

FROM SITES AND MUSEUMS TO TEMPLES

Relics, Ruins and New Buddhist Viharas
in Colonial India

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Archive series



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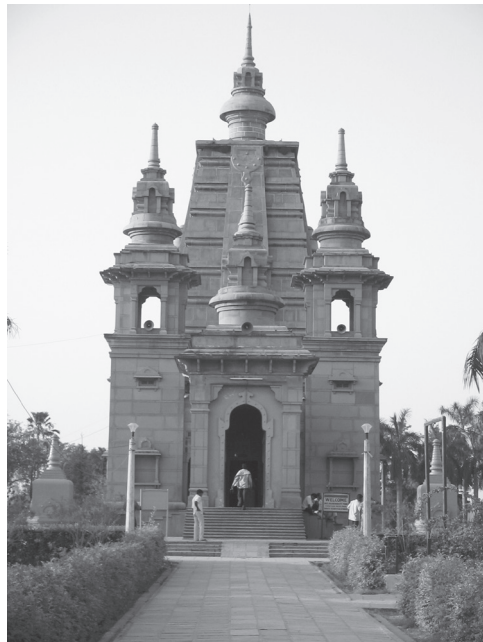
In 1892, Alexander Rea, during his excavations at Bhattiprolu (in the Kristna District of the erstwhile Madras Presidency), discovered a small piece of bone encased in a rock-crystal casket. The translation of the Brahmi inscriptions on the casket attested the identity of the corporeal remain as a '...well authenticated relic of the Buddha' himself.¹ For purposes of safe-keeping, this relic was soon carted away from the site to be housed in the Government Central Museum in the city of Madras. On 30 June 1916 the Government of India proposed to present the Bhattiprolu relic along with a cache of Buddhist relics unearthed by the Archaeological Survey of India (henceforth ASI) from sites in and around Taxila (in the Rawalpindi district of Punjab), to two neo-Buddhist associations – the Maha Bodhi Society and the Bengal Buddhist Association. The government offer came with the condition that both these societies had

to guarantee that the relics would be enshrined in worthy *viharas* and adequately safeguarded and that the shrines had to be constructed before the relics were distributed by the government.² Above all, these new Buddhist temples had to meet the approval of the ASI to be certified as worthy repositories of these ancient relics.

In the years that followed, the Maha Bodhi Society constructed the first new Buddhist temple

of colonial India, the *Dharmarajika Vihara*, in the city of Calcutta. During its opening ceremony in 1921, the Government of India, through Lord Ronaldshay, the then Governor of Bengal, presented the Society the Bhattiprolu relic for enshrinement in the new temple. After a decade long negotiations with the ASI, the Maha Bodhi Society completed the work of construction of its new Buddhist temple at Sarnath on a piece of land adjoining the archaeologically conserved Buddhist monuments and ruins. On 11 November 1931 a selection of Buddhist relics unearthed at

Taxila were presented by Raibahadur Daya Ram Sahni, the then Director-General of the ASI, to the Society and subsequently enshrined in Sarnath's new Buddhist Temple, the *Mulagandhakuti Vihara* (Figure 1). Taking the opening of these new Buddhist temples as entry points, this essay will move back in time to explore the politics at work in re-sacralization of Buddhist



sites and remains in colonial South Asia. The key players of this narrative are the ASI and the Maha Bodhi Society. The Calcutta Vihara, and other subsequent temples built by the Society at Sarnath and Sanchi during the 1930s and 1950s, embodied the complex co-configurations of secularization of archaeological heritage and politics of Buddhist religious revival. The negotiations between these two were mediated

Figure 1: Mulagandhakuti Vihara, Sarnath, 2010. Photograph, author.

through the interplay between two distinct and often overlapping objects and categories – the relic and the ruin.

At the most fundamental level, 'relic' (origin Latin word *reliquiae*), '... is a material object that relates to a particular individual and/or to events and places with which that individual was associated.' Usually, it is the body or fragment of the body of a deceased person revered as holy.³ Alongside corporeal relics are non-corporeal items that were possessed by, or came into direct contact with the individual in question.⁴ Durability, resistance to decay, transportability and mobility are frequently taken to be the defining features of a relic. While uniqueness is often regarded as a crucial attribute of relics, critical scholarship has demonstrated that throughout history, relics have been subjected to practices of 'forgery', 'fabrication' and 'reproduction' which do not necessarily diminish their hallowed status in the eyes of the community of believers.

The word 'ruin' (origin, Latin *ruina*) in turn simply means a dramatic structural collapse or decline, as in the remains of a building or structure that has suffered much visible damage.⁵ Thus, while both relic and ruin broadly imply certain physicality in the sense of remnants and remains, 'relic' carries something of a bodily implication, while 'ruin' carries with it a sense of materiality which has nothing essentially bodily about it. Again, and more importantly for our present purposes, 'relic' often carries a sacral if not religious connotation while 'ruin' does not necessarily involve something which can be marked either as sacred or religious.

Material remains per se, thus, have no intrinsic status as relics. 'The former become

the latter as a consequence of the beliefs and practices that accumulate around them. ... The symbolic and semiotic value of such objects is a reflection of the subjectivity of the society that honours and prizes them.'⁶ However, unlike other material objects – images, icons etc., a relic requires a frame in space and time that explicitly signals its status as sacred object. As we shall see in course of this essay, a relic without its reliquary/ casket loses its identity as a hallowed object. But like most other objects and



categories, the plethora of meanings ascribed to either relics or ruins were, and never are, static. The lines separating them are extremely nebulous, the distinctions and blurring of their meanings often produced out of divergent social and political networks, and different historically contingent circumstances under which these objects come to be invoked.

Looking at the networks of communication between the officials of archaeology and museums and representatives of the newly [re]formed associations and communities of the Buddhists, I will explore how Buddhist corporeal relics and structural ruins came to be simultaneously secularized and sacralized in colonial South Asia. In other words, the essay will figure how the interplay between relics and ruins marked the tortuous negotiations between, and the fraught passages from the spaces of the archaeologically conserved sites

Figure 2: Water-colour drawing by 'Abdullah, Shaikh of the stupa at Sarnath dated January 1814. Inscribed on front in ink: 'The Samaudh of Rajah Booth-Sain at Sara-Naat near Benares, January 1814. Copied by Sheik Abdullah. April 1819. Courtesy, British Library, Online Image Gallery.