



Sarnath Nominated for UNESCO World Heritage

[Source: DH](#)

Why in News?

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.

What are the Key Facts Related to Sarnath?

- **Location:** Sarnath, located near Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, is a major Buddhist pilgrimage site where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon (Dhammachakkappavattana) after enlightenment.
- **Historical and Religious Significance:** It is also known by names such as Rishipatana, Mrigadava, and Mrigadaya. The modern name is believed to be derived from Saranganatha ("Lord of the Deer").
 - Sarnath is one of the 4 key pilgrimage sites in Buddhism, along with Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, and Kushinagar, associated with the birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death of Buddha respectively.
 - Ashes of the Buddha were enshrined in stupas at these locations to commemorate significant events in his life.
- **Architecture:** Sarnath reflects the architectural evolution from the Mauryan to the Kushan, Gupta, and Gahadavala periods. The site is divided into 2 main monument groups:
 - **Group A:**
 - **Chaukhandi Stupa:** Built around the 5th century AD to honor Lord Buddha, it is a tall brick structure with an octagonal tower on top. This tower was added later, in 1588 by Govardhan, the son of Raja Todarmal to remember Humayun's visit to Sarnath.
 - **Group B:**
 - **Dhamek Stupa:** Built around 500 CE, believed to mark the exact spot of Buddha's first sermon.
 - **Dharmarajika Stupa:** Originally built by [Mauryan Emperor Ashoka](#) in the 3rd century BCE to house the relics of Buddha.
 - **Ashokan Pillar:** Bearing Ashoka's edict and originally crowned by the Lion Capital, now India's National Emblem.
 - **Ancient monasteries, temples,** and numerous **votive stupas**, spanning from the 3rd century BCE to the 12th century CE.
- **Restoration and Invasions:** Emperor Ashoka promoted Buddhism after the Kalinga War and built stupas and monasteries at Sarnath.
 - Sarnath flourished under rulers like the Kushans, Guptas, and Harshavardhana, who restored structures post Huna invasions.
 - The Guptas added artistic features to the Dhamek Stupa, notably stone-carved floral designs.

- The site suffered destruction during the **11th-century raid by Mahmud of Ghazni** but was restored by **Mahipala** of the **Pala dynasty**.
- The **last major monument, Dharmachakra Jina Vihara**, was built in the **11th century** by **Kumaradevi**, wife of **Govindachandra** of the **Gahadavala dynasty**.
- **Excavations and Museums:** The first scientific excavation at Sarnath was conducted by **Sir Alexander Cunningham**, the first DG of the [Archaeological Survey of India \(ASI\)](#), between **1834-36**.
 - The **Ashokan Lion Capital** and pillar base were excavated in **1904-05** by **Friedrich Oscar Oertel**. It was later adopted as **State Emblem of India** on **26th January 1950**,
 - The **Sarnath Archaeological Museum** houses the **original Lion Capital**, along with other important artefacts.
 - The **Mulagandha Kuti Vihar**, built by the **Mahabodhi Society**, contains vibrant frescoes narrating Buddha's life.



What are UNESCO World Heritage Sites?

- **About: UNESCO World Heritage Sites** are locations 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**, joining 195 other countries in this global commitment.
- **World Heritage Convention, 1972:** Under the Convention, **each State Party can nominate only one site per year** for inscription on the World Heritage List.
 - India currently ranks **6th globally** and **2nd in the Asia-Pacific** in terms of the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and has **62 sites on its Tentative List**.
- **Nodal Agency:** The **ASI** is the nodal agency for all **World Heritage matters** in India.

India on the World Heritage Map



Total World Heritage Sites

44

More on UNESCO's Tentative List

62

Newest Addition

Maratha Military Landscapes

First Inscribed Sites (1983):

■ Agra Fort

■ Ajanta Caves

■ Taj Mahal

■ Ellora Caves

What are the Criteria to Designate a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

- **Site Selection Criteria:** To be designated a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, a property must demonstrate **Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)** and meet at least **one of 10 criteria**, as outlined in the **Operational Guidelines** of the **World Heritage Convention**.
 - Originally grouped as **6 cultural and 4 natural criteria**, they were **merged into a single list of 10 in 2005**.
 - These are **periodically updated** to reflect global heritage priorities.
- **Nomination & Evaluation Process:** A site must **first be included in the country's Tentative List**.
 - The **State Party** submits a detailed **nomination dossier**, which is reviewed by the **World Heritage Centre**.
 - The dossier is then **evaluated by Advisory Bodies** such as:
 - **ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites)** (for cultural sites),
 - **IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)** (for natural sites) and
 - **ICCROM**, which provides **technical expertise and training** in conservation.
- **Final Decision:** The **World Heritage Committee**, which meets annually, makes the final decision. It can **inscribe, defer, or request more information**.

- **India is a current member (2021-25)** of this Committee, contributing to global heritage governance.



Selection criteria

(i)

to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;

(ii)

to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;

(iii)

to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;

(iv)

to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;

(v)

to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

(vi)

to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);

(vii)

to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;

(viii)

to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;

(ix)

to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;

(x)

to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

Operational Guidelines (year)	Cultural criteria						Natural criteria			
2002	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
2005	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(viii)	(ix)	(vii)	(x)



UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims:

Q. Consider the following properties included in the World Heritage List released by UNESCO: (2024)

1. Shantiniketan
2. Rani-ki-Vav
3. Sacred Ensembles of the Hoysalas
4. Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodhgaya

How many of the above properties were included in 2023?

- (a) Only one
- (b) Only two
- (c) Only three
- (d) All four

Ans: (b)

Mains:

Q. Safeguarding the Indian Art Heritage is the need of the moment. Discuss. (2018)

Q. Indian Philosophy and tradition played a significant role in conceiving and shaping the monuments and their art in India. Discuss. (2020)

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/printpdf/sarnath-nominated-for-unesco-world-heritage>