

Buddhist Heritage of Uttarakhand: Archaeology, Culture, and Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract: The state of Uttarakhand, located in the western part of Himalayas, has a valuable but hitherto untapped Buddhist heritage, dating back from the Mauryan period to the post-Gupta period. However, the textual evidence helps contextualise the archaeological sites of Kashipur (Govisana), Mordhwaj, Nala, and Senapani, and the Ashokan Rock Edict at Kalsi, testify to the initial spread of Buddhism into the Himalayas. The study combines archaeological, cultural, and textual sources to explore the historical evolution of Buddhism in Uttarakhand and its engagement with the larger Himalayan world of Buddhism. It also discovers indigenous Buddhist traditions followed by aboriginal Himalayan societies and provides an evaluation of the sites' value for sustainable heritage tourism. The findings suggest the need for properly planned archaeological conservation, participatory education, and development of Buddhist heritage loops that could develop cultural preservation and regional growth. The study demonstrates that Uttarakhand served as a vital corridor of Buddhist transmission and emphasizes the need for integrative conservation and tourism strategies.

Keywords: Buddhism, Uttarakhand, Archaeology, Cultural Heritage, Ashokan Edict, Sustainable Tourism, Himalaya

Introduction

Uttarakhand (30.06°N, 79.02°E) is situated in the Indian western Himalayas and is also called the land of culture and spirituality. It is well-known for its Brahminical shrines such as Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri. The state also possesses a significant but less studied Buddhist legacy. Snowy peaks, tall mountain ranges of Uttarakhand, were ideal spots for contemplative

solitude, asceticism, and monastic withdrawal. This native context contributed largely to the development of Buddhist traditions in the Himalayas (Oakley, 1905; Cowell & Chalmers, 1990). Early Buddhist mythology, such as the Jatakas, generally depicts the Himalayas as a region of enlightenment and spiritual evolution (Mandal, 2020; Singh, 2015). History and archaeology also attest to the spread of Buddhism in the region from the Mauryan period.

Based on literary and epigraphical sources, Emperor Ashoka sent missionaries such as *Majjhima*, *Kassapa-gotta*, and *Dhundhubhissara* to spread the Dhamma to the Himalayas (Cunningham, 1881; Rhys Davids, 1899). Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, characterised by the seventh century CE, mentioned cities such as Brahmapura and Govisana, present-day Pauri and Kashipur respectively, as Buddhist monasteries and Brahmanical temples (Katoch, 2003, 2019). Late in the nineteenth century, Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, systematically traced and mapped most of these sites described in Si-Yu-Ki, opening the door for subsequent archaeological work in the region (Cunningham, 1871, p. 81). Archaeological finds at Kashipur, Mordhwaj, Nala, and Senapani, and Ashoka's rock edict at Kalsi, stand as a witness to the fact that the area had in the past been a significant cultural corridor connecting the Gangetic plains and the trans-Himalayan region. The sites provide evidence of architectural adaptation of Buddhist architecture to mountains and local material.

The Buddhist heritage of Uttarakhand is of great archaeological and cultural tourism significance today as well. Trailing the early Buddhist sites with heritage trails, site museums, and interpretive signage would invite tourism to the Himalayas' early Buddhist heritage. This would benefit not only local economies but conservation and a common appreciation of regional cultural heritage as well.

Further, this research examines the Buddhist legacy of Uttarakhand and surrounding regions from both archaeological and textual viewpoints, and examines how far the Himalayan environment influenced Buddhist practice and the ways in which this can be transferred to the delivery of sustainable heritage tourism today.

Study area

This study was conducted in Uttarakhand and its surrounding foothills. The aim was to identify ancient Buddhist sites and modern Buddhist communities in the region. It highlights how the Himalayan environment has influenced Buddhist practices and explores how this legacy can contribute to sustainable heritage tourism today.

Ancient Buddhist sites in Uttarakhand

Kalsi

Asoka, the Mauryan emperor (268–232 BCE), is known best through his inscriptions and rock edicts, some of the earliest surviving written records on stone of Indian history (Allchin & Norman, 1985; Senart, 1886). The inscriptions, which have been carved on rocks and pillars across his empire in the Indian subcontinent, mostly propagate his Dhamma policy, a moral and ethical code borrowed from Buddhism (Smith et al., 2016). This rock edict is a witness to the Asokan policy of Buddhism in the Himalayan region.

