

# INDEX

**RWYC, RECONNECTING WITH YOUR CULTURE:  
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Olimpia Niglio & Rana P.B. Singh, editors

- SARNATH, WHERE THE BUDDHA TAUGHT THE EIGHTFOLD PATH:  
CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND MESSAGES FOR GLOBAL ORDER  
Rana P.B. Singh, Kiran A. Shinde, and Pravin S. Rana 167
- SHIRAKAWA-GŌ AND GOKAYAMA, THE WORLD HERITAGE VILLAGES  
IN JAPAN: TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTENANCE OF CULTURE AND  
HERITAGE IN THE FRAME OF RWYC  
Rana P.B. Singh, Masaaki Fukunaga 187
- AYODHYA, A HOLY-HERITAGE CITY OF BHARAT-INDIA:  
APPRAISING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND SUSTAINABILITY  
Rana P.B. Singh, Sarvesh Kumar 209
- THE HISTORIC AXIS OF IERA ODOS AS AN “OPEN-AIR MUSEUM”:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES  
Georgia Eleftheraki, Maria Markou 229
- ST. OLAV’S CULTURAL ROUTES AS A KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM  
THROUGH REALITY AND VIRTUALITY OF (IM)MATERIAL HERITAGE  
FOR NORDIC SOLIDARITY  
Hee Sook Lee-Niinioja 245
- DEL OBJETO A LA TRAMA. PRÁCTICAS, INSTRUMENTOS Y  
TÉCNICAS SENSIBLES PARA LA LECTURA DEL TERRITORIO  
Franco Marchionni, Alejandra Sella, Carlos Pizoni 259
- TRADITION, SYNCRETISM, AND VULNERABILITY OF THE ORIGINAL NATIVE TOWNS  
OF THE VALLEY OF MEXICO: THE CASE OF THE PATRONAL FEAST  
OF THE SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF LOS REMEDIOS  
Jaime González-García, Blanca Margarita Gallegos-Navarrete 271
- CULTURAL-BASED REGENERATION: ARCHITECTURE, ART, CONTEXT  
Luca Zecchin 281

TRACCE DEI LUOGHI, PERCEZIONI E INTERPRETAZIONI DEL PAESAGGIO RELIGIOSO DELLA VALLE DI RIETI Marco Rosati	293
PRE-HISPANIC DANCE, PATRIMONIAL PUBLIC SPACES AND SYNCRETISM: INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE, WORLDVIEW AND RESPECT FOR NATURE IN THE CONSTITUTION SQUARE, MANUEL GAMIO SQUARE AND SQUARE OF THE MARQUIS Medina-Martínez Victor Fernando, García-Ayala José Antonio, Gallegos-Navarrete Blanca Margarita	299
PARQUE LINEAL “VIAS DE FERROCARRILES NACIONALES EN CIUDAD DE MÉXICO”, PROYECTO URBANO ARQUITECTÓNICO EN UN LUGAR HISTÓRICO. COMPLEJIDAD ENTRE ARTE, SOSTENIBILIDAD Y CULTURA María Guadalupe Valiñas Varela	311
CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY URBAN TERRITORY THROUGH CULTURE. THREE MEXICAN CITIES FROM THE 16 <sup>TH</sup> -18 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY Velia Yolanda Ordaz Zubia, María Elena Torres Pérez, Erika Pérez Múzquiz	325

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**RWYC, RECONNECTING WITH YOUR CULTURE:  
CULTURAL LANDSCAPES & SUSTAINABILITY**

**Vol. 2**



# SARNATH, WHERE THE BUDDHA TAUGHT THE EIGHTFOLD PATH: CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND MESSAGES FOR GLOBAL ORDER

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## ABSTRACT

The phrase 'cultural landscape' reflects upon a way of seeing landscapes (clairvoyance) and associated attributes. Sarnath is famous as a sacred (heritage) site where the Buddha first delivered his sermon in c. 528 BCE. The whole area was developed as a township by Ashoka [ruled c. 268 to 232 BCE] in the frame of replicating the monastic and scholastic traditions of Buddhism. The Buddha (c. 563-483 BCE) passed his first stay during the rainy season at Sarnath, and he challenged Brahminism's fundamental, conservative, and superstitious rules there for the first time through his teaching called *Anattalakkhana Sutta*. At Sarnath, the Buddha discovered his 'Middle Way', which avoids both extremes and can lead one to understanding, liberation, and peace. It is the Noble Eightfold Path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. After realising understanding, liberation, and peace, he taught the Noble Eightfold Path. These noble paths establish examples of how reconnecting with culture will vitalise cultural landscapes' spirit and promote cultural sustainability. The discovery of the relics at Sarnath was an accidental story initiated by a local landlord — Jagat Singh, who destroyed the huge sacred mound of Dharmarajika to collect bricks and stones for developing a township of his own name, called Jagatganj. Over time British officers performed a series of excavations and documentation and re-established the glories of Sarnath. The cultural landscape of Sarnath is represented by different sites related to Buddhist thought and life incidences, together with the Shaivite and Jain sites, thus, possessing a more profound message for awakening and understanding universal values. Over time a dozen monasteries from different counties were established here. Despite such importance, the township is not on the main scene of spiritual tourism. It is not even inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage list, primarily due to political conservatism, the threat from Varanasi city, prioritization of the development strategy, and consequential issues. This paper highlights the three broad aspects of landscape histogenesis, i.e., existence, sustenance, and sustainability, and the interconnectedness of the frame of 'Reconnecting With Your Culture' in making global harmony and peace.

**Keywords:** Sarnath, Cultural Landscapes, Cultural Sustainability, Enlightenment, Heritagisation, Buddhist Preaching, Heritage Politics.

## SARNATH: GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Sarnath (coordinates: 25.3762° N, 83.0227° E), situated about 10 kilometres (6.25 miles) northeast of Varanasi Junction Railway Station, is one of the world's most sacred Buddhist sites (cf. Fig. 1). This place is directly associated with the life and teachings of the Buddha [c. 563–483 BCE], as it was from here that he embarked on the journey of his new life. After attaining enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, the Buddha delivered his 'First Sermon' to the five companions at Sarnath in c. 528 BCE (Sahini 1914, p. 2, Mani 2012, pp. 10-11, also Singh 2009). This act is recorded in sacred Buddhist texts like *Dharmachakra-pravarttana* (in Pali *Dhammacakkappavattana*) or 'Turning of the Wheel of Law' (Cunningham 1871a, p. 437, cf. Mani 2023, p. 75). In ancient Buddhist texts, this site is known as *Isipatan* (*Rishipattana*) and *Mrigadava*. The meaning of the first name is explained as 'the fall of the sage', i.e., *risayo 'tra palita* (Jones 1949, p. 37). It denotes a place where five hundred sages or *pratyeka Buddha* on hearing Gautama Buddha, attained *nirvana*, i.e., salvation (Sahni 1926, p. 1). Presently, the entire area is part of an archaeological site maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, ASI (Fig. 1).

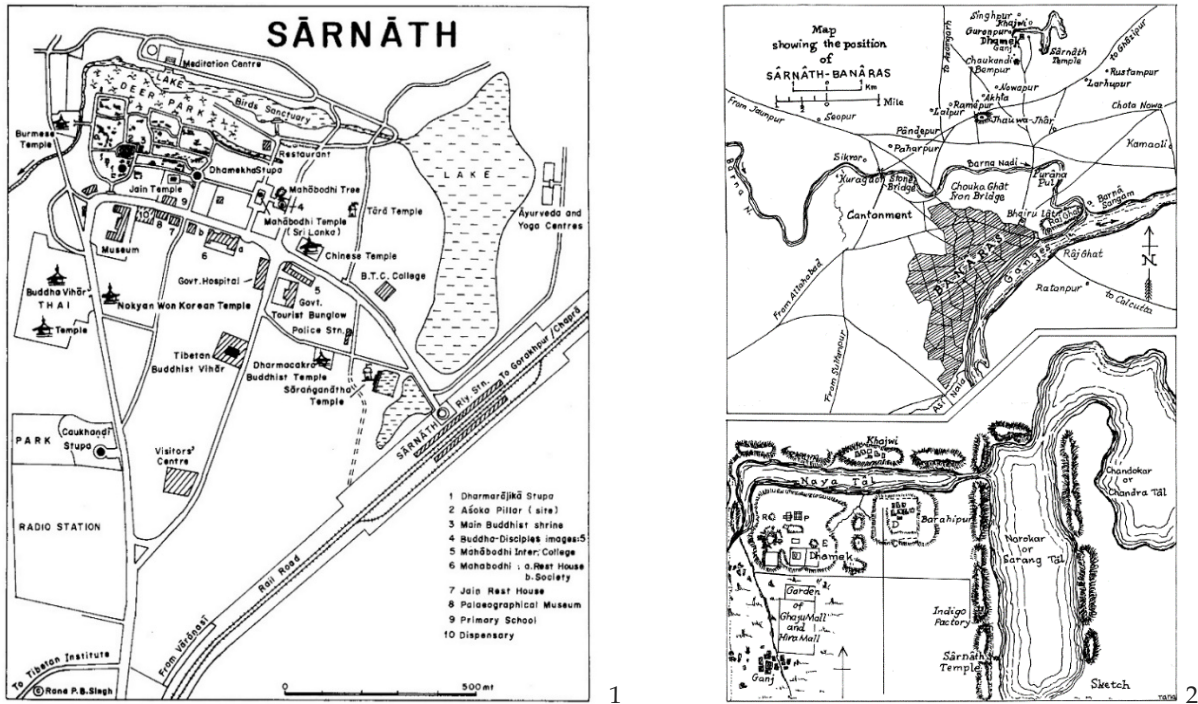


Fig. 1. Sarnath: Overviewing the landscapes (after Singh, Rana P.B. 2009: p. 126)  
 Fig. 2. Sarnath and Banaras (after Alexander Cunningham, ASI Report Vol. I, 1835-36)

