

# रूपन्देही क्याम्पस जर्नल

Rupandehi Campus Journal

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रूपन्देही क्याम्पस

सिद्धार्थनगर, रूपन्देही

**Rupandehi Campus**

Siddharthanagar, Rupandehi

रूपन्देही क्याम्पस जर्नल  
(Rupandehi Campus Journal)

अङ्क २, २०७४ जेठ

Volume 2, 2017 June

संरक्षक

बाबुराम अर्याल

क्याम्पसप्रमुख

सम्पादन

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Rupandehi Campus Siddharthanagar

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# Tilaurakot: Capital City of Ancient Kapilavastu

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## Abstract

*The location of Lumbinī at the known distance and direction in relation to Tilaurākoṭ, geophysical status of Tilaurākoṭ, and the relative distance between Kapilvastu and other Manushi Buddha's birthplace (Krakuchchhanda and Kanakamuni) is the same as given in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims and Buddhist texts. According to the Divyavadan, Bhāgirathi was the name of the river on the bank of which Kapilvastu was situated. River Bāṇagaṅgā flows to the north-east of Tilaurākoṭ at present. No river is seen flowing anywhere near Piprahawā. Tilaurākoṭ is located in the middle of a dense forest and snowy peaks of the Himālayas could be clearly seen from here as noted in the Buddhist literature. The old fortification wall and moat around Tilaurākoṭ, the city gates at the four cardinal directions along the fortification wall, highly meaningful relics and ruins, viz. monasteries, stūpas, secular structures, ceramic industries, hoards of coins, seals, terracotta figurines, beads, bangle etc. have been found in recent excavations at Tilaurākoṭ, prove its ancient status as ruined city of ancient Kapilvastu. The ceramic industries of Vedamau, Bañjarāhī and Tilaurākoṭ, belonging to the thirteenth-twelfth centuries BC and public habitational structures and secular buildings also reveal its antiquity.*

## Key Terms

*Artifacts, Bāṇagaṅgā, Bañjarāhī, Bhāgirathi, Buddhist literature, Chinese accounts, Himālayan, Kanakamuni, Kapilvastu, Krakuchchhanda, Lumbinī, Piprahawā, Structural remains, Tilaurākoṭ.*

## Introduction

The identification of Kapilvastu has being a challenging job for the archaeologists. Dr. Lassen made the first attempt in this direction in 1858 with a place on the bank of modern Rohiṇi at a short distance from Gorakhpur. Mr. Mousieur Stanislans Julian had also agreed with the identification of Lassen. In 1863 Cunningham declared Nagar khās, in the southern part of Basti district at Aurangabad, to be ancient Kapilvastu, which is situated on the eastern bank of the Chando tal, near a large stream named Kohāna, a tributary of the Rāpti. In order to identify Kapilvastu one will have to critically examine Buddhist Literature and Chinese documents. Some scholrs have tried to categories the evidences available in the Buddhist

texts and in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims. The following facts have to be established in order to identify the ancient Kapilvastu.

### Major Issues

1. It should be located near the mountains.
2. There should be dense forest around it.
3. It should be located on the bank of Bhāgirathi river.
4. The birth places of Krakuchchanda and Kanakamuni Buddha have be located by the side of Kapilvastu.
5. Capital town should be encircled by walls.
6. The cultural and human activities on the site should be older than the 8th century BC.
7. The site should yield ancient habitational deposits and secular structures to justify its antiquity.
8. Royal palace complex should have been fortified with brick-wall and built on the basis of ancient technique and tradition.
9. It should be located to the west of Lumbinī and its distance as well as direction must be in line with that mentioned in Buddhist texts and the accounts given by Chinese pilgrims.

### Discussion on the Issues

Let us now examine the views of such scholars who identify Tilaurakoṭ with ancient Kapilvastu.

