What is a stupa? How might the architecture and decoration of these monuments help us understand its symbolism and importance?

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In its most fundamental essence, the stupa is a funerary mound erected over the remains of the Buddha. Its antecedents can be traced to primitive burial cists, which evolved in the Buddhist and Jain traditions into places of veneration. In its earliest meanings, the Stupa represented the Buddha and his Parinirvana (“complete extinction”) and, as we shall explore, deeper symbolism synonymous with concurrent traditions.

This paper aims to analyze the ‘physical and metaphysical’ aspects of the stupa. It intends to achieve this by studying some of its most celebrated versions – namely Sanchi, Bharhut and Amravati.

Before addressing the question, I would like to digress into briefly discussing the historical background of the Buddhist religion. The focus will primarily be on two significant epochs/forces that pre-date these stupas, which I believe, were instrumental in shaping them. The first is the parinirvana of Buddha and the second, the imperial impetus of the great mauryan emperor Asoka. Thereafter the paper will focus on decoding the architectural

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1 Initial stupas only consecrated corporeal remains. Thereafter three types of relics were allowed 1) saririka: physical remains, 2) paribhogika: objects of use – begging bowl belt, robe setas and in this context that the pre-aryan tree cult found its place in the Buddhist system and 3) uddesika: significant symbols – stupa, cakra triratna. Zimmer H (1953:232) Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations

2 Craven R (1997) Indian Art A concise history

3 Coomaraswamy A (1983:17) Symbolism of Indian Architecture

4 Dates –Sanchi Stupa 2: 100 BC; Bharhut: 100-80BC; Sanchi Stupa 1: 1st Cent AD; Amravati: 2nd Century AD (Susan Huntington)
template of the stupa and its significance, followed by the importance and meaning of the decorative motifs.

In the 8th century BC, the gangetic plain witnessed great religious and metaphysical ferment. Philosophical speculation gained currency and salvation from mortality became the greatest goal of life. The profoundest expression of this age is found in the Upanishads, which presented a world view in stark contrast to that of the Vedas. Out of this flux emerged other heterodox cults, opposed to vedic supremacy and dogma, chief amongst which were Buddhism and Jainism.

Buddhism was founded by a prince of the Sakya clan, who renounced the world in spiritual quest. After six years of futile austerities, he reflected in calm contemplation, whereupon he attained enlightenment and became the “awakened one”. His life thereafter was that of a mendicant teacher and he preached his doctrine across the length and breadth of madhyadesha. Simplicity, inclusiveness and the compelling personality of the Buddha presented an adoptable alternative to the increasingly complex world of the Vedas.

While Buddhism blossomed under the inspiring stewardship of

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5 The undifferentiated, nondualistic world view of the Upanishads presented a sharp contrast to the cosmogeneric, materialistic world of the Vedas.
6 Aryan tribe, were seated about 500 years before the birth of Christ, at a place called Kapila-vastu about 100 miles north-east of Benaras.
7 Modern UP and Bihar
the Buddha, his impending death, in my view, presented a classic case of crisis of leadership\(^8\). In his lifetime, the Buddha embodied his doctrines, his persuasive presence was central to the propagation of the religion. His absence and the lack of a chosen successor would leave a gaping void, a concern possibly voiced in his pre-mortem\(^9\) interactions with his disciple, Ananda and the sangha. At this juncture the Buddha appointed Dharma his successor. However in doing so, the Buddha cleaved apart what had been a powerful conjoined entity - his rupakaya (physical form ) and his dharmakaya (doctrinal corpus)- the driving force behind his missionary impetus. Even his attempt to imbue it with the force of his personality, \textit{“Anyone who sees the dharma sees the Buddha”}\(^10\) could not match up to the potency of the whole he represented. It lacked the facileness of what his presence commanded for dharma was esoteric , seen through the eyes of wisdom, \textit{prajnacaksu}. Whereas his mortal presence, seen through mamsacaksu\(^11\) -ordinary eyes of flesh had an essential criticality of its own\(^12\). In this context the enshrinement of the relics makes imminent sense - it is an act of perpetuation, of retaining the rupakaya of Buddha which could \textit{“evoke or make real the absent...”}

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\(^8\) Collins Jim (2001) ‘Level 5 leadership’ Harvard Business Review. Proposes the idea of the criticality of succession planning and the potential void (and the possibility of collapse of the organizational edifice) in the event of leader not having groomed a suitable successor