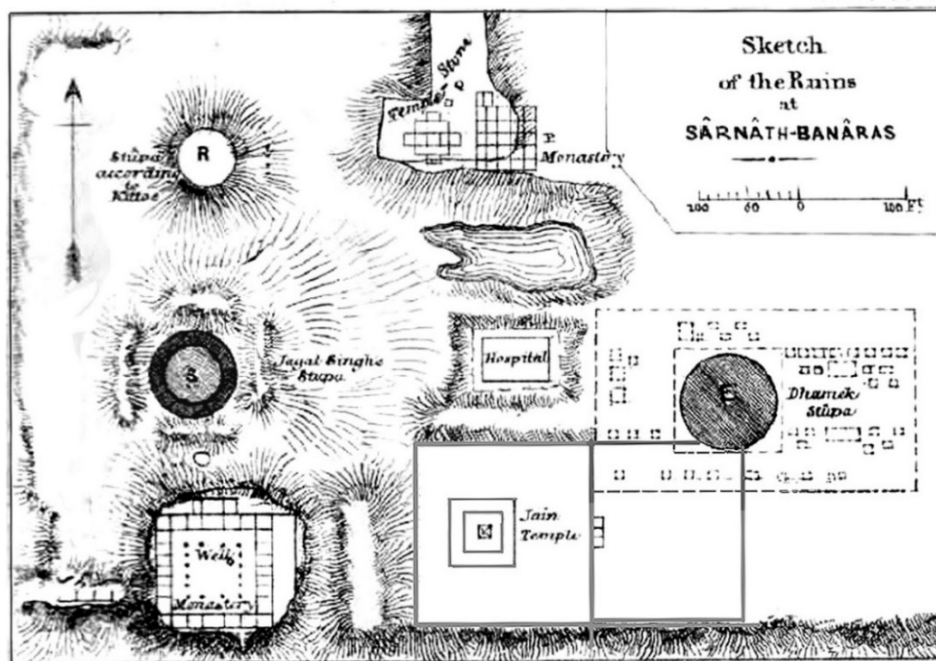


Fig. 3. Sketch of the ruins at Sarnath (after Major M. Kittoe, 1851-52, courtesy: ASIR, vol. I).

The first detailed mapping of Sarnath was done by Alexander Cunningham [1814-1893], then the Director of the Archaeological Survey of India, which shows the overall view of the landscape (cf. Fig. 2), of course lacking the details of the excavated site and the monuments. B.R. Mani (2023, p. 78) has concisely narrated the story of excavations at Sarnath. With no significant success, Col. C. Mackenzie was the first who started systematic excavations at Sarnath in 1815-16. Inspired by his works, Alexander Cunningham continued excavation between December 1834 and January 1836, and prepared the first detailed map (Fig. 2). While doing excavation for a shorter period (1851-5) Major M. Kittoe also prepared a sketch of the ancient sites; however, this was not systematic and precise and covered the entire area (Fig. 3). The earliest archaeological reference to Sarnath was narrated by Jonathan Duncan [1756-1811], then Resident Commissioner of Banaras, in 1794 in his accounts of the discovery of two urns by (Babu) Jagat Singh in the vicinity of a temple called Sarnath. Jagat Singh [c. 1746-1799],

a chieftain of the extended royal family [– not the Diwan, ‘finance minister,’ of Raja Chet Singh of Banaras as in British writings] unearthed the *stupa* mound (i.e., Dharmarajika) in 1793-94 to obtain building materials, both stone blocks and bricks, for the construction of a marketplace in the northern part of the city of Banaras (Varanasi) which named after him, i.e., Jagatganj (cf. Qureshi and Pathak 2024, p.74). While digging out the building materials from the ruined stupa mound (cf. Fig. 4), one cylindrical green marble *manjusha*, i.e., relic casket, was found inside a round sandstone box (Majumdar 2007, p. 38). The sandstone box and marble casket were discovered eighteen *hauts* or cubits below the surface. The cylindrical marble box contains a few articles inside, including human bones, decayed pearls, gold leaves, and other valuable jewels like silver ornaments, pearls, rubies, etc. (Mani 2023, p. 75). The bones were immersed in the Ganga (the *Ganges*) River, and both the vessels were handed over to the museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, centred at Calcutta (modern Kolkata). The more systematic excavation was carried out at Sarnath in 2013-14 under the direction of B.R. Mani (cf. Mani 2023, pp. 78-82), who identified a sequence of seven phases of settlements, started from the pre-Maryan period (5th - 4th century BCE) to the early medieval (Rajput) period (CE 10th - 11th century).



Fig. 4. Sarnath and the deserted environs: The view around 1805! (as archived under ASI).

Besides the vessels and articles, a statue of Buddha was also discovered at the same place—underground bearing an inscription of the Pala King Mahipala at the foot of the statue (Bhattacharya 2009, p. 64). It is a dated inscription of Vikrama Samvat 1083 (i.e., CE 1026) (Sahni 1914, p. 6, also Narain 1959, p. 174). It was at a depth of 27 feet (8.3 mt) that the two vessels were discovered (Cunningham 1871, p. 113). According to Xuan Zang (Hiuen Tsang/Chen Hui), a CE 7th-century Chinese pilgrim, this circular hollow was the site of a stupa 60 feet (18.3 metres) in height built by Ashoka (Cunningham 1871, p. 24). Due to this drastic incident, the stupa was popularly called ‘Jagat Singh Stupa’ and was referred to even in the earlier reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, including the first map of Sarnath (Nevill 1909, p. 206, Sahni 1914, p. 3, see Fig. 5). Of course, over time, it was given a more appropriate and authentic name Dharmarajika Stupa, to commemorate the structure constructed here by Ashoka to keep the relics of the Buddha (cf. Qureshi and Pathak 2024, pp.74-75).

The paper titled ‘An Account of the Discovery of two Urns in the Vicinity of Benares’ (*Asiatic Researches*, vol. V, 1798, pp. 131-132) reflects upon the history of the discovery of Sarnath. Duncan has proposed three possibilities concerning the *manjusha* (a green marble box), viz. (i) these bones belong to a consort of a Raja (king), who devoted herself to the funeral pyre of her husband after death or some other emergency; (ii) the bones of the deceased were kept here to get disposed of at the auspicious time it to the Ganga River; and more likely (iii) the bones belong to one of the devotees of the Buddha, who has no reverence for the Ganga River and prefers to deposit the remains in the earth instead of immersing to the holy river. He corroborated his view by the fact that a Buddha statue was discovered at the same place, underground along with the urn (Duncan 1799, pp. 131-132; Qureshi and Pathak 2024, pp. 75-76).

