

Genesis of Stupas

Shubham Jaiswal¹, Avlokita Agrawal² and Geethanjali Raman³

^{1, 2} *Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, India*

{ar.shubhamjaiswal@gmail.com}

{avlokita.agrawal@gmail.com}

³ *Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology, Ahmedabad, India*

{geethanjali.raman@gmail.com}

Abstract: Architecturally speaking, the earliest and most basic interpretation of stupa is nothing but a dust burial mound. However, the historic significance of this built form has evolved through time, as has its rudimentary structure. The massive dome-shaped “anda” form which has now become synonymous with the idea of this Buddhist shrine, is the result of years of cultural, social and geographical influences. The beauty of this typology of architecture lies in its intricate details, interesting motifs and immense symbolism, reflected and adapted in various local contexts across the world. Today, the word “stupa” is used interchangeably while referring to monuments such as pagodas, wat, etc. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to understand the ideology and the concept of a stupa, with a focus on tracing its history and transition over time. The main objective of the research is not just to understand the essence of the architectural and theological aspects of the traditional stupa but also to understand how geographical factors, advances in material, and local socio-cultural norms have given way to a much broader definition of this word, encompassing all forms, from a simplistic mound to grand, elaborate sanctums of great value to architecture and society as a whole.

Keywords: Stupas; Buddhist architecture; Ideology; Pagodas; Dagabas; Chortens.

1. Introduction

The stupa (“stupa” is Sanskrit for “heap”) is a sepulchral and/or commemorative structure designed to encase Buddhist relics and other holy objects. (Grover, 2010) This word is now used for the pre-eminent type of Buddhist monument, which is at least a freestanding mound, usually with a circular drum (Medhi) forming the base for a massive solid dome (anda) topped by a turret (chattri), while the bell or dome-shaped mound covers the relics or holy objects. At its simplest, a stupa is a dirt burial mound faced with stone. Stupas exist all over the world and are one of the oldest Buddhist monuments. Historically, stupas have been symbolize and represent the following elements:

1. The Buddha,
2. The path to Enlightenment,
3. A mountain and
4. The universe all at the same time. (Shelby, 2012)

As the stupa architecturally becomes more complicated, so the word “Stupa” is applied in general to monuments and whole temples, interchangeable in referring to many sites with words such as Pagoda, Wat, Candi. This paper is thus, an exploration into the evolution of the ancient Indian stupa, and its correlation with present skyline stupa forms i.e. the stupas constructed with modern methods, materials, concepts and come to a conclusion of evolution that can be followed for further research.

2. History of Stupas

The earliest known mention of the word “stupa” occurs in several ancient scripts. Rigveda refers to a Stupa raised by the King Varuna above the forest in a place having no foundation (Rigveda; verse 28). The word ‘*estuka*’ is also used in the same sense in Rigveda, probably by then anything raised on the ground like a heap/pile might have been known as Stupa. However, the Pali word ‘*thupa*’ is quite similar to the term ‘Stupa’. Thupa means a conical heap, a pile or a mound or a conical or bell-shaped shrine containing a relic (Panth, 1976).

According to mythological sources, following the cremation of Buddha, his ashes were divided into eight parts and distributed among various rulers to be enshrined at special burial mounds (Cunningham, 1960). After a few decades of Buddha's Nirvana, mound of clay or mud changed to decorated objects of veneration (Brown, 2014). Emperor Ashoka, 274–236 BCE Maurya Empire, redistributed the relics housed in the original stupas into 84,000 stupas throughout the world. (Shelby, 2012), (Brown, 2014), (Cunningham, 1960). While this is an exaggeration and the stupas were built by Ashoka some 250 years after the Buddha's death, Ashoka is also credited with the construction of numerous stupas that remain to this day, including those at Sanchi and Sarnath. (Sahai, 2006).

3. Global Expansion of Stupas

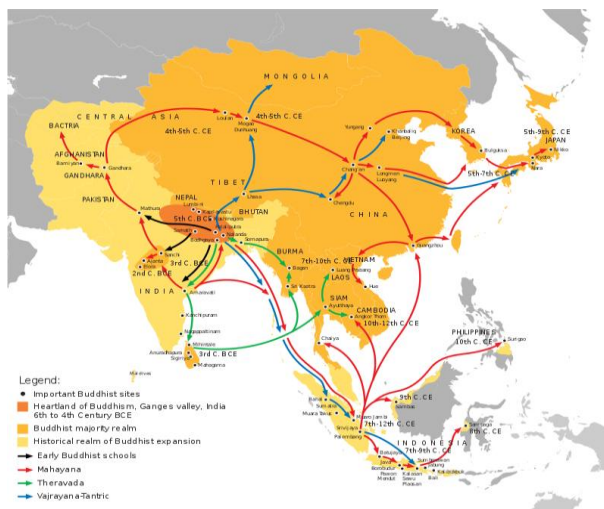


Figure 1: Global expansion of Stupas

Stupa expansion, from Buddhist heartland in northern India (dark orange) starting 6th century BC, to Buddhist majority realm (orange), and historical extent of Buddhism influences (yellow). Mahayana (red arrow), Theravada (green arrow), and Tantric-Vajrayana (blue arrow)