\(^9\) Strong John( 2001:127-148) \textit{The Buddha a short biography}. The constant reassertions of the Buddha to follow dharma, the echo of concern in ananda’s queries

\(^10\) Strong John (1983: 106) \textit{The legend of king Asoka}

\(^11\) Strong John (1983: 106) \textit{The legend of king Asoka}

\(^12\) If one were to go by the lamentation scenes at his deathbed one can get a sense of the integral centrality of his rupakaya, even amongst his disciples.
A powerful force that leapfrogged the religion onto the global worldstage came in the form of the patronage of the mauryan emperor Asoka (272-234 BC). The emperor’s dramatic conversion to Buddhism and his personal zeal saw the reallocation of the relics across the expanse of his empire. The emperor was instrumental in creating a dharmaloggical ecosystem where the stupas and edicts on pillars and rock faces worked in unison to evoke both kayas of the Buddha. The edicts were an imperial concretization of the idea of merit, virtue, righteousness. His messages in their simplicity and mass appeal, were imbued with the power of his personal endorsement. This combination of unprecedented scale and imperial espousal set the stage for the incorporation of the dharmakaya in the meaning of the stupa.

The redistribution of the relics, not only provided unprecedented visibility, it furthered contact with local cultures and indigenous cults, encouraging cross-fertilization, absorption and assimilation of diverse ideas and themes, all of which impacted the construct

13 Strong John (1983: 104) The legend of king Asoka
15 Edicts are replete with personal examples of meritorious deeds, viz the injunction against killing of animals in the royal kitchen, setting up of hospitals, adherence to non-violence and dhamma
16 Legends accredit asoka with 84,000 stupas a carefully chosen number considering that it represents totality both in the physical and doctrinal sense (the traditionally held notion about the number of atoms in the body and also represents the number of sections in the teachings of the Buddha). Also i would contend that the visual reliefs on Stupas with the jatakas and historical accounts of the Buddha’s life were extensions of this effort
of the Stupas. Ashoka’s focus also tweaked the economic model of the sangha and gave another dimension to its symbiotic relationship with the lay community. It defined a shift from dependency for subsistence to a large scale contribution towards construction of physical establishments. This set the stage for a stupa’s ascendance from a funerary emblem to a popular religious monument.

In its essential construct the stupa consists of a focal earthen mound, bearing relics and an axial pillar in its recess. The enclosed upper extremity of this central shaft ends in capping finials which extend upwards and outwards beyond the confines of the dome. The horizontal boundary of the structure
is marked by a railing (vedika) constructed such that it creates a circumabulatory path (pradakshina path) around the dome.

In analyzing the architectural elements and their symbolism, I will take an outside-in approach, starting at its outermost bound of the stupa

The railing (Vedika), the threshold of the stupa encloses the precincts. In its construction, it is based on wooden porototypes, forming a “net”\(^{17}\) of pillars and beams\(^{18}\). It opens out in four diametrically placed gateways (Toranas), which, in some instances, are monumental and elaborately ornate. Symbolically the vedika executes a delineation of sacred space, it is “the frontier that distinguishes and opposes the two worlds”,\(^{19}\) the sacred and the profane, “and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible”\(^{20}\). In this consecration of sacred, ordered space, there is an emulation of primal creation. The carving out of a space where rta (order) and vrata (prescribed function)

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\(^{17}\) Kramrisch Stella (Pg 138) Exploring India’s Sacred Art. Kramrisch linkens the railing to a trellis (jala) and links it to the concept of the universe as a woven fabric, a web of order even in its outermost limits

\(^{18}\) Zimmer H (1953:232) Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations. The railing consists of a support (alambana), which forms its basis, pillars(stambhas) with sockets or horizontal interlinking beams (sucis: “needles”) and finally a coping or crown (usnisa: “diadem, turban”)

\(^{19}\) Eliade Mircea ( 1987:25) The sacred and the profane. The nature of religion

prevailed and the unveiling of the central axis - the fulcrum of orientation. The four gateways positioned in relation to the four quarters of the universe are concordant with this cosmicized plan.

Containment finds significance in the vedic corpus, and, antedates it, as is evident from depictions in Indus valley seals.