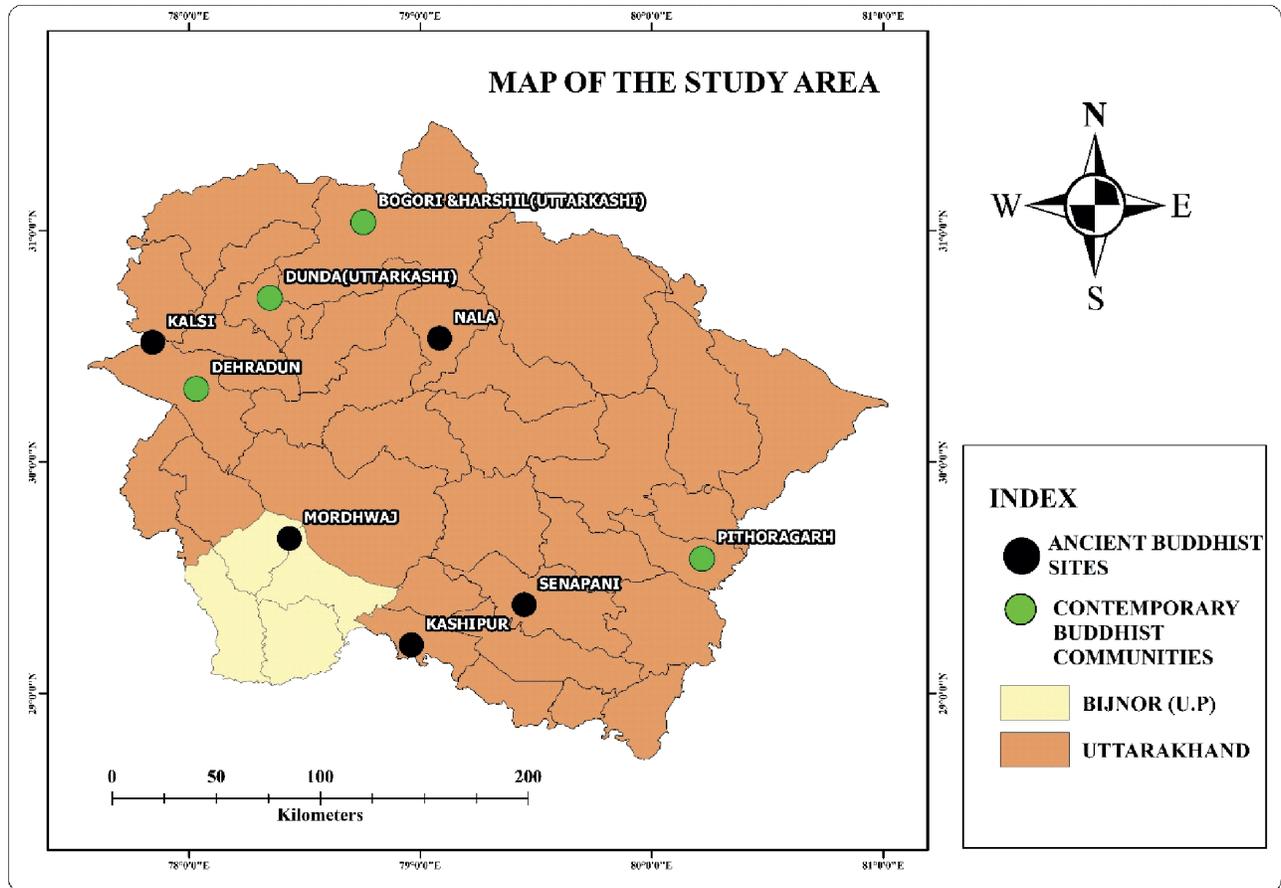


Figure 1: The above map showing the ancient distribution of Buddhist sites and contemporary Buddhist communities in Uttarakhand and its adjoining areas.

Kashipur (Govisana)

Govisana (Kashipur District Udham Singh Nagar) (29.22°N 78.95°E) kingdom is one of the important kingdoms of Uttarakhand, which is mentioned by Hieun-Tsang as Kiu-pi-shwang-na (Katoch,2019). He described that two monasteries with 100 monks and 30 Brahmanical temples existed there. Cunnigham located this as the present Kashipur town of Udham Singh Nagar District, Uttarakhand (IAR 1965–66: 53–54; IAR 1970–71: 41–45).



Figure 2: Exposed ancient monument at Kashipur, (courtesy, IAR 1965–66: 54)

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) excavation at the Bhim-gada mound has produced rich architectural remains of an early Buddhist religious monument. Excavation in 1939–40 by Krishna Deva and Rameshwar Dayal (Deva & Dayal, 1942; IAR 1965–66: 53–54). Subsequent field seasons under Y.D. Sharma further explored the stratigraphy and architectural remains (IAR 1970–71: 41–45). (**Fig. 2**).

