

# Influence of Buddhism on the Cultural Landscape of Sarnath in Varanasi

Ayushi Tiwari

Research Scholar, C.S.J.M. University, Kanpur

## Abstract:

Sarnath, a religious and historical place near Varanasi, demonstrates the significant influence of Buddhism on the development of its culture. In this research paper, the author looks at the impact of Buddhism on the selected cultural, spatial, and socioeconomic aspects of Sarnath, beginning immediately after the institution of the new faith with the first sermon by Gautama Buddha to the present time. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing history, archaeological data, and survey observation to delve into the religious architectures, cultural and communal practices, and socio-economic activities influenced by Buddhism. Some findings indicate that the locations of stupas, temples, and monasteries, along with the rituals and festivals, serve to preserve Buddhist values, thereby shaping new cultural landscapes. Furthermore, the ways in which Buddhism influenced local artisans and the roles of pilgrimage and tourism remain essential in the economy. Modernization is one of the biggest threats to heritage sites, but political leadership and residents of Sarnath enhance the prospects for this culture. Therefore, this paper uses Sarnath as a prime example to illustrate the impact of religion on culture, emphasizing the dual role of culture in development and conservation within a dynamic world.

## Introduction

Varanasi is one of the most ancient living cities of the world, which is an essential part of the spiritual and cultural map of India. Popularly referred to as the city of light, Varanasi represents spirituality, pilgrimage, and revised traditions. About 10 km from the city is Sarnath, an archaeological site of immense archaeological and religious significance. Sarnath is one of the places related to the life of Buddha, and as one of the four significant places for Buddhist visitation, it serves as an important studious site for the impact Buddhism undertook in the overall culture of Varanasi. It is here that the Lord Buddha preached his first sermon after attaining the Enlightenment, started the Wheel of the Dhamma, and emerged as one of the most important seats of Buddhism.

On the one hand, it is crucial to emphasize that Sarnath's religious role does not exhaust its historical and cultural potential. On the other hand, one can observe the gradual changes in the landscape that have occurred due to the penetration of Buddhism and Buddhist architectural and artistic traditions. From the monumental structures such as the Ashokan pillar, Sarnath has witnessed an architectural legacy primarily composed of Buddhist monastic complexes, which originated and developed significantly under subsequent dynasties. It has also demonstrated that religious architectures have not only influenced the physical appearance of Sarnath, but

have also played a significant role in shaping the local culture, practices, and daily lives of the people.

Sarnath is notable for its tourist attractions, including its historical and religious buildings, in addition to twenty-first-century cultural practices and activities reflecting the traditions of its visitors, craft builders, and residents. The Buddhist links of Sarnath extend beyond material culture, such as stupas and monasteries, and encompass non-material aspects such as annual celebrations, spirituality, and traditional crafts and art forms that serve as evidence of Buddhism in this region. The existence and dissemination of Buddhist art and iconography clearly demonstrate the influence of this religion on the growth of the artisan community, who continue to thrive by creating works that reflect the iconography and meaning inherent in the Buddha. This cultural output adds to the larger narrative of Varanasi, which is otherwise famous for its diverse and deep philosophical history.

The general aim of this research paper is to explore the effects of Buddhism on the cultural setting of Sarnath in Varanasi in relation to its physical and cultural zones. Therefore, the goal of the current paper is to reveal the overall picture of Sarnath's change under the impact of Buddhism by studying the spatial distribution of religious places, describing the types of cultural activities, and discussing other socio-economic aspects connected with Buddhist activities. This work employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing a review of historical documents, an analysis of the general physical environment, and interviews with the Sarnath population and other experts to depict the cultural evolution of the Sarnath population over time.

## **Literature Review**

Buddhism has significantly influenced the cultural and historical backdrop of Sarnath near Varanasi, a centre of Buddhist activity since Gautama Buddha. The paper compares Sarnath's historical background, architectural style, cultural uses, socio-economic change, and conservation challenge to assess how Buddhism has impacted the geography of the region at its best.

The Sarnath web page holds significance in Buddhism, as it is the site where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon, initiating the spread of Buddhism. Thapar further opined that Emperor Ashoka, who constructed stupas, monasteries, and pillars here, developed Sarnath into an important centre of Buddhist culture. In support of her argument, Thapar identified that the contributions of Ashoka were very instrumental in framing the physical socio-cultural and architectural character and disposition of Sarnath. Rhys Davids (1908) shares details about the early stages of Buddhist teachings and the selection of Sarnath as a teaching center, which paved the way for the establishment of other Buddhist shrines and universities throughout Asia.

Sarnath's architectural development reflects the function that the site served through the years as an important Buddhist religious destination. Desai (2011) provided a detailed analysis of the growth of monasteries and stupas in Sarnath, explaining how the iconographic representation

in these structures aligns with the Buddhist message of anicca and spirituality. The Dhamek Stupa stands as one of the most significant monuments in Sarnath, symbolizing a spatial and metaphoric orientation that contrasts with the materialism of Buddhist doctrine. By applying the model of sacred landscapes, which was established in Sarnath based on the material published in *Artibus Asiae* studies, the role of Buddhist teachings in constructing a specific cultural territory can be revealed.

