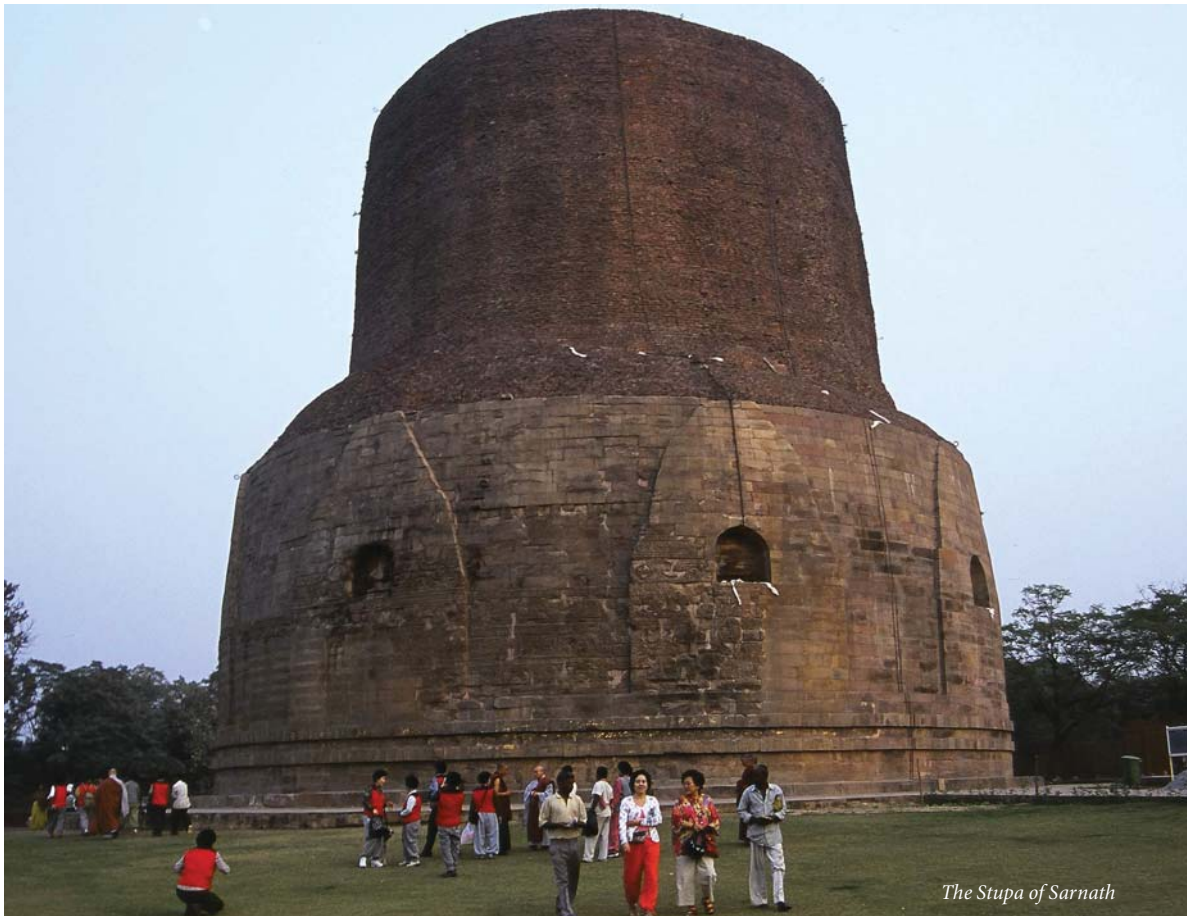


Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh

The First Enlightened Word

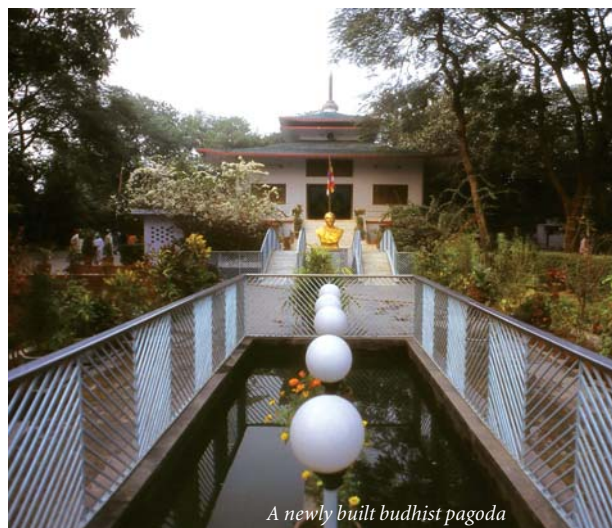
Both Gaya is perhaps the most famous Buddhist spot in the world, for it was here that Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment. But barely 250 km away is another landmark, Sarnath, almost on the outskirts of Varanasi, another holy city. As Sandeep Silas discovered Sarnath is also a major attraction for Buddhists as it was here that Buddha gave his first sermon. *Text by Sandeep Silas & Photos by Madhura Mukherjee.*



The Stupa of Sarnath

Some thoughts of the human mind as they occur, pause a moment or two, then just pass by. Some thoughts stay on for a while, become cause for an act, and then melt away. Some thoughts take roots, grow up like monumental trees, bear flower and fruit and sweeten human lives. It is this last variety of thoughts that are born in the minds of great men. It is these that are capable of moving mountains. It is these that change the destinies of not just the human race but an entire epoch. Such thoughts have the power to rewrite history, nay not by becoming a cause for destruction, but by their inherent peace, wisdom, and truth bringing about an understanding between communities. They are a source of life. They become life itself.

Sarnath, just outside Varanasi in eastern Uttar Pradesh, is the place where Buddha preached his first



A newly built Buddhist pagoda



The Shiva Linga of Sarnath, a nice assimilation of Buddhist & Hindu Mythology

sermon. Enlightenment was personal; uttering the eternal truth in words was universal. Gautam transcended the personal plane here and became Buddha, seated on the universal plateau. Sarnath, of the four holy places associated with Buddha's life, is pre-eminent, as he became a saint here with thoughts transcending the ordinary to the pure and supernatural word. Dharma Chakra