

India's World Heritage List

Mains: GS I - Art & Culture

Why in News?

Recently, the Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath has been added to the UNESCO World Heritage List, bringing India's total to 45 World Heritage properties.

Why UNESCO recognized Sarnath?

- **Sarnath** - Located in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, it is one of the four key sites of Buddhist pilgrimage.
- **Buddhist Tradition** - Sarnath, also known as **Rishipatana, Ishipatana, or Mrigadava**, is the sacred site where Gautama Buddha delivered his **first sermon in the 6th century BCE**, signifying the commencement of Buddhist teachings.
- **Buddha's first sermon** and his meeting with his **first five disciples**.
- This sermon, known as **Dharmachakra Pravartana** or the "**Turning of the Wheel of the Law**".
- It marked the beginning of the **Buddhist Sangha** and the establishment of the principles of the **Noble Eightfold Path**.
- **Continuous Development** - Sarnath developed over approximately sixteen centuries, with monuments dating from the pre-Mauryan period (4th-3rd BCE) to the 12th century CE, before its decline and destruction.
- **Rediscovery** - The site remained largely unknown until the 18th century, when it was rediscovered.
- **Coverage** - UNESCO World Heritage inscription covers two connected components:
 - Chaukhandi Stupa and

- Archaeological Remains of Sarnath.
- The archaeological complex includes the Dhamek Stupa, Dharmarajika Stupa, Mulagandhakuti Vihara, the Ashokan Pillar and several other ancient remains.

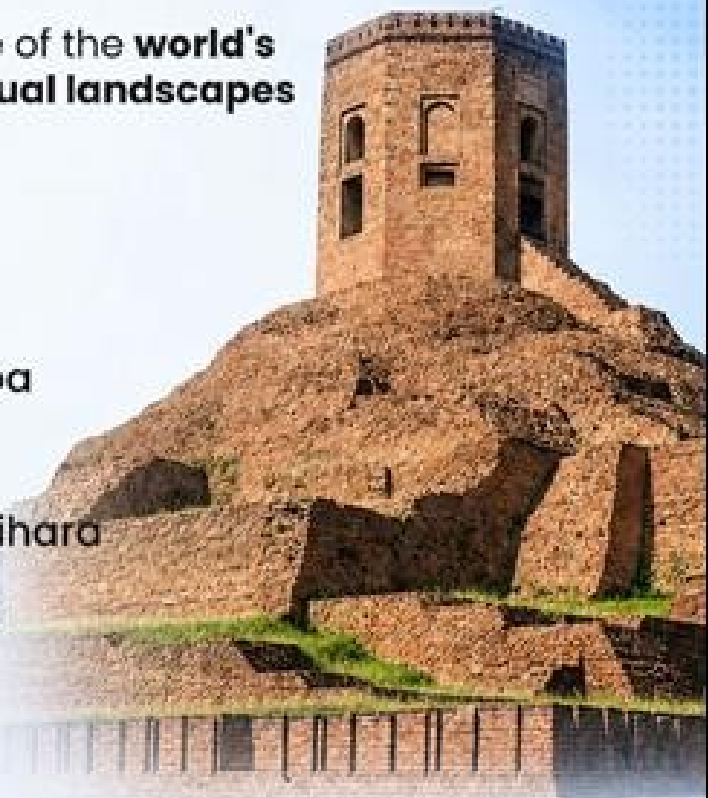


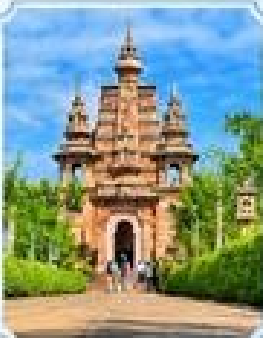
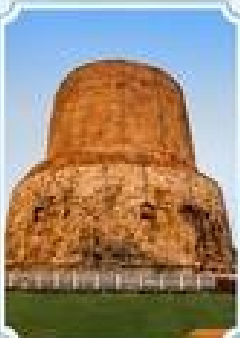
Why UNESCO Recognised Sarnath

