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"The Light and the Lotus" — Sacred Piprahwa Relics and India's Buddhist Heritage Diplomacy

6 January 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE** **IR****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

PM Modi inaugurated the exhibition "The Light and the Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One" at Rai Pithora Cultural Complex, New Delhi — the first time the Sacred Piprahwa relics (mortal remains of the Buddha) have been reunited in 127 years, since their discovery by W.C. Peppe in 1898. The event, organised by the Ministry of Culture under Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, featured 80+ artefacts spanning the 6th century BCE to the present.

PIPRAHWA — THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL HEART OF BUDDHIST HERITAGE

Piprahwa is a village in Siddharthnagar district, Uttar Pradesh — identified as ancient **Kapilavastu**, the city-kingdom where Prince Siddhartha Gautama (the historical Buddha) grew up before renouncing the world.

The 1898 excavation: William Claxton Peppe, a British engineer who owned the land at Piprahwa, excavated a large stupa mound in 1898 and discovered stone caskets containing cremated bone fragments and inscriptions in **Brahmi script** (one of the world's oldest abugida writing systems, from which most South and Southeast Asian scripts derive). The inscriptions translated to: "This relic-shrine of the Blessed Buddha is the deposit of the Sakyas, brothers of the Blessed One, jointly with their sisters and with their sons and their wives."

This identified the relics as **sariras** — the mortal remains of the Buddha — distributed among his followers after his **parinirvana** (~483 BCE) at Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.

What are sariras? The historical tradition holds that after the Buddha's parinirvana, his cremated remains were distributed among 8 kingdoms (the Malla kings of Kushinagar, the Licchavis of Vaishali, the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, the Buliyas of Allakappa, the Koliyas of Ramagrama, the Brahmans of Vethadipa, the Mallas of Pava, and Ajatashatru of Magadha). Each built a stupa over their share of the relics. Piprahwa's relics are believed to be the Sakya share — the Buddha's own clan's portion.

THE BUDDHA'S LIFE — KEY SITES AND TIMELINE

Understanding Piprahwa requires understanding the Buddhist circuit of sacred sites:

Site	Significance	Location
Lumbini	Birthplace of Siddhartha	Nepal (25 km from Piprahwa/Kapilavastu)
Piprahwa/Kapilavastu	Childhood and youth (until age 29)	Siddharthnagar, UP
Bodh Gaya	Enlightenment (Bodhi tree)	Gaya, Bihar
Sarnath	First sermon (Dhammachakka Pavattana)	Varanasi, UP
Rajgir/Nalanda	Teaching years	Bihar
Kushinagar	Parinirvana (death/passing)	Kushinagar, UP

Timeline: Siddhartha born ~563 BCE; renounced at 29; attained Enlightenment at 35 under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya; taught for 45 years; parinirvana at ~483 BCE aged 80 at Kushinagar.

India as the homeland of Buddhism: All the most significant Buddhist sites — except Lumbini (Nepal) — are in India. Yet Buddhism largely died out in India between the 12th–13th centuries CE due to the Muslim conquests of North India, destruction of Buddhist monasteries (Nalanda, Vikramashila), and absorption of Buddhist practices into Hinduism (Buddha as avatar of Vishnu in the Hindu tradition).

BUDDHIST HERITAGE AS SOFT POWER

India's engagement with the Sacred Piprahwa Relics is not merely cultural — it is **strategic soft power** in a region where Buddhism provides India significant diplomatic leverage.

The Buddhist arc of influence:

India's Buddhist heritage connects it deeply to:

Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam: Theravada Buddhist majority countries where the Buddha's life story and relic veneration are central to national identity

Japan, South Korea, Tibet (China): Mahayana Buddhist traditions that trace philosophical lineage to Indian Buddhist scholars (Nagarjuna, Asanga, Chandrakirti)

Mongolia, Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh: Vajrayana/Tibetan Buddhist communities where India is a sacred homeland

Worldwide Buddhist diaspora: 500+ million Buddhists globally

Relic diplomacy: India has used Buddhist relics as diplomatic instruments multiple times:

2012: Relics of the Buddha sent to Sri Lanka during its civil war aftermath — cultural diplomacy supporting bilateral relations

2013: Relics of Buddha’s disciples Sariputta and Moggallana (held at Victoria and Albert Museum, London) loaned to Myanmar — connecting India to Myanmar’s Buddhist identity

2024: Buddha relic sent to Thailand as part of bilateral strengthening

The Piprahwa exhibition continues this tradition — demonstrating India’s role as the **homeland and custodian of Buddhist heritage**, reinforcing Prime Minister Modi’s phrase “Buddha Sharanam Gachhami” as a diplomatic statement.

