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UNESCO World Heritage Committee Meets in Busan, India Nominates Sarnath

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HISTORY & CULTURE ·

GS1

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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UNESCO World Heritage Committee Meets in Busan, India Nominates Sarnath

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

*The opened in **Busan, Republic of Korea**, running from **July 19 to 29, 2026**, to examine roughly **30 new nominations**. India has put forward the **Ancient Buddhist Site, Sarnath**, near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, for inscription on the World Heritage List.*

THE BUSAN SESSION AT A GLANCE

The World Heritage Committee is the decision-making body that meets once a year to decide which sites are added to the **World Heritage List**. The 2026 meeting, hosted by South Korea, is scrutinising nominations from across the world, including Greece's **Mount Olympus**, submitted as a rare **mixed cultural and natural** property.

For India, the headline nomination is **Sarnath**, one of the four holiest sites in Buddhism. If inscribed, it would deepen India's standing as the birthplace and heartland of the Buddhist tradition and strengthen the country's cultural diplomacy across Asia.

What Makes Sarnath Special

Sarnath, on the outskirts of **Varanasi**, is where the **Buddha delivered his first sermon** after attaining enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. This first teaching is known as the **Dharmachakra Pravartana**, literally the "turning of the wheel of law", when the Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to his first five disciples.

The site is also woven into the story of modern India. The **Ashokan Lion Capital**, carved during the reign of Emperor Ashoka and unearthed at Sarnath, was adopted as **India's national emblem**. The **Dharmachakra** on its abacus inspired the wheel at the centre of the national flag.

HOW THE WORLD HERITAGE SYSTEM WORKS

The Committee operates under the **1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage**, usually called the **World Heritage Convention**. Nominations are assessed against criteria of **Outstanding Universal Value**, and three advisory bodies guide the process.

BODY	FULL FORM	ROLE
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites	Evaluates cultural sites
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature	Evaluates natural sites
ICCROM	International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property	Training and conservation advice

A country must first place a site on its **Tentative List** before a formal nomination dossier can be submitted. India has a substantial tentative-list backlog, meaning several strong candidates await their turn.

INDIA ON THE WORLD HERITAGE MAP

India currently has **44 World Heritage properties**, placing it among the top nations globally. These span cultural marvels such as the Taj Mahal and Khajuraho, natural sites such as Kaziranga and the Western Ghats, and mixed sites such as Khangchendzonga National Park.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

The Sarnath nomination sits within a wider push to promote the **Buddhist Circuit**, a pilgrimage and tourism corridor linking Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar. Buddhism gives India a shared cultural vocabulary with countries from Sri Lanka and Thailand to Japan and South Korea, making heritage a genuine instrument of **soft power**.

At the same time, inscription brings responsibilities. Heritage zones face constant tension between **conservation** and the pressures of urban development, pilgrim footfall and tourism infrastructure. UNESCO status typically requires stronger buffer-zone protection and site-management plans.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1: Indian art, culture and architecture; ancient Indian history; the Buddhist tradition and its heritage.

Prelims pointers:

- The **48th session** of the World Heritage Committee is being held in **Busan, South Korea** (2026).
- Sarnath is associated with the Buddha's **first sermon**, the **Dhammachakra Pravartana**.
- The **Ashokan Lion Capital** from Sarnath is India's national emblem.
- Advisory bodies: **ICOMOS** (cultural), **IUCN** (natural), **ICCROM** (conservation and training).
- India has **44** World Heritage properties.

Mains question: World Heritage inscription is as much an exercise in cultural diplomacy as in conservation. Examine with reference to India's Buddhist heritage sites.

FACTS CORNER

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

The World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972 and is administered by UNESCO from its Paris headquarters.

The Buddha's four key life events are linked to four sites: birth (Lumbini), enlightenment (Bodhi Gaya), first sermon (Sarnath) and death or mahaparinirvana (Kushinagar).

The Dhamek Stupa at Sarnath is believed to mark the spot of the first sermon.

A mixed site meets both cultural and natural criteria; Mount Olympus in Greece was nominated in this category at Busan.

India's first World Heritage sites, inscribed in 1983, included the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Ajanta Caves and Ellora Caves.

Sources: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, The Hindu on the Sarnath nomination, Archaeological Survey of India, Sarnath

Source: UNESCO World Heritage Committee Meets in Busan, India Nominates Sarnath — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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