This decryption at the emblematic level begs an obvious question. What would compel a heterodox religion to attach itself with conventional symbolism? The dichotomy is explicable if one views the stupa as a product of its times. A time when structural aspects were based not on functional, utilitarian foundations but on deeply spiritual conceptions. The act of creation, as Coomarswamy has famouly said, was an act of replication. "We must do what the gods did in the beginning. Thus the gods did; thus men do." The stupa, in its meaning, is replete with this primordial injunction and its appropriation reflects fundamental, primal, human motivations.

At another level, this inclusion may have been necessitated by the dynamics of the existing religious milieu. A rudimentary situation analysis of the moment in time when this fledgling religion

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22 This could also link back, in a more literal sense, to the Buddha’s instruction of erecting his funerary mounds at the intersection of 4 crossroads
23 Indus valley seal called “divine adoration” by Gregory Possehl depicting nature spirit worship. The central tree is seen in a ringed enclosure
24 Sat. Br. VII.2.1.4
operated, and, when the first stupa was instituted, reveals the case of a relatively new entrant jostling for space against a dominant ideology. Of an incumbent mythology replete with cosmological interpretations and paradigmatic creator gods. In this setting, legitimacy would require equally potent antecedents. What better way to consecrate the remains of the one, who, like the Vedic god, Indra was born from his mother's side\textsuperscript{25} than to have the sacred place of his interment evoke the archetypal feat of Indra?

The vedika enclosure marks off a path (\textit{Pradakshina Path}) for the ritual of circumambulation. An important rite, it involved a physical engagement with the stupa and was performed by entering the precinct through the east gate and walking clockwise. The directional emphasis related the devotee to the passage of the sun, \textit{“the transcendent centre of the universe”}, \textit{“cosmic intelligence”} whose light is \textit{“intellectual wisdom”}\textsuperscript{26}. In vedic mythology Indra is credited with releasing the sun\textsuperscript{27}, setting its \textit{“wheel in motion”} and \textit{“making a pathway through the darkness”}\textsuperscript{28}. The Buddha, whose birth is likened to the rising of the

\textsuperscript{25} Brown Norman (1942: 94) \textit{‘The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda’} Journal of American Oriental Society
\textsuperscript{26} Snodgrass Adrian (1992:24)\textit{The Symbolism of the Stupa}
\textsuperscript{27} Brown Norman (1942: 96-97) \textit{‘The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda’} Journal of American Oriental Society
\textsuperscript{28} Brown Norman (1942: 96-97) \textit{‘The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda’} Journal of American Oriental Society
sun\textsuperscript{29}, compares his *abhijana* ("superknowledge") to a rediscovery of ancient wisdom, "clearing of an ancient jungle path from the brush that has overgrown and concealed it for generations"\textsuperscript{30} – a veritable pathway, a casting of light on what has been hidden in the darkness. And thence he proceeds to "turn the wheel of law". With these inherent parallels, the ritual act performs the important function of linking the worshipper with the wheel turning Buddha, and the Sun, on a path that is homologous with the archetypal path. A further instrument to re-emphasize this symbolism is seen in the alignment of the gateways, which form a cosmological diagram in the form of a swastika - a metonymical symbol evoking the wheel and the movement of the light giving sun. This act, replete with cosmological significance puts the worshipper in harmony with the cosmos while it also reminds him of the Buddha and his odyssey across several lifetimes to attain final liberation-transcendental nirvana.

At the centre of the stupa complex is the solid hemispherical dome described variously in Buddhist texts as garbha, container or alternatively as anda\textsuperscript{31}. It bears within itself the seed (bija)-

\textsuperscript{29} Snodgrass Adrian (1992)*The Symbolism of the Stupa* Quoting from the Buddhacharita Buddha’s birth is compared to the triumphal rising of the sun, which lights the whole world. His enlightenment takes place in the darkness and is completed at the time of the rising of the sun
\textsuperscript{30} Klostermaier Klaus (2000:20) Buddhism A Short Introduction
\textsuperscript{31} Snodgrass Adrian (1992:189)*The Symbolism of the Stupa*
relic. Symbolically this links the dome to the cosmic womb eg: the vedic *hiranyagarbha (golden womb)* which emerges from the primordial waters of chaos\(^{32}\). This analogy is explicit in reliefs at Sanchi and on some early coins where the stupa is shown floating on water\(^{33}\). So deep are the cosmological interlinkages that the mythic womb, the embodiment of life and prosperity, was said to encompass the riches of the universe. In a ritual enactment of the myth, the relic caskets are often made of precious metals/stone and routinely suffused with precious elements.

