

The Birth Place of Lord Buddha

— Babu Krishna Rijal

Historical Prelude

Nepal is proud of Lumbini, where Lord Buddha, "The light of Asia", was born in sixth century B. C. The location of Lumbini is in the western Tarai of Nepal with latitude 27°28' North and 83°16' East. In sixth century B. C. the landmass of the Tarai in the present Lumbini Zone was occupied by the two ancient tribes called 'Sakyas' and 'Koliyas'. The site Lumbini, before the birth of Gautam Buddha, was a pleasure garden entertained by the people of two kingdoms—the Sakyas of Kapilavastu and the Koliyas of Ramagrama. The Sakyas and the Koliyas were bound by matrimonial alliance, thus related to each other.

The earliest reference of Lumbini as the birth place of Gautama Buddha is found in the classical Buddhist text, *Suttanipata*. The text mentions that "Buddhistta, the excellent pearl, the incomparable is born for the good and for a blessing in the country of Lumbini. Therefore, we are glad and exceedingly pleased, *Lalitavistra* and other Buddhist literatures mention that Gautama Buddha was born in Lumbini during the full moon day, in the month of May. At the time of the

birth of Lord Buddha Lumbini Garden was bloomed with various trees. The humming of bees and the sweet warblings of birds magnified the natural scenery of Lumbini. It was a pleasure resort called *Pradimoksha Vana* and comparable to the *Chittalita* Grove of Indra's paradise in the heaven.

The famous story of Gautama Buddha's nativity is that while Mayadevi, the mother of Buddha's was going to Devadaha from Kapilvastu, she got the labour pain at Lumbini. The pangs of labour caused her to stand against the trunk of a tree with raised hand. A male child came forth from the right side of her armpit and walked seven steps towards north and proclaimed the following words. "I am the foremost of all creatures to cross the riddle of the ocean of existence. I have come to this world to show the path of emancipation. This is my last birth and hereafter I will not be born again."

Buddha's attachment to Lumbini was great. He visited to Lumbini and Kapilavastu several times as a great sage. He was obliged to Sakyas and used to say that "service to relatives is a blessing." Buddha's eloquence of the purity and the contemplative virtue of

the pilgrimage to Lumbini is seen expressed in *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. From his death bed Buddha had advised to all the faithful followers and lay devotees to visit Lumbini for spiritual efficacy and aesthetic contemplation.

It is thus Buddha's impetus that caused Lumbini to develop as a centre of pilgrimage. After the great demise of Buddha, Lumbini was no more a pleasure resort entertained by young couples, but a centre of pilgrimage for contemplation or for a spiritual efficacy. It is visited by royalities, scholars, and lay devotees from all over the world. The exact spot of the birth of Lord Buddha was developed as a temple site with many votive stupas and monasteries, whereas towards a few hundred yards south-west a pilgrim village with a few hamlets and cottages emerged to accommodate the pilgrims and the tourists. This evidence is corroborated by the excavation of 1970-71 A. D.

Little more than two hundred years after the time of Buddha, Mauryan Emperor Asoka visited Lumbini and resumed the legendary fame of the site. The royal entourage of Asoka was conducted by Venerable Upagupta. The pilgrimage of Asoka had started from Patna. He came to Vaisali and took the route to Lumbini via Rampurva, Arreraj, Lauria-Nandangarh, Tribeni, Parasi, Bhairawa. The travel route of Asoka is marked with monolithic pillars. From Lumbini the royal entourage of Asoka proceeded towards Kapilvastu. Here, the birth places of Kanakamuni and Krakuchhanda Buddhas were shown to the King and he commemorated the spots with the Asokan pillars. The highway connecting Magadha with Kosala used to run through Kapilvastu, Lumbini and Ramagrama. The ancient area of Kapilvastu to Ramagram, at present, is incorporated by three districts

of Nepal-Taulihawa, Rupendehi and Nawal Parasi.

Asoka's pilgrimage in the Buddhist sites is narrated in *Divyavadana*. Here Asoka says to Upagupta "It is my desire Sir, to visit, honour and mark by sign for the benefit of remote posterity all the spots, where the Blessed Buddha has sojourned." Asoka's belief in the spiritual efficacy of the pilgrimage in Buddhist sites is appreciated by Upagupta. He said "Gracious are your intentions, O King, I myself will be your guide". This is how, Venerable Upagupta conducted the royal entourage. At Lumbini, Upagupta pointed a tree with right hand and said "Behold, O merciful King, this is the spot where Sakyamuni Buddha was born." Asoka saw the tree with overwhelming joy. He folded his palms and prostrated with deep devotion. He worshipped the spot, installed a commemorative pillar with a sign of horse on top. The inscription of pillar says--It is Lumbini village where Lord Buddha was born. The King gave away one hundred thousand gold coins in charity. He is also said to have constructed a few votive stupas to remind the folk memory occurred during nativity events. From Lumbini, Asoka went to Kapilvastu enroute to Sravasti, in Kosala.

