



Archaeological Museum Sanchi

**A celebrated collection
(3rd century BC to 12th century AD)**

INTRODUCTION

Sanchi, 45 km. north-east of Bhopal and hardly 10 km south-west of Vidisha, both on the Delhi-Mumbai Railway, is uniquely placed in the world of Buddhist archaeology and tourism (Fig.1). Sanchi is variably known as Kakanaya, Kakanadabota and Bota Sri Parvata in ancient time.

The humble beginning of the activities in this area was started during the time of mighty Mauryas in 3rd century BC. Emperor Ashoka selected this place because of its strategic location, perfect place for meditation, proximity to the city of Vidisha., some rich mercantile community of the place, location at the confluence of two rivers i.e. the Betwa and the Bes and closeness to important trade routes.

After Mauryas the Sungas during middle of the 2nd century BC were ruling here and their existence can be observed in the stone encasing and enlargement of the Stupa no 1. After that the Satavahanas came in to existence over here. The Gupta period emerged with great magnitude in the history of temple architecture, saw at Sanchi as well as revival of structural activities. Temple No 17 behind the southern *totrana* of Stupa No 1 is one of the earliest Gupta temples noted for its well –balanced proportion, restraint in ornamentation and elegance. After Gupta a number of small kingdoms emerged till the Harshavardhana (AD 606-647) came into being and he achieved some sort of political unity in northern India. After Harsha the Pratiharas established themselves in the Malwa region by the 8th century AD. Sanchi Temple No 45 belongs to this period. Sanchi seems to have been hardly affected by the political changes as many architectural edifices are seen at the site.

In a nutshell, at Sanchi, the Buddhist establishment continued the genesis of art and architecture spanning over nearly thirteen hundred years from 3rd century B.C. to 12th century A.D. (table).



Table

Categories of the Sculptures : periodical context	
1-	Mauryan period
2-	Sunga –Kushana Period
3-	Satavahana Period
4-	Gupta Period
5-	Post Gupta Period
6-	Early Medieval Period
Categories of the sculptures : with cult - context	
1-	Buddhist
2-	Saiva
3-	Vaishnava
4-	Shakta
5-	Nagas
5-	Composite figures

In the year, 1818, General Taylor discovered the site under dense vegetation and brought it to public attention. Later on, Sir Jhon Marshall did the extensive work at the site from 1912-19.

ABOUT MUSEUM & ITS DISPLAY

Objects discovered in the course of clearance for conservation and excavations done at Sanchi were placed in a small museum established on the hilltop, in 1919, by Sir John Marshall. Subsequently, Archaeological Survey of India acquired a college building at the foot hill of Sanchi Stupa and got the exhibits shifted to the new building in the year 1966 and in the same year the museum was opened for the



public. The museum and its premises is extended in about 6.30 acres area (Fig.2). The museum comprises main hall and four galleries besides exhibits in the verandah and a few in open courtyards. Majority of the objects are from Sanchi itself and a few from its neighborhood i.e. Gulgaon, Vidisha, Murelkhurd and Gyaraspur. The objects housed in the museum are datable from 3rd century BC to 12th century AD.

In the **main hall** (Fig. 3) ; the exhibits represent to six cultural periods i.e. Mauryan, Sunga, Satvahana, Kushana, Gupta and late Gupta periods (*circa* 300 BC- 700 BC). Among the objects of Mauryan period, the magnificent Lion Capital of Ashoka with remarkable mirror like luster is most noteworthy. The other notable objects of 300 BC include polished umbrella made of chunar sand stone, probably belongs to brick stupa of Asoka displays in the showcase. A rare colossal image of Nagaraja from Gulgaon near Sanchi also deserves mention. The main hall is enriched by beautiful ornamental art objects of Satavahana period. The notable among these are one graceful Yakshi figure (*Salbhanjika*). A few sculptures of Mathura school of art are also displayed in the main hall. Among these are seated Buddha made of red sand stone and pedestal bearing two feet of deity, having Buddhist creed the name of king Vaskushana. Besides, standing figures of Bodhisattavas Padmapani and Vajrapani of Gupta period are other remarkable collection of the main hall.

Gallery-1 (Fig.4) displays large size Buddhist sculptures made of sand stone. These sculptures bear Gupta as well as late medieval period art traditions in view of their treatment & style. A clumsy copy of replica of Asokan pillar capital of Gupta period with *Dharma Chakra* supported by four lions seated back to back displayed here is the main attraction of the gallery. Other



Fig.3



notable sculptures are Buddha in meditation bearing auspicious symbols on toes, palm etc, *sthanaka* (standing) Buddha in *varad mudra* and two large images of Nagaraja. Votive Stupas are also displayed in this gallery.