In the brahmanical context, the womb represents the creative unity. In the Buddhist context, it is the enfolder of the seed and signifies the involutional tendency of the spiritual path- the return to the centre, to unity. “The stupa symbolically designates this centre to which the seeker directs his life’s pilgrimage”,\(^{34}\) and it bears within itself the “pivotal presence” of the wheel turning Buddha\(^{35}\). This is significant in the light of inscriptions\(^{36}\), which state that the corporeal remains of the Buddha are “endowed with life” ( “prana sammada”) for it implies that the dome not only allows the devotee to experience proximity to the Buddha, but also makes him aware of his involutional unity.

The cosmological theme continues with the axial pillar which

\(^{32}\) Snodgrass Adrian (1992:195)*The Symbolism of the Stupa*

\(^{33}\) Snodgrass Adrian (1992:195)*The Symbolism of the Stupa*

\(^{34}\) Snodgrass Adrian (1992:88)*The Symbolism of the Stupa*

\(^{35}\) Snodgrass Adrian (1992)*The Symbolism of the Stupa*. It is the source of all the actions performed by the Buddhas to bring all the beings from darkness to light

\(^{36}\) Bajaur relic casket, king menander (140-110 BC). Quoted by Dehejia Vidya Discourses in Early Buddhist Art
represents the world axis. This pole is symbolic of the link between the human and the divine worlds. It indicates a pathway of spiritual ascent, an upward movement away from the confines of the physical world, to the limitless realm. In this sense, the pole is a beacon, a representation of the devotee’s goal, for in its verticality, one can measure one’s own progress towards the supreme attainment, a goal triumphantly achieved by the Buddha in nirvana.

The summit of the dome is capped by a smaller railing (harmika) which encloses the projecting end of central axis. The theme of containment is replicated, creating a second sacred precinct. The harmika also evokes solar resonances, the unmoving sun atop the world axis, evoking the Buddha and his enlightenment. The axis is capped by a series of parasols (chattras) honorific elements that protect relics below in the heart of the mound.

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37 It also relates back to the archetypal world tree, with its branches extending to the heaven (just like the pillar extends beyond the dome) and its roots into the subterranean waters. The tree/pillar that pushed up the sky also pegged down the mound to the bottom of the waters, giving it the stability it needed to expand into our universe. It links celestial powers with the fertile soils of the earth.

38 Snodgrass Adrian (1992:254) The Symbolism of the Stupa. The sun remained stationary over the Bo tree at the time of enlightenment.

39 Etymologically chattra links back to the chattra (foliage) of the cosmic tree.
The chattra is a link to another theme closely linked to the Buddha – that of kingship. The imperial parasol indicates the rank and status accorded to a monarch. The temporal chakravartin who through the turning of the wheel, subjugates the four quarters and maintains a paradisical state through the rule of dharma or righteousness. His capital is the centre of the world, and his grave dome the hub of the earth.

In a parallel, yet, supra-terrestrial identity, the Buddha subjugates the “realm of the spirit”, “rolls back the veil of ignorance”. He is the upholder of transcendent dharma - the cosmic sovereign. This analogous symmetry is repeated in events spanning the Buddha’s life and it finds expression in the honour accorded to the stupa both in terms of worship and the iconographic template through the overt usage of regal themes.

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40 Strong John (1983: 45-49) The legend of king Asoka
41 Zimmer H (1953) Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations.
42 Zimmer H (1953) Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations
43 Snodgrass Adrian (1992:89) The Symbolism of the Stupa
44 Eg: At his birth soothsayers had prophesied that he would be a chakravatin either of the temporal or spiritual world. He was frequently given epithet of a “conqueror”, the “turner of the wheel”, he was a chakravartin in his previous life. On his death bed he instructed that his relics be enshrined like that of a chakravartin
45 Parasol, lion throne, jewelled garlands, wheel etc
In analyzing the sculptural adornments on the railings and gateways, I would tend to disagree with Susan Huntinton in her statement that the sculptures served a “subsidiary/secondary” purpose. They may be locationally on the extremities, the outer bounds of the complex – however they are at the critical point of inflexion, the marker of the entry into sacred portals. Along with the gateways they symbolize a transformative potency - an entry into an ordered realm, in the presence of the Buddha’s relics, into the complex that is the “essence of transcendental reality, nirvana.” Their intent and meaning in this context cannot be secondary.

