

New Light on the Buddhist Antiquity of Vrindavan (Based on New Archaeological Finding)

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Vrindavan, situated 8 km north of Mathura along the River Yamuna is one of the most sacred towns of India from religious-cultural perspective. Mathura's importance as one of the greatest archaeological sites and ancient cultural centre is well known but Vrindavan lags far behind in any such information. Although, there are found a number of references mentioning Vrindavana in various Puranas like *Harivamsa*, *Vishnu*, *Matsya*, *Srimadbhagavata*, *Varaha* etc. while mentioning the episodes of the life of child Krishna, its exact nature as an archaeological site is not clear. Vrindavana of the Puranas appears to be a quite wider area of sacred grove or forest lying between the river Yamuna and the Govardhana hill. Was there a particular settlement in those days like the present day Vrindavan or not, is not clear. The view of some scholars (including the great Braj saint Surdas of 16th century) that the original Vrindavana was situated at Parsauli near Govardhan does not make much sense since the modern Vrindavan town is also not inferior to any other site in the region in terms of archaeological antiquity and cultural importance. There must have been some logic for considering the modern settlement of Vrindavan as the ancient Vrindavana in medieval times. If someone argues that the Yamuna was flowing near the Govardhan hill in the past, then it would become impossible to justify the location of ancient Mathura as it was for sure situated along the river and the Yamuna could have flown either through Govardhan or through Mathura. And as per the archaeological information the Yamuna is flowing near Mathura for at least past 3000 years.

It appears that during the ancient times also Mathura and Vrindavan's importance lied together as in modern days. The whole landscape between Mathura and Vrindavan is full of archaeological sites, many of which had some definite Buddhist association. As one moves towards Vrindavan from Mathura, the sites encountered are:

Chamunda Mound - This mound was situated near the metre gauge track to Vrindavan, in the vicinity of Chamunda temple. It was not an outright Buddhist area. The site provides evidence of some regular habitation but only from the late Kushan period. Most of the area of this mound (in records under the ASI protection) has either been encroached by modern settlements or

destroyed, so not much remains of it now. This site was excavated by M.C. Joshi led team of A.S.I. in the year 1975 and Joshi dates the site back to the Mauryan period. I observed the brick walls of about 2nd- 3rd century A.D. Buddhist monastic settlement in one of the larger plots being razed to ground at the time of my exploratory visit to the site. Some Buddhist sculptures and railing posts were reported from the site and many of them were brought to the Mathura Museum by F.S. Growse from the famous Hindu temple of Mata Chamunda (Growse 1883: 135). One Buddhist railing pillar in dilapidated condition was observed by me near this site (Pl. 31.1).

Jaisinghpura Area - There is confusion about the identification of this site. In fact, the whole area between Gokarneshwar temple and Ganesh Tila seems to have provided Buddhist sculptures from time to time. The archaeological deposit belonging to early centuries of the Christian era can be observed at a number of spots in this area, especially in front of Methodist Hospital by the side of Vrindavan road. But this area is by and large a regular habitation area, so, where the Buddhist establishments were located, cannot be found out. At the Muslim burial ground situated at the back side of Gayatri Tapobhumi, there are some natural elevations with a flimsy deposit of Kushan and medieval times. At the mound locally known as Ganesh Tila, there is a possibility of it being an earthen *stupa* as its shape and nature of the deposit indicate. Presently it houses a Hindu temple atop it. R.C. Sharma in a map of ancient Mathura has shown this area as the site of Jaisinghpura mounds but it does not seem to be the case actually.

Kankor Tila (Jaisinghpura Mound) - The site of Jaisinghpura from where a number of Buddhist sculptures (M.M. nos. J 9, J 10 and J 11) and some inscriptions have been found is situated in the back side of Birla temple near the village Bangali Basti, just after crossing the Mathura-Vrindavan Railway track. The name of the mound is Kankor Tila, but in ASI records it has been wrongly mentioned as Jaisinghpura mound. This site is under possession of the Archaeological Survey of India and is comparatively well maintained. The area of the site is about 180 x 140 m, with an approximate height of 2 m at some places. The site has been recently fenced with iron wires. The pottery found at this site belongs to the Kushan, Gupta and post-Gupta periods but in all probability it was just a Buddhist establishment. A very conspicuous fact about this site is that there are five lofty areas at this site, four at four corners and one at the centre which rise to nearly 2- 2.5 m height while the rest of the area is a depression. Whatever might be the exact nature of these lofty areas, it indicates that it formed some *Panchayatana* type of structure.