The famous pilgrim to visit Lumbini after Asoka was a Chinese monk Fa-hien. In the first decade of fifth century A. D. he reached Lumbini. His travel account of Lumbini is scanty and vague. He saw here a few legendary monuments and the tree under which Buddha was born. He also saw the water pool where Mayadevi had taken bath before giving birth to Lord Buddha.

The second most important pilgrim from China to visit Lumbini was Hiuen-Tsang. He came to Lumbini in seventh century A. D. The travel account of Hiuen-Tsang is more

in details. At Lumbini, he saw the bathing pool, Ashokan pillar with a horse-capital and votive stupas built to mark the event occurred during nativity period of Lord Buddha. He saw the oil river flowing towards east of the tree, under which Lord Buddha was born.

The revival of Hinduism and Muslim invasion in India caused the total negligence of the Buddhist sites. Great Buddhist pilgrim centres slowly covered and shrouded into bushes and remained obscured for a long time. However, Lumbini and Kapilvastu are visited by the Malla Kings of Western Nepal. Ripu Malla visited Kapilvastu and Lumbini in 1312 A. D. and engraved his name on the Asokan pillars in Lumbini and Kapilvastu. A few more names of the pilgrims visiting Lumbini could be seen engraved on Asokan pillar, but no precise efforts of reading is made so far.

Archaeological Pursuits

After the consolidation of British power in India, during 18th century the British rulers were attracted towards the cultural heritage of their Indian colony. The "Royal Asiatic Society" was formed in Calcutta by Sir William Jones in 1784 A. D. Its aim was to promote the history and antiquities, arts, sciences and literature of Asia. The activity of this institution heralded the age of cultural renaissance in India as well as in the neighbouring countries. In 1837 James Princep discovered the key to the Brahmi alphabet. The decipherment of the Brahmi script helped archaeology to free itself from this antiquarian and literary affiliations. Sir A. Cunningham organised a country wide survey of archaeological remains in India. He followed the foot steps of the Chinese pilgrims and relocated many Buddhist remains in a vast area stretching from Gaya in the east to the Indus

in the north-west and from Kalsi in the north to the Dhamnar Cave in the south.

But unfortunately for Nepal, the rulers Rana of that time kept the country closed to the foreigners. No archaeological activities were allowed. The pioneer archaeologists could not locate the birth place of Buddha. They could not explore Nepalese Tarai and have to calculate the location of Lumbini, Kapilvastu and Devadha in the Basti District of India. In Buddhist literature it is mentioned that "Kapilvastu is situated near the Himalayan Mountains in the Madhyadesa". But as there was no map of the Tarai, so was not easy to explore the region. It was only by accident that in 1893, Major Jaskaran Singh of Balrampur announced in newspaper to have seen an Asokan pillar with inscription in the Nepalese Tarai. In 1895 Dr. Fuhrer was deputed to take its estampages. Dr. Fuhrer could not discover the said Asokan pillar but found a new pillar at Niglihawa. This discovery raised high hopes in the right location of Kapilvastu. Therefore he was again deputed to explore in the Nepalese Tarai. In 1896 Dr. Fuhrer discovered two more Asokan pillars one at Rummindehi and another at Gotihawa in Kapilvastu. Thus, the discovery of three Asokan pillars by Dr. Fuhrer in 1895/96 at once conformed that Gautama Buddha, the Apostle of Peace, was born in western Nepal and his birth place was known at present as Rummindehi. His Royal palace is in Tilaurakot near Taulihawa. After the right location of Lumbini and Kapilvastu by Dr. Fuhrer and P. C. Mukhjee in 1896-98 A. D. the Kolian stupa of Ramagrama, was discovered by Dr. W. Hoey at Parasi on the bank of the river Jharahi.

The discovery of three very important Buddhist sites in western Tarai of Nepal during the last decade of 19th century was

taken by the Oriental Congress as "one of the most important discoveries of the century". P. C. Mukherjee was commissioned by Indian government to verify these discoveries. The Rana Government of Nepal, though conservative, took the achievements with highest approbations and decided to sanction a scheme of further exploration. P. C. Mukherjee published his excavation report with accurate description, illustrated plans, drawings and photographs in 1901.

