that the life depicted in the reliefs is of a generation which lived during the third quarter of the 1st Cent. B. C. It also helps us to study the tastes and fashions of a particular generation. This point can only be realized when we take into consideration the fact that there is no other similar edifice in the country which can be precisely dated to an approximate decade as our chronology is based generally in centuries. Thus we are on surer chronological grounds so far as the *toranas* of Sanchi are concerned.

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- (1) Marshall has discussed at length the comparative chronology of the four gateways. See *op. Cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 36 ff.
 (2) *Ibid.*, P. 37.
 (3) Marshall and Foucher, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 177.