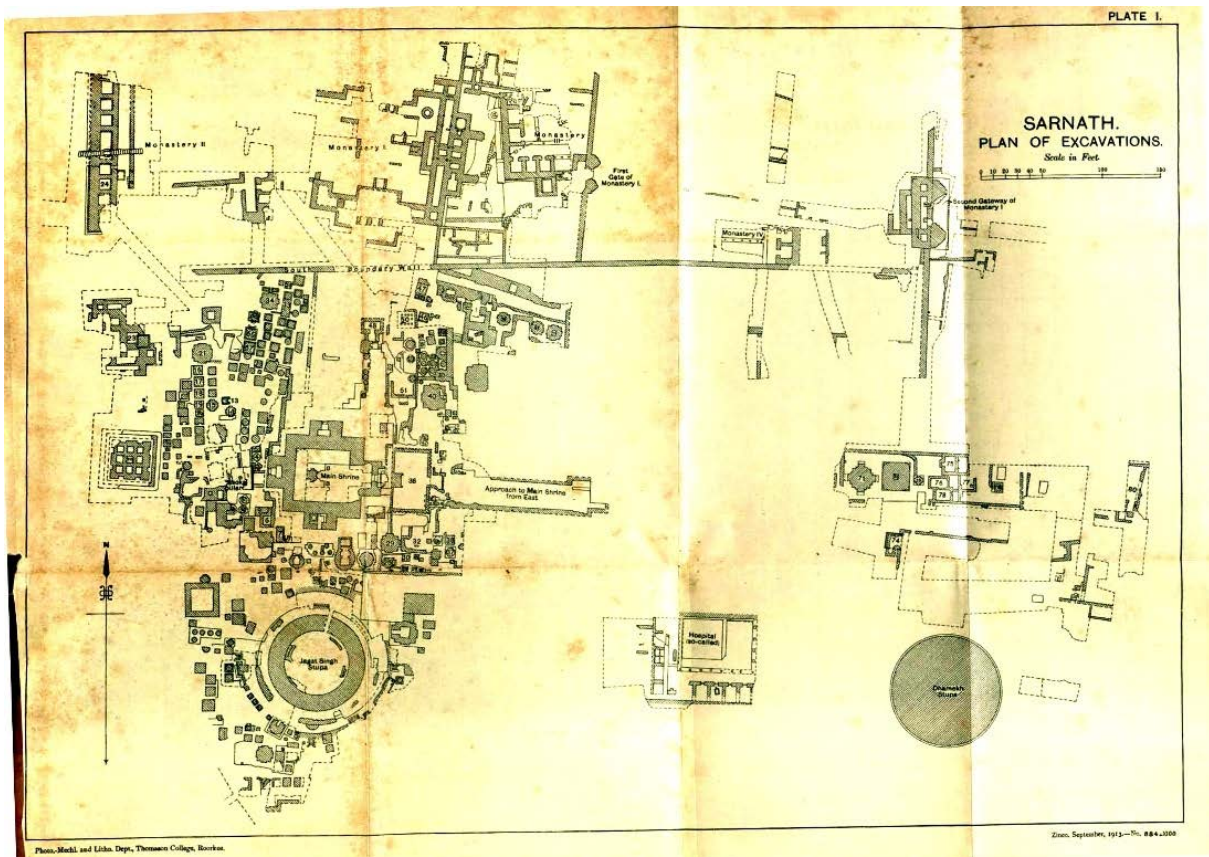


Fig. 5. The archeological site of Sarnath, September 1913 (after Sahni 1914).

The present name, Sarnāth, seems to be derived from the word Sāraṅganāth meaning 'Lord of Deer' (Schumann 2004, p. 67). Interestingly, this is an epithet used for the Hindu deity trinity God Shiva, and already one Shiva temple exists within the vicinity of half a mile (0.8 km) east of the Buddhist remains (Sahni 1926, p. 1). The present territory includes three *stupas* (a mound-like or hemispherical structure), i.e., Dharmarajika Stupa (earlier called Jagat Singh Stupa; cf. Figs. 11 and 12), Dhamek Stupa (cf. Figs. 15, 16, 17, and 18), and Chaukhandi Stupa (cf. Fig. 19), in addition to the main shrine, and other sacred structures. Sarnath recorded a long, continuous, and glorious history in the past seventeen centuries and was enriched from time to time through subsequent additions till the CE 12th century when bigoted Mahmud of Ghazni destroyed the sacred site in CE 1017, and again in 1193 by Qutb al-Din Aibak, general of the Ghurid king Muhammad Ghori (Sahni 1914, p. 7, p. 8). Once the main centre of learning, pilgrimage, and monasteries for scholars and monks till the twelfth century, Sarnath went into oblivion after this depredation. The ancient site was devastated by the invaders and was converted into a heap of ruins buried under its debris, totally secluded, and covered by dense vegetation for centuries (Sahni 1922, p. 6). Only in the last decade of the eighteenth century (c. 1787-88!) did the sacred site again come to the fore, accidentally delved into by Jagat Singh, the local zamindar and a chieftain of the extended royal family (cf. Nevill 1909, p. 206).

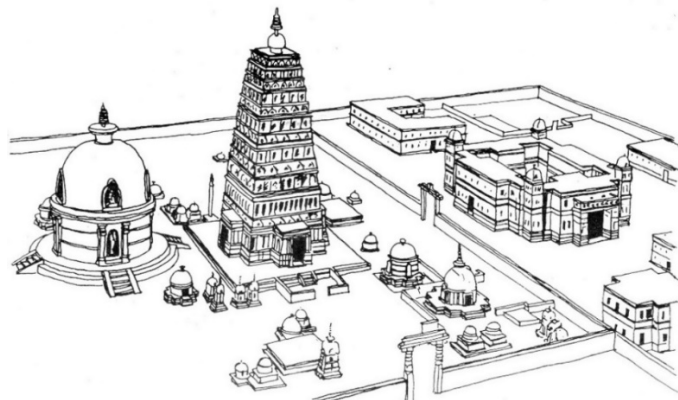


Fig. 6. Sarnath: Overviewing the ancient landscapes –reconstructed (imagery perspective by Brown 1959).



The reliquary itself has also disappeared, although the outer sandstone box was replaced in the relic chamber, where it was rediscovered by Cunningham in 1835 (Oertel 1908, p. 61-62). The bricks of the stupa were hauled off and used for the construction of the market in Jagatganj, Varanasi (Sherring 1868, p. 26). Jagat Singh and his crew also removed a large part of the facing of the Dhamek Stupa and removed several Buddha statues which he retained at his house in Jagatganj (Oertel 1908, p. 62-64). Brown (1959) has reconstructed a landscape perspective of ancient Sarnath, where Dharmarajika Stupa and Mulagandha Kuti Vihar were prominently depicted showing an imagery perspective (Fig. 6, compare Figs. 22 and 23).

#### THE BUDDHA RETREAT TO SARNATH: THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Pali texts narrate that after getting enlightenment at Bodh Gaya the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (c 563-483 BCE), came to know intuitively that his five old Brahmin friends who had left him earlier, viz. Kondanna (Kondajja), Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama, and Assaji were leading an ascetic life at Isipattana Migadaya (*Sanskrit*: Rishipattana Mrigadaya, 'the deer park of Sarnath'). By his divine knowledge, he came to know that they were staying at Sarnath, therefore he came to Banaras (Varanasi) and eventually reached the deer park at Isipattana. The name Deer Park derives from an occasion in one of Shakyamuni's former lives as Boddhisattva when he was leading a herd of deer. It becomes clear that the Buddha did not want to preach his privileged knowledge to a layman, because the latter cannot comprehend it. So, his choice was an educated recipient of his supreme knowledge; his choice was his five early companions staying at Sarnath (Das 2016, p. 231). He soon transformed his five friends and accepted them as his first five disciples (*bhikkhu*) by preaching to them the noble rules, called Dhammacakka Pavattana (*Sanskrit*: Dharmacakra Parivartana). Soon afterward the Buddha converted 55 noblemen, including the merchant Yasha and his relatives, who became Buddhist monks and his disciples. Slowly the number of disciples reached 60, who were sent in various directions to disseminate the message of the Buddha.

A tale from the *Nigrodhamiga Jataka* states that the Buddha in his previous life was born as a Golden Deer at Sarnath and saved the life of a pregnant deer. By this incident, the king of Kashi declared this territory as a 'protected area', protected from hunting and preserved for mendicants and deer. This mythology is one of the earliest-telling care of the animal. All the 1,000 Buddhas of this aeon, after demonstrating the attainment of enlightenment at Vajrasana, proceed to Sarnath to give the first turning of the '*Wheel of Dhamma*' (Cunningham 1871a, p. 437). In like manner, Shakyamuni walked from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath in order to meet the five ascetics who left him earlier. He entered Banaras (Kashi) early one morning, made his alms round, bathed, ate his meal, and leaving by the east gate of the city, walked northwards to Isipattana Migadava, the Sage's Deer Park, i.e., present Sarnath (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The Buddha preaching at Sarnath (an example of Gandhara art)

At this place, the five ascetics resumed their austere practices. When they saw the Buddha approaching, thinking him still to be the Gautama who had forsaken their path, they decided not to welcome him. Yet, as he neared, they found themselves involuntarily rising and paying respect. Proclaiming that he was Buddha, Shakyamuni assured them that the goal had been attained. Xuan Zang (Hsüan-tsang), a 7th-century Chinese Buddhist monk, saw a large, dome-shaped Stupa on this spot, where a large mound, probably its remains, surrounded by an octagonal Muslim structure (now called **Chaukhandi Stupa**, cf. Fig. 19), which stands a short

distance south of the park. During the first watch of the night the Buddha was silent, during the second he made a little conversation, and at the third began the teaching. At the site where all the Buddhas first turned the wheel, 1,000 thrones appeared. Shakyamuni circumambulated those of the three previous Buddhas and sat upon the fourth. Light radiated from his body, illuminating the 3,000 worlds, and the earth trembled. Brahma offered him a 1,000-spoked golden wheel, and Indra and other gods also made offerings, all imploring the Buddha to teach (cf. Fig. 21).

The Buddha passed his first stay during the rainy season at Sarnath, and there for the first time, he challenged the fundamental, conservative, and superstitious rules of Brahminism through his teaching called *Anattalakkhana Sutta*. The Pali texts have mentioned the names of many great Brahmin priests in the middle Ganga valley, but no one from Kashi. This indicates that during the period of the Buddha, Kashi was not a stronghold of religious-ritual institutions and was also not dominated by conservative groups.