Sarnath preserves one of the **world's most influential spiritual landscapes**

It Includes

- Dhamek Stupa
- Dharmarajika Stupa
- Ashokan Pillar
- Mulagandhakuti Vihara
- Chaukhandi Stupa





Source: Ministry of Culture

- **A Global Legacy of Peace** - Sarnath continues to serve as a major global center for Buddhist pilgrimage, extending its significance beyond archaeology.
- **International Visitors** - It remains a global pilgrimage destination for Buddhists from Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Vietnam, South Korea, Cambodia, Mongolia and many other countries.
- **Cultural Diplomacy** - It reinforces India's identity as the birthplace of Buddhism and serves as a bridge for cultural ties and international engagement with Buddhist nations.
- **UNESCO Coverage** - With its inscription, Sarnath joins Lumbini (Nepal) and Bodhi Gaya (Bihar) on the UNESCO World Heritage List.
- It brings 3 of the 4 main Buddhist pilgrimage sites associated with Buddha's life under this recognition.
- They join other important Buddhist World Heritage sites, including Sanchi, Nalanda and Ajanta in India, Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, Paharpur in Bangladesh, and Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi in present day Pakistan.

UNESCO
• The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, better known as UNESCO. • Objective - To promote the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage that holds exceptional value for humanity. • Legal commitment - It is rooted in the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. • Current status - As of July 2026, UNESCO's World Heritage List carried 1,273 properties across 173 countries, comprising 991 cultural, 240 natural and 42 mixed sites. • Ratification of members - As of October 2024, 196 States Parties have ratified the World Heritage Convention making it one of the most celebrated and acknowledged conventions by any United Nations Agency.

What are the key stages in the recognition of Sarnath?

- **Tentative Listing** - It is included in India's Tentative List in 1998, has now achieved UNESCO World Heritage recognition after a long and careful process.

- **Proposal** - Inscription proposal submitted to the World Heritage Committee in Jan 2025.
- **Evaluation** - Followed by 18-month process with UNESCO advisory meetings and ICOMOS mission for assessment.
- **Decision** - Culminated in inscription at the **48th Session of the World Heritage Committee, Busan (South Korea)**.
- **Nomination** - Sarnath proposed under UNESCO criteria (iii) & (vi).
 - Criterion (iii) - It highlights Sarnath's enduring spiritual significance as a major Buddhist pilgrimage site with centuries-old monuments.
 - Criterion (vi) - It recognizes Sarnath's direct association with Buddha's first sermon, his disciples, teachings, and the Triratna concept.
- The purpose of the Convention is to support UNESCO's goal of preserving heritage of Outstanding Universal Value for future generations.



How is India's World Heritage List expanding with new inscriptions like Sarnath?

- **Current Status** - India possesses 45 UNESCO World Heritage properties, comprising 37 cultural, 7 natural, and 1 mixed site. The country ranks sixth globally and second in the Asia-Pacific region.

India's World Heritage



Preserving a Legacy for Humanity

India is home to **45** UNESCO World Heritage Sites, reflecting its rich cultural and natural heritage.

Composition:



37

Cultural Sites



7

Natural Sites



1

Mixed Site

Global Standing:



Ranked
6th
globally

In the number of World Heritage Sites, India stands as a global custodian of heritage, culture, and conservation.

Source: UNESCO



Country			World Heritage Sites (as of July 2026)
1		Italy	62
2		China	61
3		France	56
4		Germany	55
5		Spain	50
6		India	45
7		Mexico	36
8		United Kingdom	35
9		Russia	33

- **First Inscriptions (1983)** - The earliest entries included Agra Fort, Taj Mahal, Ellora Caves, and Ajanta Caves.
- **Recent Additions** - The inclusion of Maratha Military Landscapes (2024, Paris) and Sarnath (2025, Busan) increased the total number of sites to 45.
- **Future Potential** - India's Tentative List currently includes 69 properties, representing the pipeline for future World Heritage nominations.