Krishnapuram Site - As one moves further on the road to Vrindavan, in front of PMV Polytechnic College, a Kushan period habitation settlement was explored by me in the Jungle area. This small habitation site cannot be associated with any religious affiliation at the moment but certainly indicates towards the importance of the area.

Ahalyaganj Mound - It was a mound of similar nature as was Jaisinghpura mound and is mentioned in the list of sites of Agra Circle under ASI, but unfortunately it has been completely destroyed and nothing significant of that now remains. It is only because of the finding of some important Buddhist relics at the site that it was declared as a protected site by the British. This site was situated midway between Mathura and Vrindavan near the Gas Godam curve. Only a few degenerated potsherds can be observed at the site which can now be identified with the presence of Chamar Mata shrine at the destroyed site and a few years back this area has also been sold to some influential people. A local (Mr. Baghel) of nearby Dhaurera village informed about the chance finding of various Buddhist sculptures during diggings in Ahalyaganj and

nearby area. According to him, these sculptures were smuggled out by the active network of smugglers from time to time.

Akrur Tila - This site is situated on the periphery of Vrindavan, very close to the course of Yamuna. This place is associated with Bhagavata cult. There is a temple of Vasudeva-Krishna and especially that of Akrura, the great ancestor of Varshney caste at the top of the mound. According to Jaina texts Akrura is the commander among the Panchavṛishni Viras which include Baladeva, Akrura, Anadhrishti, Sarana and Viduratha. A beautiful standing female deity sculpture (M.M. No. F 6, Pl. 31.2) was found near this site (Vogel 1910: 113). S.R. Quintanilla has dated it prior to Kushan period during the reign of Sodasa. (Quintanilla 2007: 208). I am also supportive of this date. The site is an isolated mound in the level ground formed of Yamuna soil. The pottery which can be observed on the surface of the mound is quite late in date and indicates its occupation by the people of later period when this site was abandoned after the Kushan period. There is no other site in its vicinity, so the monks might have resided there at the same spot in a monastery. The area of site with a little scattered deposit is about 50 x 50 m. On a whole, this site cannot be called a Buddhist site, but there is possibility of its Buddhist affiliation at some point of time as the shape of the mound like a *stupa* indicates.

Vrindavan in Archaeological Perspective

Vrindavan seems to be an important town settlement even during the ancient period as the presence of various high mounds in the city indicate. Some of the densely populated elevated areas concealing the archaeological deposits can be observed at Govindadeva Temple, Jugal Kishore Temple, Ramanreti (in front of Shorawala Bhawan) etc. But, significant numbers of pre-medieval remains have not come to light till now because the town is densely populated on these mounds. During my explorations I observed a lofty mound quite similar in nature to Naga, Dhruva Tila of Mathura near the Vrindavan Railway Station in the locality known as Bhangipara. In the records of the Government Museum Mathura, following sculptures with probable Buddhist affiliation are reported from Vrindavan:

