

Sarnath Nominated for UNESCO World Heritage

India has officially nominated the 'Ancient Buddhist Site, Sarnath for the UNESCO World Heritage List under the 2025–26 nomination cycle. Sarnath has been on UNESCO's "tentative list" since 1998.

Key Facts Related to Sarnath

1. Location and Importance

Sarnath is located near Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh. It is a major Buddhist pilgrimage site where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon after attaining enlightenment, known as the Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta (Turning of the Wheel of Dharma). The site is one of the four most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage destinations, the others being

1. Lumbini – Buddha's birthplace (Nepal)
2. Bodh Gaya – Site of enlightenment (Bihar, India)
3. Kushinagar – Buddha's Mahaparinirvana (Uttar Pradesh, India)

2. Historical and Religious Significance

Sarnath was historically known by different names such as:

1. Rishipatana – "Where the holy men descended"
2. Mrigadava / Mrigadaya – "Deer Park"

The present name Sarnath is believed to be derived from Saranganatha meaning "Lord of the Deer." After the Buddha's death, his ashes were divided and enshrined in stupas at key sites to commemorate important events of his life.

3. Architectural Heritage

Sarnath's monuments reflect an evolution from the Mauryan period to the Kushan, Gupta, and Ghahadavala dynasties. The site has two main monument groups

Group A – Chaukhandi Stupa

Built around the 5th century CE to honor Buddha's visit. A tall brick structure with an octagonal tower added later in 1588 CE by Govardhan, son of Raja Todarmal, to commemorate Mughal Emperor Humayun's visit.

Group B

1. Dhamek Stupa

Built around 500 CE; believed to mark the exact spot of Buddha's first sermon.

2. Dharmarajika Stupa

Originally constructed by Mauryan Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE to enshrine Buddha's relics.

3. Ashokan Pillar

Contains Ashoka's edict. Originally topped with the Lion Capital (now India's National Emblem). Surrounding the stupas are monasteries, temples, and votive stupas from the 3rd century BCE to 12th century CE.

Restoration and Historical Events

1. Mauryan Period

Emperor Ashoka promoted Buddhism after the Kalinga War and constructed stupas and monasteries at Sarnath.

2.Kushan & Gupta Periods

Under the Kushans, Sarnath flourished as a learning center. The Guptas added artistic features to the Dhamek Stupa, such as intricate stone-carved floral designs.

Huna Invasions: Site damaged but later restored by rulers like Harshavardhana.

11th Century: Damaged during the raid by Mahmud of Ghazni. Restored by Mahipala of the Pala dynasty.

Last Monument: The Dharmachakra Jina Vihara was built in the 11th century by Kumaradevi, wife of Govindachandra of the Gahadavala dynasty.

Excavations and Museums

1. 1834–36: First scientific excavation by Sir Alexander Cunningham, first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).
2. 1904–05: The Lion Capital and pillar base excavated by Friedrich Oscar Oertel.
3. The Lion Capital was adopted as India's State Emblem on 26 January 1950.
4. The Sarnath Archaeological Museum now houses: The original Lion Capital, Sculptures, relics, and artefacts from various periods.
5. The Mulagandha Kuti Vihar (built by the Mahabodhi Society) contains frescoes depicting Buddha's life.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites

UNESCO World Heritage Sites are places of exceptional cultural or natural significance. Officially designated under the World Heritage Convention, 1972 for their value to all humanity. India ratified the Convention in 1977 and is among 195 countries committed to heritage preservation.

World Heritage Convention, 1972

Each country can nominate only one site per year for inscription on the World Heritage List. India's Rank: 6th globally in total number of sites, 2nd in Asia-Pacific. India currently has 62 sites on its Tentative List. In India, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is the nodal agency for World Heritage matters.

Criteria for UNESCO World Heritage Designation

1. Site Selection Criteria

1. Must have Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).
2. Must meet at least one of 10 selection criteria (originally 6 cultural + 4 naturals, merged into a single list in 2005).

2. Nomination & Evaluation Process

1. Tentative List: The site must first be placed on the country's Tentative List.
2. Nomination Dossier: The State Party submits a detailed proposal.
3. Evaluation by Advisory Bodies: ICOMOS – for cultural sites, IUCN – for natural sites.
ICCRUM – for technical expertise and training.

Final Decision: Taken by the World Heritage Committee in its annual meeting. The Committee can inscribe, defer, or request more information.

3. India's Role

India is currently a member of the World Heritage Committee (2021–25), contributing to global heritage governance.

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/ancient-buddhist-site-sarnath-submitted-as-indias-nomination-to-unesco-for-2025-26-cycle-3664619>