The 1965–66 excavation exposed remains of a massive burnt-brick structure, 29.5 meter long and 5.95 meter high, ornamented with seven chaitya-window (caitya-gavākṣa) motifs, three open and four blinds set within pilasters. These architectural features i.e., burnt-brick construction, chaitya-window motifs, and bold mouldings reflect a mature Gupta–post-Gupta idiom adapted to Himalayan conditions. The sequence of three construction phases suggests prolonged ritual use and architectural evolution from a solid stupa platform to a circumambulatory shrine. Such design continuity makes Kashipur one of the region’s most instructive examples of Buddhist architectural adaptation in the mountains (IAR 1965–66: 54).

Later investigations (1970–71) revealed that the monument had undergone three construction phases. The earliest (Phase 1) comprised a solid brick platform, stylistically assignable to the Gupta period, likely serving as the base of a stupa or chaitya-like shrine. In Phase-2 (**Fig.3**), a circumambulatory wall (pradakṣiṇā-patha) was added around the platform, ornamented with chaitya-windows flanked by pūrṇaḡhaṭa columns, providing ritual access for worshippers (IAR 1970–71: 42–44).

The space between the wall and the platform was used for parikrama, a characteristic Buddhist ritual practice. Decorative lotus and floral motifs cut on reused bricks, together with a terracotta bulls depicting two haloed figures reminiscent of Kushan-period Buddhist iconography, reinforce the Buddhist affiliation of the complex (Katoch,2003-2019). Stylistic and architectural evidence, therefore, suggests that the Kashipur monument originated as a Buddhist brick stupa or chaitya complex, associated with the monastery described by Xuanzang (IAR 1965–66: 53–54; IAR 1970–71: 41–45).



Figure 3: Image showing phases -1 and 2 at the Kashipur (courtesy IAR 1970–71: 41–45).

Mordhwaj

Mordhwaj (29°40'12"N 78°26'03" E), located about 15 kilometres southwest of Kotdwar in the Garhwal Himalayan foothills (Bijnor district, Uttar Pradesh), was excavated by Garhwal University in 1979 (Nautiyal and Khanduri, 1978-79). Excavations revealed three cultural periods: Period I (5th-2nd centuries BCE), Period II A (2nd century BCE-1st century CE), and Period II B (2nd-4th centuries CE) (Nautiyal and Khanduri, 1978-79).

During the excavation of the Shigri mound, Markham also observed a circumambulatory path around the Moradhvaj Stupa (Markham, 1878; Führer, 1891). However, he did not find any railing remains there. The antiquities recovered from the stupa's metal chamber are preserved in the State Museum, Lucknow (Katoch, 2003). Due to the lack of extensive excavation, a complete description of their architectural structure is impossible. Another reason is that these stupa sites were already in disarray.

A terracotta stucco Buddha was recovered, highlighting the site's religious significance during the Kushan period. The discovery of a Kushan gold coin in the upper layers corroborates the chronology of Buddhist occupation (Nautiyal & Khanduri, 1978–79). These finds suggest that Mordhwaj was not only a residential and fortified settlement but also served as a religious centre associated with early Buddhist practices

Nala

On the Patra route to Shri Kedarnath, near Guptakashi, stands a small stone stupa at Nala Chatti, the only surviving stupa in Rudra Prayag, Uttarakhand (Sankrityayan, 1953). It has a square base rising in four steps, a circular *Medhi*, a semicircular *Anda*, and is topped with a **harmika** and *Chhatravali*, possibly with an umbrella (chhatra-yasti), giving it a bell-shaped form similar to Tibetan **Chorten (the Tibetan variant of the Indian stupa)** (Katoch, 2003, 2019). The stupa likely contained relics of a lama or monk and may have been associated with a Buddhist monastery in the region. Its style predates the nearby 1st Century CE Brahmin temple by three to four centuries, indicating an early Buddhist presence. The Nala stupa reflects Lamaism influences, similar to Tibetan-style miniature stupas found across the Himalayan border regions from Ladakh to western Nepal, suggesting the site may have been part of a larger monastic complex (Katoch, 2019). (Fig. 4).

Senapani

According to **Yaswant Katoch** (2003), the Terai region of Nainital district, between Haldwani and Tanakpur, preserves evidence of early Buddhism. Near **Senapani**, ruins of a stupa dating to the 2nd Century BCE have been discovered, constructed from **red sandstone**. A **Brahmi inscription** on a stone block was also found, though it remains undeciphered. In close proximity, the site of **Sudalimath** is believed to have been another Buddhist stupa. These sites together indicate that this forested region was an early centre of Buddhist activity, reflecting the spread of Buddhism into the Terai and Himalayan foothills during the early centuries BCE (Katoch, 2003).