Early Archaeological Activities in Lumbini

On 11 March 1899, P. C. Mukherjee came to Lumbini. He saw here two mounds—the temple mound where Mayadevi temple Asokan pillar and many votive structures scattered in ruins. To the south-west of the temple site there was a mound of the ancient Lumbini village, where the King Asoka had given away one hundred thousand gold coins in charity. The aim of P. C. Mukherjee exploration was limited to the area around the ruins near Asokan pillar and Mayadevi temple. The temple mound as seen by P. C. Mukherjee, was a rectangular plot of elevated ground about 300 ft. to 400 ft. in size and raised from 10 to 20 ft. above to surface of the surrounding plain. The top of the mound is formed with ruined temple and enshrined broken sculpture called Rupadevi. The local people came here with regular offerings and the sacrifices of goats, pigeons and fowls where made. The main sanctum of the shrine is lately repaired and dwarfed into an ugly shape of a Sadhu.

The entrance to the sanctum is from the east and after getting down a few steps in a collection of broken sculptures of antiquity are enshrined as Rupadevi. The chief sculpture enshrined was a head less panel.

P. C. Mukherjee saw the detached head portion of the panel kept in debris outside the sanctum. He lifted that part and joined to its original panel. When the head portion was fixed with the nativity scene of Buddha with Mayadevi holding the branch of the tree was clear. P. C. Mukherjee also noticed the bell shaped capital of Asokan pillar broken into the halves and stored in the temple compound. After clearing the temple debris. P. C. Mukherjee was able to draw the plan of the ante-chamber of ancient Mayadevi temple built over the earlier subsidiary structure which possibly was the Mauryan complex. The outer wall of the ancient temple was built with a bay of masonry in carved bricks, forming Sapta-Ratha temple in plan.

Thus the keen observation and the judicious archaeological activities of P. C. Mukherjee in Lumbini, revealed the existence of a magnificent Mayadevi temple with carved bricks, completed panel of Nativity sculpture of Buddha, and the Asokan pillar standing on its original position, enclosed with brick walls raised in different periods. A few ruins of votive stupas were also excavated by him around Mayadevi temple.

The major works of excavation in Lumbini were conducted under the patronage of General Kaiser Shumsher J. B. Rana during 1932-39. But the excavation carried with levelling methods caused a great damage to the site. The ground below the foundation of several monuments were laid opened to maintain the lowest level of the site. Several super structures of different periods were destroyed and therefore at present it is very difficult to date and correlate one structure with another as many subsidiary structures which were already destroyed.

Proper conservation of exposed struc-

tures were not carried out for a long time. There is neither any record nor any report of the excavation of the time of General Kaisar Sumsher available. Only some utilitarian works like providing a high platform around Mayadevi temple and enlarging the Sakya Tank with successive terraces and brick veneer was to his credit. He put iron fence around the Asokan pillar. He built some rest houses to accommodate the pilgrims.

After long interlude, Mrs. Devela Mitra of Archaeological Survey of India came to Lumbini in 1962 for archaeological exploration. She tried to check the base of the Asokan pillar possibly to be confirmed that it is in its original position. She took the photographs of the excavated antiquities dumped in the kitchen of the Buddhist monk since a long time. Some very important antiquities were brought to Kathmandu. She published her report in 1972 A. D.

Recent Archaeological Activities

The first scientific excavation in Lumbini was conducted by the department of the Archaeology H. M. G. Nepal in the year 1970-71 A. D. The aim of this excavation was to locate the site of ancient "Lumbini village" mentioned in the inscription of Asokan pillar situated to the west of Mayadevi Temple. The second object was to prepare the plan of the exposed structures around Mayadevi Temple for future conservation. Our last interest was to plot the potential habitational area of archaeological sites around Telar River.

The archaeological investigation in the second mound around the old guest house proved that the earliest human habitation in Lumbini started during sixth century B.C. The stratigraphy of the human habitation was divided

into ten successive layers and the pottery types were mainly N.B.P. in the lowest level and red were in the upper strata. A trace of mud a terracotta ring well and some antiquities lying dating to the period of 6th century B.C. were encountered at the lowest level. In the upper level a circulation human burial two brick wells and a large number of Kushana figurines were excavated from the habitational mounds. A terracotta plaque mould of Lord Buddha in the Earth Touching posture was also discovered in the excavation. On the basis of the carved brick structures in the mound on and the terracotta plaque mould of Lord Buddha in mound a two clearly show that the sequence of culture in Lumbini dates from the time of Buddha to the Gupta period.