When the retreat season ended, the Buddha returned south. He stopped by the Deer Park in Isipattana, the place where he had delivered his first Dhamma talk on the Four Noble Truths thirty-six years earlier.

Thirty-six years after his first teaching the Buddha visited Sarnath together with his main disciples like Sariputta, Mogagallana, and Mahokotithata, and delivered religious discourses and teachings, mostly challenging the superstitious rituals, sacrifices, and totemism performed under the Brahminic traditions. This second visit was later followed by several visits to Sarnath. However, after the death of the Buddha, the cultural arena turned in different directions where Brahminism superseded Buddhism, and still it predominates.

At Sarnath, addressing his five old friends, the Buddha said, "Listen! My friends, I have found the Great Way, and I will show it to you. You will be the first to hear my Teaching. This Dharma (Pali: *Dhamma*) is not the result of thinking. It is the fruit of direct experience. Listen serenely with all your awareness." The Buddha's voice was filled with such spiritual authority that his five friends joined their palms and looked up at him. Kondanna spoke for them all, "Please, friend Gautama, show us compassion and teach us the Way." The Buddha began serenely:

"My brothers, there are two extremes that a person on the path should avoid. One is to plunge oneself into sensual pleasures, and the other is to practice austerities that deprive the body of its needs. Both extremes lead to failure. The path I have discovered is the 'Middle Way', which avoids both extremes and has the capacity to lead one to understanding, liberation, and peace. It is the Noble Eightfold Path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I have followed this Noble Eightfold Path and have realised understanding, liberation, and peace." This Eight-fold path is aligned with the recent mission of deeply sensed education and awakening, i.e., RWYC- Reconnecting With Your Culture.

"Brothers, why do I call this path the Right Path? I call it the Right Path because it does not avoid or deny suffering but allows for a direct confrontation with suffering as the means to overcome it. The Noble Eightfold Path is the path of living in awareness. Mindfulness is the foundation. By practising mindfulness, you can develop concentration, which enables you to attain Understanding. Thanks to the right concentration, you realise the right awareness, thoughts, speech, action, livelihood, and effort. The Understanding that develops can liberate you from every shackle of suffering and give birth to true peace and joy."

"Brothers, there are *four truths*: the existence of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path which leads to the cessation of suffering. I call these the Four Noble Truths. The **first** is the existence of suffering. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are suffering. Sadness, anger, jealousy, worry, anxiety, fear, and despair are suffering. Separation from loved ones is suffering. Association with those you hate is suffering. Desire, attachment, and clinging to the five aggregates are suffering."

"Brothers, the **second** truth is the cause of suffering. Because of ignorance, people cannot see the truth about life, and they become caught in the flames of desire, anger, jealousy, grief, worry, fear, and despair."

"Brothers, the **third** truth is the cessation of suffering. Understanding the truth of life brings about the cessation of every grief and sorrow and gives rise to peace and joy."

"Brothers, the **fourth** truth is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. It is the Noble Eightfold Path, which I have just explained. The Noble Eightfold Path is nourished by living mindfully. Mindfulness leads to concentration and understanding which liberates you from every pain and sorrow and leads to peace and joy. I will guide you along this path of realisation" (Singh 2009, pp. 124-125).

While Siddhartha was explaining the Four Noble Truths, Kondanna suddenly felt a great light shining within his own heart. He could taste the liberation he had sought for so long. His face beamed with joy. The Buddha pointed at him and said "Kondanna! You've got it! You've got it!" (*Vinaya Mahavagga, Khuddaka Nikaya 1, and Samyutta Nikaya, LVI.11*).

#### ASHOKAN LION CAPITAL – SYMBOL OF CULTURAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS

The Lion-Pillar at Sarnath is the finest and the most famous of all the examples of Mauryan art. Discovered in 1905 by Friedrich O. Oertel [1862-1942], this consists of a shaft made of a single piece of a block of black-spotted buff-coloured sandstone that supports a capital made of another single piece of stone (cf. Figs. 8 and 9). The inscribed stump of the Ashokan column, presently of a height of only 2.03 metres, was originally 15.25 metres high, and it was surmounted by the famous Lion Capital with a crowning *dharmachakra* fitted above the heads of the four lions, on a contrivance into a groove in the centre (Singh 2009, p. 136). The portion of the pillar embedded in the ground in rough rests on a large flat stone, 20.3 x 15.2 x 45.7 cm. The pillar bears *three inscriptions*. The first,

an edict of Ashoka in Brahmi characters refers to the emperor giving a warning to the monks and nuns against creating schism. The second is of the Kushana period and refers to the 40th year of Ashvaghosha. The third inscription, an early Gupta script, mentions the teacher of the Sammitiya sect and the Vastiputraka School.



Fig. 8. Ashokan Lion Capital, ruined site, 1905, after F.O. Oertel.

Fig. 9. The Lion Capital, in museum, 2022.

Ashoka's messages are well symbolised in the Lion Capital, dated c. 250 BCE to commemorate the occasion of the Buddha's first sermon in Sarnath. This is the most elaborately carved surviving capital made under the patronage of the Mauryan king Ashoka.

The crowning element was originally a large wheel (*chakra*) that is lost over time (Huntington 1985, p. 47). The *chakra* is an important symbol of cosmic order in Upanishadic metaphysics, "which was incorporated into Buddhism at an early date" (*ibid.*). The symbol of the lion refers to the Buddha's clan, *shākya* (lion), and Ashoka, and indicates the natural order. The four animals on the drum indicate the life incidents of the Buddha, from conception to enlightenment, and the cosmic order of nature (*rita*), viz. the elephant, the bull, the horse, and the lion, separated by intervening Dharma Chakras (cf. Table 1). The Buddha is often called a "lion", and his words are "the voice of the lion", or *simhaghosha* (*ibid.*). It is noted that "Ashoka's major contributions to pillar iconography may have been of this royal and Vedic symbols to a form of suitable for Buddhist use" (Huntington 1985, p. 46).

Table 1. The Buddha's life symbols, as represented in the Lion capital at Sarnath.  
(Source: based on the Buddhist texts.)

Se	The Animal	The Buddha's life incidents	Cosmic Order of Nature	Direction
1	An Elephant	The dream of Queen Maya, where a white Elephant enters her womb—symbolising the conception of Buddha's mother	Wisdom	East
2	A Bull	The Bull depicts the zodiac sign of Taurus, the month in which the Buddha was born—the Buddha's Nativity as a King	Agricultural economy	South
3	A Galloping Horse	The Horse Kanthaka, which the Buddha is said to have used for leaving his princely life—retreats towards the Renunciation of his kingdom.	Speed	West
4	A Lion	The Lion shows the attainment of enlightenment—the Buddha in the Post-Enlightenment stage	King of wilderness	North

The four lions comprising the Capital are depicted with their mouths open as if mid-roar and their manes are arranged in neat ringlets. They also portray an understated but carefully studied musculature. It is commonly

believed that the eye sockets of the lions were once fitted with semi-precious stones. The overall form of the lions is poised, heavily stylised, and compact, like the lion images carved in Achaemenid Persia [522 BC–330 BCE], which is a known source of influence for Mauryan architecture. In addition, the abacus features four animals (as cited) carved in high relief suggesting that the sculptor(s) may have been familiar with the anatomies of the animals. They appear to be moving in a clockwise direction and are separated by four *chakras* with twenty-four spokes each. The abacus rests on an upturned, bell-shaped lotus with elongated, fluted petals, which are like that of the Achaemenid style of architecture. This symbolic icon corroborates the landscape, dominated by the serenity of wilderness, vegetal covers, and agricultural landscapes.

The various icons that appear on the Lion Capital are recurring symbols within Buddhism. The *dharmachakra* (wheel) is a solar symbol with its origin in many faiths and, therefore, has multiple interpretations. Here, it is believed to represent the Buddha “turning the wheel of the law” with his first sermon at Sarnath. It also possibly refers to Ashoka’s title of Chakravartin, meaning “a ruler whose chariot wheels roll everywhere.”

Some sources interpret the lions as personifying the Shakyamuni (of the Shakya, or lion, clan) Buddha who preached his sermons at Sarnath. Their open mouths are interpreted as spreading the Buddha’s teachings, the Four Noble Truths, far and wide. An almost identical lion capital with its mouth open is found at the Sanchi pillar, which is another site where the Buddha is believed to have delivered sermons. Some interpretations suggest that the lions symbolise not only the Buddha but also Ashoka. As a significant ruler of the first historical empire in India with a vast geographical reach, strong relations with foreign states, and diverse secular cultures, Ashoka was held in parallel with the Buddha, having limitedly imbibed the Buddhist way of life.

A motto inscribed below the abacus in Devanagari (Sanskrit-Hindi) script says: “*Satyameva Jayate*” (Truth Alone Triumphs) – a sacred verse from the *Muṇḍaka Upanishad* (3.1.6) which mentions:

*Satyameva Jayate nānṛtaṃ Satyena panthā vitato devayānaḥ |*

*yenākramantyrśayo hyāptakāmā yatra tat Satyasya paramam nidhānam |3.1.6 |*

“Truth Alone Triumphs, not Falsehood; by Truth, the Devayanah (the path of the Gods) is widened, that by which the seers travel on, having nothing to wish for to where there is that—the highest treasure attained by Truth.”

