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Piprahwa Buddha Relics — 2,300 Years of Sacred History on Public Display

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

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WHY IN NEWS

The Grand International Exposition of the Sacred Piprahwa Relics of Bhagwan Buddha was inaugurated in New Delhi — the first-ever public display of the 2,300-year-old relics discovered in 1898 at Piprahwa (ancient Kapilavastu) in Uttar Pradesh. The relics, classified as ‘AA’ antiquities and custodied by the Indian Museum, Kolkata, hold special significance as they are associated with the Sakya clan — the clan of Siddhartha Gautama himself.

DISCOVERY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story of the Piprahwa relics begins in **1898**, when **William Claxton Peppe**, a British estate manager in Birdpur, Uttar Pradesh, began excavating a large brick-built stupa on his property in **Piprahwa village**, near Birdpur. The site had long been known locally as a place of religious significance, but its ancient history was not documented.

At a depth of approximately **18 feet**, Peppe and his team found five caskets — three stone caskets, one crystal casket, and one sandstone casket — along with loose gems, gold ornaments, and bone and ash fragments. One casket bore a **Brahmi inscription in Pali**, which when translated read (approximately):

“This deposit of relics of the Shakya Muni, the Blessed One, is that of the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, in conjunction with their sisters, and with their sons, and with their wives.”

The inscription identified the remains as those of the **Sakya clan** — the clan of **Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha)** — and placed the site at or near **Kapilavastu**, the ancient city where the Buddha grew up before his renunciation.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KAPILAVASTU/SAKYA CONNECTION

The identity of the relics is deeply significant for two reasons:

Historical: According to Buddhist tradition, after the Buddha’s **Parinirvana (death)** at Kushinagar (~483 BCE), his cremated remains were distributed among eight royal clans, each of whom built a stupa over their portion. The Sakyas of Kapilavastu were one of these eight clans. If the Piprahwa relics are authentic — and the inscription, pottery styles, and archaeological context strongly support an early Mauryan (3rd century BCE) date for the deposit — they represent a direct material connection to the historical Buddha.

Religious: Buddhist traditions across Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, and China regard relics of the Buddha as supremely sacred objects of veneration — more significant than any image or text. Nations with access to authenticated Buddha relics are seen as spiritually authoritative in the Buddhist world.

THE DISPUTE OVER KAPILAVASTU

Piprahwa's identification as Kapilavastu is widely accepted by Indian archaeologists — the Pali inscription, the proximity to other excavated Mauryan-era sites, and the match with ancient textual descriptions all support it. However, Nepal's archaeologists and the Nepali government have long contested this, claiming the site at **Tilaurakot in Nepal** is the true Kapilavastu.

The dispute matters because:

- Kapilavastu is one of Buddhism's holiest sites — pilgrimage and revenue

- The relics' provenance depends partly on which Kapilavastu is authentic

- Both India and Nepal have archaeological evidence supporting their claims — the question is unresolved

Archaeological surveys by the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** continue to support the Piprahwa identification.

THE RELICS' LEGAL STATUS AND CUSTODIANSHIP

After discovery in 1898, the relics were divided:

- Peppe donated most of the material to the colonial government

- A portion went to the **Indian Museum, Kolkata** (India's oldest museum, established 1814)

- Some relics were donated by the colonial government to the **King of Siam (Thailand)** — a diplomatic act recognising Thailand's Buddhist monarchy

The relics remaining in India are classified as '**AA**' **antiquities** under the **Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act**:

- '**AA**' **classification** is the highest protection category — these objects cannot be exported, loaned abroad permanently, or traded

- Any public display requires Ministry of Culture and Archaeological Survey of India oversight

INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION: INDIA'S BUDDHIST SOFT POWER

The inauguration of the Piprahwa Relics Exposition in New Delhi is not merely a cultural event — it is a **strategic diplomatic statement**.

India is home to the four most significant sites in the **Buddhist circuit**:

Lumbini region (birthplace connection — actually in Nepal, but bordering UP)

Bodh Gaya, Bihar — site of Enlightenment

Sarnath, Varanasi — site of the first sermon (Dhammachakkapavattana Sutta)

Kushinagar, UP — site of Parinirvana (death)

The Piprahwa relics — associated with the Buddha's own clan — add a fifth dimension: the material remains of the Sakya connection.

For India's **Act East Policy** and **Buddhist diplomacy** with Southeast and East Asian nations (Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Japan, South Korea), displaying authenticated Buddha relics creates goodwill and cultural authority. Several ASEAN nations' leaders are deeply personally religious in the Buddhist tradition — PM-level visits to display their reverence at Indian Buddhist sites strengthen people-to-people ties.