- 1- According to *Lalitavistār* it was situated near the slopes of the Himālayas and the young lions used to come to this place. Lord Buddha had also mentioned to Bimbisar of Maghada that he was the dweller of a place which was near the Himālaya. The Himālayan mountains are not more than 16 km. on the north of the ruins of Tilaurākoṭ. The green shaded mountain looks quit close to this place and and even the snow – covered peaks of the Himālayas, especially Dhaulāgiri, can be easily seen from Tilaurākoṭ in fair-weather (Mishra 1972:42). According to another theory Piprahawā is also not very far from the foot of the Himālayas. However, it can not be claimed that the Himālayas can be easily seen from here. Thus, Tilaurākoṭ stands in a better position to be identified as the capital town of ancient Kapilvastu than Piprahawā.
- 2- The villages around Kapilvastu were surrounded by the rich darkgreen foliage of mangoes and tamarinds (Oldenberg 1971:95). The name Śākya itself is , probably, the corrupted form of *sāl* (tree). Thus, there was a pleasure grove of *sāl* trees called Lumbinī

*Chittalata* grove in Indira's Paradise and its branch could be held after reaching there. The trees of *Plaksha*, mango, *Pipal*, *Sāl* and *Aśoka*, associated with Prince Siddhartha, could be seen in the region. According to Srivastav Piprahawā (lat. 27° 26'30" N., long. 83°7'50" east) " was located in a picturesque surroundings near dense *sāl* forest.

However, it should be noted that *sāl* trees are very common in the Terai region. There is a continuous forest of *sāl* trees along the foothills in the whole region. To the north of ruined complex of Tilaurākoṭ is the *char kose jhādi* (about 13km. long forest) from Chetrādei to Pattharakoṭ, on the foot hills of the mountain (Vajracharya 2029:129). Any one visiting Tilaurākoṭ, can see the dense forest in its vicinity even now. Piprahawā, however, has no claims to be ancient Kapilvastu as there are no natural forests of sal trees there.

- 3- According to *Dighanikāya*, Kapilvastu is situated on the bank of a lake (Bhāgirathi river). The site of Tilaurākoṭ is located on the western bank of Bāṇagaṅgā river, which has been flowing for twenty-five hundred years. It is called Bhāgirathi after the name of the sage who brought Gaṅgā of this world after great penance. Siswa, Majhauri, Sagar tāl and Bajha tāl, located in the vicinity of Piprahawā, are said to have been formed by the accumulation of rain water. *Tals* in the area are used to store rain water for use in irrigation. However, no river is to be seen flowing anywhere near Piprahawā.
- 4- The Stūpa and Aśokan pillar found at Goṭihawā village may be identified with the *nirvaṇa* stūpa of Krakuchchanda Buddha as mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims (Verard 1996:85-90). Pipri, about one km. north-west of Goṭihawā, may be identified with the Native town of Krakuchchanda. The inscribed-pillar of Kanakamuni Buddha on the bank of Niglisāgar, about 5 km. east of Tilaurākoṭ, indicates the existence of the town of Kanakamuni in its vicinity (Fuhrer 1972:34). The pillar is not *in situ*. However, the ruins of Aaurā koṭ, Thagi-bābāki dādi, Sadawā, Semari, Gobari, Śivapur, and Baidauri may be the remains of the Kanakamuni's town. Thus, Tilaurā koṭ should be identified with the capital town of Kapilvastu rather than Piprahawā.
5. According to the ancient technique and tradition the town should be encircled with walls. Hiuen-Tsiang had seen the capital in ruins (Beal 1994:14). The royal precincts of bricks within the city measured some 14 or 15 *li* (3.802-4.074 km.). The foundation walls were still strong and high. *Mahāvastu*, a Buddhist text, has also mentioned the same details of the walled-city of Kapilvastu. In the course of excavation of Tilaurā koṭ complex, the brick-walls have been exposed by Mukherji (1969:19), Mitra Mishra, Rijal (1979:27) and other members of the team of the Department of Archaeology, H.M.G. Nepāl Tilaurākoṭ is encircled by a thick burnt brick wall covering an area of 518.143 m.

north-south and 396.227 m. east west. It is encircled by a moat, which is roughly 6.095 m. wide. There were gates and bastions on four sides. K.M. Srivastav says that after a limited exploration in the vicinity, excavation was undertaken at an adjoining mound in the village jurisdiction of Ganwariā, a kilometre south-west of the ancient site of Piprahawā. It was spread in an area measuring 300m. from north to south and 270 m. from east to west. However, the wall encircling the town was not seen at this site. On the basis of archaeological findings the outer city of the common people at Tilaurākoṭ seems to have extend from Dhamnihawā in the north to Derwā village in the south, and from the eastern stūpa in the east upto Rāmaghāt in the west.