There are four *chakras* (wheels) within the space gaps of the animals, and each of the *chakras* consists of twenty-four spokes that represent each hour of the time and indicate the passage of time. Together with a Dharma Chakra in the centre, a bull on the right, and a galloping horse on the left, it was adopted as the state emblem of the country on the first day of Bharat (India)’s day of becoming Republic, i.e., 26 January 1950 as a reaffirmation of independent and contemporary India’s “ancient commitment to world peace and goodwill”, through the values espoused by the Buddha and Emperor Ashoka through the Lion Capital. The new Central Foyer (Parliament building), inaugurated on 11 July 2022, of the country has the Lion Capital emblem placed on top at a height is 6.5 metres, is made of bronze, and weighs approximately 9,500 kilograms. On a circular disc, it has four Asiatic lions mounted back-to-back, replicating the Ashokan Lion Capital at Sarnath. In the national emblem, only three of the lions are visible, and the lotus base is omitted. A bull and a horse are visible beneath the lions, separated by a *dharmachakra* (cf. Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. The replica of Lion Capital on the top of the main hall of the Central Vista (New Parliament, 2022).

The lions in Ashoka’s Lion Capital stand upon Dharmachakra, representing to draw their power from *dharmā*. However, the lions on the new emblem are found to look a little ‘angry’, with their fangs visible, as opposed to the grace and glory of the original. And the lions in PM Narendra Modi’s Central Vista step on Dharmachakra symbolise power unto themselves. In the frame of *dharmacracy*, “Modi understands symbolism more than most political leaders do; he knows how to use architecture, sculptures, paintings, and lectures to cast masses in the mould of the State” (cf. Yadav 2022). The four lions in the original Ashokan Lion capital symbolised power, courage, confidence, and pride, while in the New Vista (2022), the replacement of serene lions with ferocious ones reflects a depiction worth changing the Nation’s political environment. It is remarked that “With the Central Vista Redevelopment Project, India is gradually letting go of the elements it has identified within the past 75 years.

While the supporters of this ongoing project have repeatedly echoed a single claim of attempting to ‘decolonise the country’ and give it a ‘new, Indian identity’, even after 75 years of Independence, are we really under the shadow of colonialism? Or have we claimed it as our own by carving out a unique identity for it? (Pande 2022).

#### THE STUPAS – SYMBOL OF CULTURAL HISTORY AND AWAKENING

Cunningham (1871, p. 123) mentioned in his report that many statues nearby Dharmarajika and Dhamek, about forty in number, and most of the carved stones that he excavated and left on the ground by the end of January 1835 were kept in a cart by Davidson and thrown into the Varanā River under the bridge to check the cutting away of the bed between the arches (cf. Das 2016, p. 241). Sherring (1868, p. 235) mentioned that this irreparable loss of antiquarian remains was due to a British officer’s imprudent and reckless action. He quoted the full report of Cunningham, but he accepted and regretted the fact that the superintendence of Sarnath excavations had occasionally been taken up by inexperienced persons, by which he meant “the ability to decipher inscriptions and intelligently describe what has been from time to time discovered is concerned;” he (1868, p. 25) wrote:

“As instances of ruthless spoliation, I may here remark, that, in the erection of one of the bridges over the river Barna [*Varanā*], forty-eight statues and other sculptured stones were removed from Sarnath and thrown into the river, to serve as a breakwater to the piers; and that, in the erection of the second bridge, the iron one, from fifty to sixty cart-loads of stones from the Sarnath buildings were employed.”

Cunningham’s excavation was followed by Major Markham Kittoe. He excavated some of the stupas and made a rough sketch of these sites. Further, he proposed that the monastery located to the west of Dhamek stupa was a hospital, based on pestles and mortars found there (Das 2016, p. 241). But he found no time to compile his discoveries because of his ill- health and untimely death (Cunningham 1994, pp. 124-125). From 1904-05 onwards regular excavations were done and finally, most of the monuments and ruins were brought to notice.

#### (i) DHARMARAJIKA STUPA

In 1798-99, the area was dug by Jagat Singh’s labours around the ruined rubrics of Dharmarajika (cf. Figs. 11, and 12). It was surrounded by a thick brick wall, where found green marble casket containing human bones and pearls (see Fig. 4 and 5). It was at a depth of 27 feet (8.3 mt) that the two vessels were discovered (Cunningham 1871, p. 113). According to Xuan Zang (Hiuen Tsang/Chen Hui), a CE 7th-century Chinese pilgrim, this circular hollow was the site of a stupa 60 feet (18.3 metres) in height built by Ashoka (Cunningham 1871, p. 24). The old mound was earlier called after Jagat Singh who dismantled the stupa, as mentioned in the first map of the archeological site (cf. Fig. 5, cf. Mani 2023, p. 77), which over time named Dharmarajika Stupa, most likely in 1912 when the first archaeological site museum in Bharat (India) at Sarnath was opened (cf. Singh 2009, p. 139). After the follow-up disappearance of the mound, the name ‘Jagat Singh Stupa’, was changed to Dharmarajika in view to replace it to authentically befit the monument that preserves the relics of the Buddha (cf. Sahni 1914, p. 9). Similar Dharmarajika stupas were also built in several places, including at Taxila (cf. Fig. 13), distinct and designed similarly to Sarnath.

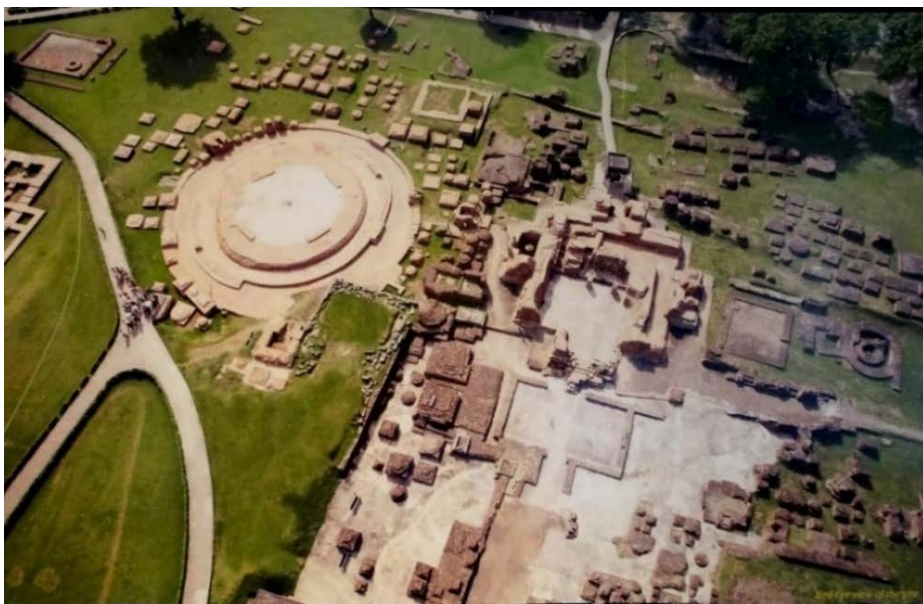


Fig. 11. Sarnath, Dharmarajika Stupa and Environs: A Bird’s eye view, 2021.

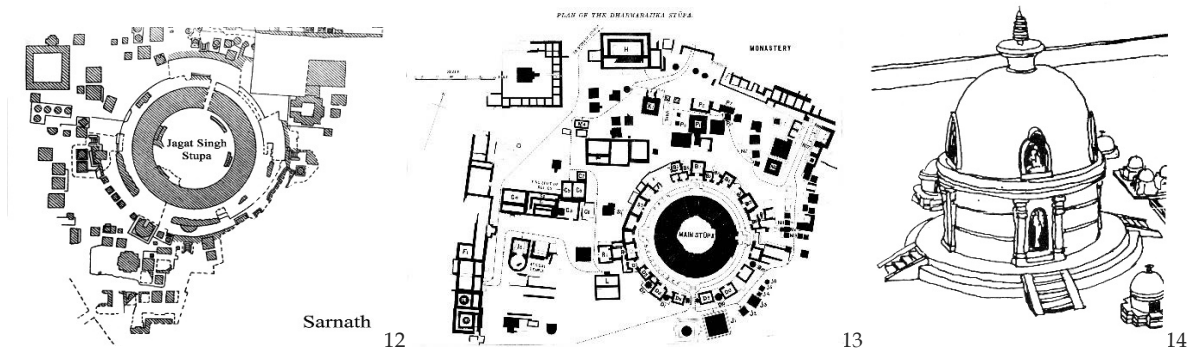


Fig. 12. Dharmrajika Plan, Sarnath

Fig. 13. Dharmarajika Plan, Taxila

Fig. 14. Dharmrajika reconstructed

The Dharmarajika stupa, built by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, represents one of the lights' "Divine Towers", all of them having reference to certain leading events in the life of the Buddha (cf. Figs. 12, and 13). From the successive excavations at Sarnath, it has been revealed that the Dharmarajika Stupa was enlarged six times in succession. The *first* enlargement was done in the Kushana period with brick measuring 38.1 x 26.2 x 7 cm. The *second* was made during the CE 5th-6th centuries with the addition of a circumambulation path (*pradakshinapatha*), nearly 4.88 m wide, comprising a stone fencing of 1.35 m height and consisting of four directional gates. The *third* was affected in the CE 7th century, during the period of Harsha, when the *pradakshinapatha* was filled up and access to the stupa was provided by placing four monolithic staircases. The *fourth* and *fifth* enlargements were attributed to the CE 9th and 11th centuries. The *sixth*, the last enlargement, was done when Dharmachakra Jina Vihara monastery of Kumaradevi was built in the CE 12th century (cf. Jayaswal 2015, p. 67). The best-known statue of the Buddha in the gesture of *dharmachakra* was found at this site (Singh 2009, pp. 134-135, cf. Fig. 21). Brown (1949) has reconstructed the imagery plan of the monastic town of Sarnath, including Dharmarajika and the main shrine, Mulagandha Kuti Vihar (Figs. 22 and 23, compare Fig. 6).