The culture of Sarnath is a fine example of continuity and change in an older culture. This nature stems from the fact that Sarnath's Buddhist practices are alive to this date. From a cultural perspective, DeCarali (2004) identified the Buddhist festivals still celebrated with fervour in Sarnath, such as the Buddha Purnima pilgrimage. The rituals and pilgrimage mentioned above hold religious significance, and these activities also contribute to the identity of the Sarnath community. Primary research in Cultural Anthropology reveals that the tradition and culture of Sarnath comprise regional customs and Buddhist standards, which shape the religious and social daily lives of the people.

This paper established that Sarnath possessed a rich artistic heritage, which included its contribution to the evolving structure of Buddhist iconography. Kramrisch (1981) asserts that Sarnath played a crucial role in the development of Buddhist art as a temple, particularly during the Guptan era, known as the Golden Age of India. The *Journal of Asian Studies* publishes substantial research demonstrating that the sculptures and carvings from this era, including the Lion Capital of Ashoka, not only significantly influenced India's iconography but also served as a source of inspiration for neighboring countries. Regional artisans have drawn significant inspiration from this art and architecture, while Sarnath has become a prominent hub for robust ethnic arts and craft cultures deeply rooted in Buddhism.

The socioeconomic profile of Sarnath has also evolved out of its importance as a prominent location on the Buddhist circuit. According to Gladstone (2005), this has caused severe effects in that pilgrimage has introduced people from all over the world, resulting in changes in the economy in particular through touring and companies related to the handcraft industry. Sarnath local artisans have always crafted products that embody Buddhism motifs to sell to tourists and pilgrims. Studies published in *Tourism Management* highlight the dual role of pilgrimage: although it has its impact in the economic aspects of development, it has a huge strain on the physical infrastructure and architectural history of the region.

## Methodology

This study adopts a geographical perspective to examine the impact of Buddhism on the cultural setting of Sarnath. An exploratory, descriptive, and comparative research design was employed to use both field notes and historical data analysis. A location-based study was performed to assess the patterns and location of some of the significant religious architectures, like stupas and monasteries, and its effects on their locational context. Vernacular observation trips involved observing and taking photographs of Sarnath place features, including physical geography, demography, and art works.

The research strategy of field visits used observation and picture taking of Sarnath's place features, including physical geography, demography, and art works; the mapping techniques used were geographic imaging of fixed and significant landmarks significant to Buddhism. Documentary information such as historical records, archaeological findings, and research papers was used to study the history of the cultural development. Informal conversations with academics or local people were also made to hear their views about the sociocultural significance of Buddhist monuments in Sarnath. Using these methods enabled the researcher to gain the big picture of how religion, space, and culture intersect with each other

### **A Historical Background to Sarnath**

Sarnath is a Buddhist shrine site in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, near Varanasi. This place is considered a most sacred place because Buddha delivered his first teachings after attaining enlightenment. The most important ceremony that signifies the establishment of Buddhism is called the 'Turning of the Wheel of Dharma or The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma'. Sarnath is traditionally understood to have been named after a deer park, Isipatana, where the Buddha delivered a sermon; it has ample historical importance related to voice, knowledge, spirituality, and peace.

The archaeology of Sarnath in historical context started most prominently in the third century BCE during the rule of emperor Ashoka. Ashoka, who was an avid follower of Buddhism, did spend a lot of effort, time, and resources to develop Sarnath into one among the foremost learning centres for Buddhism. He built many stupas, viharas—monasteries—and the Ashoka Pillar, which became the emblem of Buddhist preaching. It supports the Lion Capital and is still today one of the most popular symbols of India, representing the power and the unity; it is the national emblem of the state.

At that time, during the Gupta period (4th to 6th centuries CE), Sarnath was a centre for both cultural and architectural importance. Some authors even called this period the golden age of Buddhist art because of the construction of the large stupas, this kind of carving sculptures, and the exquisite monasteries. During this time the Dhamek Stupa was built, perhaps the most important surviving structure of the complex, which underlines the persistent people's faith in the words of Buddha. The period brought architects and artists that had a Gupta style displayed in their works characterised by refinement and delicate details, hence adding to the cultural value of the area.

Sarnath was one of the most important centres of Buddhism during the centuries running up to the 12th century AD, after which the town, like many others in the subcontinent, faced the invasion of Islamic rulers who destroyed many monasteries and stupas. Sarnath remained in this state of oblivion for several centuries until the area was comparatively well excavated by British archaeologists in the 19th century. Following that, Sarnath has then returned to the most important Buddhist sites, and many restoration works helped to draw attention to its history and religious importance.