Contemporary Buddhist Communities in Uttarakhand

In modern Uttarakhand, Buddhism continues through a few monastic centres and Himalayan Buddhist communities. Dehradun, especially Clement Town, is a prominent centre of Sakya

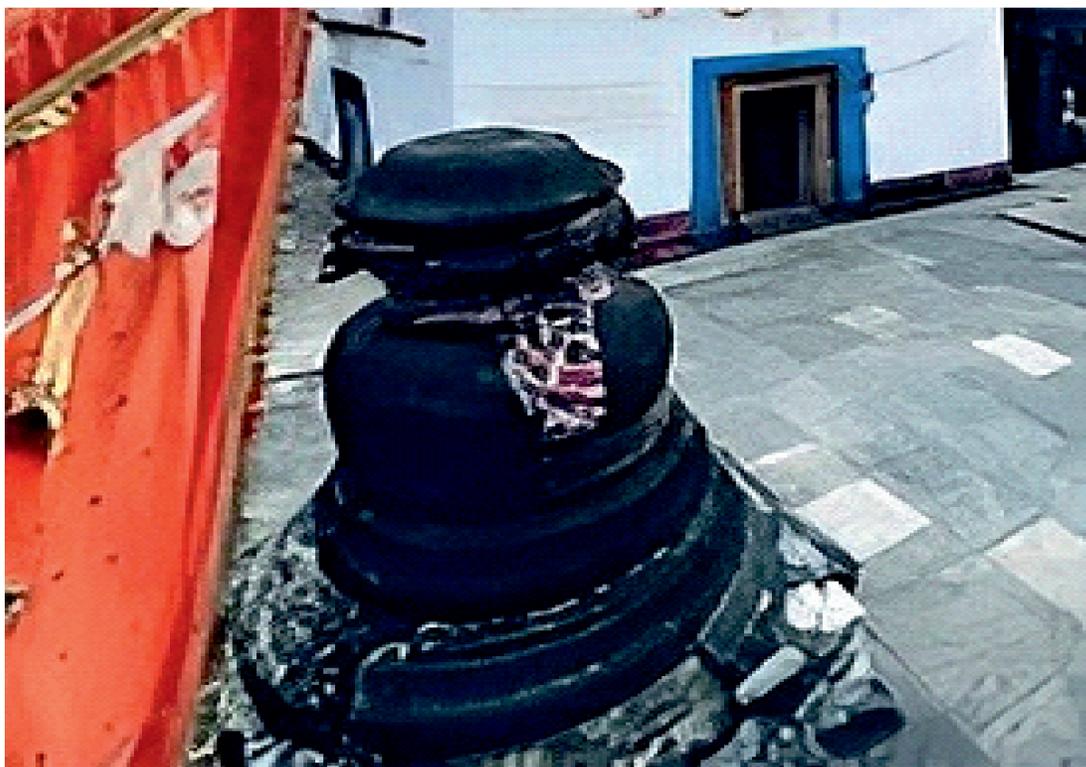


Figure 4: Small stone stupa at Nala, Guptkashi, Rudraprayag

Buddhism with a monastery and Buddha temple that attract both local devotees and international visitors. Other practicing groups include the Khampa, Jad (Tsongsa Rongpa), Kinnauri, and Theravada communities, whose presence reflects the living continuity of Buddhist traditions in the Himalayan region. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, several of these communities relocated from high-altitude border villages such as Jadung and Nelang to Bogori near Dunda (Uttarkashi district), where a monastery now serves as their religious centre. The villages of Jadung and Nelang in Uttarkashi district, inhabited by the Jad Buddhist community, were evacuated, and all of them settled in Bogori village, which is 70 km from Dunda Tehsil in Uttarkashi district. This village has a Monastery and is inhabited by Jad and Khampas, with a population of around 1500 people.

Khampa

The Khampa are of Tibetan origin, known for their warrior heritage and strong Buddhist identity (Channa, 2017). Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, many migrated to India, settling mainly in Himachal Pradesh and parts of Uttarakhand. Small Khampa monasteries in Pithoragarh and Uttarkashi remain active, and maintain the ritual traditions of Tibetan Buddhism (Bhakuni & Chaunan, 2023).