Jagat Singh [b. c.1746 - d. 20 October 1799, the son of Shiv Lal Singh – cousin brother of Chet Singh, the king of Banaras] was involved in an unintentional excavation of Dharmarajika Stupa in 1787-88. Based on recent historical research, especially the family history and available inscription, significant credit for discovering this ancient historical and archaeological site would be credited to Jagat Singh. In the pages of history, the English attempted to take credit for the discovery of this site, and Jagat Singh was intentionally propagated for destroying the whole structure. The English officers were responsible for the complete bulldozing of the area (cf. Qureshi and Pathak 2024, p. 86).

## (ii) DHAMEK STUPA

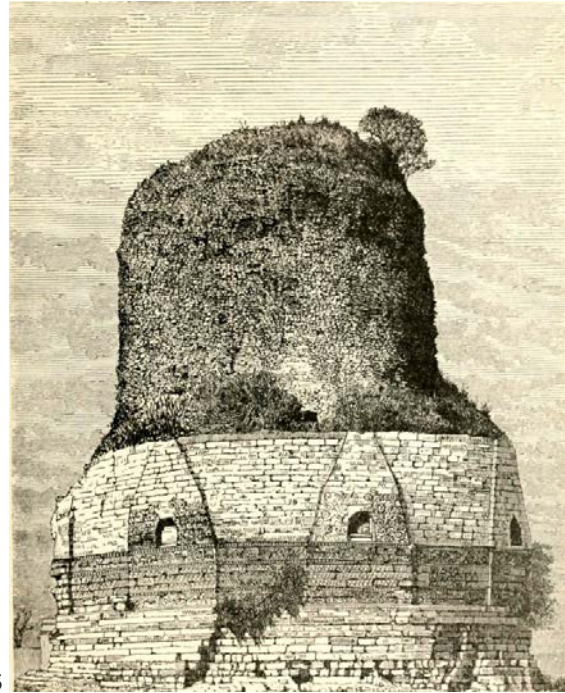
For the first time, 'Cunningham himself climbed up the Dhamek on the 18th of January 1835 and started his excavation from the top and found a stone slab inscribed with the Buddhist creed in the script of the sixth century' (Mani 2023, p. 78). It is a colossal, solid cylindrical stupa of a diameter of 93 feet (28.35 metre) at the base and about 143 feet (43.59 metre) in height including its foundations (Mazumdar 1947, p. 40, cf. Figs. 15, 16, 17, and 18). Cunningham discovered the stupa in a rather sorry state with long grasses and vegetation grown on it. Of course, full credit for its restoration goes to him with two local masons he recreated the ornamentations done on the stupa. The tower consisted of a circular stone drum of a height of 11.20 metre (Das 2016, p. 243). This portion is made of Chunar stones, and the lower portion has eight projecting faces with niches (ASI 1990, p. 73). Immediately below them, one can see elaborately carved floral and geometric motifs, where birds and human figures are also depicted occasionally. Probably this was done by the Gupta workmen.

After a careful examination of the structure, Cunningham reached the conclusion that it was a solid hemispherical stupa, 49 feet (c. 15 metre) in diameter at the base and about 35 or 40 feet (10.7, or 12.2 metre) in height, including the usual pinnacle. Later, when the upper portion had become ruinous, it was repaired by a casing wall of 16.5 feet (5 metre) thick in CE 1026, its outer thickness increased to a 16.5 feet thick wall, making the diameter to be 82 feet (25 metre) and height about 50 feet (15.24 metre; Mani 2023, p. 78, cf. Fig. 17). He concluded that the inner hemisphere was an ancient relic stupa and over time changing to ruinous was repaired by two brothers—Sri Sthirapala and Vasanta Pala, with an inner chamber and eight niches (Das 2016, p. 243). Cunningham looked for a relic casket inside the stupa. He mounted to the top and dug a shaft or a well of 5 metre in diameters to the bottom (Das 2016, p. 242). Some 3 feet below from the top he found an inscribed Buddhist slab of ca. CE 6th-7th centuries, which was put to the structure at a later date, and the stupa was originally built much earlier. He even went deeper and found it increasingly difficult to move deeper owing to the toughness of the lower stones of the edifice.

Cunningham tried to know what event this stupa commemorated. Either it was erected by Emperor Ashoka (in the 3rd century BCE) to commemorate some important event of the Buddha's life or it was a structure in honour of the Maitreya or the future Buddha. The later view finds support from Xuan Zang (Hsüan-tsang, ca. 635 CE) who says that it was to mark the coming of the future Buddha for the welfare of mankind. Cunningham also investigated the meaning of the name Dhamek. He saw that the local people knew nothing of the name. But it was obvious that the name had something to do with Dharma. It is probably an abbreviation of the Sanskrit word *Dharmopadeśaka* or the preacher of dharma. He concludes that here the word surely means the Buddha who preached his first sermon and therefore undoubtedly the monument derived its name from this great incident (Cunningham 1994, p. 113). Alternatively, it is suggested that the word Dhamek is derived from the Sanskrit word *Dharmekṣa* or Pāli *Dharmekkhā*, the beholding of the dharma, summed up in the first sermon preached by the Buddha at the deer park. In both cases, the preaching of the Buddha has been associated with the name of the tower (Mazumdar 1947, p. 41).



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Fig. 15. Dhamek 1814, painting by Abdullah Sheikh

Fig. 16. Dhamek Stupa, 1899, ASI Report.

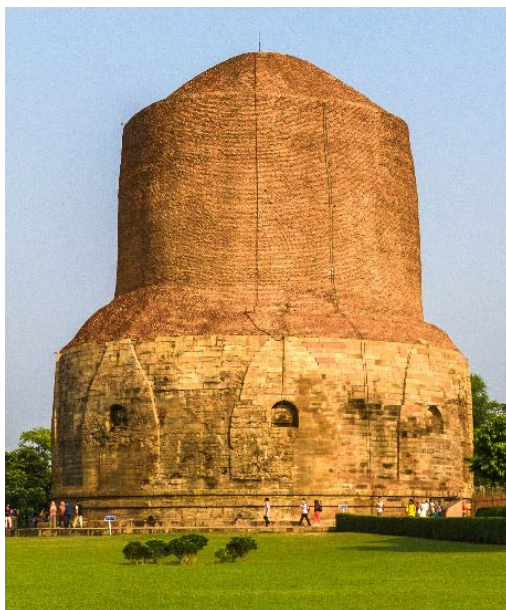


Fig. 17. Dhamek Stupa, 2023

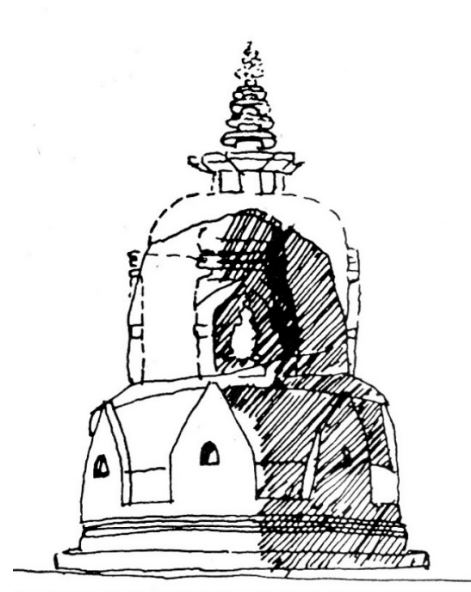


Fig. 18. Dhamek Stupa, reconstructed (after Brown 1959)

### (iii) CHAUKHANDI STUPA

Outside the main monastic complex, in the southern part exists a large brick-made stupa with an octagonal tower (25.6 metres) at the top. It is basically of a squarish shape and hence locally called the Chaukhandi stupa. The tower was however added much later into the stupa. It was probably a memorial stupa built on the spot to commemorate the Buddha's meeting with his first batch of lay devotees. In the description of Xuang Zang (ca. CE 635) a stupa not having the usual inverted bell shape featured was located some 2 or 3 li to the southwest of the Deer Park monastery, which seems to be the Chaukhandi stupa that he mentions (Das 2016, p. 251, cf. Fig. 19).