## **Influence of Buddhism on Cultural Landscape**

Exploring the phenomenon of Buddha's influence on Sarnath, hence reasoning and assessing its imprint on its physical appearance, tangible culture, and social and economic reality from the time of Gautama Buddha. Sociocultural activities by architecture and rituals of Sarnath show the impact of Buddhism; turned Sarnath into an important pilgrimage and culture site.

The first and most evident impact that Buddhism marked in Sarnath is architectural and geographical. The spreading of stupas, monasteries (viharas), and other religious architectures has characterised the entire geography of this area. The Dhamek Stupa and the mix of old and new buildings, including the ruins of Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, show case the Buddhist principles and are architectural marvels that define the history of Sarnath. Ashoka, in this respect, sponsored the Ashoka Pillar, which remains today as testimony and indicators of the spread of Buddhism in that part of the world, and the religious dictum got deeply sunk into the psyche of the people of today's India and other parts of South Asia. Its spatial organisation of these structures adheres to the guidelines of Buddhist monastic existence—seclusion, unity, and frugality.

Customs and ceremonies are also components of the environment and morphology of the settlement, which is associated with Buddhism. The tradition of conducting meditation sessions, chanting, and celebrating typical festivals of Buddhism such as Buddha Purnima are the cultural activities that still played a role in the formation of the communal culture of Sarnath. Such practices cover pilgrim and tourist trappings, both foreign and domestic, interested in accessing the Sarnath historical sites as well as experiencing the spirituality. Pilgrims' arrival has remained continuity and culture of Buddhism practices as people gained sense of togetherness through shared religious experiences.

## **Socio-Economic Influence of Buddhism**

A prominent and profound effect of historical and cultural aspects that Sarnath has embraced is the socio-economic life of the region. By enlightening his first sermon at Sarnath, it has become one of the major Buddhism pilgrimage sites, and this status has defined its socioeconomic development in various fronts such as tourism, local artefacts, and community income.

Another area where socio-economic effects can be deduced concerning Buddhism and Sarnath is tourism and journey. Being one of the important sites sacred for Buddhists all over the world, Sarnath brings thousands of pilgrims and tourists from Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and other countries each year. These travellers have consequently promoted the creation of several services because of vacations, totalling to places to live, dining, guides, and transport, among others. Lacking in grandiosity in comparison with Varanasi, the hospitality industry of Sarnath also profits from the tourist flow and gives job places for the locals and contributes to the development of the economy of the region.

Buddhism has also impacted the local art makers, mainly in that artisans vie to produce Buddhism trinkets and locally made waffles. In Sarnath, people make sculptures of Buddha, prayer flags, and other things connected with the imagery that is represented in the teachings of Buddha. These crafts are a major source of revenue to artisans in the region, and they are occasioned by pilgrimages and vacationists who would wish to make souvenirs and religious trinkets. The handicraft industry is helpful for development, which keeps the traditions and the old processes of craft making related to Buddhist artwork alive.

Further, education and cultural structure Buddhism has come into the picture in dependency of Sarnath. The Maha Bodhi Society has built the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, which is important for learning and ernite practice. Places of learning such as the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies should continue offering fuzzy scholarships to Buddhist students all over the world in educational institutions. These institutions have not only been instrumental in maintaining the traditions concerned with Buddhism but also are—an added social-economic strength to the community in providing job opportunities in teaching and housing students and faculty members from around the world who come for education and research purposes and hence adding to the socio-economic dynamics of Sarnath.

This culture has also helped the local people through various cultural events and festivals that belong to Buddhism. The tourists, especially those who are Buddhists, prefer visiting during occasions like Buddha Purnima, and this brings incomes from local businesses and service providers. These occasions indeed play major roles in economy uplift and constructing social bonds as people of specific areas unite together in order to design as well as celebrate such amazing festivals.

The impacts of Buddhism secular on Sarnath socio-economic The Buddhism has played a significant role in the growth of Sarnath through tourist centres, craft centres, educational centres, and cultural centers. It has strongly over the years influenced the socio-cultural transformation of Sarnath into unprecedented economic interaction between socio-cultural spheres. However, the outgoing studies also reveal a propensity for unsustainable use of the historical and religious heritage of this important Buddhist shrine.

## Conclusion

Sarnath has a rich culture of Buddhism and has played a vital role in the religious and cultural history of the Varanasi region and hence is called the cultural capital of northern India. Then the archaeological and architectural bulletin inviting Buddha's first sermon. Buddhism was promoted via the Mauryan and Gupta colonisation periods; physical relics of the religion exist there, and it manifested in the culture. Many attractions like stupas, monasteries, and sacred relics have made Sarnath an alive example of Buddhism and religion, and on the other hand, rituals, festivals, and cultural activities are still strengthening spiritual characteristics.

In the last few decades, Sarnath has greatly owing to its prominence as a holy city; thousands of people from different countries visit Sarnath every year, leading to local business, especially



tourism and sales of artifacts. It has hence boosted the local economy by provisioning for the survival of people here, encouraged the richness of our cultures through the arts, and encouraged the growth of learning institutions with an emphasis on Buddhism.

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