

# The Ancient City of Kapilvastu-Revisited

- Swoyambhu D. Tuladhar

The ancient kingdom of Kapilvastu lying at the foothills of the Himalayas spread between the country of Kosala on the west and Koliyas on the east. It was known to be a stable kingdom flourishing during the time of King Suddhodhana, father of Prince Siddhartha Gautam. It was in the city of Kapilvastu that Prince Siddhartha Gautam spent his early years after his birth in Lumbini in 623 BC. We know that once Prince Siddhartha left Kapilvastu in search of truth at the age of 29 and attained enlightenment as Buddha, he did not return to live in Kapilvastu. After the death of King Suddhodhana, a gradual decline set in the country. For a long period Kapilvastu was left utterly desolate and forsaken. It lapsed into oblivion and was ruined beyond recognition. It is not clear how and why exactly the desolation of Kapilvastu started but some construction activities had taken place even after the place was in ruins. Huen Tsian during his visit in 6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. had mentioned about the monasteries and stupas built over the ruins of the royal precincts. In course of time Kapilvastu was almost forgotten and erased from the world map and the name of Kapilvastu remained known only in the old Buddhist Chronicles.

The search for the lost city of Kapilvastu started in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century after the translation of the notes of the great Chinese travelers. A. Cunningham identified Bhula in UP as Kapilvastu which was later proved untrue. In 1895 Kapilvastu was rediscovered along with the Niglihwa Asokan pillar with inscription, but not without controversy. The lost city of Kapilvastu was identified as Tilaura Kot until 1898, when W. Peppe found several relic caskets inside an old stupa in Piprahwa believed to contain the relics of Buddha. On the lid of the smaller vase an inscription was incised mentioning Sakyamuni and Sakya. But the date and the translation of the inscription in old Prakrit and Brahmi script were obscure and inconclusive. There was considerable difference of opinion regarding the date and the meaning of the inscription. The paleographic dating varied from 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD by various scholars. Different scholars interpreted the translation of the inscription differently. Some scholars interpreted that the relics are those of Buddha and some as those of Kinsmen of Buddha. Conflicting dating and translation confused the identification of

Kapilvastu. Vincent A. Smith in Nov. 1900 even suggested the theory of dual Kapilvastu.

However, the identification of Kapilvastu was treated as settled, based on the overwhelming evidences provided by the archaeological sites and antiquities around Tilaura Kot, until the discovery of two more caskets below Peppe's coffer in 1972 by K. M. Srivastava who complicated the matter further by bringing up the new theory of Piprahwa as the original Kapilvastu of the Sakya Clan. He put forward various conjectural hypotheses regarding the relics and the location of Kapilvastu. He was more obsessed with his belief that Piprahwa was the original city of Kapilvastu than analyzing the real facts discovered in Piprahwa and Tilaura Kot. Since then the discussion on the identification of the actual town of Kapilvastu resurfaced again. Today Piprahwa is being recognized and developed as the ancient city of Kapilvastu in India and Tilaura Kot is being developed as the original site of the Kapilvastu in Nepal which sounds quite untrue. This has brought confusion in the World Buddhist community. The dispute of the location of the ancient city of Kapilvastu between scholars of India and Nepal is quite unique. In this planet nowhere do we find such type of scholarly dispute between two countries.

Various scholars supporting their opinions and views about the actual location of Kapilvastu came forward with many arguments, reasons, evidences and facts. In this article I will be discussing the position of Kapilvastu as noted by the Chinese travelers and with respect to the position of the three Asokan Pillars found in Nepal Terai because the locations and inscriptions of the pillars are important indications for the actual identification of the lost city of Kapilvastu. Actual historical facts and figures with archaeological evidences will be considered rather than depending upon the mythical legends, romances, stories and hypothetical presumptions. As

A. Cunningham (1871) had rightly said "The monuments themselves cannot enable us to indicate the real site, unless an ancient description of the monument is found or it speaks through the inscriptions." In Kapilvastu we have today the remains of the monument erected in third century BC with clear-cut inscriptions left behind by King Asoka and also seen later by the travelers who visited the site in the sixth century AD. They are the most reliable and authentic evidences supporting to justify the actual identification of Kapilvastu. This vital evidence have been by passed by K.M. Srivastava.

