

2. Odisha's Diamond Triangle- Art & Culture

Serial Nomination of Buddhist Triangle Sites of Odisha

The inclusion of Odisha's 'Diamond Triangle'—comprising Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri—in UNESCO's Tentative List marks a pivotal moment for Indian Buddhist heritage. This cultural cluster represents the pinnacle of Buddhist monasticism and artistic evolution in Eastern India.

Overview of the 'Diamond Triangle'

- Constituent Sites-** A serial cultural cluster of three major Buddhist monastic-stupa complexes- Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri.
- Geographic Location-** Situated in the Jaipur and Cuttack districts of Odisha.
- Etymology-** The name 'Diamond Triangle' is derived from Vajrayana Buddhism, where *Vajra* signifies a "thunderbolt" or "diamond," symbolizing the indestructible nature of enlightenment.
- Religious Evolution-** These sites are unique for witnessing the propagation and synthesis of all three major schools- Hinayana (Theravada), Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Tantrayana).
- The Puspagiri Connection-** Archaeologists believe these sites, along with Langudi, formed the ancient **Puspagiri Mahavihara**, a monastic university mentioned by Chinese traveler Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) in the 7th century CE, comparable to Nalanda and Taxila.

Key Archaeological Profiles

- Ratnagiri ("Hill of Jewels")**

Located 100 km from Bhubaneswar between the Birupa and Brahmani rivers, it is Odisha's most extensively excavated site.

 - The Vajrayana Hub-** Emerged as a premier center for Tantric Buddhism between the 4th and 12th centuries CE, largely under the patronage of the Bhaumakara dynasty.
 - Monastic Identity-** Inscribed seals bearing "Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihariya" confirm its status as a premier university.
 - Architectural Marvels-** Features the only Buddhist monastery in India with a curvilinear roof. Contains a mahastupa, chaityagriha, and colossal Buddha heads.
 - Recent Discoveries-** Excavations of the 5th–13th century complex unearthed a colossal Buddha head, a massive palm, an ancient wall, and inscribed relics dating to the 8th–9th century AD.

- Lalitgiri (Naltigiri)**

Representing the earliest Buddhist center in the triangle, it boasts uninterrupted occupation from the 2nd–3rd century BCE to the 13th century CE.

 - Relic Caskets-** The most significant find is a relic casket made of Khondalite, Steatite, Silver, and Gold, believed to contain the sacred relics of Lord Buddha.
 - Institutional Evidence-** An inscribed seal referring to "Sri Chandraditya Vihara" establishes it as an organized monastic institution.
 - Artistic Evolution-** Sculptures of Tara, Avalokiteswara, and Manjusri demonstrate a transition across all three Buddhist doctrines.

- Udayagiri ("Sunrise Hill")**

The largest complex in the triangle, located on a crescent-shaped hill along the Birupa river.

 - Major Establishments-** Home to the Madhavapura Mahavihara and Simhaprastha Mahavihara.
 - Unique Features-** Features double-storeyed brick monasteries and vaulted windows, which are rare in Indian Buddhist architecture.
 - Ritual Space-** Houses a massive chaityagriha containing the Pancha Dhyani Buddhas (Five Dhyani Buddhas).

Comparison of the Triangle Sites

Feature	Ratnagiri	Lalitgiri	Udayagiri
Primary Identity	Epicentre of Vajrayana	Earliest/Longest-lived site	Largest monastic complex

Monastery Name	Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihariya	Sri Chandraditya Vihara	Madhavapura/Simhaprastha
Key Discovery	Curvilinear roof & Colossal heads	Gold/Silver Relic Caskets	Double-storeyed structures
Chronology	4th to 12th Century CE	2nd Century BCE to 13th Century CE	1st to 13th Century CE
Key Geography	Between Birupa & Brahmani rivers	On Nandapahad hillock	Along Birupa river

Understanding UNESCO World Heritage Status

The Tentative List

Definition- An official inventory of sites a State Party intends to nominate for full World Heritage status.

Mandatory Step- Inclusion in this list is the first requirement before a formal nomination dossier can be submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

India's Status-

- 44 Total WHS- The 44th and most recent is the Maratha Military Landscapes.
- 70 Tentative Sites- Including the Diamond Triangle, Ekamra Kshetra (Bhubaneswar), and Chilika Lake.

Legal & Governing Framework

- 1972 Convention- The legal framework for protecting sites of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).
- India's Ratification- India joined the convention in 1977.
- Governing Body- The UNESCO World Heritage Committee manages the updates and inscriptions.

Odisha's Legacy as a Buddhist Centre

Dynastic Patronage- Buddhism flourished under the Bhaumakara dynasty (8th–10th Century AD).

Ashokan Impact- After the Kalinga War (261 BC), Emperor Ashoka's conversion led to the global spread of Buddhism from Odisha.

Discipleship- Tradition holds that Tapassu and Bhallika, Buddha's first disciples, were from ancient Odisha (Utkala).

Maritime Connectivity- Ancient Kalinga maintained trade and cultural links with Southeast Asia, a memory preserved today through the Baliyatra festival.

Source- <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6926/>