The structures hallowed in the memory of Lord Buddha from the earliest time up to medieval period are seen scattered in Lumbini around the area covering 16,081 square yards. Most of the important and interesting edifices were however enclosed and protected within the barbed wire since 1970-71 they were left without any archaeological conservation since 1939. Therefore, many of them are disintegrated and ruined not only by the tropical climate of the Tarai but also due to the constant brick robbings by the ignorant villagers for making ovens to perform the praxis vow called Karaicharan. Since 1975, regular annual archaeological activities were devised by the Department of Archaeology in coordination with the Lumbini Development Committee.

The main of the archaeological activities in Lumbini were to avoid further damage of the already exposed structures. In consonance with the aim restoration works are also carried out. Archaeological excavation was limited and carried out only to complete the restoration programmes.

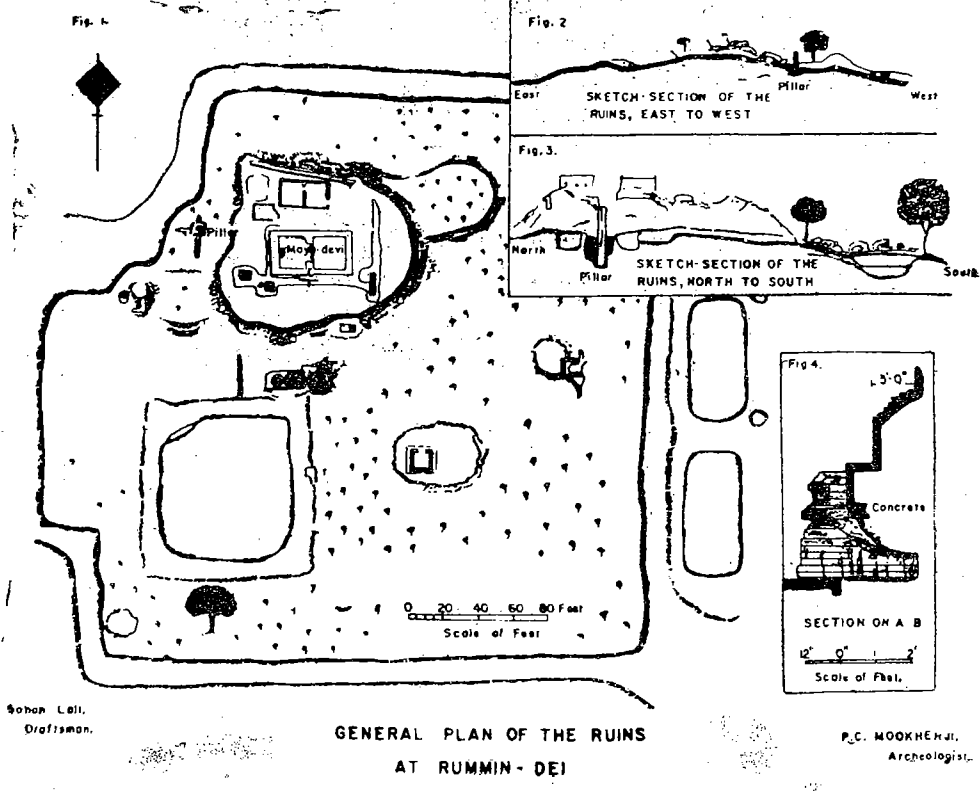
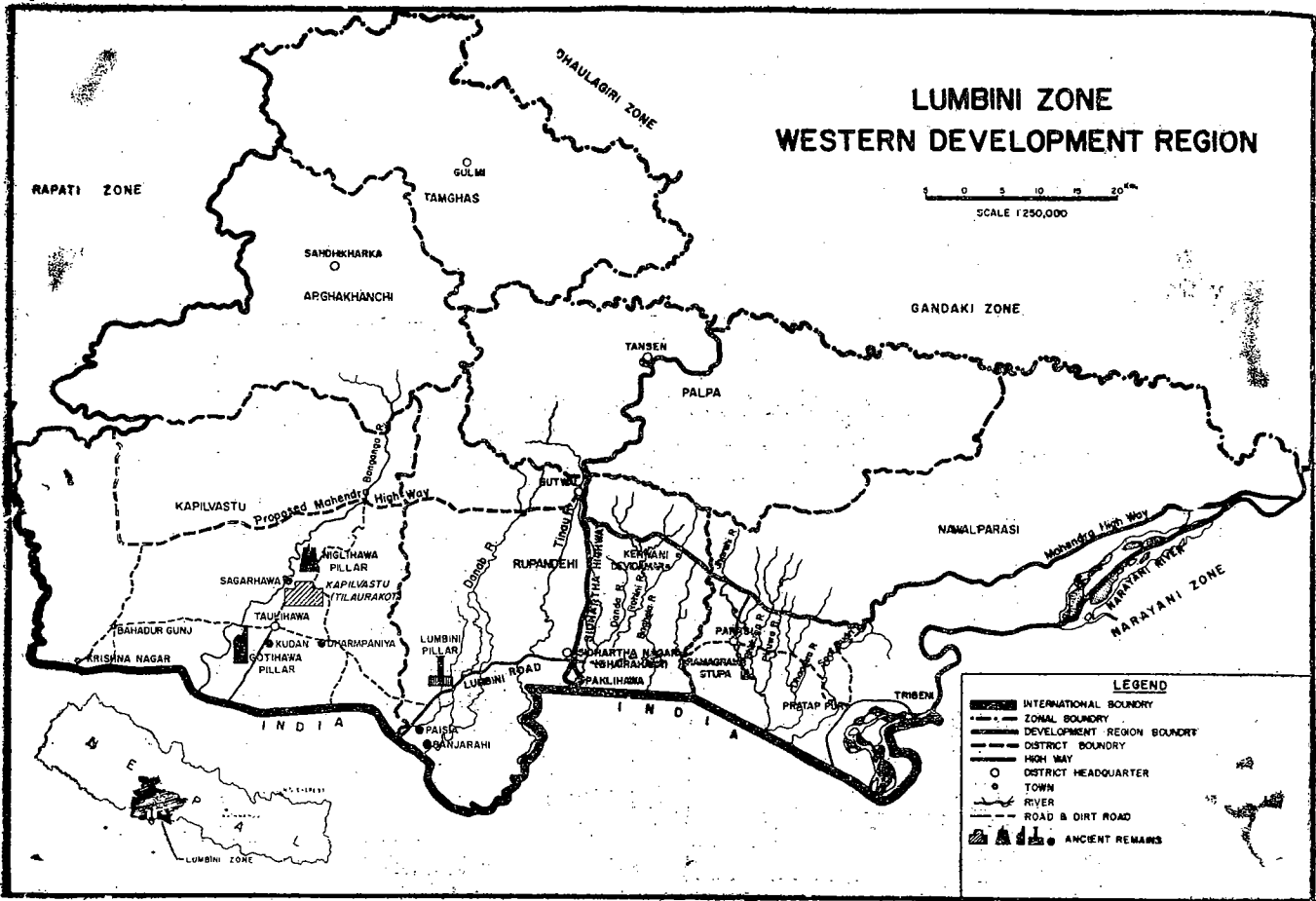
The implementation of the conservation activities in Lumbini around Mayadevi temple resulted the repairment of many ruined structures. Many succidous monumental towards east-west and north side of Mayadevi temple were brought to its original stage. Several votive stupas were repaired. Some dilapidated wall of monasteries were strengthened. A new monastery towards the south of Mayadevi temple was excavated, the weeds and vegetation overgrown in the entire structural area were cleaned. The extensive scrappings around Mayadevi Temple have revealed many new structures which were hitherto unseen in the history of Lumbini. A new revised structural plan of the monuments around Mayadevi Temple was prepared to represent those unseen structures.