Jad (Tsongsa Rongpa)

The Jad community traditionally inhabited the Nilang and Jadong valleys along the Jad Ganga near the Tibet border (Sharma, 1990). After 1962, they resettled in Bagori and Dunda villages. They remain bilingual in Garhwali and Hindi, and though the Jad language is now endangered, it continues to be used in cultural and ritual contexts (Rastogi & Kakoti, 2021).

Kinauri and Theravada Buddhist communities of Uttarakhand.

The Kinnauri people of Himachal Pradesh share a mixed Hindu–Buddhist tradition (Rajesh, 2019). In Uttarakhand, some Bhotiya groups exhibit Kinnauri Buddhist heritage, maintaining monasteries influenced by Tibetan ritual forms (Bradley & Mohanty, 2023). Theravada practice, though limited, is represented in Dehradun through lay groups and visiting monks, reflecting wider South Asian connections of Himalayan Buddhism (Price-Wallace, 2023).

These contemporary Buddhist communities, though shaped by later Himalayan migrations, ensure that the spiritual heritage of Buddhism remains alive in Uttarakhand. Their monasteries and festivals provide cultural continuity that complements the region’s ancient archaeological sites. When included in heritage circuits and tourism planning, these living centres can offer visitors an experience that unites Uttarakhand’s past and present Buddhist traditions.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the UNESCO report *World’s Languages in Danger* (2022), approximately 2,500 languages worldwide are classified as endangered, with India accounting for the highest number—197 of them. The Jad language is one of these endangered languages (UNESCO, 2022). It is also known by several other names, including JaaR, Jadh, Rongpa, Rongma, Rongba, Dzad, and Bhotia.

Archaeological and historical findings show that Buddhism had a strong presence in Uttarakhand from the early historical period to the early medieval period. The region acted as an important connection between the Gangetic plains and the trans-Himalayan world. Several sites in Uttarakhand, such as Kashipur (Govisana), Mordhwaj, Nala, and Senapani, provide clear evidence of early Buddhist activity. The Kalsi Rock Edict of Emperor Aśoka, inscribed on a quartz boulder near Dehradun, also shows that the Mauryan emperor’s teachings had reached the western Himalayas as early as the 3rd century BCE.

At Kashipur, excavations uncovered a large brick monument with chaitya-arch decorations and a circumambulatory path. The structure followed the Gupta-period style of Buddhist architecture. Later, it was converted into a Hindu *pañcāyatana* temple, which shows that the sacred nature of the site continued even when its religious use changed. At Mordhwaj, archaeologists found terracotta Buddha figures and Kushan coins, suggesting that it served as both a settlement as well as a religious centre during the Kushan period. The stone stupa at Nala, near Guptkashi, marks another stage in the development of Buddhist architecture. Its design, which resembles Tibetan *chortens*, indicates cultural connections between Indian and Himalayan Buddhist traditions. The Senapani stupa, built of red sandstone and dated to the 2nd century BCE, provides rare early evidence of Buddhist activity in the Terai region.

Together, these sites show how Buddhism spread through the foothills and valleys of Uttarakhand and adapted to the mountain environment. Builders used local materials like stone and brick, and their designs were smaller and simpler than those in the plains. The mountains offered monks and followers peaceful surroundings for meditation and study, helping the Buddhist traditions to last even when they declined elsewhere in India.

Some Himalayan communities, such as the *Jad*, *Khampa*, and *Kinnauri*, still follow Buddhist traditions today. However, most of them migrated from Tibet and nearby regions in the last

few centuries. This means they may or may not be directly connected to the ancient Buddhist population of early Uttarakhand, though their traditions continue to keep Buddhism alive in the modern Himalayas. Nevertheless, these communities maintain a living connection with the broader Himalayan Buddhist tradition

Today, these ancient Buddhist sites have great potential for archaeological and cultural tourism. They can help visitors understand how Buddhism reached the Himalayan region and developed there alongside other faiths. Creating heritage trails, site museums, and information boards could help local communities while also preserving these sites. If planned carefully, tourism can support both education and conservation without damaging the monuments.

In conclusion, the Buddhist heritage of Uttarakhand shows how religion, environment, and human settlement were closely linked over many centuries. The stupas, monasteries, inscriptions, and surviving traditions together tell the story of how Buddhist ideas spread into the western Himalayas and adjusted to new cultural settings. Protecting and studying these sites will not only deepen our knowledge of ancient Uttarakhand but also strengthen connections between history, local identity, and sustainable development. However, future interdisciplinary studies integrating GIS mapping, conservation assessment, and community participation could further enhance our understanding and preservation of Uttarakhand's Buddhist heritage.

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