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Indian Buddhist Archaeology

India is called the motherland of many religions in the world, one of the most renowned religion is Buddhism, which emerged in India during the 5th century BCE. Siddhartha Gautama also known by the name Buddha was said to be the greatest preacher of Buddhism and his teachings are the main reason for huge followers worldwide. The central idea of Buddhism revolves around the 4 noble truths, which tell about the root cause of suffering and ways to get over it by EIGHT-FOLD wisdom, and guiding practitioners towards enlightenment and liberation from the rebirth cycle.¹

Over centuries Buddhism has spread across Asia gained prominent followers from the Western world and influenced several people through its teachings of culture, mindfulness, compassion etc. Buddhist studies represent a dynamic domain within the broader field of religious studies.

In the exploration of scholars Buddhism, the major focus has traditionally rested upon written accounts—those ethereal narratives that weave together transcendent beliefs and spiritual realms. These texts, often revered as conduits to enlightenment, have guided generations of practitioners. In our quest for understanding, we must not neglect the tangible expressions of faith—the material manifestations that anchor Buddhism in the earthly and the mundane.

Consider Buddhist temples: architectural marvels that grace landscapes across the world. Their intricate designs, serene

courtyards, and sacred halls evoke a sense of reverence. But are these temples merely aesthetic reflections of devotion, or do they harbor deeper significance?²

PATH. This path emphasized ethical conduct, mental discipline,

To approach Buddhism from a material perspective is to tread a delicate path—one that diverges from the spiritual narratives upheld

² Ibid, P. 2

by practitioners. It is to recognize that temples, while beautiful, are not faith incarnate; they are waypoints on the pilgrim's journey toward enlightenment. In doing so, we encounter an alien understanding—one that challenges our preconceptions and invites us to explore the interplay between the sacred and the tangible.

By studying Buddhist temples through the lens of material culture, I seek to unravel their stories—the whispers of artisans, the echoes of rituals, and the silent prayers etched into stone. In doing so, I hope to bridge the gap between the earthly and the transcendent, honoring both realms as integral facets of Buddhist practice.

In the heart of archaeology lies the exploration of material remnants left behind by past civilizations—the silent echoes of human endeavor. Ruins, with their crumbling walls and faded grandeur, evoke a poignant awareness of impermanence, reminding us that even the most monumental achievements eventually yield to time's inexorable march. Yet, within these remnants lies a profound narrative—a glimpse into the tangible actions of those long departed.

Unlike the lofty, ethereal concepts enshrined in ancient texts, these earthly actions—whether mundane or extraordinary—shape the fabric of history. They reveal the everyday struggles, aspirations, and rituals of people who once walked these same paths. Archaeology, then, becomes a bridge between the spiritual and the material, inviting us to explore the interplay between faith and practical existence. It is not a replacement for textual study but rather a complementary lens—one that enriches our understanding of the human experience across epochs and cultures. Consequently, an archaeological account of Indian Buddhism should integrate both textual scholarship and archaeological research to yield a comprehensive understanding of the religion's inception, evolution, and eventual decline in its birthplace.”

The Journey of Indian Buddhism: From Siddhartha to the Sangha

In the annals of time, around the fifth or sixth century BCE, a remarkable figure emerged: Siddhartha Gautama. Born a prince, he cast aside the trappings of privilege to embrace the ascetic life. Through trials and tribulations, Siddhartha attained enlightenment—a profound awakening that revealed the path to liberation from the relentless cycle of rebirth and the cessation of suffering. His teachings resonated deeply with those who sought wisdom and solace.

Picture this: Siddhartha, now known as the Buddha, spent the remainder of his days imparting his profound insights to an ever-growing circle of disciples. His words echoed through the ancient groves, stirring hearts and minds. But even after his physical departure from this mortal coil, his legacy endured.

His devoted followers—the sangha—carried forth the torch of enlightenment. These were not mere scholars or casual enthusiasts; they were a community of monks and nuns who dedicated their lives to preserving and propagating the Buddha's teachings. Their existence was a testament to the transformative power of spiritual commitment.

Now, let's explore two distinct paths within this rich tapestry:

1. The Ascetic Sangha: Wandering Souls

- Imagine the early sangha members: wandering ascetics, living on the fringes of society. They roamed the dusty roads, their saffron robes billowing in the wind. Their sustenance came from alms—humble offerings of food from the townspeople. Their days were filled with meditation, contemplation, and the rigors of ascetic practice.
- These mendicants sought truth beyond material existence. Their simplicity contrasted sharply with the opulence of

Palaces and court life. They were the torchbearers of renunciation, embodying detachment from worldly attachments.