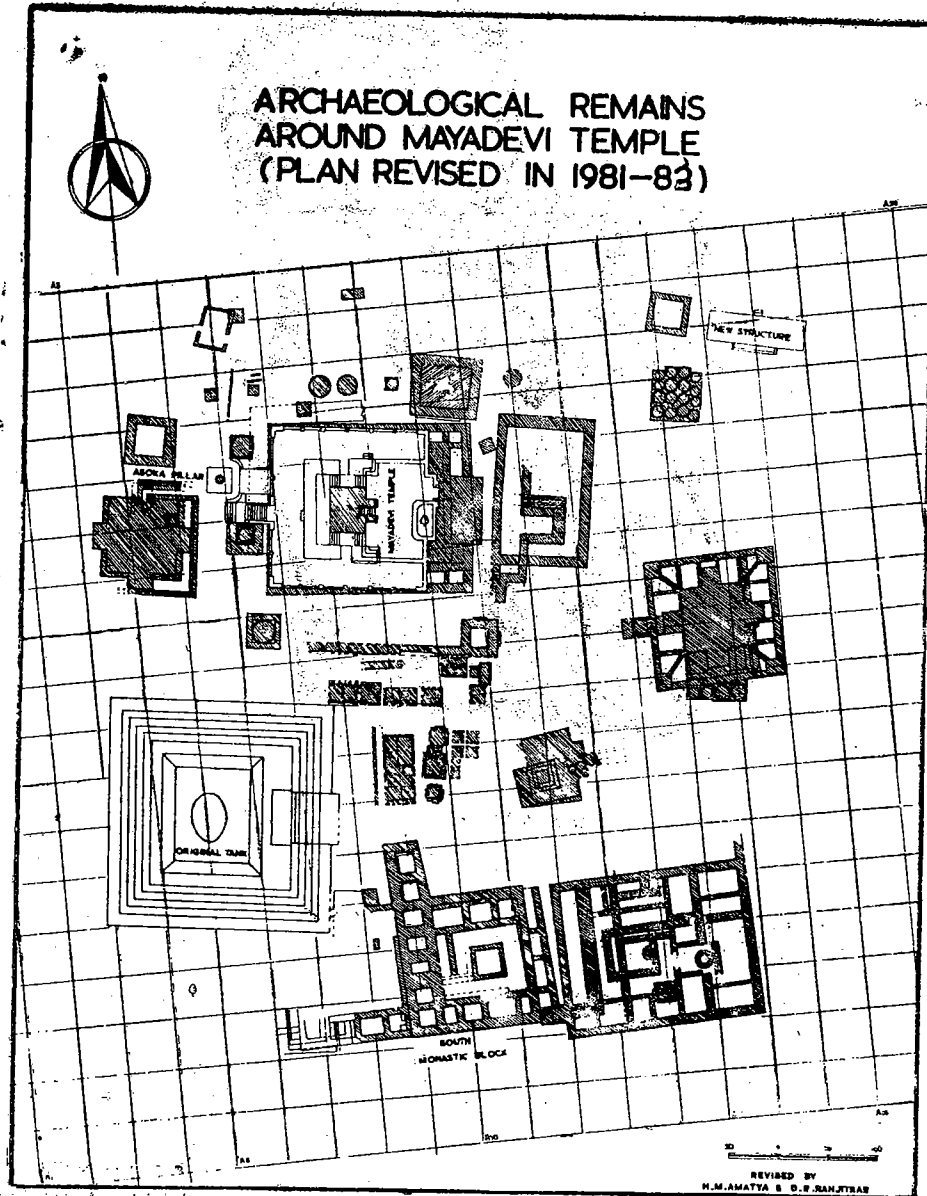
During the exploration activities in Lumbini a new well with various animals, birds and other votives engraved on the bricks was discovered in the nursery field. This well is dated to the Kushana period. However, three more such type of the new wells were discovered during the archaeological activities in 1970-71. The well discovered in 1983, is more elaborate and exposed up to the bottom course. The new well is made with 29 course of the solid concave bricks with the marks like elephant, horse, boar, palm tree couch etc.