Pravartana or the Turning of the Wheel of Law is how history has recorded this event of preaching the first sermon. The first Sangha took root at this very place. Buddhist texts mention the site as Rishipatana or Issipathana and Mrigadava or Mrigadaya. However, the modern name is— Saranganath – “Lord of Deers”. The Jains also hold the place in reverence, being the death place of Sreyansanatha, the 11th Trithankara. A series of excavations led in 1798 AD by Duncan and Col. E. Mackenzie, later in 1835-36 by A. Cunningham, in 1907 by John Marshall, and in 1914-15 by M H Hargreaves restored the entire Sarnath complex to its rightful place in history. The first eye-catching thing at Sarnath is the imposing platform of the Dharamarajika Stupa. A monolithic railing, made of Chunar sandstone, bearing the typical Mauryan polish, discovered in 1904-05 during an excavation by Oertel was probably the masthead of this stupa. The railing measures 2.54m in length and 1.45m in height. It bears two inscriptions, which refer to teachers of Sarvastivadin sect, about 3rd century AD. Three parallel designs on the railing hold attention. Curling waves, once bouncing right, once to the left are contained on both sides by a dainty stem. The stem opens up in bud



The ruins of Sarnath Stupa

like fashion and out flows another. Next is a criss-cross moving stem, separated as it turns, by a broad wave-like band. To the extreme is carved a pillar manifestation. Interestingly, the design in the middle is topped by a three-tiered dome— the embellishment perhaps drawing inspiration from a stupa, which rises skyward. On moving inside this open chamber you find a railing of massive proportions, which perhaps fell as the stupa descended earthwards and became a ruin. A circular rock, with a shaft hedged in its centre was seemingly a fixture in the building. Now it reminds you of the ascendant Buddhist thought of those days as it flew upwards from its earthen base. ■