

TIMELESS LUMBINI BUDDHA'S BIRTHPLACE

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Now and then undreamed surprises happen in our lives. My visit to timeless Lumbini was such an unimagined surprise for me. I was in Kathmandu for an international refresher programme organized by the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) under the auspices of International Institute of Journalism and Communication (IIJC) in November 2007.

The Refresher Programme mentioned a full day exposure trip to historical and cultural heritage sites. A tourist information leaflet mentioned that the Kathmandu Valley boasts of seven UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites all within a radius of 20 kilometers. I was hoping to visit some of them.

But I never thought about going to Lumbini some 300 kilometers away from Kathmandu. Of course, I have heard and read about Lumbini as the birthplace of Lord Buddha. But I never imagined to go to Lumbini, in the midst of blockades, stopping traffic for looting and political insurrections which were happening often in Nepal.

So I was pleasantly surprised to see the Lumbini visit in the schedule of Nepal UCIP Refresher Programme 2007 when I reached at the venue on November 14.

After a very enlightening talk by Dr. Pratyoush Onta, the Director of "Martin Chautari" research centre and a sumptuous lunch in St. Xavier's College Terrace Canteen we set out for Lumbini in a 20-seat mini bus with push-back seats on November 17.

The three cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur in Kathmandu Valley lies about 3500 meter high within the sight of Himalayan peaks like Kanjanganga including the highest Mt. Everest at 8,848 meter. The bus ride from Kathmandu to Lumbini in the plain on winding roads along Narayani river offers breathtaking views of mountains and ravines with green vegetation and thick forests.

The road was good up to Narayanghat but the traffic was heavy and at one place we were held up for an hour and a half. The expected 7 to 8 hour trip took us more than 9 hours and we reached Lumbini at 10.30 pm.

The organizer and leader of our group Mr. Chirendra Satyal had made good arrangements for boarding and lodging in Siddhartha Restaurant less than a kilometer away from the main entrance of Sacred Garden Lumbini.

Refreshed with a good sleep and breakfast on November 18 morning we walked to Sacred Garden Lumbini. Lumbini situated in the foothills of the Churiya range, the birthplace of Lord Buddha is a place of pilgrimage for devotees and tourists from around the world. We could see both pilgrims and tourists of many nationalities there already in the early morning.

As we approached the monuments a tourist guide or information officer briefed us about the place and gave us each a copy of a brochure on Lumbini prepared by Lumbini Development Trust (LDT).

Lumbini the birthplace of Lord Buddha is a world Heritage site. The place was known for the beautiful shady grove of lush green trees and colourful flowers. Maya Devi, the queen of Sakya King Suddhodana of Kapilavastu on the way to her maternal hometown Devadaha was passing through the area. It was full moon day (vaisakhapournima) of 623 B.C. In the place there was a well, Puskarini where she took bath. While proceeding on her way she felt labour pain and took support of the branch of a tree and gave birth to the prince Siddhartha.

We went to Puskarini, the place of the well which is now a large square pond with tortoise and fish in it. An old Hindu couple did puja (veneration) to Puskarini and threw a currency note into the water. On one side of Puskarini is the Maya Devi Temple and the other side there is a huge tree with a parapet built around it with a picture of a Hindu god facing Puskarini and a pujari sitting there receiving and blessing the devotees. The old couple went to the pujari for his blessing and prasad, offering blessed by God.

On another side of Maya Devi Temple stands the Ashoka Pillar which bears the first epigraphic evidence of the birth place of Lord Buddha. The inscription written in Brahmi script and Pali language is translated as follows:

“Twenty years after his coronation, King Priyadarsi, Beloved of Gods visited this spot in person and offered worship at this place, because Buddha, the Sage of the Sakyas, was born here. He caused to be built a stone wall around the place and also erected this stone pillar to commemorate his visit...”

This inscription is the most noteworthy monument and historic document of the birthplace of Lord Buddha in Lumbini. There was a group of Japanese pilgrims praying near the Ashoka Pillar led by a Buddhist monk.

Then, we went to the front of Maya Devi Temple and entered in it. Maya Devi shrine complex is the heart of all monuments at this timeless place Lumbini. The complex bears testimony of several layers of constructions over the centuries. The government of Nepal and LDT jointly restored the temple and reopened it on May 16, 2003, on the 2547th birth anniversary of Lord Buddha.

When we entered a large number of pilgrims of different nationalities were sitting around and reciting prayers loudly led by a leader.

In the centre of the temple a white marker stone covered with bulletproof glass pinpoints the exact location of the birth of Lord Buddha. Through a raised platform the pilgrims and tourists can go very close and see the marker stone. Above it is seen the Nativity Sculpture with the image of Maya Devi holding the branch a tree with her right hand for support. Next to Maya Devi is her own sister Gautami Prajapati in supporting posture in the time of delivery. The newly born Prince Siddhartha is standing upright. The Sculpture is dated back to 4th century A.D.

Visiting the holy site and standing there motionless was an experience of timelessness. The tourist brochure quotes the words of Buddha from Mahaparinivana Sutta: “Ananda, this (Lumbini) place is where the Tathagata was born, this is a place, which should be visited and seen by a person of devotion and which would cause awareness and apprehension of the nature of impermanence...”

Today one can say that Buddha’s words has come true. There are a number of places of interest close to Maya Devi Temple and we spent the whole morning visiting them. In one temple of prayer we spent time in Buddhist meditation by sitting quiet and experiencing timelessness.

Chirendra and others too told us that the then Secretary General of United Nations (UNO), U. Thant visited Lumbini in 1967 and he wept at the neglect of the sacred garden Lumbini. His visit became a milestone in the history of Lumbini as it led Lumbini being developed as an international pilgrimage and tourist centre. U Thant helped in the formation of 15 members nation committee in 1970 for the development of Lumbini. Today Lumbini is in a fast development mode. Lumbini master plan covers an area of 1 x 3 square miles comprising three Zones of a square mile each: 1) Sacred Garden Zone, 2) Monastic Zone and 3) New Lumbini village.

We spent the whole afternoon till late evening visiting the monastic zone and a part of Lumbini village. No vehicles except pedal rickshaws are allowed to go in from the front entrance. But thanks to the owner of the restaurant, where we were staying, who accompanied us in our bus and took us inside by the back gate of the Lumbini sacred gardens and showed us the way to visit different national Buddhist monasteries and other institutions.

The first temple which we visited was to me the most beautiful one: The Great Lotus Stup built by Tara Foundation, Germany. We visited also Chinese Monastery (China), Vietnam Phat Quoc Tu (Vietnam), Myanmar Golden Stup (Myanmar) & Monastery, International Nuns’ Society (Nepal). Eternal Peace Flame, Peace Bell and Crane Sanctuary, etc. Many countries have monasteries being built in various stages of construction.

The last place we visited was the huge World Peace Stup build by Japan. Close to the Stup was a Buddhist temple and monastery. Prayer was in progress in the temple with a monk playing a huge drum and leading the prayer with other monks. We also joined the prayer and each one of us was given a hand-held drum and stick to rhythmically beat and recite the prayers.

My visit to timeless Lumbini will remain etched in my memory for the rest of my life. It is an unforgettable experience of timelessness.(Contact: ciss@satyam.net.in)