The bottom of the well contains a few Kushana spouted pots and a faceted pot used for Naga worship.

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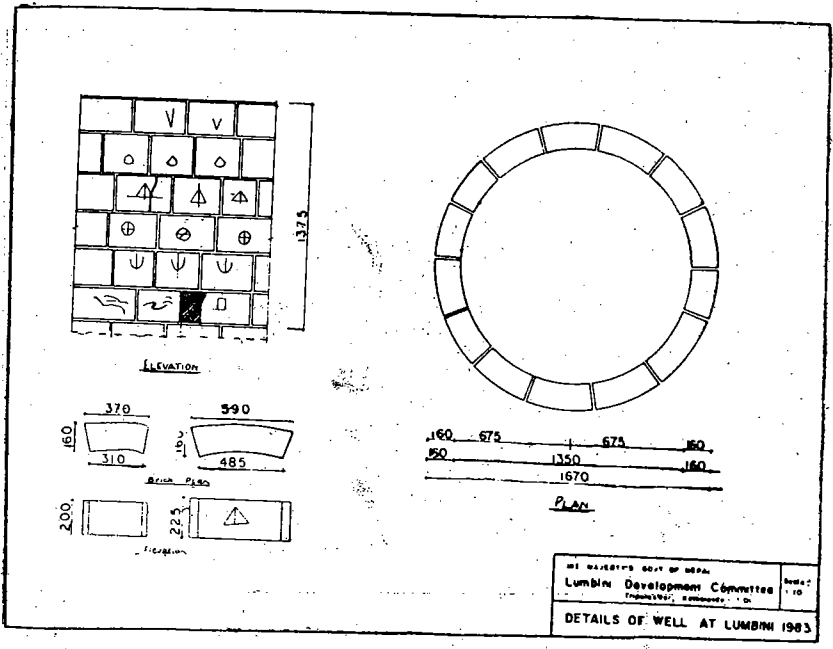