CULTURAL WORLD HERITAGE SITES (INDIA)

Year	Site	State / UT
1983	Agra Fort	Uttar Pradesh
1983	Ajanta Caves	Maharashtra
1983	Ellora Caves	Maharashtra
1983	Taj Mahal	Uttar Pradesh
1984	Sun Temple, Konarak	Odisha
1984	Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram	Tamil Nadu
1986	Khajuraho Group of Monuments	Madhya Pradesh
1986	Fatehpur Sikri	Uttar Pradesh
1986	Churches and Convents of Goa	Goa
1986	Group of Monuments at Hampi	Karnataka
1987	Elephanta Caves	Maharashtra
1987	Group of Monuments at Pattadakal	Karnataka
1987, 2004	Great Living Chola Temples	Tamil Nadu
1988, 2005	Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks	Uttarakhand
1989	Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi	Madhya Pradesh
1993	Humayun's Tomb, Delhi	Delhi
1993	Qutb Minar and its Monuments, Delhi	Delhi
1999, 2005, 2008	Mountain Railways of India	WB, Tamil Nadu, HP
2002	Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya	Bihar
2003	Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka	Madhya Pradesh
2004	Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park	Gujarat
2004	Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus	Maharashtra
2007	Red Fort Complex	Delhi
2010	The Jantar Mantar, Jaipur	Rajasthan
2013	Hill Forts of Rajasthan	Rajasthan
2014	Rani-ki-Vav (the Queen's Stepwell) at Patan	Gujarat
2016	Archaeological Site of Nalanda Mahavihara	Bihar
2017	Historic City of Ahmedabad	Gujarat
2018	Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai	Maharashtra
2019	Jaipur City	Rajasthan
2021	Dholavira: a Harappan City	Gujarat
2023	Kakatiya Rudreshwara (Ramappa) Temple	Telangana
2023	Sacred Ensembles of the Hoysalas	Karnataka
2024	Santiniketan	West Bengal
2025	Moidams – the Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty	Assam
2026	Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath	Uttar Pradesh



NATURAL WORLD HERITAGE SITES (INDIA)

Year	Site	State / UT
1985	Kaziranga National Park	Assam
1985	Keoladeo National Park	Rajasthan
1985	Manas Wildlife Sanctuary	Assam
1987	Sundarbans National Park	West Bengal
1988, 2005	Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks	Uttarakhand
2012	Western Ghats	Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu
2014	Great Himalayan National Park Conservation Area	Himachal Pradesh



MIXED WORLD HERITAGE SITE (INDIA)

Year	Site	State / UT
2016	Khangchendzonga National Park	Sikkim

What are the steps taken by government to preserve its heritage?

- **Repatriation Drive** - India has recovered 669 antiquities (656 since 2014) through coordinated efforts of the Ministry of Culture, ASI, Indian Missions, and enforcement agencies; recently, 657 art objects were handed over by US authorities.

- **Key Artefacts** - Returns include iconic pieces like the Chola-period Shiva Nataraja, Saint Sundarar with Paravai, and Somaskanda.
- **Adopt a Heritage**
- **Launched in** - Sept 2017, revamped in Sept 2023.
- **Collaboration Framework** - It involves private firms, PSUs, NGOs, trusts, societies.
- **Focus** - To develop & maintain visitor-friendly amenities at Protected Monuments of National Importance.
- **Supported by** - CSR & contributions, aimed at enhancing visitor experience.
- **Gyan Bharatam Mission**
- **Launched in** - 2025, to preserve, digitise, and disseminate India's manuscript heritage, focusing on ancient knowledge systems.
- **Technology Integration** - Uses modern digital tools & conservation networks to safeguard fragile manuscripts and ensure global accessibility.
- **National Manuscript Survey (2026)** - To identify, document, and build a comprehensive national database of manuscripts.
- **National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities**
- **Implementation by** - Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).
- **Objective** - To build a national database of built heritage and antiquities.
- **Role** - To document and inventory monuments to guide planning, prioritisation, and monitoring of conservation work.

What lies ahead?

- India's cultural heritage is a living legacy that continues to inspire, educate, and connect people across generations.

- The inscription of Sarnath reflects the country's sustained commitment to conserving places of exceptional value while strengthening their role in education, cultural exchange, and sustainable development.
- As India moves forward, protecting its heritage will remain central to preserving its civilisational legacy and sharing it with the world.

Reference

[PIB | Turning the Wheel of Heritage](#)