Gallery-2 (Fig. 5) is divided into two parts. First part(on left side) comprises of miniature sculptures datable from 3rd century BC to 12th century AD, while on the right side iron objects belonging to medieval period are displayed. The displayed miniature figures, terracotta & stone plaques, both Buddhist and Brahmanical, denote cult affiliation from Sunga to early medieval period. Notable among them are two armed standing Vishnu with attendants, Buddha belonging to Gupta period and Siva with *Jatamukuta* as well as head of Avalokitesvara bearing Dhyani Buddha. Some of Brahmanical plaques depicting Vishnu, Ganesha



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



and Mahishasurmardini etc. belonging to 12th century AD. can also be seen in this gallery. To the right side of the gallery iron implements of daily use belonging to medieval period are displayed. These iron implements were found during excavations at Sanchi from 1912 to 1919 by Sir John Marshall. The main objects are related to the farming and some of these are purposed for iron smith. The locals of the Sanchi used these iron objects for farming. The size and accuracy of these objects show that farming was much prevalent in this region. The notable objects are plough share, sickle, wedge, hammer, chain, anvil, chisel, clamp etc. Besides, arrow head, dagger and spear head are also included. A particular medieval lock is also displayed in this gallery.

In Gallery –3, (Fig. 6) there are some sculptural fragments. These are datable to early medieval period (from 8th to 12th century AD) accepting stones of relic casket of 1st century B.C. and an image of Surya - Siva - Vishnu displayed in the showcase belongs to 5th–6th Century A.D.



Fig.7

These images reflect the development of late Gupta art.

In addition there is a Photo Gallery (Fig. 7) which contains old photographs, drawings & sketches highlight the history of discovery, the excavations and conservation of Buddhist monuments at Sanchi.

Besides, a few excavations carried out by Bhopal Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India in the year 1995-96 have also been highlighted in this gallery through pictures.



SELECTED SPECIMANS OF THE MUSEUM

The museum indeed is enriched by various outstanding objects. However, the following specimens of the museum deserve special mention:

1- Lion Capital

Lion Capital, one of the master pieces of Mauryan art datable to 3rd century BC is displayed in the rear side of the main hall of the museum (Fig. 8). This Capital was once the part of Ashokan Pillar now stands near the southern *torana* of Stupa No.1 on hill top. Four lions seated back to back on circular

abacus over inverted lotus. The capital is made of



Fig.8

Chunar sand stone with very fine polish. The abacus is displayed with the figures of duck-pairs and in between two pairs a flower is carved out on four cardinal sides. This lion capital is almost similar to that of Sarnath Ashokan pillar capital but the decoration on the abacus is different as Sarnath Capital is decorated with the figures of lion, elephant, horse and bull and between the two *chakra* is carved out.

2- Bodhisattva Padmapani

Displayed in the main hall (Fig.9) a colossal figure of Padmapani stands in *samabhanga* posture



Fig.9



carrying a lotus in his right hand while left hand rests upon the thigh holding the knot of *Uttariya*. Having rounded face with half closed eyes; Bodhisattva wears a broad & decorated *gravayaka*, *keyura*, *katakavalaya* and *karnakundala* but badly broken. The figure is represented to the Gupta period.

3- Bodhisattva Vajrapani

Another colossal image of Bodhisattva Vajrapani (Fig.10) also displayed in the main hall in standing posture but broken from the thigh and both the arms. His delineated and rounded face with heavenly smile explicitly



Fig.11

represents Gupta period. He is adorned with a broad & decorated *gravayaka*. A unique feature of this figure lies in its halo which has some deep holes probably to fix the jems, beads or other shining objects perhaps to enhance the impression of the figure. Vajrapani tightly holds the left end of *uttariya*. Besides, he is adorned with a crown but broken badly.



Fig.10

4- Yakshi-

A beautiful Yakshi (Fig.11) figure in *tri-bhanga* posture with bare body belongs to Satavahana period is displayed in the main hall. Presently, head, arms and portion below the thigh are completely missing. The figure deserves special

mention for its hair style which is comprised of three rows of knotted strings along with a long *choti* twisted towards the end at the back side. She is wearing an



ornamented belt around the waist just above her genital organ.

5- Nagaraja -

Assignable to post Gupta period a colossal figure of Nagaraja in human form is displayed in the main hall. He is canopied by a snake hood in which only five snakes are survived. His head gear is decorated with a coiled ornament which looks like a coiled turban. The face of Nagaraja is flat and he is adorned with a *gravayaka* and long *hara* consists of various strings, *katakavalaya* and *keyura*. He is two armed and carrying a lotus in the right hand while his left hand is held on the



Fig.12

waist. Both the arms are broken in the middle. He is wearing a dhoti also (Fig.12).

6- Seated Buddha

Buddha in *dhyana mudra* on *padamasana* displayed in the main hall having curly hair. His face is rounded and a kind of smile is observed on it. He is covered with *uttariya* which has various folds enhance the beauty of the figure. The sculpture is assignable to Gupta period (Fig.13).