In my opinion, the imagery, successfully completes the task and intent of the asokan edicts, which despite their spread and scale, were curtailed by demands of literacy. I link back to the edicts, as the earliest examples of visual narrative, the reliefs at Bharhut showcase a spirit similar to that of the edicts- lay precepts and morality, a focus on virtues and meritorious deeds through the depiction of Jataka tales (49% of the reliefs at Bharhut portray these stories).

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46 Huntington Susan (1990:406)'Buddhist Art and theory of Aniconism' Art Journal
48 Dehejia Vidya Discourses in Early Buddhist Art,
The dual potency of a visually alive medium, and the familiarity of stories would have created a field of influence that would have ensured maximization of participation and effect. While one sees an inversion of themes at Sanchi and Amravati, where the depiction of key episodes from the life of Buddha take centrestage. (At Amravati one also sees the advent of the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha which had hitherto been totally symbolic)- the role of the ornate sculptures and decorative motifs remained focussed and goal oriented. With a rich vocabulary of stories, themes, symbols and narrative modes, the ornate railings and gateways enriched the experience of the stupa. The ancient sculptor was able to craft eloquent expressions that served to re-emphasize the credo of Buddhism and helped in propagating the faith. The sculptures were efficacious means for proselytization, through their vivid narration of the greatness of Buddha’s quest, the portrayal of virtues, merit and moral excellence, and their emphasis on the importance of holy pilgrimage and worship. This art also spelt the democratization of the stupa complex, not only were the narratives mass in their appeal, their collective commissioning transformed the stupa to a participative, shared entity. This art stood for “the art of the people, used for the glorification of the religion”. The stupa became a veritable punyakshetra (a field of spiritual merit) where votive reliefs of
pious devotees could win them karmic merit. 49
This theme of democratization is also evident in the profusion of images of nagas vriskha devatas, yakshas and yakshinis. These indicate the assimilatory efforts of the religion which resulted in an amalgamation of pre-buddhistic folk traditions and authochtonous cults into its folds. The stupa became a veritable showpiece for ancient motifs and in turn gets charged with the symbolism and mythology of these primitive expressions and beliefs. This integration powerfully signals the inclusiveness of the religion, the reconciliation of antagonistic principles. Its a magical, harmonious union, a force that charges

49 Donationary contribution demographics: Bharhut - 1/3rd from buddhist monastic community, rest from lay people. 1/3rd of donations from women. Sanchi stupa 2- 55% lay community, rest by monks and nuns. 1/3rd by women. Sanchi Stupa 1-69% lay community, rest monastic community. 50% contribution by women. Amravati - 2/3rd Lay community, 1/3rd by women
the railings and gateways with deeper meaning and primeval energy. With the incorporation of the nagas came the life force of fertility and birth. These guardians of the sustaining, nourishing terrestrial waters kept a protective watch over the stupa and its devotees. With the yakhas, the soil genii of fertility, riches and prosperity, the stupa was imbued with notions of abundance, growth and fertility and these benign, munificent creatures poured their blessings over those who passed through the gates into the holy enclosure. The pre-aryan cult of tree worship, the pre-buddhistic goddess gaja laxmi, among other traditions found a place on the stupa portals. The emphasis accorded to them demonstrates that they were no less important than the buddhistic precepts in the scheme of the stupa. They were all “parts of one and the same vital process.”

The simplistic design of the stupa belies a deep significance that is epitomized in every element. The architectural fabric links the stupa back to cosmogonic codes and themes of kingship. In doing so it imbues with a sacrality and symbolism that transcends religious constructs and links it to the realm of ageless principles. The stupa is an “imago mundi” a representation of the cosmos on earth. It is the realm of the chakravartin (chakravartikshetra), albeit a supra-terrestrial one. The decorative motifs imbue it with

50 Zimmer H Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations
terrestrial life forces – the potency of nature, of indigenous vitality. It is under the union of this primeval energy and universal principles that stupa formalizes and executes its basic purpose, and wherein lies its importance and centrality – that of a “magical structural milieu”\textsuperscript{52} which evokes the buddha and allows the devotee to commune with him in a sacred, ordered, potent, divine world, and chart his own progress to spiritual salvation.

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