

Significance and Works on Sacred Place : - Gaya City In Bihar

Dr. Ashok Kumar

Post Research Scholar, Department of Geography (Magadh University, Bodh Gaya)

Religion is one of the most important aspects of culture studied by scholars of different social scientists. Not only is it found in every known human society, it also significantly interacts with other cultural institutions. It finds expression in material culture, in human behaviour and in value system, morals and ethics. It interacts with systems of family organization, marriage, economics, law and politics, it enters into the realm of medicine, science and technology; and it has inspired rebellions and wars as well as sublime works of art. No other cultural institutions presents so vast a range of expression and implication. Religious concepts and ideas are not constrained by physical environment. Their formulataion meet with no other limitations then those inquiring spirit of the human mind itself.¹

A full-length study of the sacred city of Gaya is a dimension of India civilization in the frame-work of Redfield's and Singer's theories has been attempted by Vidarthi (1961). It is an aid to the understanding of religion in India in terms of the great-traditional life the communities.²

On the model of the study of sacred complex of Gaya by Vidarthi, field researchers were undertaken by many places of pilgrimage both in north and South India and few papers and books have been published among which mention may be made of Rajgir (Narayan, 1969), Deoghar (Narayan, 1971), Janakpur, 1971), (Jha, 1971), Bhubaneshwar (Mahapatra, 1972), again Gaya (Singhal, 1972), Bodh-Gaya (Narayan 1978), kashi (Vidarthi and Sarawati, 1978) and a general Survey of the temples dedicated to the deities of Shiva, Vaishnava and of the Shakti cult (Goswami and Morab, 1970), again Janakpur (Yadav, 1989), Shakti PITHS in India (Indumati). A Seminar on the sacred complex in India was jointly organized by the I.C.S.S.R. and Department of Anthropology, Ranchi University in 1973. The Seminar discussed at lengths the substantive data on places of pilgrimage specially collected from Varanasi and analysed the various theoretical implications of sacred complex studies. These papers along with the summary of the discussion have been published in a book from.³

Mythological History Gaya

In the religious history of India, Gaya occupies a unique place; it is one of the great places of pilgrimage. According to the religion of the Puranas which is the modern religion of the Hindus of India, it is incumbent on every Hindu to visit Gaya and make offerings for the souls of the ancestors. This type of sanctity of Gaya is recorded in the Gaya MAHATMAYA,

which forms part of the VAYU Purana and is even in the abridged forms in the AGNI and GARUDA Purana.⁴ The Gaya MAHATMYA mentions that, "a great demon, named Gaya Asura, performed a rigid penance for a thousand years. The gods, anxiously, fearing that they could give no sufficient recompense for his piety, came to him and asked what reward he wanted, his request that he might be the holiest of all things was granted, with the consequence that all he saw or was touched by him went to heaven. Yama, the god of hell, finding that he was monarch of an empty realm, appealed to the gods. They persuaded Gaya Asura to allow a sacrifice to be performed on his body. The sacrifice (YAJNA) was accordingly performed, but the demon was not yet laid. Yama then brought a sacred rock from the home, which he placed on the demon's head, and all the gods sat on his body; still the demon moved. At last Vishnu was called in. He struck Gaya with his club and removed with his blow all fatigue and pain. Gaya Asura begged as a last boon that the gods should abide for all time on his body, and that this should be the holiest of spots within the limits of which all men might obtain salvation by offering SRADDHA. His prayer was granted, and his body became the holy ground of Gaya."⁵

The above summary of the legend recounts the religious significance of the place and tells as that it obtained the name "Gaya" from the ASURA, Gaya Dr. Rajendra Lal Mitra⁶ interpreted the legend as an allegory of the triumph of Hinduism over Buddhism, and the Vishnupada as an object of worship of the Buddhists appropriated by the Hindus. Dr. Mitra points to the similiarity between the character of Gaya ASURA and the practice of Buddhism as it appeared to the Hindus. He argues, "that the benevolent demon, like the budhism, made salvation too easy a matter and was therefore, an enemy to Brahmanism while the followers of buddha were as pious and self-mortifying as the Asura, and like him did away with Brahmanism and all sacrice."⁶

Here, too it has been held that the story of struggle points to a religious strife between the Brahmanism and Buddhism, which ended in a compromise, the latter religion not being rooted out, but incorporated in Brahmanism.⁷