1. Fragmentary relief showing the worship of a decorated cylindrical *stupa* (with a *vedika*, *harmika* and *chhatravali*) by flying winged *Gandharvas* (M.M. No. 10.130, Pl. 31.3) belonging to the Sunga period.
2. Railing pillar (M.M. No. 10.119, Pl. 31.4) belonging to the early Kushan period which depicts a lady standing over a couchant dwarf in an act of plucking flowers from a tree (*asoka-dohada*).
3. *Salabhanjika* images MM. Nos. 40.2887 and 40.2888 (Pl. 31.5 & 6) belonging to early Kushan period showing maidens standing under a *sala* or *asoka* tree. Both of them have their faces retouched by someone in quite recent times (may be late medieval times) to make them look like the figures belonging to Vaishnava tradition.
4. Lower part of an inscribed Bodhisattva image (M.M. No. 74.26, Pl. 31.7) belonging to the early Kushan period. R.C. Sharma (Sharma 1984) has dated it to Kanishka's reign but has wrongly mentioned its Acc. No. 74.20 in stead of 74.26. The inscription as deciphered by K.K. Thapalyal and Sharma reads:
 1. *sindhuka putrasya sresthasya hastisya sa putro sevakah bodhisattva (prati) sthapaya (ti) sa budha pujaye .*
 2. *sarva satvani hitartha mata pitranam pujaye atra cha bodhisattvah.....*
 3. *senakenah dama putra cha.*

What was the exact find-spot of the above-mentioned sculptures is not clear, but I doubt that these might have come from the site of Bhangipara since it had the scope of such findings while digging for some structural activity. The other site in Vrindavan from where these sculptures might have come is Madan Mohan Temple site but such possibility is negated because of it being an ASI protected site even before the Independence. So, firstly from there sculptures would not have reached the local museum in the first place otherwise the find-spot would have been mentioned in the museum records as Madan Mohan Temple site.

The most significant and interesting information about the antiquity of Vrindavan has been obtained recently at the site of Madan Mohan Temple which is a Centrally Protected Site under the auspices of the ASI for the 16th century remarkable temple. The temple is situated atop an ancient mound which has structural remains visible facing the old course of River Yamuna. The huge brick-built structural remnant is made up of bricks of various sizes (Pl. 31.8) which measure 52 x 26 x 8 cm, 39 x 29 x 7 cm, 42 x 28 x 7 cm, 36 x 26 x 6 cm etc. The larger brick size of 52 cm length correspond to Mauryan brick size and is comparable to various Mauryan bricks found at Saheth-Maheth, Sonkh etc. whereas the 42-36 cm length bricks are comparable to the bricks of Sunga, Kushan and Gupta periods. Besides, a number of reused bricks (broken), smaller post-Gupta bricks are also visible at various places in the structure. Lakhori bricks can be observed in the upper part of this brick structure. Various bricks used in this structure confirm the point that the structural edifice at the site dates back to as early as Mauryan period and continued during the succeeding periods of Sunga, Kushan, Gupta, post-Gupta and medieval periods before the Madan Mohan Temple was constructed over the mound in the 16th century. Since no regular habitation deposit is observed at or near this site, it is quite probable that it served as a religious edifice. To which religious affiliation it was dedicated, cannot be said with certainty. It might have been either Brahmanical or Buddhist. At what point of history the mound started to be known as Dvadasa Aditya Tila is also not clear but is indicative of its importance to the Sun cult. From the Kushan period, we start getting certain evidence of the presence of Buddhist structure at the site as is clear from the sculptural findings exposed during the development work of garden by the ASI. The important Buddhist finding is as follows:

Railing pillar (Pl. 31.9 a-d)

It is a broken railing pillar of about 2.5' length. It actually appears more like a temple doorjamb than a railing and is somehow comparable to two pre-Kushan Brahmanical pillars (one is the famous Isapur *Yupa* stambha and the other one is Bhagavata Mandir stambha from Mathura) in its decorative style. It is decorated with *makara* design, leaves and creepers. In the lower part an attendant or a Bodhisattva is carved in standing pose holding *pushpaguchchha* in his hands whereas in the now surviving upper part possibly a Bodhisattva image (quite similar to the Buddha image) is carved which has its right hand in *abhaya mudra* but the angle of the palm is slightly in profile rather than frontal. The slightly wavy hair is tied in a topknot (*ushnisa*) but it is different from any Buddha headgear belonging to this period and observed till now. A *urna* is visible on the forehead in between the eyebrows. Folds of the upper garment are visible on his left shoulder. His *dhoti* is draped in such a way that one-third of his legs are uncovered. The *ekansika sanghati* is worn in such a way that one of the folds runs across the chest (very much like a *yajnopavita*). He is adorned with wristlets and a broad *ekavali*. He is also provided with a round halo with a scalloped border. The overall treatment of this figure is so unique that it is slightly difficult to identify its exact nature but since it appears to be a pre-stage when the iconography of Buddhist deities evolved a set pattern, it might be one of the earliest examples of seated Buddhist figures in Mathura art, datable to pre-Kushan period (may be even last decades