From the time of Mahaparinirvana of Buddha till the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century AD we know of four great Visitors to Kapilvastu who have left behind valuable evidence which later contributed to the identifications of various Buddhist sites in India, Nepal and Pakistan. They are King Asoka, Chinese traveler Fah Hien, Chinese traveler Huen Tsian and King Ripu Malla.

King Asoka visited Kapilvastu in 249 BC with his spiritual advisor Upagupta. He erected numerous stone pillars and stupas. In Nepal three Asokan Pillars have been found so far one each in Lumbini, Niglisagar and Gotihwa. They are the only three structural elements found today credited to Asoka in Kapilvastu. Lumbini and Niglihwa Pillars are inscribed and dated. The Lumbini and Gotihwa Pillars are in situ. Huen Tsian witnessed all the three pillars during his visit to Kapilvastu in 6<sup>th</sup> Century AD. In 1177 AD Ripu Malla engraved the date of his visit in the Lumbini and Niglihwa Piller. All three pillars were erected within the dominion of Kapilvastu of which two were in the vicinity of the city of Kapilvastu. Of the two, one of them have been found in Gotihwa and second one at Niglihwa in Nepal.

In Gotihwa the lower part of the stump standing on a sandstone base was found. The upper part of the pillar with the inscription has broken off and is missing. Three fragments of the pillars were found

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around the village and one of them is a portion of the bell shaped base which is about 1'-7" in height and 1'-8 1/2" broad. The pillar is about 10' - 6" long and is standing on a sandstone base stone. There is no damage to the surface of the stem and there are no signs of any dents due to the intentional hammering to the pillar. The sharp edges at the point where the pillar was broken indicates that the pillar was damaged due to the natural disaster and the damage is not very old. The assumption that the pillar was carried from some other place to its present position is quite remote and highly unlikely. The pillar is still fixed to its original position. The pillar is standing next to an ancient stupa on a base stone placed in a pit 7-8 feet deep over rock bedding. It is not simple to erect a pillar 30-40 feet tall weighing fifty tons. Great accuracy and engineering precision is required to erect such pillar and is against any engineering norm to dig a pit, prepare a rock foundation, place the base slab, erect 50 ton pillar and then shift it to the intended place. The only uncertainty of the Gotihwa Pillar is that there is no inscription on the pillar. The upper stem with the inscription is missing. The identification of the Gotihwa Pillar with Krakuchanda pillar could be confirmed by the description of Huen Tsian. He had mentioned three pillars erected by Asoka in Kapilvastu commemorating the birthplace Kanakmuni Buddha, Krakuchanda Buddha and Sakyamuni Buddha. The pillar of Lumbinigrama of Sakyamuni Buddha and the Kanakmuni pillar of Niglihwa have been found with inscription so the third one has to be Gotihwa Pillar for there are no records of other pillars erected by Asoka in Kapilvastu. The distance and bearing given by Fah Hien and Huen Tsian between Kapilvastu and the town of Krakuchanda Buddha quite matches with the distance and direction between Tilaura Kot and Gotihwa.

