Piprahwa Gems

Prelims – History of India.

Mains – *General Studies-I* (Indian Heritage and Culture).

Why in news?

The Indian government has recently condemned an auction of ancient Indian gems and issued a legal notice to stop the "unethical" sale of the relics, stating that it should be treated as the sacred body of the Buddha.

- Piprahwa Gems date back to the *Mauryan Empire*, circa 240 to 200 BC.
- The precious stones consist of thousands of pearls, rubies, topazes, sapphires and patterned gold worked into jewels and maintained in their natural forms.
- They were *originally buried in a dome-shaped funeral monument called a stupa in Piprahwa in modern-day Uttar Pradesh*.
- They are believed to be mixed with some of the cremated remains of the Buddha, who died about 480 BC.

William Peppe

- In 1898, William Peppe's archaeological discovery was claimed by the British under the 1878 Indian Treasure Trove Act, reflecting colonial-era laws.

  The 1878 Indian Treasure Trove Act establishes the legal framework for buried wealth. Treasure is defined as "something of any value hidden in the soil, or in anything affixed thereto, "It only applies to riches that have been buried for less than 100 years.

- The relics, including bones and ash, were presented to King Chulalongkorn of Siam (modern Thailand), highlighting diplomatic engagements of the time.
- The majority of the approximately 1,800 gems found are now part of the Indian Museum in Kolkata, an important institution for Indian heritage.
- Notably, *Peppe retained about a fifth of the gems*, categorized as "duplicates" by British administrators, a decision indicative of the colonial administration's handling of such finds.

Stance of the Indian Government

- Indian government argued that the Piprahwa gems are the heritage of both the Buddha's descendants and of Buddhists worldwide.
- India's government has called on Chris Peppe to halt the sale of the gems, issue a

public apology to Buddhists worldwide and to provide a full disclosure of the provenance of the relics.
- Failure to comply, would result in legal proceedings in Indian and Hong Kong courts and through international bodies "for violations of cultural heritage laws".
- The Ministry noted that "the relics of the Buddha cannot be treated as 'specimens' but as the sacred body and originally interred offerings to the sacred body of the Buddha" and the proposed auction "offends the sentiments of over 500 million Buddhists worldwide".

Reference

1. The indian express | Piprahwa relics
2. Al Jazeera | Piprahwa Gems

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