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## Sarnath on the World Heritage List: India's 45th UNESCO Property and the Wheel of Dharma

27 July 2026 ·

HISTORY &amp; CULTURE ·

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

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

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# Sarnath on the World Heritage List: India's 45th UNESCO Property and the Wheel of Dharma

27 July 2026 · 8 min read ·

🟢 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

*The Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath, near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List at the 48th session of the World Heritage Committee held in Busan, Republic of Korea. The decision, taken on 25 July 2026, makes Sarnath India's 45th World Heritage property and Uttar Pradesh's fourth.*

## THE INSCRIPTION AND WHAT IT COVERS

Sarnath entered India's Tentative List in 1998, which means the inscription arrived after a wait of twenty-eight years. The nomination was steered by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the nodal agency for cultural properties under the World Heritage Convention, working with the Government of Uttar Pradesh.

The inscribed property is not a single monument but a serial cultural landscape made of two separately protected archaeological zones. UNESCO recognised the site under cultural criteria (iii) and (vi): criterion (iii) for bearing exceptional testimony to a civilisational tradition, and criterion (vi) for its direct and tangible association with events and beliefs of outstanding universal significance, namely the Buddha's first sermon and the founding of the monastic order.

## Components of the inscribed property

| COMPONENT                         | PRINCIPAL STRUCTURES                                                      | SIGNIFICANCE                                                               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Chaukhandi Stupa                  | Lofty terraced brick mound with a later octagonal tower                   | Traditionally marks where the Buddha met the five ascetics                 |
| Archaeological Remains of Sarnath | Dhamek Stupa, Dharmarajika Stupa, monastery ruins, Ashokan pillar remains | Core sacred precinct built and rebuilt from the Mauryan to the Pala period |

The Dhamek Stupa is the surviving vertical landmark of the site, a cylindrical drum of dressed stone and brick carrying delicate geometric and floral carving of the Gupta period. The Dharmarajika Stupa survives only as a circular foundation, having been dismantled in the late eighteenth century for building material, a destruction that is itself a lesson in the history of Indian heritage protection.

## THE FIRST SERMON AND THE FOUNDING OF THE SANGHA

Sarnath is where the Buddha, after attaining enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, delivered his first discourse to the five ascetics known as the Pancavaggiya. That sermon, the **Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta**, literally the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma, is remembered in Sanskrit tradition as the **Dharmachakra Pravartana**. It is the sermon in which the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path were first expounded.

The event carries an institutional weight beyond the doctrinal. With the ordination of the five ascetics, the **Sangha**, the monastic community, came into being. Buddhism therefore dates the completion of its Triple Gem, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, to Sarnath. Ancient texts call the place **Isipatana Migadaya**, rendered in Sanskrit as Rishipattana Mrigadava, the Deer Park where sages alight.

### The four principal pilgrimage sites

| SITE       | PRESENT LOCATION                   | EVENT IN THE BUDDHA'S LIFE           |
|------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Lumbini    | Rupandehi district, Nepal          | Birth                                |
| Bodh Gaya  | Gaya district, Bihar               | Enlightenment                        |
| Sarnath    | Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh   | First sermon, founding of the Sangha |
| Kushinagar | Kushinagar district, Uttar Pradesh | Mahaparinirvana                      |

Three of these four lie in India, which is the geographical foundation of India's claim to be the land of the Buddha's life and the basis of its Buddhist diplomacy.

## MAURYAN ART AT SARNATH AND THE NATIONAL EMBLEM

The single most consequential object recovered from Sarnath is the **Ashokan Lion Capital**, carved in polished Chunar sandstone around 250 BCE and excavated in 1904 to 1905. Four addorsed lions sit back to back on a circular abacus bearing an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull and a lion, each separated by a wheel, the whole resting on an inverted lotus bell.

The capital was adopted as the **State Emblem of India on 26 January 1950**, the day the Constitution came into force, with the motto *Satyameva Jayate* from the Mundaka Upanishad added below. The **Ashoka Chakra** on the abacus was placed at the centre of the National Flag. Sarnath is therefore not merely a

religious site; it is the physical origin of two of the Republic's constitutional symbols. The capital is displayed at the Sarnath Museum, the oldest site museum of the ASI, opened in 1910.

Sarnath also carries one of Ashoka's **Minor Pillar Edicts**, commonly called the **Schism Edict**, which warns monks and nuns against splitting the Sangha and prescribes expulsion for those who do. It is direct epigraphic evidence that the Mauryan state took an interest in regulating monastic discipline. The famous Mauryan polish, a lustrous mirror finish achieved on hard sandstone, is best seen on the Sarnath capital and remains a technique that has never been fully reconstructed.

## THE SARNATH SCHOOL AND XUANZANG'S ACCOUNT

By the fifth century CE, Sarnath had become one of the two great centres of Gupta sculpture alongside Mathura. The **Sarnath school** is defined by the use of fine-grained cream Chunar sandstone, serene downcast eyes, and above all the diaphanous, almost invisible drapery that clings to the body without folds, in contrast to the ribbed, string-like folds of Mathura. Its masterpiece is the seated **Preaching Buddha** in *dharmachakra pravartana mudra*, with the wheel and deer carved on the pedestal below and the five disciples in attendance, widely regarded as the finest single Buddha image of the Gupta age.

The Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang**, who travelled in India in the seventh century during the reign of Harshavardhana, visited Sarnath and recorded a flourishing establishment with a large number of monks of the Sammitiya school of the Hinayana tradition, a tall stupa and a great vihara, along with a stone pillar of brilliant lustre. His account is a critical dating anchor for archaeologists reading the layers of Sarnath, since it fixes the state of the site at a known moment.

## HERITAGE DIPLOMACY AND THE CONSERVATION TRADE-OFF

The inscription strengthens the **Buddhist Circuit**, a themed pilgrimage corridor developed under the Ministry of Tourism's **Swadesh Darshan** scheme, which links Sarnath with Bodh Gaya, Kushinagar, Sravasti, Vaishali and Rajgir. India's engagement with Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Vietnam and Mongolia has an explicit Buddhist heritage component, institutionalised through the **International Buddhist Confederation** headquartered in New Delhi. A UNESCO listing converts a national monument into an internationally recognised asset, which is precisely the currency of cultural soft power.

The harder question is management. Inscription reliably raises visitor numbers, and Indian heritage sites have repeatedly absorbed that pressure badly. The ASI regulates construction around centrally protected monuments under the **Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act, 1958**, as amended in 2010, which fixes a **100 metre prohibited area** where construction is barred and a further **200 metre regulated area** where it requires clearance from the National Monuments Authority. Enforcing this against a dense, commercially active settlement at Sarnath, on the edge of one of India's fastest-changing urban regions, is the real test.

The persistent weak link in Indian heritage management is livelihood integration. Vendors, guides, rickshaw operators and craftspeople who live off a site are usually treated as an **encroachment** problem rather than as stakeholders, which converts them into adversaries of conservation. A credible way forward involves a statutory Site Management Plan with periodic reporting to the World Heritage Centre, complete digital and photogrammetric documentation of the standing structures, carrying-capacity limits at the Dhamek Stupa precinct, and formal integration of the buffer zone into the Varanasi master plan so that heritage regulation is not perpetually in conflict with municipal permission.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

**GS Paper 1:** Indian culture covering salient aspects of art forms, literature and architecture from ancient times; Mauryan and Gupta art; Buddhism and its institutional history; conservation of monuments.

**GS Paper 2:** India's soft power and cultural diplomacy; **bilateral** and regional groupings; statutory regulation of heritage.

### Prelims pointers:

- Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath inscribed on the World Heritage List on 25 July 2026 at the 48th session of the World Heritage Committee, Busan, Republic of Korea.
- India's 45th World Heritage property; Uttar Pradesh's fourth; on India's Tentative List since 1998.
- Inscribed under cultural criteria (iii) and (vi); two components, the Chaukhandi Stupa and the Archaeological Remains of Sarnath.
- The Archaeological Remains include the Dhamek Stupa and the Dharmarajika Stupa.
- The Ashokan Lion Capital of Sarnath, about 250 BCE in Chunar sandstone, was adopted as the State Emblem of India on 26 January 1950.
- Ancient names of Sarnath: Isipatana Migadaya, the Deer Park.
- The World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972; the World Heritage Committee has 21 States Parties as members.
- India's previous inscriptions: Maratha Military Landscapes in 2025, the 44th property, and the Moidams of the Ahom dynasty at Charaideo in 2024.
- The AMASR Act, 1958 prescribes a 100 metre prohibited area and a further 200 metre regulated area around centrally protected monuments.

## ★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

### THE INSCRIPTION:

Property name: Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath

Date of inscription: 25 July 2026

Session: 48th session of the World Heritage Committee, Busan, Republic of Korea

Rank: India's 45th World Heritage property, Uttar Pradesh's fourth

Criteria: cultural criteria (iii) and (vi)

On India's Tentative List since 1998

### SARNATH'S MONUMENTS:

Chaukhandi Stupa: terraced brick mound with a later octagonal tower

Dhamek Stupa: cylindrical stone and brick stupa with Gupta-period carving

Dharmarajika Stupa: survives as a circular foundation

Ashokan Lion Capital: polished Chunar sandstone, about 250 BCE, housed in the Sarnath Museum

Ashokan Minor Pillar Edict at Sarnath: the Schism Edict on monastic unity

### REGULATORY FRAMEWORK:

UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 1972

World Heritage Committee: 21 States Parties

AMASR Act, 1958: 100 metre prohibited area, 200 metre regulated area

Nodal agency in India: Archaeological Survey of India

### KEY CONCEPTS:

Dharmachakra Pravartana: the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, the setting in motion of the Wheel of Dharma

Pancavaggiya: the five ascetics who became the first members of the Sangha

Sangha: the Buddhist monastic community, the third of the Three Jewels

Outstanding Universal Value: the threshold of cultural or natural significance that transcends national boundaries, required for World Heritage inscription

Sarnath school: Gupta-period sculptural style in cream Chunar sandstone marked by transparent, fold-free drapery

Buffer zone: the area surrounding an inscribed property in which land use is regulated to protect its setting

Sources: UNESCO, PIB, The Hindu

Source: Sarnath on the World Heritage List: India's 45th UNESCO Property and the Wheel of Dharma —  
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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

## Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/daily/2026/07/27/sarnath-unesco-world-heritage-site-2026/>

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