

Buddhism in Modern India

Mains Syllabus: GS I - History & Culture

Why in the News?

Buddha Purnima 2025 was observed on May 12, 2025, celebrating Gautam Buddha's 2587th birth anniversary.

How was Buddhism revived in modern India?

- **Rediscovery of Buddhist Monuments** - The efforts of the British archaeologists and explorers in the nineteenth century commenced the rediscovery of Buddhism by bringing to light the rich Buddhist heritage.
- Discovery of Ashokan pillars and rock edicts in the 18th and 19th century.
- The Great Sanchi Stupa was the first Buddhist shrine to be discovered in modern India by in 1818 by General Taylor.
- Alexander Cunningham in 1851 made an important discovery at Sanchi in 1851 when he unsealed the Sanchi Stupas for the first time.
- He unearthed the well-preserved gateways, or Torana's, which were adorned with elaborate carvings illustrating Buddhist stories and teachings.
- **Entrepreneurial Patronage** - J.K. Birla financed major Buddhist constructions in pilgrimage centres like Rajgir, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, and also in new centres of "urban Buddhist activity", including Calcutta, Bombay, and New Delhi.
- **Buddha Gaya Maha Bodhi Society** - Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sri Lankan Buddhist reformer, played a crucial role in reviving interest in Buddhism in India.
- **Theosophical society** - Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, Madame Helena Blavatsky led the revival of Buddhism in India through the society.
- **Role of Social Reformers** - Social reformers like Jyotirao Phule, Iyatheedasa Pandithar and B.R Ambedkar in the late 19th and early 20th centuries advocated for Buddhism as a means of challenging caste oppression and social inequality.

On October 14, 1956, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, publicly converted to Buddhism in Nagpur along with over 400,000 of his followers, primarily from Scheduled Castes (Dalits).

- **Tibetan Buddhism** - After the Tibetan uprising in 1959, the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan refugees settled in India.
- This brought Tibetan Buddhist traditions into India, creating monasteries and communities in places like Dharamshala and Ladakh.

What are the effects of revival of Buddhism in colonial and post-colonial India?

- **Revival of Buddhist Philosophy** - The revival of Buddhist archaeological heritage sites helped in connecting its monumental past with its philosophy.
- **Hindu Reform Movements** - The revival of Buddhism challenged Hindu orthodoxy, particularly the caste system, prompting Hindu reformers to introspect and adapt.
- **Dalit and anti-caste activism** - Anti-caste leaders like Jyotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar have used Buddhism as socio religious tool to find against caste oppression and for equality.
- The threat of conversion to Buddhism (and other religions) encouraged reformist Hindus to become more inclusive of lower castes, at least rhetorically.
- **Making of Hindu Nationalism** - Hindu nationalists responded to the Buddhist revival, especially Ambedkar's movement, by reasserting a unified Hindu identity that downplayed internal divisions.
- **Nehruvian Secular Democracy** - Buddhism was an important cornerstone for building India a secular democracy post-independence.

What are the importances of Buddhist monuments?

- **Reflecting Years of History** - Lives of the monuments resonated with the people and communities around them, including monks, laity, kings, traders, guilds, landlords, agriculturalists, and villagers.
- **Deciphering the Past** - Inscriptions, sculptures, and iconography provide key evidence for reconstructing ancient Indian history, society, and art.
- **Capture the Changing Times** - The buildings are "complex ecosystems" which capture the changing times and give an idea about belief systems, rituals, stories, and folklore.
- For instance, the sculptured panels on the gateways of Sanchi not only depict events from the life of the Buddha but also the Jataka tales and the mythical bodhisattvas.
- **Preservation of Texts** - Many caves and monasteries were repositories of Buddhist manuscripts and teachings.
- **Social Cultural Interactions** - Over time, the monumental structures have acquired different forms and meanings, and have also become important sites of social and cultural interactions.
- **Places of Pilgrimage** - Sites like Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Lumbini (in Nepal) are sacred places associated with the life of the Buddha—his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death.
- **Spiritual Legacy** - They preserve the teachings of the Buddha in a visual and symbolic form, inspiring faith and practice.
- **Inspirations to Art and Architecture** - Sites like Ajanta Caves (with murals), Sanchi Stupa, and Borobudur (Indonesia) display exquisite artistic achievement.

What are the significances of Buddhism in contemporary India?

- **Recovering from Self Obsession** - In an era of social media obsession, the world is increasingly getting obsessed with self-promotion.
- Often, a 'perfect' identity is carefully curated on social media with a focus on the self.

- The teachings of the Buddha said thousands of years ago that the self is an illusion and that our belief in it is the cause of most, if not all, of our sufferings.
- **Promotion of Peace, Non-Violence, and Compassion** - Buddhism's core teachings—non-violence, compassion, mindfulness, and the Middle Path—remain influential in shaping India's moral and ethical landscape.
- These principles are celebrated during festivals like Buddha Purnima and are increasingly recognized as universal values relevant to India's pluralistic society.
- **Interfaith Harmony** - Buddhism promotes tolerance and compassion, helping to build bridges in a religiously diverse society.
- **Soft Power** - India leverages its Buddhist heritage as a cornerstone of its soft power and diplomatic outreach, especially within Asia.
- Initiatives such as the International Buddhist Circuit, restoration of Buddhist sites, and the exposition of holy relics serve to strengthen spiritual and cultural ties with Buddhist-majority countries.

Conclusion

- In essence, Buddhism in contemporary India is both a spiritual tradition and a dynamic force for social change, cultural identity, and international engagement.

References

[The Hindu | Understanding the social, cultural and geographical contexts of Buddhism](#)

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