MAYADEVI

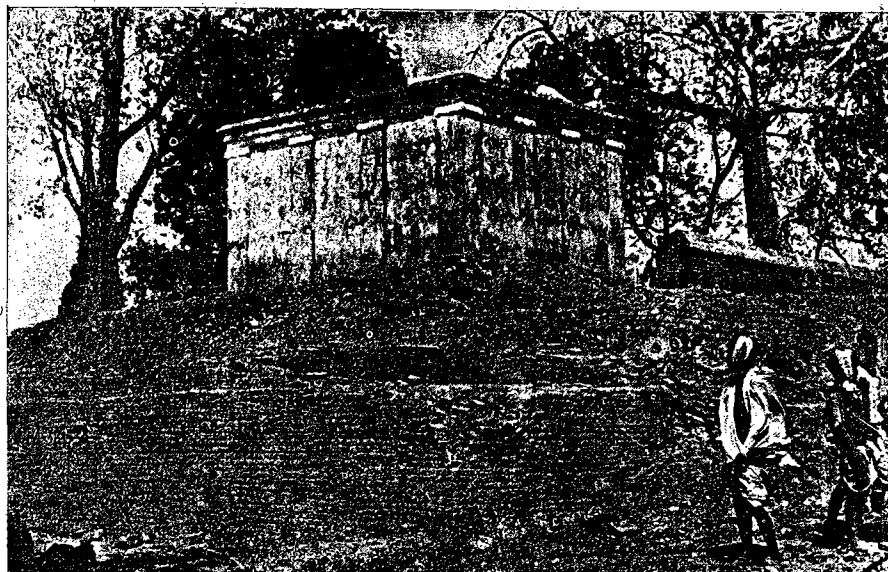


SCALE OF FEET

P. C. Mookherji.
18-3-99 Archeologist.



Courtesy : Kaisher Library
General view of Mayadevi Temple 1933-39



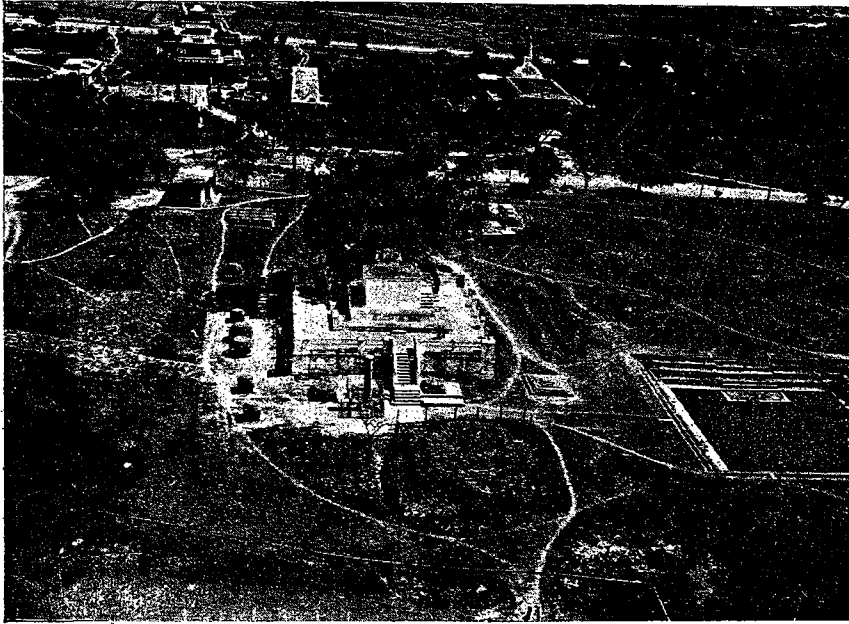
Courtesy : Kaisher Library

A) Excavated Mayadevi Temple 1932-39 (S. W. Corner)