THE AZADI KA AMRIT MAHOTSAV CONNECTION

The Ministry of Culture’s decision to hold this exhibition under **Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav** (India’s 75th Independence anniversary campaign, running 2021–2023, with legacy programmes continuing into 2026) is deliberate:

Narrative linkage: The exhibition connects India’s ancient civilisational heritage (the Buddha, ~500 BCE) with its modern democratic nationhood (Independence, 1947). Both represent India as a civilisational state with millennial continuity, not merely a colonial-era construct.

The Godrej PPP model: The repatriation partnership with **Godrej Industries Group** under a Public-Private Partnership model represents a new template for India’s cultural heritage work — where corporate sponsors fund international diplomacy around heritage repatriation/exhibition, reducing the financial burden on government.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Piprahwa (Siddharthnagar, UP; Kapilavastu; W.C. Peppe 1898; Brahmi script; Buddha’s sariras); “The Light and the Lotus” exhibition (January 3, 2026; Rai Pithora Cultural Complex, New Delhi; Ministry of Culture; 80+ artefacts; 127 years); Four Buddhist Dhams: Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar; Brahmi script (oldest abugida; parent of Devanagari, Tamil, Sinhala, Khmer, Thai scripts); Theravada/Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism; Nalanda University (Bihar; 5th–12th century CE; destroyed 1193 CE by Bakhtiyar Khilji); Buddhist Circuit of pilgrimage.

Mains GS-1: Buddhism in India — historical development, decline, and legacy | India’s Buddhist sites as cultural heritage and tourist destinations | Brahmi script and India’s linguistic heritage

Mains GS-2: India’s Buddhist soft power — how does India leverage its Buddhist heritage in foreign policy with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Mongolia? | Cultural diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy | Repatriation of cultural heritage — India’s position and international law frameworks.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

SACRED PIPRAHWA RELICS:

Location: Piprahwa, Siddharthnagar district, Uttar Pradesh

Identification: Kapilavastu — Sakya kingdom; Buddha's childhood home

Discovery: W.C. Peppe (British engineer), 1898; stone caskets with Brahmi inscription

“The Light and the Lotus” exhibition: January 3, 2026; 80+ artefacts; 127 years since reunification; Rai Pithora Cultural Complex, New Delhi; organized by Ministry of Culture + Godrej PPP

KEY BUDDHIST SITES IN INDIA:

Bodh Gaya (Gaya, Bihar): Enlightenment; Mahabodhi Temple (UNESCO WHS)

Sarnath (Varanasi, UP): First sermon (Dhammachakka Pavattana); Dhamek Stupa; Ashoka Pillar (Lion Capital)

Kushinagar (UP): Parinirvana; Mahaparinirvana Temple

Lumbini (Nepal): Birthplace; UNESCO WHS; Maya Devi Temple

Nalanda (Bihar): Greatest Buddhist monastery-university; UNESCO WHS; est. ~450 CE; destroyed ~1193 CE

Rajgir (Bihar): Buddha spent multiple rainy seasons; Griddhakuta (Vulture's Peak)

BUDDHIST DENOMINATIONS:

Theravada (“Way of the Elders”): Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos; oldest surviving school; Pali Canon; no Buddha-worship

Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”): China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam; Bodhisattva ideal; Sanskrit texts; expanded canon

Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”): Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Ladakh, Sikkim; esoteric practices; Lamas; Tibetan Book of the Dead

INDIA'S BUDDHIST SOFT POWER TOOLS:

International Buddhist Confederation (IBC): India-based body; promotes Buddhism globally; connected to Bodh Gaya

Buddhist circuit development (PRASHAD scheme + Swadesh Darshan 2.0): Ministry of Tourism

Nalanda University revival: International university at Rajgir, Bihar; opened 2014; part of India's soft power

Relic diplomacy: relics sent to Sri Lanka (2012), Thailand (2024)

BRAHMI SCRIPT:

One of the oldest known abugida scripts; origin ~3rd century BCE

Emperor Ashoka's edicts (3rd century BCE) in Brahmi; deciphered by James Prinsep (1837)

Parent script: Devanagari (Hindi/Sanskrit), Tamil, Telugu, Sinhala, Khmer, Thai, Lao, Tibetan, Burmese — all derived from Brahmi

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav: India's 75th Independence anniversary celebration; launched March 12, 2021 (from Dandi March anniversary); extended through August 2023; legacy programmes continue

300 million+ Buddhists worldwide (Pew Research); ~7 million in India

India's Buddhist sites earn ~Rs 5,000-6,000 crore annually in religious tourism

2023: PM Modi laid foundation stone for new India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage at Lumbini, Nepal

Sources: Ministry of Culture, Archaeological Survey of India, PIB, AffairsCloud

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