

Indian Tourist sites – In the footsteps of the Buddha

By

Dr. Adarsh Batra *

Abstract

Across the world and throughout the ages, religious people have made pilgrimages. The Buddha himself exhorted his followers to visit what are now known as the great places of pilgrimage: Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Rajgir, Nalanda and Kushinagar. The actions of the Buddha in each of these places are described within the canons of the scriptures of the various traditions of his teaching, such as the sections on Vinaya, and also in various compendia describing his life. The sites themselves have now been identified once more with the aid of records left by three pilgrims of the past (The great Emperor Ashoka, The

Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien and Hsuan Chwang).

The practice of Buddhism flourished long in India, perhaps reaching a zenith in the seventh century AD. After this it began to decline because of the invading Muslim armies, and by the twelfth century the practice of the Dharma had become sparse in its homeland. Thus, the history of the Buddhist places of pilgrimage from the thirteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries is obscure and they were mostly forgotten. However, it is remarkable that they all remained virtually undisturbed by the conflicts and developments of society during that period. Subject only to the decay of time

* The author has a Ph.D. in Tourism from Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (K.U.K.), India. He has published extensively in Tourism and Travel Magazines. Currently he is a lecturer in MA-TRM program in the Graduate School of Business of Assumption University of Thailand.

they remained dormant, waiting for rediscovery.

From the middle of the last century, the Archeological Survey of India, under the auspices of the British Government, and one Englishman in particular--General Sir Alexander Cunningham--unearthed and identified many sites. Since that time, owing to a renewed Indian interest in Buddhism and the devotion and hardship of many individuals, the pilgrimage sites have been revived.

The following account is intended less to present a purely historical record of the places of pilgrimage than to offer some information and perhaps inspiration to other pilgrims, with the wish that this revival may increase.

INTRODUCTION

In 566 BC, in the little state of Kapilvastu at the foot of the Himalayas, was born a son, Siddhartha, to Suddhodana, a Sakya prince, and his wife Mayadevi. Seers proclaimed that the new-born would either conquer the world or be a Buddha- the enlightened one. The prophesy came true when Gautama attained Supreme Knowledge (bodhi) and laid the foundation of a religion which is today practiced by one-third of the world's population.

In India, it is pilgrimage which is the most important segment of domestic

tourism. And yet India has failed to exploit the Buddhist angle, the most potential. Buddhism was born in India. But it almost disappeared from the country of its origin. It is, however, a major force in much of Asia – in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and so on.

NORTH EAST INDIA

100 kms from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, **Kapilavastu** (Piprahwa) on the Gorakhpur Gonda loop-line with Naugarh (35 kms.) is the nearest railway station. The capital city of the Sakya clan, and one of the earliest republics, it was in Kapilavastu's opulent environs, that the holy soul of prince Siddharth (Gautam Buddha) spent his childhood. Here he saw sorrow and pain, disease and death. Then, finally when he saw a radiant happy Sadhu who had conquered all these, he decided to renounce all worldly riches and pleasures to seek truth and embark on the path of salvation. The place holds significant value for Buddhist pilgrims and has several Stupas. The archaeological excavations have revealed stone caskets containing relics believed to be that of Buddha's.

Sarnath, about 10 kms. from the holy city of Varanasi, is the blessed locale where more than 2500 years ago Buddha chose to deliver his first