- 6- The findings of Tilaurākoṭ have revealed that it's antiquity goes to a period before the eighth century BC. All the archaeological findings including structural remains are comparable with the pre-Buddhist and Buddhist antiquities of Hastināpur, Vaisāli, Pātaliputra, Rājgriha, Śrāvasti etc. During 1967-1972 Mishra had conducted excavation at Tilaurākoṭ. He dated the defence wall to P.G. and N.B.P. ware periods in *circa* 7th century BC and the depositions of three habitational periods beginning in 8th-7th centuries BC. During 1972-73, the habitational deposits found in ten layers within the fortified area was divided into five periods. Layers 9-10 yielded P.G. ware dated in C. 8th and 7th centuries BC. Structures found in the excavation of mound V of Tilaurākoṭ belonged to the Mauryan and Kushan periods only. In 1974-75, Rijal exposed thirteen layers of human depositions and divided them into five periods from the 11th century BC to Kushan period. Its 10-13 layers had yielded a clear cut sequence of P.G. ware ascribe to the period II of Hastināpur, which may go back to at least C. 8-11th BC in antiquity. Vedamau and Bañjarāhī in the vicinity of Tilaurākoṭ also represent the antiquity of this region (Deo 1964:3). On the other hand, the first period of Ganwariā is datable only between 800 and 600BC on the basis of fine grey ware, black polished ware, red ware vases and dishes with reddish rim and painted grey ware found from all layers of this sites.
- 7- During the excavations of Tilaurākoṭ the trial trenches yielded clear cut sequence of habitational deposits as well as secular structures of different periods. Mukherji found monumental structures as well as habitational deposits within the fortified complex of Tilaurākoṭ in 1898 AD. Mishra exposed three periods of habitational deposits during 1967-1972. During 1972-73 Rijal discovered ten layers divisible in four periods, and in excavations of mound V of Tilaurākoṭ yielded the structures from the Mauryan to the Kushāṇa period. In 1974-75, he exposed thirteen layers divisible into five periods

of human depositions from mound V. In addition to the above-mentioned excavations some other programmes for the identification of Kapilvastu were also launched at different times. No proper report of these efforts are available. It is hoped that if extensive programmes of excavations are undertaken by the authorities in proper manner, clear cut evidences of the form of habitational deposits and secular structures may be available in the complex. A lot of antiquities have been collected from the surface as well as from the trenches between pre-Mauryan to Suńga-Kushāᅇa periods. The finds from this complex include terracotta human and animal figurines, toy-cart and wheels, seals and sealings of terracotta, copper coins and miscellaneous metal objects including iron nails and copper antimony rod, besides beads and bangles of varied materials like glass, pottery, semiprecious stones, pottery (P.G. ware, N.B.P. and red ware), dabber, flesh rubber and stone fragments.

- 8- In ancient period the palace complex was surrounded by an outer wall having four gates, one on each side. It was provided with many apartments and other parts, specially bed room, drawing room, dressing rooms, toilet rooms, bath room, mirror hall, annexe, audience hall, mediation chamber, image house etc (Ray 1964:81). Tilaurākoᅇ mound has yielded ruins of a roughly pentagonal habitation with four gates including a wide moat, which is roughly 6.095 metre wide. High and strong brick walls have been exposed (Mitra 1971:11). Hiuen-Tsiang has described the existence of such a wall in seventh century AD. In course of excavation the western gateway complex has yielded a defensive wall, a watch man's room, brick-platforms and a black-smith's workshop. Mukherji has also discovered the eastern gateway complex, the remains of road, pillars of three pieces of wooden gate, 3.047 metre wide wall bastions on both sides of the gate. Roughly in the centre of the citadel the team of Japanese archaeologists had discovered a complex with blocks having rows of small rooms, with corridors facing south and north during 1967-77 AD. Rijal has interpreted this structural complex as Suddhodhana's palace complex. However, many scholars do not agree with his view (Hartel 1991:72). Being a huge fortified complex, the ancient palace of Suddhodhana may be buried under the mounds existing in the north-east portion of the citadel. The reality may come to light if an extensive excavation of the mound is undertaken in future.
- 9- Lumbini lies to the east of Tilaurākoᅇ, as it has been mentioned in the accounts of the Chinese travellers. The River of Oil, described by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsiang, is still flowing in Lumbini today and is known as *Telār nadi* in local dialect. Aśokan Pillar,



Māyādevī temple, Tank, stūpas and monasteries are located in the area as mentioned in the Chinese accounts. Pillar inscription of Lumbinī and artifacts found there have already proved it to be the birthplace of Lord Buddha. Various mounds, or *koṭs*, as they are locally called, are dotted over the whole tract extending from Kapilvastu on the north-west and the Lumbinī garden on the north-east in Nepālese territory. According to Hiuen-Tsiang Lumbinī lies 110 to 120 *li* (29 to 32 km.)<sup>13</sup> east of Kapilvastu city. These mounds are located exactly in the same direction and distance.