7- Sthanaka Buddha-

A colossal figure of lord Buddha



Fig.13



assignable to the post Gupta period is displayed in gallery no.1. His right hand is in *varada mudra* but left one is missing. Beautiful folds of his *uttariya* hanging down towards the end, long ear studs, curly hair with conical knot, elongated face are the important features of this sculpture (Fig.14).

8- Seated Buddha-

A colossal figure of Buddha (Fig. 15) in *dhyaana mudra*



Fig.15

his palm as well as sole of the feet.

on *padma pitha* represents Gupta period is displayed in the gallery no.1. Interestingly, various auspicious symbols such as *swastika*, *sankha*, *wheel*, *tri-ratna* and *chatrawali* are engraved on

9- Loin Capital –

Displayed in the gallery no.1,(Fig. 16) datable to Gupta period is in damaged condition. Four lions seated back to back on a circular abacus depicting the figures of parrot and lotus flower alternately. This is an effort to replicate the Ashokan Pillar-Capital.

10- Votive Stupa –

A votive stupa displayed in the gallery no 1 portrays



Fig.14

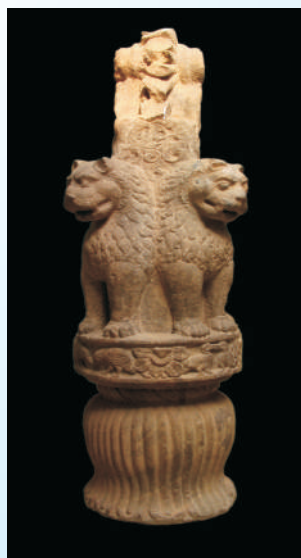


Fig.16



three Dhyani Buddhas at the cardinal sides on octagonal base but the fourth Buddha is missing. Two Buddhas are shown with *bhumisparsha mudra* while rest one is in *dhyana*. The stupa is also assignable to the post Gupta period (Fig.17).

11- Nagaraja –

A beautiful colossal image of Nagaraja (Fig. 18) in human form well finished, assignable to Gupta age is



Fig.18

13- Sthanka Vishnu-

Displayed in the gallery No.2 a miniature figure (Fig.20) is datable to 10-11th century AD. Both of his back hands are missing. He carries a *sankha* in the left hand while his right hand is in *varada mudra* with an *akshamala*. Vishnu is wearing *kirita mukuta*



Fig.17

displayed in gallery no 2. The figure is canopied by a hood of seven snakes. Beautiful crown, long ear with circular studs, broad *gravayaka* composed of floral pattern & jems the significant features of the sculpture. Two armed figure is holding a lotus bud in the right hand while his left hand carries a pot with long neck.

12- Stone & Terracotta Plaques-

Ston plaques depicting Mahisasurmardini, Vishnu, Ganesha and Lajja - Gauri are displayed in a wall showcase of gallery no 2. Two terracotta plaques depict Buddha in *bhumisparsha* are also noteworthy. They are datable to 11th-12th century AD (Fig.19).



Fig.19



Fig.20

performing *abhiseka* to the goddess Lakshmi. The deity is bejewelled with various ornaments. The sculpture is assignable to 10th-11th century AD. This sculpture was brought from Gyaraspur in district Vidisha of Madhya Pradesh.

15- Dancing lady-

A unique figure of dancing lady (Fig. 22) along with a singer and a drummer date to 10th-11th century AD. is displayed in the gallery no. 3.

and a long *Vajayanti mala* covering whole body. Rounded face, flashy body, *gravayaka* are the other outstanding features of the sculpture. Besides, a female attendant also stands near Vishu.

14- Gaja-Lakshmi

Four armed Lakshmi (Fig.21) seated in *lalitasana* carrying *kalasha* in lower left hand while lower right hand is in *varada mudra*. Displayed in gallery no 2, her both the upper hands are carrying lotus bud over which elephants one on each are standing and performing *abhiseka* to the goddess Lakshmi.



Fig.21



16- Surya-Siva-Vishnu figure

A unique miniature composite figure of Siva-Surya-Vishnu depicted in a *chaitya arch* (*gavaksha*) is displayed in gallery no 3. It is datable to Gupta period. Three headed figure wearing *jatamukuta*

is having four arms but front two are missing.



Fig.23



Fig.22

The upper right hand carries a full blown lotus while upper left hand holds a bow like object. This figure is one of the master pieces of the museum collection (Fug.23).

Marshall House

There is a beautiful building named 'Marshall House' (Fig. 24) in the museum premises which was built for Sir John Marshall who lived here from 1912-19 and did the incredible work on explorations, excavations, restoration and conservations work at



Fig.24

Sanchi and its stupas. Presently, this house is being served as a small museum and a few belongings of John Marshall are housed here. Three volumes of 'Monuments of Sanchi' written by Sir John Marshall are the centre of attraction of the house.

Bibliography–

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