2. The Devout Laity: Pilgrims and Tumuli-Stupas

- But there was another facet to Indian Buddhism—the laity. Ordinary people, not bound by monastic vows, found their own ways to connect with the Buddha's legacy.
- Picture pilgrims traversing sacred landscapes—the very soil where the Buddha had walked. They visited key sites: the Bodhi tree under which he attained enlightenment, the Deer Park in Sarnath where he delivered his first sermon, and the ancient stupas that held relics of his cremated remains.
- These tumuli-stupas, like silent sentinels, stood as monuments to impermanence. They housed fragments of bone, ashes, and perhaps a whisper of the Buddha's essence. Pilgrims circled them, their hearts filled with reverence.

And so, the dual currents of asceticism and devotion flowed through the river of Indian Buddhist history. Siddhartha's enlightenment had set ripples in motion, touching both the wandering mendicants and the devout seekers. Their paths intertwined, creating a vibrant mosaic of faith, philosophy, and practice.

MAJOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE: BODH GAYA

Bodh Gaya: Nestled in the verdant state of Bihar, India, Bodh Gaya stands as an archaeological marvel—an ethereal crossroads where spirituality and history converge. Reverberating with the echoes of enlightenment, this sacred site holds profound significance for Buddhists worldwide.

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At its heart lies the Mahabodhi Temple, an architectural testament to devotion. Its soaring brick edifice, hailing from the 5th or 6th century CE, cradles the very spot where Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha, achieved enlightenment beneath the venerable Bodhi tree. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the temple exudes an aura of sanctity, drawing pilgrims and seekers from distant lands.⁴

The temple's precincts unfold like a tapestry of faith: stupas, monasteries, and shrines—each a testament to diverse cultural influences. The Japanese Temple, with its minimalist elegance, pays homage to Bodh Gaya's universal appeal. Nearby, the Tibetan Monastery stands resolute, adorned with intricate murals and fluttering prayer flags. And then there's the Thai Temple, its golden spires reflecting the sun's benediction, a testament to Thailand's devotion to the Buddha's teachings.

Yet, it is the earth itself that yields secrets. Archaeological excavations have unearthed fragments of antiquity—a mosaic of monastic ruins, votive stupas, and ancient artifacts. These relics, dating back to the Buddha's era, whisper tales of devotion and contemplation.

Bodh Gaya thrives not only on reverence but also celebration. Festivals punctuate the calendar, weaving vibrant threads into its historical fabric. Pilgrims circumambulate the temple, their footsteps echoing centuries of devotion. Scholars gather, their minds alight with inquiry, seeking wisdom in the very soil that cradled enlightenment.⁵

MAJOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE: SARNATH

Sarnath: Where the Wheel of Dharma Set in Motion

Sarnath, situated near the ancient city of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, India, holds immense significance in Buddhist archaeology. Legend has it that it was here, at the Deer Park, that Siddhartha Gautama—better known as the Buddha—delivered his first sermon after attaining

⁴ The Archaeology of ancient Indian Buddhism, R.C. Sharma, P-145-150

⁵ The history of Indian Buddhism, D.D.Kosambi, P-105- 110

Enlightenment. This pivotal event is often referred to as the “Turning of the Wheel of Dharma.”

Now, let's explore the key features of this remarkable site:

1. **The Dhamek Stupa:** Rising prominently from the landscape, the Dhamek Stupa stands as a testament to ancient Buddhist architecture. Constructed in the 5th century CE, it marks the precise spot where the Buddha delivered his sermon. The stupa's cylindrical shape and intricate carvings evoke a sense of reverence, drawing pilgrims and curious visitors alike.⁶
2. **Ancient Monasteries and Stupas:** As you wander through Sarnath, you'll encounter the evocative ruins of monasteries and stupas. These remnants provide glimpses into the architectural and cultural achievements of early Buddhist communities. Imagine monks in saffron robes studying scriptures, meditating, and engaging in philosophical debates within these sacred precincts.
3. **Mulagandha Kuti Vihara:** Among the ruins, the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara stands out. This monastery, reconstructed in the 20th century, serves as a place of worship and meditation. Its serene ambiance invites contemplation, allowing visitors to connect with the spiritual legacy that permeates the air.⁷
4. **The Ashoka Pillar:** The Ashoka Pillar, inscribed with edicts promoting Buddhist principles, adds historical weight to Sarnath. Emperor Ashoka, a devout Buddhist, erected this pillar in the 3rd century BCE. Its polished surface gleams in the sunlight, bearing witness to a time when Buddhism flourished across the Indian subcontinent.⁸
5. **Archaeological Artifacts:** Excavations at Sarnath have yielded a treasure trove of artifacts. Intricately carved sculptures, inscriptions, and relics provide insights into the evolution of

⁶ Sarnath: The cradle of Buddhism , R.N. Sharma ,P-15-23

⁷ Art and Iconography of sarnath, A.K. Sharma, P-101-108

⁸ Buddhism and Sarnath by Kamla Rohatgi, S.P Rohatgi. P- 31- 41.