Niglihwa Pillar was found the bank of a lake in two pieces. Top portion 14'-9 1/2" in length was found

at the bank of Niglisagar. It was lying over a small tree, which indicates that it was in that position as recently as only 20 years before its discovery. Second 10'-0" piece was found half buried with inscribed part visible. The pillar was not in situ and the place of its origin is not known but it's inscription proves that it was previously located at the town of Kanakmuni Buddha about a yojana (7-9 miles) from the city of Kapilvastu. The bottom part of the base along with the base is missing. After closely examining the pillar even though it seems to be badly mutilated it does not look as if the pillar was initially damaged intentionally. The damage must be due to the natural cause. The deep cuts at the edges are not intentional and there are no sign of dents from hammering while trying to damage the pillar. The buried part of the inscribed piece has pointed edges indicating the breakage similar to the Gotihwa Pillar. The pillar exhibited the most important evidence for the identification of Kapilvastu. The inscription confirmed the erection of the commemorative pillar by Asoka for Past Buddha in the town of Kanakmuni. It is mentioned that he doubly enlarged the stupa in his 14<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, personally visited the place and erected the pillar on his 20<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. There is collateral evidence that the town of Kanakmuni is located at the neighborhood of city of Kapilvastu. Huen Tsian who visited the town nine hundred years after it was erected confirmed the existence of the pillar and its position. As per him it was in a neighborhood of about 6-7 miles South East of the town of Kapilvastu and today it was found at about 3 miles North East of Tilaura Kot. G. Buhler in his article "The Asoka Edicts of Paderia and Niglihwa" in 1898 after finding Huen Tsian's note about Kanakmuni Buddha pillar that the city of Kapilvastu should be in the neighborhood of Niglihwa. The finding of both the Gotihwa and Niglisagar pillars at the neighborhood of Tilaura Kot clearly indicates that Tilaura Kot is the

actual position of the city of Kapilvastu. It is further backed by the findings of 12-15 feet thick walled fortress surrounded by a moat in Tilura Kot and the discovery of the terracotta seal containing the legend Sa-ka-na-sya;

Fah Hien and Huen Tsian provided the location of the prominent towns, cities and places around the vicinity of Kapilvastu. They have given distances and bearings of all the places with short stories and description. How they measured the distances and fixed the directions are still a big controversy because they both differ from each other about the distances and directions between places. Their means of transportation and the method used for the measurements of the distances and the directions are unknown to us. We do not know if they had used compasses and other instruments to provide directions and the distances accurately. The bearing was given in eight cardinal directions only. But it is believed that the Chinese had discovered Magnet around I-II Century AD. They both gave the distances mostly in Li Le or Yojana and not in terms of days walk. It is highly probable that the measurement used by Huen Tsian is completely different from what was used by Fah Hien. The exact equivalent values of the Li and Yojana used by them are not clear. Today all we can do is guess using various mathematical interpretations. C. F. Fleet in his article on Imaginary Yojana published in JRAS the value of Yojana ranges between 4.5 to 9 Miles which is quite a big difference. A. Cunningham in Ancient Geography of India had also given different equivalents. Kapilvastu is not a big country and the distances between the towns and places are not very long but the roads connecting the towns and the places could not have been straight like the highway connecting Delhi and Jaipur today. The roads in that period were rough and had to pass through rough terrain, thick jungles and cross many small and big rivers. The direct distances from today's map cannot

be used to match the distances noted by the Chinese travelers. The actual distance of the winding road should be considered. K. M. Srivastva had used the direct distance in his identification of Kapilvastu. As he said in his report "The third indication for the identity of Piprahwa with Kapilvastu appeared from the records of the Chinese travelers Fah-Hien. According to him Lumbini (The Birth Place of Buddha) should be nine miles east of Kapilvastu which corresponds very well with the ancient site of Piprahwa". He failed to consider the distances with respect to other places. The roads must be winding through the jungles, crossing the rivers at the convenient places. Even today the rivers are quite treacherous in Nepalese Terai. So we cannot completely just rely on the distances and directions provided by the Chinese travelers as the clue to identify location of proper city of Kapilvastu. The location and position of the monuments mentioned by the Chinese traveler fifteen hundred years ago and their positions today have to be considered for the identification of the location of Kapilvastu which K. M. Srivastva completely ignored.

