



## New Escalations of Lumbini

Mr Thusitha Malalasekera



Buddha. Buddha in his Parinibbana Suthra named four places that should be venerated by the Buddhists. These were, Lumbini where his birth took place, Buddhagaya where he attained Buddhahood, Isipathana where the first sermon was delivered, and Kusinara where Parinibbana took place. One can understand how much Buddha liked the natural environment, endowed with a variety flora and fauna.

Nepal is a kingdom situated at the foot hills of the Himalayas. Lumbini is located in a valley of the Rupandehi district which is about 300 kilometers to the south-west of Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. Historical sources indicate that ancient Lumbini was a beautiful garden park with trees laden with flowers. The Sal trees known by the scientific name *Shorea robusta* were plentifully, and were distributed throughout the garden. Hence it must have been an attractive garden providing ample enjoyment and leisure to the Kshathriya kings as well as their citizens.

the garden as well as to take a rest. According to Buddhist history prince Siddhartha was born under a Sal tree in the Lumbini garden. It is generally accepted that Bodhisatva - Siddhartha was born on the Vesak (May) full moon day in the year 642 BC.

A large number of pilgrims visit Lumbini every year because Lumbini is believed to be the place of birth of Prince Siddhartha Gauthama who became Lord

According to historical records, Emperor Asoka of the Mauryan dynasty accompanied by his teacher Upaguththa visited Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, it was a garden surrounded by a fertile and spectacular village. At the time of his visit Emperor Asoka had already

When Mahamaya Devi the chief queen of King Suddhodhana, who was reigning in the city of Kimbulwath, was on her way accompanied by a retinue to Devgahanuwara (her birthplace) in order to deliver her baby, she desired to enjoy the environment of



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embraced Buddhism. King Asoka is known to have erected four stupas and a pillar (column), at the top of which was a stone figure of a horse. On this pillar the Emperor made the following inscription in Brahmi script in Pali language.

“ King Piyadasi (Asoka) beloved of the gods came to the birthplace of Sakyamuni on a royal visit 20 years after his coronation, and venerated the place. He also constructed a stone wall and erected a pillar in order to pay respects to Buddha. The tax that should be paid to the King by the citizens of Lumbini was also reduced to 1/8th”.

Later it became easy to locate Lumbini because of the Asokan pillar. There is evidence to indicate that various pilgrims had visited Lumbini up to the 15th century AD. Records show that Chinese travelers, specially Fa Hien (4th century AD) and Suen T-Seng (4th century AD) visited Lumbini. There is also historical evidence that a Malla King had been a pilgrim to this location.

However after the 15th century

AD Lumbini became desolate and overgrown with forest and turned into ruins. Lumbini came into limelight again after the German archaeologist Dr A. Firtner along with Khadga Samsher, the Governor of the region discovered the Asokan Pillar in 1896. Through various investigations and excavations carried out subsequently Mahadevi Viharaya, several stupas, and the pond named ‘Puskarni’ situated to the south of the Viharaya were discovered. There is a belief that Mahamaya Devi had a bath in this pond before giving birth to Prince Siddhartha. Lumbini was declared a world heritage in 1947, and since then all investigations are coordinated by the UNESCO office in Kathmandu with the assistance from the government of Nepal.

It is after this, that the strengthening and

management project for conservation of Lumbini began under the leadership of UNESCO. The recent investigations associated with the Lumbini Sal garden in Nepal, has been the most talked about of the archaeological explorations carried out in the world. Archaeologists involved in these investigations have been successful in discovering archaeological structures that are as old as 6 centuries BC, which have conclusively established that the birth place of Gauthama Buddha - Prince Siddhartha had been in 6th century BC. What is of special significance is that these discoveries have conclusively assigned the birth of Prince Siddhartha to a particular century with certainty.

Although the sacred and venerated Lumbini Sal garden, considered as a UNESCO World Heritage had been accepted from a long time ago as the place of birth of Prince Siddhartha, based on ancient texts and oral tradition, it is the current exploration that has provided definite evidence for this event. During these excavations, a hitherto undiscovered timber structure had also been found beneath many ruins of buildings made of brick. The open





space located at the center of this wooden structure (which is similar in plan to the structures above it), is believed by the archaeologists to be the birth place of Buddha.

Professor Robin Coningham of Durban University, UK, who is directing the archaeological explorations says that although many academics had believed that the birth of Buddha took place in the 3rd century BC basing their views on ancient texts and oral tradition, now for the first time evidence of a wooden building that existed in the 6th century BC in the Lumbini garden has been discovered.

The excavations at the Lumbini Sal garden in Nepal are conducted jointly by the governments of Japan (World Cultural Heritage Conservation Trust) and Nepal under the supervision of UNESCO. Further financial assistance and resources are supplied by the

Universities of Durban and Sterling (U.K.), and the National Geographic Society Global Exploration Fund. This investigation team is led by Professor Robin Coningham and the well known archaeologist Kosh Prasad Acharya of Nepal.

The current archaeological excavations and investigations are expected to reveal a great deal of new information on the pre Asokan constructions before 3rd century BC. In this context, further attention is scheduled to be paid to the ancient Mayadevi Viharaya, and the monasteries in the east of the Sal garden which have so far not been investigated.

This investigation which was begun in 2010 continued research excavations of 'Maya Devi' Viharaya in 2011. It has been shown that another Viharaya existed at the location before the brick Viharaya was constructed by King Asoka. Since January 2013 the investigators

have been attempting to collect data, evidence and information necessary to understand the nature of this ancient Viharaya. With the current explorations it has been possible to reveal that there were ancient human settlements in the Lumbini village, the oldest village in South Asia and situated to the South West of Mayadevi Viharaya.

Professor Robin Coningham and the archaeologist Kosh Prasad Acharya who made a statement in July 2013 regarding the new discoveries, said that as believed so far, Emperor Ashok in his efforts to spread Buddhism in this entire region had constructed the Viharaya in brick in Lumbini in 3rd century BC. They also stated that the current excavations have revealed the existence of a Viharaya constructed in brick and a timber structure beneath it constructed before the Asokan period.

Analysis of this archaeological information will provide new and clear information about the life of the Buddha, including his birth and how it took place. It will also provide new information as to whether the birth of the Buddha took place in the 6th century BC (and not in the 3rd century BC as believed by some) and whether Lumbini was a place of worship even before the birth of Buddha. The analysis of this new information and drawing conclusions will be a task for the future.

**Mr Thusitha Malalasekera**  
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0718172766