

TRACING THE ROOTS OF GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF STŪPA IN INDIAN CONTEXT: INPUTS FROM LITERATURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Stūpa, primarily a funerary monument, was made immensely popular as an architectural creation to entomb the corporeal remains (*śāririka*), or the items used (*pāribhogika*) by Buddha or highly venerated monks. Many times, a *Stūpa* was raised in memory of an important event, or for seeking merit, or for thanksgiving (*uddesika*). For the Buddhists this structural form became so popular, meritorious and sacred that much of India (subcontinent) and many of her neighbouring countries were virtually dotted with *Stūpas*, also known as *chaityas*. Literally, a *Stūpa*, means a pile (of earth, stone or bricks or any other things), while a *chaitya* should be basically a built structure. In the Buddhist context both the terms become synonyms of a sacred funerary construction that is hemispherical in form, obviously raised on a circular plan. Regarding the antiquity of the form and sanctity of *Stūpas* the sayings of Buddha are often quoted to show that it was an older tradition, and in this regard, the series of hemispherical tumuli at Nandangarh are also cited as pre-Buddhist in time, albeit a few of them were subsequently appropriated by the Buddhists. Archaeologically speaking, there is little to trace the tradition of raising *Stūpas* or *chaityas* much back in time. It is most significant that, the Harappa cemetery at Dholavira seems to have yielded evidence of exceeding importance.

At Dholavira, two out of six large hemispherical tumuli, which stand out prominently were investigated besides several other memorial graves. Excavation has revealed that those, which are arbitrarily designated as Tumulus-1 and Tumulus-2, were in fact built structures made of mud-brick of the Harappan standard round a large and deep rock cut chamber. Brick

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work of each was made in two tiers—a circular basal platform and a massive peripheral ring built on it—and the open shaft, above the chamber was filled in with sand and earth or stone or earth in a manner that the whole assumed a hemispherical form. It was also found that the Tumulus-1 was additionally furnished with radial walls emanating from the ring wall to run toward the central area which had a flatted top, while in the case of the other both these features were absent and the top was domical. While in case of the latter the central chamber could not be evacuated fully, the former contained offerings of pottery and jewellery, but no corporeal whatsoever as was the usual norm in respect of almost all graves (barring one exception) opened in the cemetery at Dholavira. Such hemispherical funerary monuments are the first of their kind found hitherto far in any Harappan, for that matter in any protohistoric, context in the subcontinent.

In order to trace the antiquity of hemispherical funerary monument a peep into the past proved to be very profitable. Significantly, the later *Vedic* literature (*Maitrāyaṇī-saṁhitā*, *Taittīriya-saṁhitā* and *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* and the *Śulba-sūtras* (*Baudhāyana*, *Āpastamba*, *Kātyāyana* and *Mānava*) mention, among others, a chariot-wheel altar (*ratha-chakra-chiti*), obviously built in the form of a wheel. It is also stated in the text that such altars are constructed both for sacrificial purpose (*agni-chayana*) and as funerary structure (*śmaśāna-chiti*). *Baudhāyana* speaks of its two variants, viz. one as a spoke wheel (*sāraratha-chakra chiti*) and the other as a wheel with a rim (only) (*sapradhiratha-chakra-chiti*). These two types, not only strongly recall, but also correspond well with Tumulus-1 and Tumulus-2 so far as the basal layout on a circular platform, built around a chamber symbolizing a grave, is concerned.

The very concept of adopting a wheel as a design is highly significant as it is a symbol of the sun and the eternal time, life, motion, renewal and immortality as gleaned from the *R̥gveda* and the later literature. And, the same was adopted in Buddhism with different connotation as the Master after his enlightenment set in motion the wheel of *dhamma* (*dhamma-chakra-pravartana*) at Sarnath. It was why a wheel was shown surmounting

four roaring lions in the capital of the pillar raised at the site where Buddha delivered his first sermon. Of course, it was most appropriate to raise a sacred Stūpa on a basal layout of a wheel or a spoke wheel as can be seen at Sanghol (Punjab), Alluru, Nagarjunikonda (Andhra Pradesh), and, if looked for, most of such monuments would follow design of a wheel, with or without spokes or some other sacred symbol like swastika (examples are there). It is formally believed that the tradition of raising a funerary monument in the form of hemispherical Stūpa is deeply rooted in the past going back to the 3rd millennium B.C.E. Hence, in the present paper an attempt has been made to trace the root of birth and evolution of Stūpa architecture in Indian context based on the evidences found from literature and archaeology.