The description of Fah Hien and Huen Tsian of their graphic accounts of the various sites in the city of Kapilvastu and its suburbs do not match. There are differences between the description about what they saw and the distances and the bearings provided by them. They visited the same place but described the place differently. This may be probably due to the long time span between their visits. They visited the place 200 hundred years apart and it is apparent that there must have been big changes in the size and position of the places mentioned by them. In two hundred years big changes to the landscaping of the towns and villages are apparent. Some towns and villages must have disappeared from the map altogether with new ones popping up. So it is highly probable that the description of some of the places

seen by Huen-Tsian are different from those seen by Fah-Hien two hundred years earlier. But the interesting part here is that their description of the same place with same story is different from one another in size, distance, direction and contents. Their distances and bearings of the spot of Buddha's Birthplace in Lumbini, Kanakmuni and Krakachunda Buddha town do not correspond. Fah Hien did not see all three Asokan pillars of Kapilvastu. The pillars standing thirty feet above the ground with majestic capital were missed by Fah Hien. Asokan stone pillars must have stood out prominently among the rest of the construction of that period, which is usually of wood or brick with mud mortar. It is inconceivable that any body would miss seeing such a monument had he visited the actual site. Niglihwa Pillar was still standing when Ripu Malla visited the town as late as 12<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Fah Hien had mentioned the pillars of Jetavana Vihara in Sravasti which were also noted by Huen Tsian 200 years later. Both the Chinese Travelers did not also mention the Piprahwa Stupa which K. M. Srivastava claimed to have been built over the one eighth share of Buddha's relics in Kapilvastu by the Sakyas where as both of them have mentioned the stupa built over the one eighth share of Buddha's relics by the king of Ramagrama. Their description of various sites at Sravasti also matches. This shows that they either did not visit the same city of Kapilvastu or visited different suburbs of Kapilvastu. After analyzing Huen Tsian and Fah Hien notes one can with certainty say that they both saw the same Kapilvastu but Fah Hien saw the wrong town of Kanakmuni and Krakuchanda. Hypothetically it is possible to see another site with layout of monuments similar to Kapilvastu and presume that it is Kapilvastu. It happened in 19<sup>th</sup> century when A. Cunningham identified Bhuila in the Basti Dist. of UP as the original Kapilvastu and was later proved wrong.

Both the Chinese travelers differ from each

other about the location of the Kanakmuni and Krakachunda towns. Huen Tsian placed the birth place of Krakuchand Buddha as 50 li South from the Kapilvastu where as Fah Hien placed it 1.4 yojana south west of Kapilvastu. Both have placed Krakachunda town in the southerly direction whereas Kanakmuni town is placed in the opposite directions. Fah Hien placed Kanakmuni town on the westerly direction where as Huen Tsian in easterly direction. So who is right? Fah Hien or Huen Tsian? Srivastava has claimed that Fah-Hien's position about Kapilvastu is the correct one. If we assume the position of Piprahwa as Kapilvastu as suggested by K. M. Srivastava the town of Kanakmuni and Krakachunda have to be around Piprahwa and the broken pillars of Niglisagar and Gotihwa must have been transported from about 7-8 miles west and 11-12 miles south west of Piprahwa respectively which is quite remote. There is no way to prove that they were taken to Niglihwa and Gotihwa from the vicinity of Piprahwa. Above all there are no traces of existence of any one of the numerous ancient towns in the neighborhood of Piprahwa. The old Buddhist Chronicles and the description of the Chinese Travelers had mentioned the existence of many towns and villages in the neighborhood of the city of Kapilvastu. In the neighborhood of Piprahwa within a radius of 6-7 miles no important monuments of Archaeological value have been found except in Ganawaria (See plate I). Piprahwa by its archaeological findings and its location do not have the character of a central town or a political center of a state or a country. Every town or city, which seats the political power and is the economical center acts like a core nucleus with satellite towns radiating in all directions from it. The city of Kapilvastu may not be a big town or city but was the center of a country or a state. The evidences found in Piprahwa are not substantial enough to back the identification of the old lost city of Kapilvastu.