Buddhist art and thought. Each artifact whispers stories of devotion, resilience, and the quest for enlightenment.

MAJOR ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE: NALANDA

Nalanda: A Beacon of Ancient Learning

Nalanda, situated in the verdant state of Bihar, India, stands as a testament to intellectual prowess and spiritual exploration. From the 5th to the 12th centuries CE, this venerable monastic university flourished, drawing scholars and seekers from distant lands. Imagine the bustling courtyards, the murmur of countless conversations, and the scent of incense wafting through the air.⁹

1. The Monastic University:

- Nalanda was no ordinary seat of learning. It was a vibrant hub where Buddhist philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and the arts converged. Monks and scholars congregated here, their robes swishing as they moved from one lecture hall to another.
- The monastic complex sprawled across acres, its architecture blending grace with purpose. Monasteries, temples, and meditation halls adorned the landscape, their walls echoing with the chants of sutras.

2. The Great Stupa:

- At the heart of Nalanda stood the Great Stupa—a colossal edifice that reached toward the heavens. Its white dome, serene and timeless, held relics of the Buddha. Pilgrims circumambulated it, seeking enlightenment.

3. The Libraries:

- Nalanda's libraries were legendary. Vast repositories of knowledge, they housed palm-leaf manuscripts, scrolls, and texts from across Asia. Scholars pored over ancient treatises, their eyes tracing the inked lines of wisdom.¹⁰

⁹ Nalanda : A study of its history and art, K.C. Panigarhi,p-12-22

¹⁰ Nalanda the great Buddhist university, S.R. Bhatt. P-45-58

MAJOR ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE: SANCHI

Sanchi: A Timeless Marvel

Sanchi, nestled amidst the serene hills of Madhya Pradesh, stands as a testament to ancient Buddhist craftsmanship and devotion. Its most iconic feature is the Great Stupa, an architectural marvel dating back to the 3rd century BCE. Imagine standing there—a traveler in time—gazing up at its massive dome, adorned with intricate carvings that narrate the life of the Buddha. Each stone tells a story: the enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the first sermon at Sarnath, and the final nirvana. The gateways (*toranas*) encircle the stupa, their sculpted panels depicting celestial beings, lotus motifs, and scenes from Jataka tales. As you walk around, you can almost hear the echoes of ancient pilgrims, their footsteps reverent as they circumambulated this sacred monument.¹¹

But Sanchi isn't just about the Great Stupa. It's a complex of monasteries, temples, and other stupas. The Ashoka Pillar, erected by Emperor Ashoka himself, stands tall nearby, its polished sandstone surface reflecting the sunlight. Inscriptions on the pillar proclaim Ashoka's commitment to dharma and his efforts to spread Buddhism across his vast empire. And then there are the Four Gateways, each a masterpiece of stone carving.¹²

MAJOR ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE: KUSHINAGAR

Kushinagar: Where the Buddha Entered Parinirvana

Now, let's journey eastward to Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. This sacred town cradles the memories of the Buddha's final moments on Earth. It was here, under the shade of a sal tree, that the Buddha attained parinirvana—the ultimate liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Mahaparinirvana Stupa, a somber yet majestic structure, marks

¹¹ The Art and Architecture of Ancient India, C. Sivaramamurti, p-110-115

¹² Sanchi: The Buddhist complex, A.P. Sharma, p-23-40

the very spot where he breathed his last. Pilgrims come from far and wide to pay their respects, their hearts heavy with reverence.¹³

And then there's the Reclining Buddha Statue—a poignant representation of the Buddha in his final repose. Carved from stone, it captures the serenity of that moment when he relinquished his mortal form. The statue lies on its right side, head resting on a cushion, eyes half-closed. It's as if the Buddha is teaching us even in death: impermanence, acceptance, and the path to enlightenment.

Kushinagar isn't just about monuments; it's about the intangible—a sense of closure, a connection to the eternal. As you walk through the peaceful gardens surrounding the stupa, you might feel a gentle breeze, carrying whispers of ancient teachings. Perhaps you'll sit under a tree, contemplating impermanence and the interconnectedness of all beings.¹⁴

¹³ Kushinagar: The final journey of Buddha ,S.K. Singh, P-20-34

¹⁴ The historical geography of ancient India, D.D. Kosambi,P-135-140