Gaya from the Hindu point of view

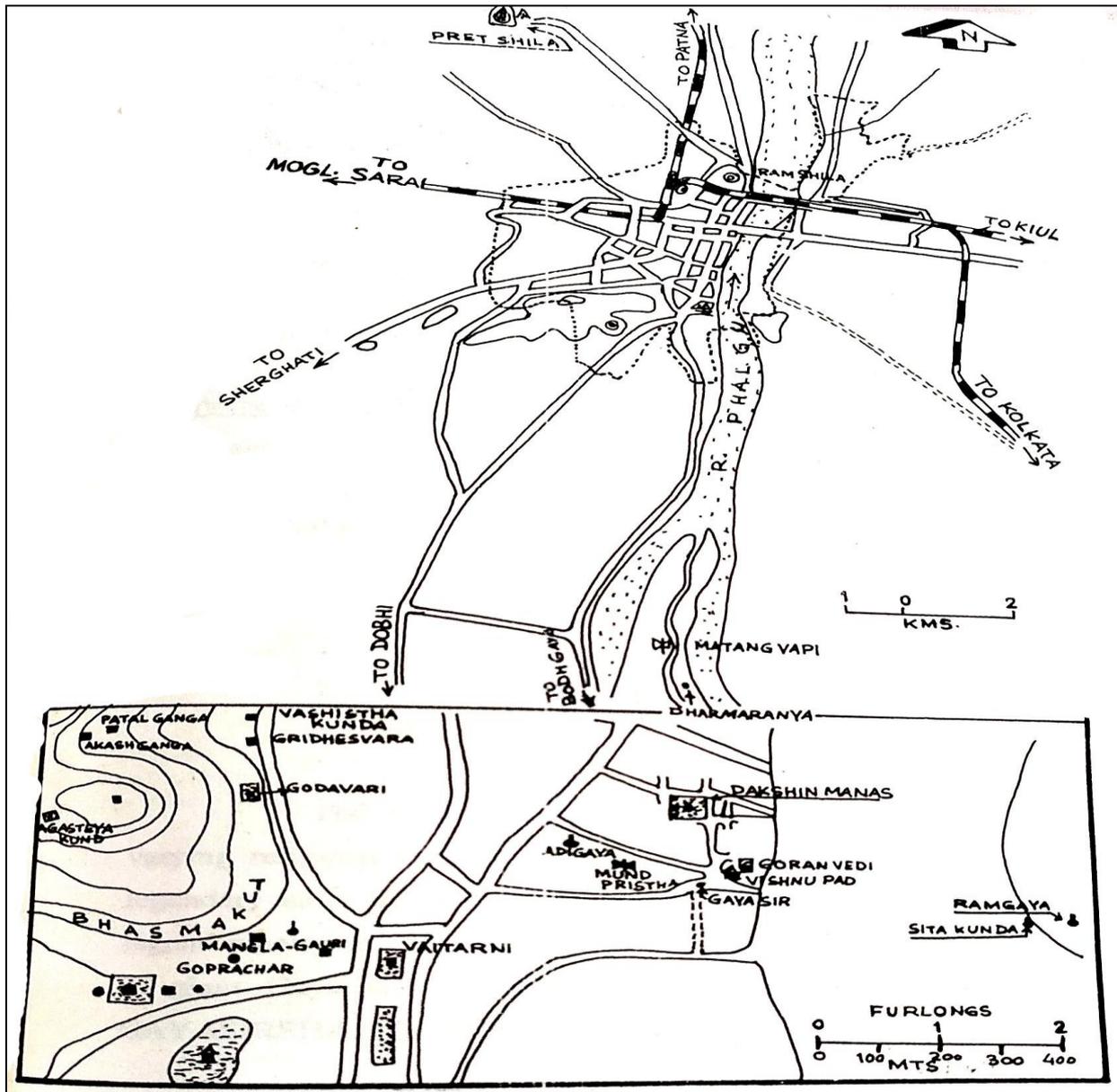
During the life-time of Buddha, Gaya acknowledged superiority to others in point of sanctity which may be known from the archaic Pali-writing "YASMA CHA LOKEGAYA SAMATTARA". From Mahavastu (V,III, P.324) and other Pali texts, it is known that during the time of Buddha, the tract