### Conclusion

The accounts given by the Chinese pilgrims have been of invaluable help in explaining many knotty problems in the history. Their accounts have been universally accepted as the basic evidences in the exploration and identification of the important places of Buddhist pilgrimage in India including Śrāvastī, Kusinagar, Sānchī, Vaiśālī and Bodhgayā. As such these accounts could be accepted as more authoritative and conclusive evidences to identify ancient Kapilvastu. The location of Lumbinī at the known distance and direction in relation to Tilaurākoṭ, geophysical status of Tilaurākoṭ, and the relative distance between Kapilvastu and other *Manushi* Buddha's birthplace (Krakuchchhanda and Kanakamuni) is the same as given in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims and Buddhist texts. According to the *Divyavadan*, Bhāgirathi was the name of the river on the bank of which Kapilvastu was situated. River Bāṇagaṅgā flows to the north-east of Tilaurākoṭ at present. No river is seen flowing anywhere near Piprahawā. Tilaurākoṭ is located in the middle of a dense forest and snowy peaks of the Himālayas could be clearly seen from here as noted in the Buddhist literature. The old fortification wall and moat around Tilaurākoṭ, the city gates at the four cardinal directions along the fortification wall, highly meaningful relics and ruins, viz. monasteries, stūpas, secular structures, ceramic industries, hoards of coins, seals, terracotta figurines, beads, bangle etc. have been found in recent excavations at Tilaurākoṭ, prove its ancient status as ruined city of ancient Kapilvastu. The ceramic industries of Vedamau, Bañjarāhī and Tilaurākoṭ, belonging to the ninth-eighth centuries BC and public habitational structures and secular buildings also reveal its antiquity.

As compared to Tilaurākoṭ evidences for identifying ancient Kapilvastu with Piprahawā and Ganwarā are not so strong. There is no river flowing near Piprahawā and the snowy peaks of the Himalays are also far from there than Tilaurākoṭ. Monuments as well as artifacts, viz. terracotta figurines, coins, seal, sealings, beads, bangles, dabber, potteries etc. were found in the course of excavation, but the finding of so-called original casket from the same stratum where Peppe found it in 1897-98 is not at all clear.

On the basis of archaeological antiquities and circumstantial evidences it is clear that the Tilaurākoṭ complex and its vicinities as well as Piprahawā and Ganwariā in North Indian territory were a part of the republic of ancient Kapilvastu of the Śākyas. There was no political and cultural boundary between the two countries as we see today. This explains the existence of various mounds of ancient structures along the Indo-Nepāl border, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Western Terai region of Nepāl. The inscriptions of "*Devaputra Vihare ...*" and "*Negama*", "*Negameya*" on the seals from Piprahawā and Tilaurākoṭ prove the Buddhist monastic character and their use as traders medium of exchange respectively. These two sites may be lying on the north-south route in the ancient period. Evidences so far available are more in favour of Tilaurākoṭ rather than Piprahawā- Ganwariā, to be identified as the ancient city of Kapilvastu. Proper excavations should be conducted at Tilaurākoṭ and its vicinity to find out its real status in ancient period as noted in the Buddhist texts and Chinese accounts. Other ancient Buddhist sites, viz. birth places of Krakuchchanda and Kanakamuni, place of massacre of the Śākyas and Rāmagrāma could also be identified with Goṭihawā, Araurākoṭ or Sisahnīyā-Pandey, Sagrahawā, and modern Rāmagrāma at Parāsi *bazār* respectively. *Hastigarta*, *Nigrodharam* and *Sarakupa* are also identified with Derwā village, Taulihawā Samaimāi sthāna, Haradewā or Dharamapāniyā respectively by various scholars. However, the matter can conclusively be decided only after a proper excavation of ancient sites in the Western Terai Region of Nepāl.

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