Fig. 19. The present scene of the Chaukhandi Stupa, Sarnath

The credit for its first exploration goes to Cunningham, who examined the centre of the present mound and saw that it was a solid brick-built structure. He sank a shaft into the structure from the floor of the octagonal tower at the top to the level of virgin soil and concluded that it must be the same memorial stupa mentioned by Xuang Zang where the Buddha met the group of five *bhikkhus* (recluses) declined to rise to salute the Buddha (Cunningham 1994, pp. 116-117, also Mani 2023, p. 81). Later Major M. Kittoe (1851-52) found three massive straight walls about mid-way up the eastern side and two more on the western side. Apparently, they seemed to be gigantic buttresses and have been built to support the upper portion of the building that no longer exists (Das 2016, p. 252).

A more detailed survey of the structure was made in 1904-05. This report confirms the view of Cunningham that the brick stupa located half a mile southwest of the Dhamek stupa and mentioned by Xuang Zang was actually the Chaukhandi stupa. In this session, the lower parts of the stupa were exposed. It stood on a basement consisting of three squared terraces each of 12 feet breadth and height. The innermost portion of the stupa was solid brickwork laid in clay mortar (ASI 1904-05, pp 76-78). Through the recent renovation, landscape gardening, and preservations the scenic beauty of the area becomes more attractive.

The Persian inscription over one of the doorways of the *stupa*, reads "As Humayun, king of the Seven Climes, now residing in paradise, deigned to come and sit here one day, thereby increasing the splendour of the sun, so Akbar [r. 1556-1605], his son and humble servant, resolved to build on this spot a lofty tower reaching to the blue sky." By the order of Akbar, Govardhan, son of Raja Todarmal, the finance secretary in the Akbar's court, built this octagonal tower on top of the *stupa* in 1588.

These three stupas are distinct landmarks in the cultural landscape of Sarnath and are prominently described in the earlier excavation reports of the 19th century. That's how they also serve as important sites for pilgrims and tourists' attraction. Circumambulation or *pradakshina* has been an important ritual and devotional practice in Buddhism since the earliest times, and stupas always have a *pradakshina* path around them. The manifested stories at these sites refer to direct attachment to the Buddha, who performed meditation, prayer, and meetings at these sites. For Buddhist pilgrims performing circumambulation and rituals at these places provides divine attachment to the Buddha's spirit, resulting in acquiring peace, solace, a sense of compassion, an understanding of the truth, and thus finally becoming close to the spirit of place (*genius loci*). Buddhists visit stupas to perform rituals that help them to achieve one of the most important goals of Buddhism: to understand the Buddha's teachings, known as the "Four Noble Truths" (also known as the *dharma* and the law) so when they die they cease to be caught up in *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth and death. Stupas were constructed in sacred locations related to the Buddha's life events. These places were considered sacred because they were associated with Buddha's life.

From being simple sepulchral places to monuments of veneration and enlightenment, *stupas* are now fundamental places of devotion for Buddhism. The best possible definition for a *stupa* is 'Spiritual monument', this structure represents in fact the divinity and the path to Enlightenment, to the Buddha, to his mind and spirit. The different parts of the *stupas* manifest symbolically to the cosmic elements. The base represents the ground and



the earth, water is represented by the hemispherical vase, and the spire that stands out towards the sky represents fire. The upper lotus and the moon represent air while the sun represents wisdom and knowledge.

Currently, a stupa is not only a sepulchral monument, but its functions have also evolved, welcoming visitors and observance of the Buddhist religion every day. The Buddha had left instructions about how to pay homage to the *stupas*: "And whoever lays wreaths or puts sweet perfumes and colours there with a devout heart, will reap benefits for a long time" (Phuoc 2010, p. 143) This practice would lead to the decoration of the stupas with stone sculptures of flower garlands in the Classical period (Phuoc 2010, p. 173).

#### PREACHING POSE OF THE BUDDHA

During the Gupta period (mostly CE 5th to 6th centuries, using Chunar sandstone), parallel to the Gandhar and Mathura Schools of Art, there developed the Sarnath School of Art, whose distinctive features include the standing Buddha, gestures (*mudras*), different facial features, special body signs of the great noble persons, body postures, drapery, and halo in images. The most notable and the best sculpture of the Sarnath School of Art is the image of **Buddha** in *dharmacakramudra* (the pose showing "Turning the Wheel of Law"), which is made of Chunar sandstone and retains traces of red colouring (Figs. 20, and 21). This image (1.6 m high up to the top of the halo, 0.79 m width at base), seated cross-legged, preaching the first sermon at Sarnath, on a thick cushion supported on a seat with moulded legs is lying at a corner in the Tathagata gallery. This image is a remarkable example of the Buddha's personality as the compassionate one in its spirituality and inner bliss. The calm, relaxed, and introspective face with the gentlest smile playing on the sensuous lips, drooping eyes, aquiline nose, gently curved eyebrows joined with each other, ear with distended lobes, rows of curls covering the head sacred cranial protuberance (*Ushnisha*). The fingers connected to each other by the thin webbing of stone and transparent drapery make this image remarkable and impressive. The halo is carved with a pair of celestial figures and conventionalised floral scrollwork. The *dharmachakra* occupies the central position of the pedestal, on both sides of which has been placed the figure of a deer, denoting the place as Mrigadaya ("deer park"). On the lower part of the image, the figures of the five disciples to whom the Buddha preached the first sermon are depicted along with a lady and child, probably representing the donor of the sculpture.



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Fig. 20. The Buddha image at the site, 1905.  
Fig. 21. The Buddha in *dharmacakramudra*, 2022.

The Buddha Preaching his 'First Sermon' is a stone sculpture of the CE 5th century depicting Gautama Buddha in the "preaching posture" or *Dharmachakra pravartana* posture. Describes Eck (1982, p. 63), "In the most famous of these images in the Sarnath museum, the Buddha sits cross-legged, his limbs in the perfect proportions prescribed by the iconometry of the day, his hands in a teaching pose, his eyes downcast, half-shut in meditation, his head backed by a beautifully ornamented circular nimbus". The image is 5'3" (1.6 metre) tall and was found in the central part of the archaeological site at Sarnath by F. O. Oertel during the 1904–1905 excavation season of the Archaeological Survey of India (Sahni 1914, pp. 70-71, cf. Fig. 20). From the time of the Archaeological Museum's completion in 1910-12 at Sarnath, this preaching image of the Buddha (Fig. 21) has been displayed in the central hall, and denotes the "type considered a hallmark of the Sarnath School of Buddhist art" (cf. Eck 1982, p. 63), and is described by Leidy (2009, p. 50) as "justifiably one of the most famous representations of the Buddha in Asian art." The sculpture depicts the Buddha giving the famous "Sermon in the Deer Park" at Sarnath, where the Buddha initiated his teachings, which are recorded in the Pali *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. Here the Buddha is seated in the *padmāsana posture*, or "lotus position" (Huntington 2009, p. 89, and Singh, U. 2008, p. 534). His hands in this gesture symbolises the *mudra* of "Turning the Wheel of Dharma", by means of teaching. He is delivering the first sermon to the five disciples shown, at a much smaller scale, below, with the *dharmachakra* in the centre. The wheel is flanked by couchant deer, symbolizing the deer park (Mrigadava) at Sarnath, where the event took place (Sahni 1914, p. 71, and Huntington 2009, p. 89). The serenity of the deer park led to the domination of meditative poses in representing the Buddha which then became the famous postures to be imitated elsewhere.

#### 6. The Mulagandha Kuti Vihara

The old site, now in ruins, square on plan, measuring 18.29 m along each side, represents the main shrine where the Buddha used to sit in meditation for three months during the rainy season. According to Xuan Zang (Hsüan-tsang) it was 61 m high. The style of decoration and moulding indicate that the monument was raised in the Gupta period (c. CE 5th century; cf. Singh 2009, p. 140). The pavement around the monument was added later when the brick walls were also added inside the main chamber to give support to the roof (Fig. 22).

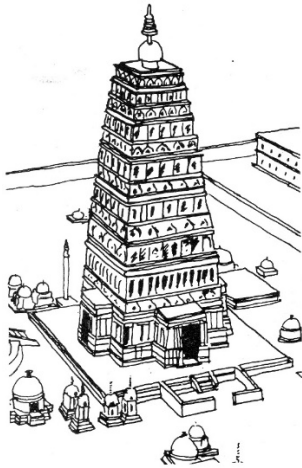


Fig. 22. Ancient Mulagandha Kuti Vihar (Brown 1959). Fig. 23. Mulagandha Kuti Vihar, Sri Lankan temple, 2022.