3.1. Sects Associated with Stupas

After the Buddha's death, stupa worship became increasingly popular. With King Aśoka's (r. 268–232 BCE) conversion to Buddhism and its subsequent patronage, stupa worship spread throughout India. Various religious orders developed around the doctrine of the stupa. Some of these orders and sects are mentioned below:

1. THERAVADA BUDDHISM: Oldest form monastic path. Dominant form today in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

2. MAHAYANA BUDDHISM: Philosophical movement for universal salvation. Bodhisattvas or Buddhahood (becoming a Buddha) to liberate all creatures in the universe from suffering.

3. TANTRIC BUDDHISM: Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism, or Vajrayana (the Vehicle of the Thunderbolt). An offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, the origins traced to ancient Hindu and Vedic practices. Described as offering a shortcut to enlightenment. Initiates worked closely with a spiritual guide -Tibetan Buddhism.

4. Construction Ideology

While they can vary visually, all stupas have a few features in common. Every stupa contains a treasury filled with various objects—small offerings, or *Tsa-Tsas*, fill the majority of the treasury, while jewelry and other precious objects are also placed within. It is believed that the more the objects placed into the treasury, the stronger the stupa's energy. The Tree of Life, a wooden pole covered with gems and mantras, is an important element of every stupa and is placed in the stupa's central channel during an initiation ceremony, where participants' most powerful wishes are stored.

The earliest stupas contained portions of the Buddha's ashes, and as a result, the stupa began to be associated with the body of the Buddha. "The Stupa is truly the image, or rather the epiphany, of the Buddha, of his Law that rules the universe, and is moreover a psycho-cosmogram. (Sahai, 2006). The form, suggested by the apparent aspect of the vault of the sky, implies in its turn the total presence and intangibility of the Buddha, who in this way is seen not as a human teacher but as the essence of the Universe." (Boundless, 2018)

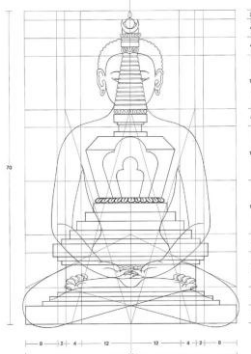


Figure 2: *Tsa - Tsa*;

5. Types of Stupas

According to A. Cunningham, Maisey and Foucher the Stupas can be classified into five categories (Cunningham, 1960)

5.1. Relic stupas

Relic stupas are those in which the relics of Buddha and other religious persons are buried. - SANCHI.

5.2. Object stupas

Object stupas are those in which the objects belonging to the Buddha or his disciples are buried. - VAISHALI .

5.3. Commemorative stupas

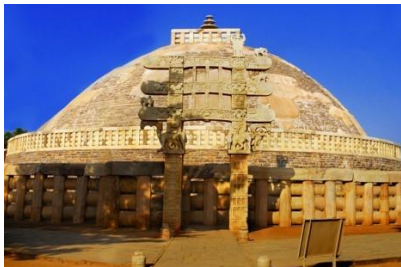
Commemorative stupas are those which are built to commemorate events in the life of Buddha and his disciples. - ANURADHAPURA

5.4. Symbolic stupas

Symbolic stupas are those which are built to symbolize various aspects of Buddhist theology. - LEH

5.5. Votive stupas

Votive stupas are constructed to commemorate visits or gain spiritual benefits. can be made from metal, stone, glass, etc



Relic Stupa - Great Stupa - Sanchi



Object Stupa - Buddha Stupa - Vaishali



Votive Stupa - Stone



Commemorative Stupa - Jetavanaramaya Stupa
- Anuradhapura



Symbolic Stupa - Shanti Stupa - Leh



Votive Stupa - Glass

Figure 3: Types of Stupas

6. Evolution of stupas

6.1 Morphological development

6.1.1 India and Nepal

The first true stupas were constructed after the reign of Ashoka. While Indian stupas consist of a solid hemisphere surrounded by a railing, other stupas such as the great stupa at Borobodur (built a thousand years after the one at Sanchi) are considerably more complex. Unlike the Sanchi stupa, the one at Borobodur consists of a polygonal base, with steps leading up to the summit and punctuated by as many as 72 smaller stupas along the way.