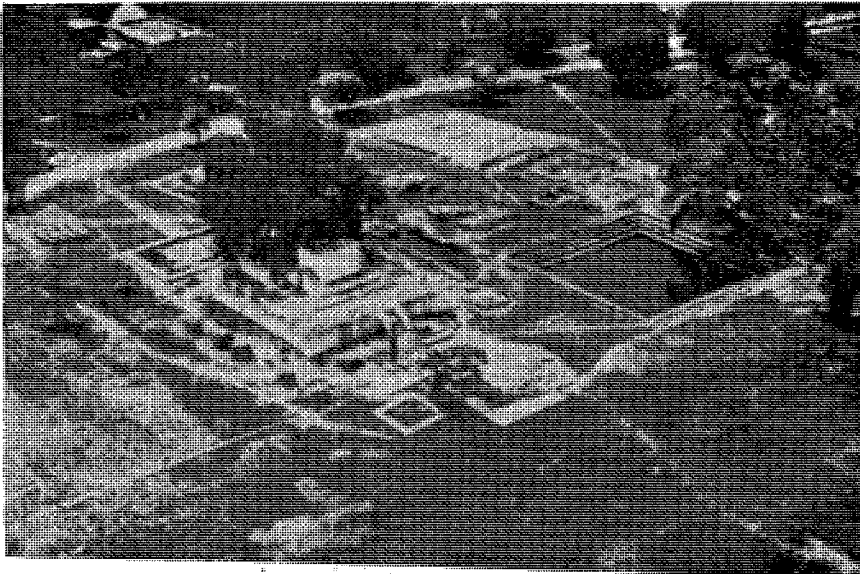


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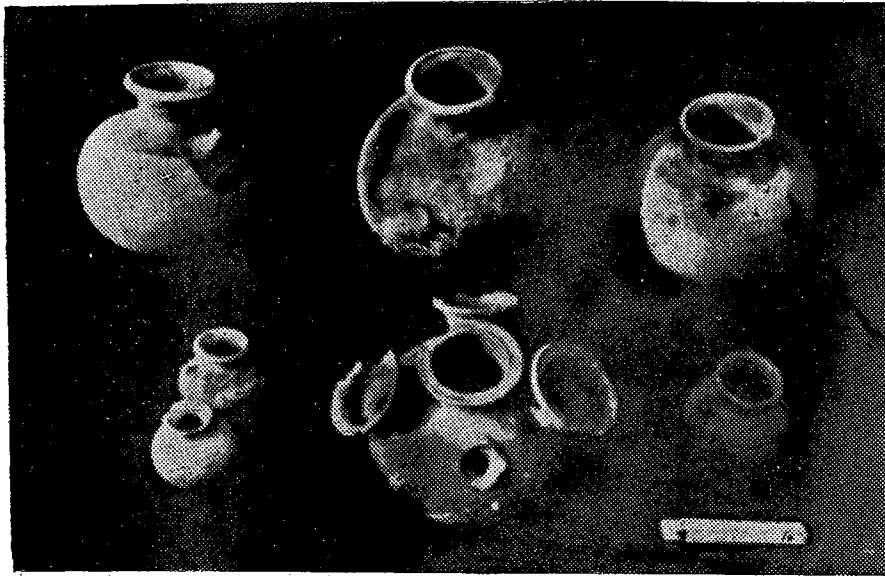
B) Gen. Kaisher Shumsher with Ashokan Pillar during 1932-39



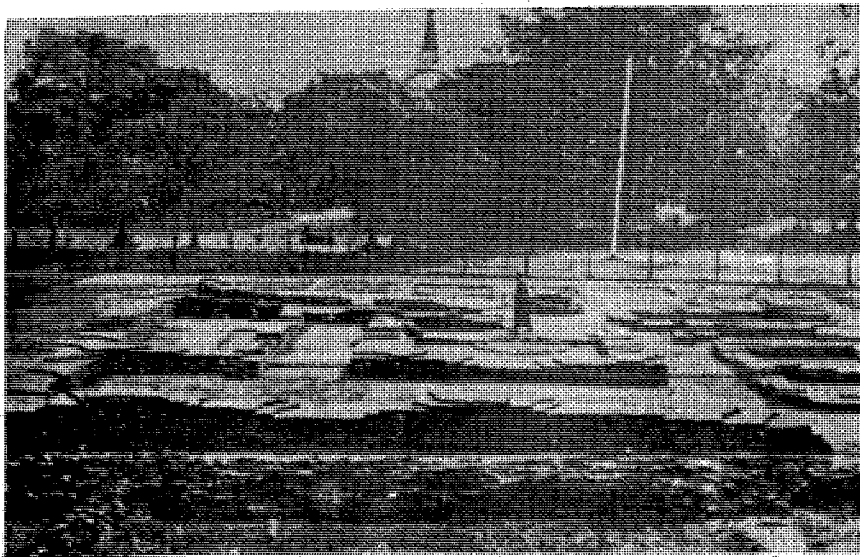
A) An aerial view of the ruined Structures around Mayadevi Temple in 1980



B) An aerial view of the ruined structures around Mayadevi Temple in 1983.



Earthen pots found at the bottom of the Kushana well at nursery block



New Monastery discovered in 1982