

Barrier-free Sanchi

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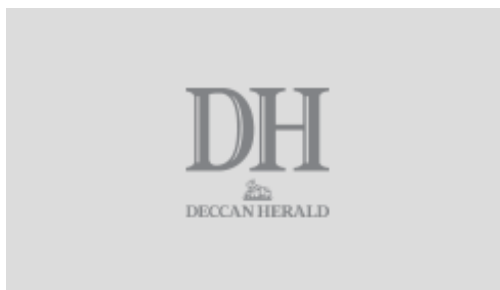
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Shefali Tripathi Mehta, Mar 11, 2012 :,

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School and college trips invariably took us to Sanchi, just a few hours from Bhopal. We looked forward to such trips, except for the history lessons.



And god knows how difficult it is to run from history when in Sanchi. So, I am not ashamed to confess that we found Sanchi rather monotonous. Also, in those days, the landscape was stark and even the winter sun felt harsh. But history grows slowly on some.

During subsequent visits, the 'book in stone' was slowly deciphered and devoured. Insight alone leads to appreciation. Yes, I could see the yakshini with the 'bobbed hair', discern the danam in Sanskrit engraved before the names of thousands of donors and take in the stories from the life of Buddha, beautifully etched in stone. History began to pulsate.

How did Sanchi, this sleepy, little remote town in a remote part of Madhya Pradesh come to be such an important Buddhist landmark? Curiously, I discovered that Sanchi had more to do with the Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka the Great, than with the life of Buddha.

Ashoka's first brush with Buddhism happened when he was sent by his father, Emperor Bindusara, to suppress an uprising in Ujjain. Ashoka was injured in battle and was nursed in hiding by Buddhist monks and nuns. Among his caregivers was Devi, a follower of Buddhism and the daughter of a merchant from the neighbouring town of Vidisha, whom he had married. Devi, one of Ashoka's many wives, was also the mother of his children Mahindra and Sanghamitra, who later took Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

After Ashoka turned benevolent witnessing the bloodshed of Kalinga, he published his edicts — his policies of rule based on ahimsa, mercy, respect for all religions; and examples of leading an enlightened life — on pillars that were erected all over his kingdom. Over the centuries, as Buddhism declined in India, much of the ancient Buddhist monuments fell to ruins. In 1818, a British General, Mark Taylor, discovered on a small hill in Sanchi, obscured by thick foliage, a great Buddhist stupa and almost 50 other ancient stone structures around it.

The stupas, monasteries, temples and pillars of Sanchi date from the 3rd century BC to the 12th century AD. The ‘Great Stupa’ at Sanchi is the oldest stone structure in India and was originally commissioned by Ashoka in the 3rd century BC. At 16 m in height and 36 m in diameter, it stands majestically with a paved procession path, walkway or pradakshina, and four exquisitely carved gateways in four directions. A balustrade encircles the entire structure. The carvings on each of the four gateways depict stories from Buddha’s life — the Jataka tales, Buddha’s renunciation of worldly life and enlightenment, the dream of maya, and his incarnations.

There are two other prominent stupas, a great stone food bowl, many temples and monasteries. The Ashokan pillar with its crown of the four lions, which has been adopted as India’s national emblem, is also among these. Only the highly polished shaft of the pillar remains here, though the crown has been removed to the museum.

My renewed interest in this UNESCO World Heritage site arose from it being recently made completely barrier-free and disabled-friendly, thanks to the efforts of a Bhopal-based voluntary organisation, Arushi.

What does it mean to make a historical site, a tourist spot, barrier-free when stepping out anywhere else in this country cannot guarantee such? Most roads have been widened to make place for more cars. Pavements for walkers are non-existent.

Every few steps of public walking space is riddled with danger for the disabled — missing sewer covers, dug-out drains, uneven surfaces littered with muck and debris. How it must constrain the daily lives of persons with disabilities to access any public space — cinema, bank, railway station or library where there are no ramps or railings?

The stupas are now completely wheelchair accessible and have signages and information plaques in Braille, special tactile walkways, beepers and a Braille map that allow people with disabilities too to experience the splendour of the monuments.

The staff and the guides at the stupas have also been trained and sensitised towards the needs of tourists with disabilities, including wheelchair users and those with visual impairment. It is a befitting tribute to the benign emperor who bequeathed the teachings of Buddha to posterity. By creating an inclusive environment at this site, we honour the ideals of equality and humanism that these great lives exemplify.