Some way east of the ruins, through the gardens, is the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, built in 1931 by the great Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), the founder of the Mahabodhi Society. In many ways, the temple represents the universality of the Buddha's teachings. Most of the funds for the temple were provided by Mrs. Mary Foster, Anagarika Dharmapala's American patron. A British nobleman, Sir Harcourt Butler, laid the foundation of this temple in November 1922 (Fig. 23). Raja Shiva Prasad, Raja Moti Chand, and Rajarshi Udai Pratap Singh gave the major share of donations of land and money (Singh 2009, p. 143).

Made of the Chunar red sandstone with simple carvings of conventional bell designs, this *vihara* was opened to the public by its inauguration on 11 November 1931, and attended by representatives from almost every Buddhist country. The chief feature of this temple is a series of interior *frescos* drawn by a Japanese artist Kosetsu Nosu, who was inspired by the *Buddhacharita* (*The Acts of the Buddha*) and worked almost single-handed taking a period of four years (1932-36) to put his composition of frescos together piece by piece. The motifs of the frescoes comprise episodes and scenes from the life of the Buddha, from his birth to *parinirvana*, the great end of his mortal frame. During that period Rs 10,000 was spent on these frescos, and an English Buddhist B. L. Browton donated this entire amount. The Mahabodhi Society of Japan presented the huge bell in the corridor leading to the temple, which is supposed to emit its echo up to 8 km. The temple also possesses a pot containing certain relics of the Buddha (Singh 2009, p. 144).

The main shrine in the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara contains relics believed to be those of the Buddha, found in a *stupa* at Taxila, and another one at Nagarjunakonda and presented to the Mahabodhi Society by the Viceroy of

India, Lord Irwin. Behind the shrine is the small *stupa* containing the ashes of Anagarika Dharmapala. Directly behind the temple itself is a park for deer, and right behind that is a monument marking the site where Dharmapala's body was cremated. To the right of the main path leading to the entrance of the temple is a statue of Anagarika Dharmapala, arms folded in front of him, looking down sternly.

Right-hand side to the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, across the lane, is the **Bodhi Tree**, a sampling of the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapur, Sri Lanka, that was bought and planted by Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala in 1931. Attached to it is a small platform with a pavilion built in 1989 by the Burmese Buddhist Society, consisting of statues of the Buddha preaching to his first five disciples, viz. Kaundmya, Bashpa, Bhadraka, Mahanaman and Ashvajit. A beautifully carved gate was also built in 1999, and all around the Bodhi tree the Bodhisattva images are arranged in glass chambers (Singh 2009, p. 146).

### THE BUDDHIST TEMPLES AND COUNTRY'S REPRESENTATIONS

Due to the religious importance of Sarnath as the birthplace of Buddhism where the Buddha delivered his first sermons, and its serene environment in the span of time many monasteries-cum-temples developed in this territory. Such sacred structures represent many countries, like China, Japan, Tibet, Myanmar (Burma), Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, etc. Selected ones are described here.

#### (I) CHINESE TEMPLE

Chinese Temple was founded in 1939 by Ven. Te-Yu, a disciple of His Holiness Tao-Kai, Abbot of Beijing, and Fa-Yuan-Tsu, the President of the Eastern Asian Buddhist Association (Fig. 24). A banker from Singapore, named Lee Choong Seng gave the main fund. The gate and the compound wall of the temple were erected in 1952 by Rev. Pau-Chao and Rev. Cheu-Tsau, High Priests and successors of the late Ven. Te-Yu, together with donations from the overseas Chinese in India. There is a main hall, square in shape, consisting of a beautiful marble image of the Buddha at the centre. The image was sculpted in Myanmar and gives a fine and lively impression of Burmese art and craft (Singh 2009, p. 147).

#### (II) NICHIGATSUZAN HORINJI (JAPANESE) TEMPLE

About 100 m west of the Saranganatha (Shiva) Temple, the Dharmachakra Indo-Japanese Society has built a temple, covering an area of 2500 sq.m., which is known as Indo-Japanese Temple (*Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo*; Fig. 25). Its land purification ceremony was performed on the 30th of September 1986. Made in the Japanese pagoda style, the tiles and other important objects were brought from Japan; its cost was above INR Rs 10 million. The Mitsusui Construction Co. supervised the construction, and it was finally opened to the public on 21st November 1992. In the inner sanctum, there is an image of the Buddha in meditation posture along with several Bodhisattvas (Singh 2009, p. 147-148).



Fig. 24. Chinese monastery and temple  
Fig. 25. Nichigatsuzan Horinji-Japanese temple

#### (III) TIBETAN BUDDHIST VIHARA (TEMPLE)

In 1955, under the leadership of the monk Goshelama, the refugees of the Sino-Tibetan War built this monastery and temple (Fig. 26). The largest image of the Buddha in Sarnath is in this temple. There are 9 other images also, two of them are of the Buddha, 2 of his disciples, one of Tara, one of Maitreya, one of Rev. Tsong Khapa of Tibet, and two of his followers. Rev. Tsong Khapa belonged to the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism; the other three notable sects in Tibet are Nyingapa, Shakya, and Kagyudpa. Hundreds of Tibetans, irrespective of their sect, come every year to worship in this temple. Inside the temple are preserved 150 rare Buddhist scriptures that were translated into the Tibetan language during CE 7th-9th century. Another astonishing item of the temple is several frescos made on cloth wall hanging; they are several hundred years old, but their colours are still bright and fresh (Singh 2009, p. 148).



Fig. 26. Tibetan monastery and temple  
Fig. 27. Vajra Vidya monastery and temple

#### (IV) VAJRA VIDYA INSTITUTE AND MONASTERY

Located about 450 m north of the Mahabodhi Temple in the village Khajuri, the 'Vajra Vidya Institute & Monastery' is the latest addition to the sacred territory of Sarnath (Fig. 27). Spread over one hectare of land this monastery was constructed by the patronage of Thrangu Tulku Rinpoche, a Buddhist Bhikshu (monk) of Sikkim. This is a unique example of the integration of ancient and modern Tibetan architecture. Its construction started on 18 December 1993 and was completed on 29 October 1999; it cost INR Rs 20 million. It consists of a 4.6 m tall image of Shakyamuni Buddha; this image made of brass with a thick layer of golden polish is unique. The ceremony of "putting life in the image" (*prana-pratistha*) was performed during 29-31 October 1999. Officially His Highness The 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso inaugurated it on 15 December 1999, i.e., the 7th day of the 11th month of Female Iron Rabbit year, and opened it for the public. Together with the main image of Shakyamuni, there are 30 more images, each 1m high, of the Buddha in different gestures, and 1000 images of the Buddha each 20cm high. There are also images of Tara inside the main hall. In the inner courtyard, there are images of Mahakala, Brahma, Indra, and several other Hindu gods. The basic plan and architectural design of this temple are based on the Great 'Samyasha' Buddhist Vihara, which is itself a replica of the Buddhist Vihara at Odantapuri in Bihar. This Institute also runs master's degree courses of five years on Buddhist philosophy, religion, and meditation (Singh 2009, p. 141, p. 143).

#### SARNATH AND THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Sarnath is one of the 52 heritage properties from India enlisted under the Tentative List of World Heritage Sites (till September 2023). The three main Buddhist stupas and the nearby ancient monuments and structures in Sarnath were inscribed in UNESCO's WHC under the category of "cultural property" on the 3rd of July 1998. The UNESCO's Heritage criteria taken for the inscription included (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1096/>):

III: "To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living, or which has disappeared", and

IV: "To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history"

As a follow-up step, a revised dossier for Sarnath was prepared in 2020 and re-submitted, however, due to a lack of proper reporting and management plan, it could not be transmitted further. Moreover, on the 13th of April 2021, "The Iconic Ganga Riverfront of Varanasi" was enlisted in UNESCO's WHL Tentative List (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6526/>) under cultural properties following the three criteria: (iii), (iv), and (vi). Resultantly Sarnath was thrown out of the path. This was further supported by the preference of the Hindu ideology and populist intention of the present government for the political benefit under the envelope of 'dharmacracy'.

Again, on the 6th of July 2021, a committee for preparing the dossier was formed (to which the author was a member) for "Kashi-Sarnath-Kardameshvara Sacred and Heritage Path", under the category of "Cultural Landscape", in addition to Criteria V that refers to "an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), etc." Unfortunately, due to political reasons, and priority for some other aspects, the government authorities decided to close this project on the 25th of January 2022—only after running all the preparations and surveys for over six months. This is another example of political fallacy and misuse of *dharmacracy* (cf. Singh and Rana 2023, pp. 266-267).

In a recent paper that studied the issue of the inscription of Sarnath in UNESCO's World Heritage List, questions are raised about the factors influencing the growth and development, and prospects and constraints of getting Sarnath inscribed in the WHL (cf. Shinde and Singh 2023, p. 5052). However, to make this issue more plausible, the emphasis also to be laid on the detailed and correct cultural history and management plan in the frame of a sustainable future. On this line, this paper is a small step. It is rightly observed that "there is a complex