of 1st century B.C.). On the reverse side of this pillar, *chaitya* shrines divide the pillar into three parts. In the lower part only a shrine is visible while above it a male figure is shown standing wearing *ekansika sanghati* (similar to Bodhisattva figures). His left hand is placed near his waist probably holding some object whereas it is difficult to judge the posture of his right hand. Not many details are identifiable in this figure since the surface is quite corroded. In the upper panel, a Bodhisattva is shown standing possibly holding a water-pot in his left hand whereas his right hand is in *abhaya mudra* with slightly angular position. He is wearing a *dhoti*, a thick fold of which is arranged over his left hand. He is adorned with a broad *ekavali*. A round halo with scalloped border indicates his divine status. His slightly wavy *jata* like hair is tied in a top bun. The overall treatment of the figure indicates it to be Maitreya Buddha and again confirms its pre-Kushan date. Some fragmentary architectural pieces from the site may also belong to Buddhist faith but it cannot be said with certainty.

All other architectural members found at the site are Brahmanical temple remains (possibly of a Vaisnavite temple) belonging to the Gupta period.

Importance of Vrindavan as an important Buddhist settlement is also confirmed by the fact that most of the important Buddhist sites near Mathura are situated on major trade routes like Bharatpur road, Sonkh road, Govardhan road, Chhata-Kaman road via Barsana etc. Vrindavan which has not provided so much of early archaeological evidence is reached from Mathura via sites of Gokarneshwar, Chamunda, Jaisinghpura locality and mound, Krishnapuram site, Ahalyaganj mound and Akrur tila. All these are important Buddhist establishments except Akrur Tila. Besides these two village sites have been explored by me between Jaisinghpura and Vrindavan. These two sites are: a low mound in front of P.M.V. Polytechnic College (till now part of dense forest but recently a colony has been constructed near the site) and village Tehra. Both are Kushan period habitation sites which got abandoned after some centuries. Then from Vrindavan three important routes go to: Manth across Yamuna, Govardhan via Chhatikara, Maghera, Ral, Radha Kunḍa, Neemgaon and the third to Sehi via Sunrakh, Gond Atas, Sakraya and Parkham. Many of these sites had provided Buddhist sculptures but because of high level of smuggling activity, nothing substantial survives. Presence of a Sunga period Yakshi and Kushan period Yaksha at Parkham are only indicative of the importance of such sites and some kind of their possible Buddhist association at some point of time because of their importance and arrival of some outsiders. Besides, the recent finding of a probable Vrishni Vira sculpture of Kushan period at Sunrakh also indicates towards the religious importance of this whole area.

References

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 Sharma, R.C. 1984. *Buddhist Art of Mathura*. Delhi.
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Pl.31.1: Railing Pillar fragment from near Chamunda Tila



Pl.31.2: Devi from Akrur Tila (M.M. No. F.6)



Pl.31.3: Relief showing stupa worship from Vrindavan (M.M. No. 10.130)



Pl.31.4: Railing pillar from Vrindavan (M.M. No. 10.119)



Pl.31.5: Salabhanjika from Vrindavan (M.M. No. 40.2887)



Pl.31.6: Salabhanjika from Vrindavan (M.M. No. 40.2888)



Pl.31.7: Lower part of the Buddha image from Vrindavan(M.M. No. 74.26)



Pl.31.8: Mauryan period brick, Madan Mohan Temple



**Pl.31.9 a: Railing pillar
from Madan Mohan Temple
(front view)**



**Pl.31.9 b: Railing pillar
from Madan Mohan Temple
(back view)**



Pl.31.9 c: Enlarged view of top of railing pillar



Pl.31.9 d: Enlarged view of bottom part of railing pillar