of Gaya was inhabited by two classes of a aboringinals-worshippers of the Demi-gods of “Nagas” (Muchilanda, Kamandaka, etc.) the rulers of the waters, and of ‘YASKSHAS’, the rulers of the rocks. The legend of Suchiloma was as old as the second century B.C., if not earlier. The Buddhist scripturers’ **SAMYUTTA-NIKAYA** and ‘SUTTA NIPATA’ informs us that in Buddha’s life-time, these existed a tower-like rude stone structure on the bank of the Gaya-tank (present Brahma Kunda at the foot of Pretsila, once noted for its hot-water spring), where the Yaskshas and Suchiloma (Needle-haired) and ‘KHARA’ (rough-skinned) lived. Buddha visited this tank and subdued the demon Suchiloma by his miraculors feats.⁸ “By the time of the rise of the Buddha the region of Gaya had not only come within the

pale of Aryandom and formed on integral part of the Magadhan Kingdom but had also acquired distinction as a place of Hindu pilgrimage.⁹ Gaya region gained fame as a place of Hindu pilgrimage both for sacred bathing and for fire-sacrifice. “Ceremonial bathing in the holy waters and oblations to sacrificial fire (AGGIHOTTA) constituted the daily or routine life of the matted-hair ascetics”.¹⁰

Bathing was a popular ceremony at this place. The Vernal ceremony of bathing was popular in region. During this occasion the pilgrims from all parts crowded the place and returned back after having a touch of the holy water. The season during the year for the ceremonial bathing was in the month of PHALGUNA (March-April).

SACRED SITES IN GAYA KSHETRA



“The function of great fire-sacrifice was ushered into existence by the RISHIS who were the cultured representatives of Indian knowledge and Wisdom”.¹¹ On this sacred-occasion the centre of attraction was a highly

distinguished body of the officiating Brahmanas and ascetics and the whole interest lay round the sacred-fire lit by these sacred personalities. The season for the Great fire-sacrifice (MAHAYANMA) of the JATILAS was probably SRAVANA

(July-August), the first month of the then current new year. There were three different patches of settlement of the JATILAS Brahman viz. (a) Gaya Proper, (b) Nadi and (c) Uruvela (Both –Gaya present). All the three settled regions had got its own leader and the three leaders are represented as three brothers who were actually the scions of an old and distinguished Brahmin family of Magadha. According to Hwen Thsang, the location of the three centers of Gaya, Nadi and Uruvela were from north to South, one below the other. But Prince Siddhartha's enlightenment at the land of Uruvela marks an epoch in the History of the Gaya region. Several Buddhist Shrines of much architectural and sculptural value were installed which were historically associated with Buddha's earlier wanderings and subsequent ponderings. Again the conversion of the JATILA- Brahmins to the new faith of Buddhism may also be taken a triumph of Buddhism over Brahmanism. In fine, with the changing historical effects "the Gaya proper or the city of Gaya remained as before a stronghold of Brahmanical Hinduism, while Buddhism gained predominance over the tract of Uruvela".¹²

The Epic Eulogium points out the established fame of Gaya as place of Hindu Pilgrimage, and specially as the place for the release of the departed spirits from the horrors of hell.

The entire landscape is dotted with a large number of sacred sites, which includes worship of hills, trees, river and tanks.¹⁵

According to the description of the Epic "Gaya proper, presents predominantly a scene of nature-worship, while the solitary phallic symbol of Lord Shiva marks just the commencement of the semi-iconic stage in the process of visualization of the image of the Divinity of the place."¹⁴ But Gaya had not attained the highest position in a day rather the place by the gradual steps of preference (PRADHANYA) has changed into its unrivalled seat of pre-eminence.

Site and situation

The city of Gaya is situated on the West bank of river Phalgu, on of the thirteen rivers of Magadh Division, which flows from South to north. The city is hill girdled. It has a ring of hills round her. The Ramsila Hill (715 feet) on the north, Katari Hill (454 feet) on the west and Brahmayoni Hill (793 feet) on the south Abgila is in east. To the northwest of the city is the Pretshila Hill (873 feet). So a view from the Brahmayoni, one on the five surrounding hills of the city, presents a striking picture of a lowland country dotted with hills. A view from the Ramshila hill also presents a very beautiful picture of the city of Gaya.¹⁵

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