The exposition also connects to India's **Buddhist Circuit Tourism** initiative under the Swadesh Darshan scheme — aiming to attract the global Buddhist pilgrimage market (estimated at 300 million pilgrims worldwide) to India's UP-Bihar Buddhist corridor.

THE SOTHEBY'S CONTROVERSY (CONTEXT)

The broader context for this exposition includes a recent controversy: **Sotheby's auction house** attempted to auction related Buddhist antiquities (reportedly from the same regional provenance as Piprahwa-related finds). India's Ministry of Culture intervened, citing:

The **1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property**

India's own **AMASR Act** provisions

The need to repatriate illegally exported Indian antiquities

India has been increasingly active in repatriation diplomacy — PM Modi has brought back 297+ antiquities from various countries since 2014. The Piprahwa exposition is framed as a counterpoint: India is not just asking for returns, but also demonstrating that India is the authentic custodian and revealer of these treasures.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Piprahwa (UP; ancient Kapilavastu; 1898 excavation; William Claxton Peppe); Sakya clan (Buddha's clan); Parinirvana (Kushinagar); 8 clans received relics; 'AA' antiquity (AMASR Act; highest protection); Indian Museum Kolkata (est. 1814; oldest in India); Buddhist circuit sites (Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Lumbini); 1970 UNESCO Convention (cultural property)

MAINS GS-1:

“Discuss the historical significance of the Piprahwa relics and their place in Buddhist heritage. How do they contribute to our understanding of post-Parinirvana relic distribution?” | “Kapilavastu — India or Nepal? What does the archaeological evidence say?”

MAINS GS-2:

“Analyse India's Buddhist heritage diplomacy in the context of the Act East Policy. How can India leverage its Buddhist cultural assets in building soft power with Southeast and East Asian nations?”

ESSAY:

“Relics do not belong to nations — they belong to humanity. But they need nations to survive.”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

PIPRAHWA RELICS — CORE DATA:

Discovery: 1898 | Discoverer: William Claxton Peppe (British estate manager)

Site: Piprahwa village, Siddharth Nagar district, Uttar Pradesh (near Birdpur)

Contents: 5 caskets including crystal casket (~2,300 years old); bone, ash fragments (relics), gems, gold

Inscription: Brahmi script, Pali language — identifies relics as belonging to Sakya clan of Kapilavastu

Age: ~3rd century BCE (early Mauryan period; contemporaneous with Ashoka)

Custodian: Indian Museum, Kolkata (since discovery)

Classification: 'AA' antiquity (highest under AMASR Act)

KEY BUDDHIST SITES IN INDIA:

Bodh Gaya (Bihar): Enlightenment | Mahabodhi Temple: UNESCO World Heritage Site

Sarnath (Varanasi, UP): First sermon (Turning of the Wheel of Dharma)

Kushinagar (UP): Parinirvana (final death)

Nalanda (Bihar): Ancient university of Buddhist learning; UNESCO WHS

Sanchi (MP): Major stupa; UNESCO WHS; contains relics of Sariputra and Moggallana

Ajanta (Maharashtra): Buddhist cave paintings; UNESCO WHS

BUDDHA'S LIFE TIMELINE:

Born: ~563 BCE, Lumbini (now Nepal)

Enlightenment: ~528 BCE, Bodh Gaya

First sermon: ~528 BCE, Sarnath

Parinirvana: ~483 BCE, Kushinagar

Post-Parinirvana: Relics distributed to 8 clans; 84,000 stupas built under Ashoka

INDIAN MUSEUM, KOLKATA:

Established: 1814 (oldest museum in India; oldest in Asia-Pacific)

Location: Jawaharlal Nehru Road, Kolkata

Collections: Archaeology, art, natural history, geology, economic botany

AMASR ACT:

Full name: Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958

Administered by: Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) under Ministry of Culture

'AA' antiquities: Most protected; export completely prohibited

INDIA'S REPATRIATION DIPLOMACY:

297+ antiquities repatriated since 2014 from USA, UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, etc.

Key legal tools: 1970 UNESCO Convention; bilateral cultural property agreements

BUDDHIST CIRCUIT TOURISM:

Swadesh Darshan scheme: Buddhist Circuit identified as one of 15 thematic circuits

UP-Bihar corridor: Bodh Gaya–Sarnath–Kushinagar–Varanasi–Kapilavastu (Piprahwa)

Global Buddhist pilgrimage market: ~300 million pilgrims worldwide

Sources: Insights on India, PIB, ASI

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