Another distinct type of stupa architecture prevalent in India during Ashoka's reign was associated with rock-cut caves. The term 'chaitya' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Chita' (The mound of ashes formed by the cremation of a dead body). The earliest 'rock-cut' sanctuaries date back to c. 200 B.C. Eventually, it came to mean the earth mound heaped over the ashes or relics of a saint, and chaitya became thus 'worshipful'. These chambers were carved as retreats for ascetics and monks. The architecture resembled the wooden structures of the time, with barrel-vaulted interiors and vertical grooves on the walls to imitate wooden beams and members. Even the thatched vedikas and toranas of the 'built-up' stupas were made to resemble parallel developments in wood-work.



Figure 4:
Dhamek Stupa,
Sarnath
AjantaCaves,
Aurangabad

6.1.2 Tibet

In Tibet, the Indian stupa underwent several architectural transformations. The change is most apparent to the anda or dome at its summit. While the Indian stupa consists of a circular dome, the Tibetan chorten adopts a more elliptical form, like an oval above a rectangular base. The summit also comprises of a series of ring-shaped enclosing 'umbrellas', crowned by a disc.

The Tibetan Chorten has at least 8 different models, one for each of the 8 major stages in the life of the Buddha. Of these, the most common model by far is the one that describes Buddha's 'supreme enlightenment'. This type of chorten occurs with a square base supporting stairs above it, which is then topped by the dome –an inverted oval form called the bumpa. The bumpa is mounted with a towering spire, with the typical 'umbrella' shaped rings, which is then finally crowned by a ring and a crescent 'moon'. Apart from this model, there are also examples symbolizing the 'descent from heaven', and the 'many gates' tradition of Llama Buddhism.

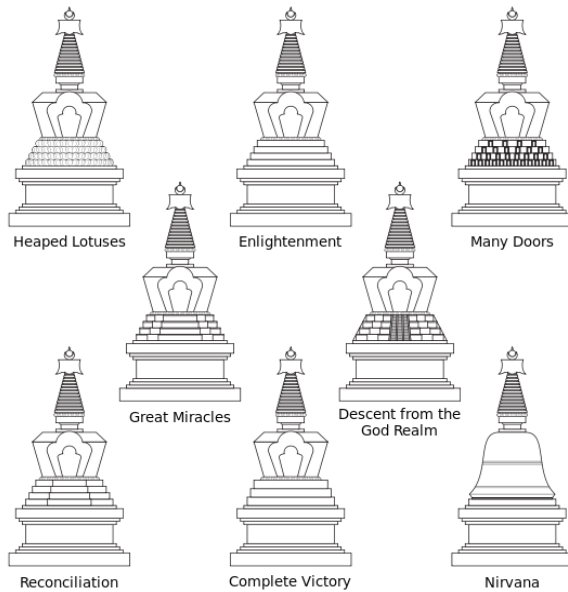


Figure 5:

TYPES OF CHORTEN - SYMBOLISM

Base - Square - Earth - Equanimity

Dome - Circle - Water - Indestructibility

Spire - Triangle - Fire - Compassion

Parasol - Half Circle - Wind - All accomplishing Action

6.1.3 Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the stupa is known as dagoba. Different shapes of domes developed in Sri Lanka, and a very unique architectural expression also developed, in which the dagoba itself was enclosed by a large dome known as vatadage, supported by columns located around the dagoba. Among the many vatadages built in Sri Lanka, there is one of particular importance named Thuparama, which supposedly houses the collarbone relic of the Buddha.

6.1.4 China, Japan, Korea

In China, Japan, and Korea the stupa transformed into the pagoda, a four- or eight-cornered wooden or brick, tower. The spire or ridged roof of the original stupa is retained in this development and holds similar symbolism. Pagodas usually have an internal staircase, which is clockwise in ascent. The central pillar represents the Buddha and his position at the centre of the universe, and the passage symbolizes other individual Buddhas, and functions as an aid to meditation. The multiple storeys represent different worlds on the path to enlightenment, and the octagonal plan pagodas additionally indicate the eight spokes of the wheel of dharma



Figure 6:

Dagaba, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka;

Goju-no-to Pagoda, Miyajima, Japan

6.2. Chronological Development of Stupas

- Early Indian Stupa 3rd to early 1st centuries B.C.
- Later Indian Stupa 2nd century A.D.
- Chinese Pagoda 5th - 7th centuries
- Japanese Pagoda 7th century