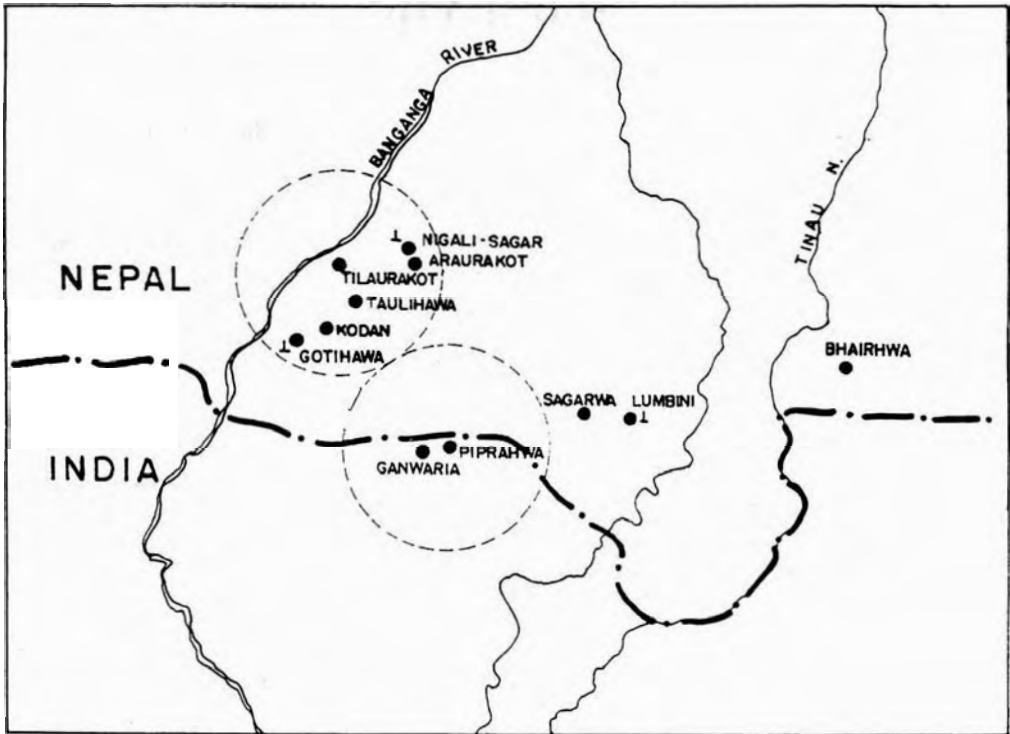
Evidences found in Piprahwa do not reflect any urban character. Piprahwa by its findings is a large monastic zone on the remote southern border of Kapilvastu and the Stupa found belonged to a group of various ranking monks of the Monastery.

As mentioned in the old Buddhist Chronicles and the description of the Chinese Travelers in the neighborhood of Tilaurakot many ancient remains of Archaeological value of that period have been found to back the identification of Kapilvastu. Tilaurakot is surrounded by towns and villages with ancient monuments within a radius of 8-10 miles like Taulihwa, Niglihwa, Sgrahwa, Gotihwa, Chitradei, Arura Kot, Lori-Kudan, Chitradei etc.

Thus, in a nutshell, based on the description of the Chinese travelers, the position of Gotihwa Asokan Pillar, Inscription of Niglihwa Asokan pillar, the thick walled fortress with moat in Tilaurakot, the seal denoting Sa-ka-na-sya, numerous archaeological sites and antiquities discovered around Tilaurakot, we can conclude that the ancient city of Kapilvastu has to be located in close vicinity of Tilaurakot and not Piprahwa.

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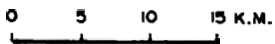
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### KAPILVASTU & ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AROUND TILAUROKOT & PIPRAHWA  
WITHIN A RADIUS OF 8 KILOMETERS

1 LOCATION OF ASHOKAN PILLARS IN NEPAL



SWOYAMBHU & ASSOCIATES  
THAPATHALI, KATHMANDU  
DATE 10-10-2002