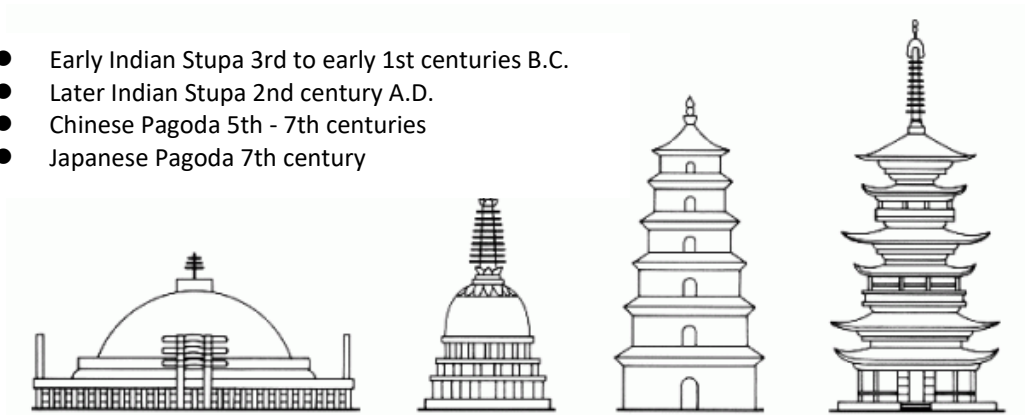


Figure 7: Evolution (Stupa to Pagoda)

6.3. Present Day Stupas

The core ideology of the stupa is retained in terms of architectural design across millennia, and even to this day. However, the difference lies in the material used in the modern-day stupa. For instance, the Sambodhi Chaithya is a stupa built with reinforced concrete on a platform supported by two interlocking arches. Apart from this, stupa is also having access via Elevators. Patliputra karuna Stupa is having glass facade, along with void stupa concept so people can see the holy relics along with ramp design for entrance instead of stairs which makes it barrier free for everyone.

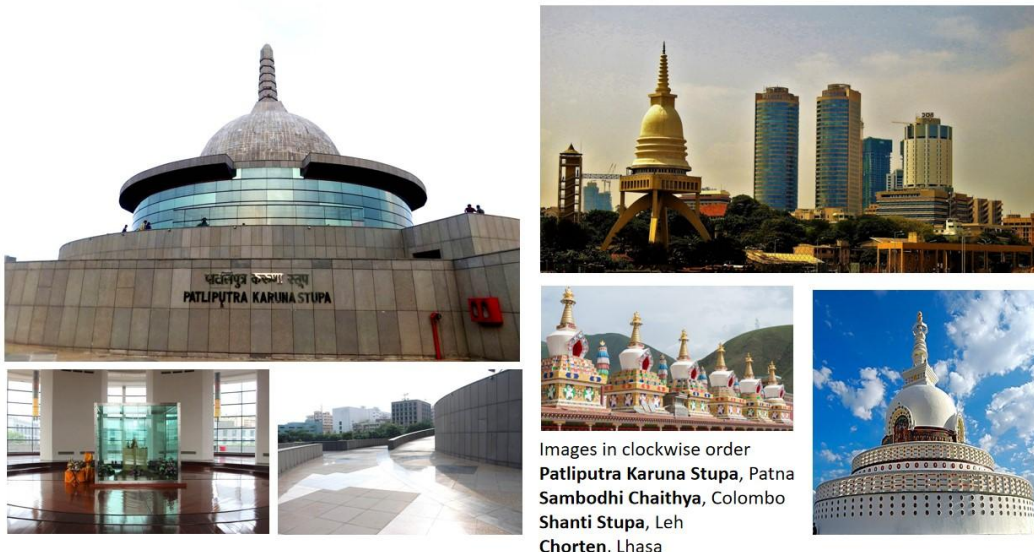


Figure 8: Present Day Modern Stupas

STUPAS, PAGODAS, AND DAGABAS - exceeding 100 feet in height

- Tianning Temple Pagoda (2007): Changzhou, China = 505 feet or 154 meters (world's tallest wooden structure)
- Jetavanaramaya Dagaba (ca 350): Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka = 400 feet or 122 meters
- Phra Pathommachedi (1870): Nakhon Pathom, Thailand = 395 feet or 120.5 meters (world's tallest stupa)
- Shwedagon Pagoda Yangon, Myanmar = 368 feet or 112 meters
- Global Vipassana Pagoda (2008): Mumbai, India = 315 feet or 96 meters
- Liaodi Pagoda (1055): = 276 feet or 84 meters (world's tallest brick pagoda)
- To-Ji (796): Kyoto, Japan = 180 feet or 54.8 meters (tallest wooden structure in Japan)
- Sun Pagoda Guilin, China = 134 feet or 41 meters (world's tallest copper pagoda)



Figure 9: Stupas, Pagodas, and Dagbas - exceeding 100 feet in height

7. Conclusion

It is thus apparent that the stupa, which was conceived as a simple monument for the Buddha's corporeal relics, has over time transformed in its form and nomenclature and resulted in various types of structures all over the world. In some regions, even supplementary structures like monasteries have come up alongside stupas, fuelling the inception of new Buddhist orders and sects.

However, the core ideology of the stupa remains constant throughout each new development, as does its symbolism and several crucial architectural features. These characteristics must, therefore, be given due consideration and importance while designing any stupa project.

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