Sanchi Stupa through the Ages: Architectural, Technological and Epigraphical Evolution (from the Mauryan Period up to Contemporary Conservation)

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Abstract: The Sanchi Stupa, built by Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, initially served as a simple brick reliquary. Throughout the centuries, this was transformed into a massive stone structure that embodies the Indian aesthetic ideal and the timeless truths of spirituality in Buddhist philosophy and practice. It is based on the evolution of the Sanchi Stupa from the Mauryan era to the present, including the Sunga, Kushan, Satavahana, Gupta, and post-Gupta periods. It involves the architectural adjustment, which includes enlargement of domes, stone railings, and added *toranas* in the art, the substitution of the aniconic images in artwork with anthropomorphic images, and the alteration in technology, which includes masonry, stone carving, and restoration. The epigraphical data are also analysed to notice the trend in patronage, language, and the pattern of religiosity shift. When viewing the Sanchi Stupa in the light of architecture, technology, and epigraphy, it is a building, a place is not simply a locality that can be attributed with sacredness, but is also a depository of culture that traces its way back to the times of antiquity till our current age of heritage preservation.

Keywords: Sanchi Stupa, Buddhist Architecture, Toranas, Heritage Conservation, UNESCO World Heritage

Introduction

The Sanchi Stupa, in Madhya Pradesh, India, is central to the architectural and cultural story of South Asia. It is not an archaeological monument but is a historical witness to the evolution of Buddhist ideology, religious practices, and the artistic imagination of the ancient Indian context. Commissioned by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, the original stupa was a modest brick structure enshrining the relics of the Buddha (Marshall, 1940). Through centuries of transformation, the simple mound grew into a richly adorned stupa, layered with architectural refinements, vivid sculptural reliefs, and inscriptions, becoming both a sacred shrine and a living record of Buddhist devotion and cultural memory (Dehejia, 1992; Willis, 2000).

The significance of the Sanchi Stupa lies in its capacity to represent both continuity and transformation. While its role as a relic mound endured, successive dynasties- including the Sungas, Satavahanas, Kushans, and Guptas- reshaped its architectural, artistic, and symbolic dimensions. The introduction of stone balustrades, staircases, *toranas*, and intricately carved reliefs elevated Sanchi from a modest reliquary to a sophisticated ceremonial and artistic complex (Brown, 1942). The construction of the monument at each stage not only highlights advancements in architectural and technological techniques but also embodies the ideological aspirations of the rulers and communities that backed its development.

Research Objectives

This paper presents a comprehensive study of the Sanchi Stupa from three interconnected perspectives:

1. **Architectural Evolution**: tracing structural modifications from Mauryan origins through later dynastic patronage and colonial restorations.
2. **Technological Innovations**: examining advancements in construction techniques, stone masonry, and modern conservation practices.
3. **Epigraphical Contributions**: Analyzing donative inscriptions, royal edicts, and linguistic variations to understand social, political, and religious contexts.

Methodology

The study used a multidimensional framework that included archaeological reports, art-historical studies, and epigraphical studies. The main sources of study included Ashokan edicts and inscriptions from Sanchi, and the secondary scholarship included the results from the works of Marshall (1940), Dehejia (1992), and Willis (2009). The interdisciplinary quality of archival, aesthetic, and technological reports provides insight into the conditions of the stupa in totality. We offered modern conservation and UNESCO documentation for the aim of assessing present-day resource management for the monument.

Significance of the Study

The Sanchi Stupa epitomizes cultural memory beyond a mere historical relic; it is a living vernacular of cultural memory that archives over two millennia of change in architecture, technology, and religious practices. Locating the monument within historical and cultural contexts means situating it as a site of Buddhist art and an extension of India's civilization. Moreover, whereas the nature of heritage conservation processes increasingly emphasizes authenticity, sustainability, and digital documentation, as well as challenges present in both frames of heritage, Sanchi Stupa is useful for situating approaches by which to consider ways to negotiate new hierarchies of preservation and access.
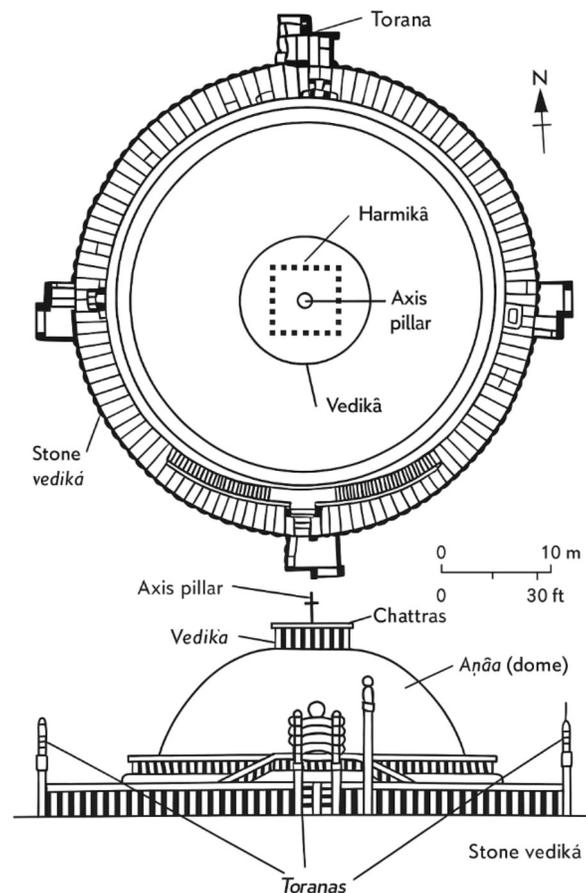
Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into five sections:

*   **Section I:** Mauryan Foundations (Ashokan Phase)

- **Section II:** Sunga and Satavahana Modifications (Artistic & Architectural Embellishments)
- **Section III:** Gupta and Post-Gupta Transformations (4th–7th Centuries CE)
- **Section IV:** Medieval Decline and Colonial Rediscovery (8th–19th Centuries CE)
- **Section V:** Sanchi in Modern Heritage and Global Recognition (20th–21st Centuries CE)

By analysing the monument through these layered perspectives, this study contributes not only to the field of Buddhist studies and Indian art history but also to the discourse on heritage conservation in South Asia.

Figure 1: Basic structure of the Great Stupa of Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India
(Courtesy: Lotus Arise)

Section I: Mauryan Foundations (Ashokan Phase)

The origins of Sanchi Stupa lie in the transformative epoch of the Mauryan Empire, particularly under Emperor Ashoka's reign (268–232 BCE). Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism after the Kalinga war marked a decisive moment in Indian history, not only in terms of religious patronage but also in the material culture that emerged from it. The Sanchi Stupa, initially commissioned in the 3rd century BCE, was among the earliest Buddhist stupas constructed under Ashoka's vast program of religious architecture (Marshall, 1940). It symbolized the Mauryan commitment to enshrining

the relics of the Buddha across the subcontinent, serving as both a devotional center and a political statement of imperial piety.

Ashoka's Role in Establishing Sanchi

Ashoka's propagation of Buddhism was intrinsically tied to architecture. According to Buddhist chronicles, he is credited with constructing 84,000 stupas to house the Buddha's relics (Strong, 1983). While this figure is symbolic, it underscores the scale of his patronage: Sanchi was among the most significant of these projects, strategically located near Vidisha, an important trade and cultural hub in Central India. Its placement ensures accessibility to monks, merchants, and lay devotees, thereby embedding it within both religious and commercial networks (Fergusson, 1873; Thapar, 1997).

Sanchi's choice also reflects the Mauryan policy of integrating Buddhism into regional landscapes. Ashoka's queen Devi hailed from Vidisha, further strengthening Sanchi's significance as a dynastic and cultural site (Dehejia, 1992). Thus, the stupa at Sanchi was not an isolated monument but a carefully chosen node within the larger network of Buddhist dissemination.

Original Form of the Stupa

The earliest phase of the Great Stupa was a modest hemispherical brick mound approximately half the diameter of its later form. This unadorned structure was capped with a simple wooden railing and parasol (*chhatra*) symbolizing spiritual sovereignty (Brown, 1942). Unlike the later elaborately carved gateways, the Mauryan stupa derived its aesthetics from geometric simplicity and symbolic resonance rather than ornamentation.

The form held a cosmological and religious significance. The hemispherical mound represented the cosmic dome, the *chhatra* symbolized the axis mundi, and the relics within sanctified the stupa as a living embodiment of the Buddha. As Coomaraswamy (1927) observed, Mauryan architecture often privileges symbolism over surface decoration. Sanchi Stupa exemplifies this principle.

Construction Techniques and Materials

The Mauryan phase of Sanchi demonstrates the empire's mastery of brick construction. Unlike the later phases, which were dominated by stones, the original structure was composed of burnt bricks with remarkable precision (Marshall, 1940). The stupa was encircled by a mud and brick platform that provided structural stability and a circumambulatory path (*Pradakshina-Patha*). The simplicity of the materials underscores the technological pragmatism of early Mauryan builders while also highlighting the durability of their methods, given that traces of the original core remain detectable even after later expansions (Mitra, 1971).

Ashokan Edicts and Epigraphical Evidence

Ashoka's association with Sanchi was further confirmed through the inscriptions. Pillar edicts discovered at Sanchi bear testimony to their role in propagating Buddhist *dharma* (Thapar, 1997). While the original Ashokan pillar at Sanchi is now broken, the inscriptions associated with it resonate with the broader themes of his edictal corpus: non-violence, moral governance, and religious tolerance (Falk, 2006). These epigraphs not only authenticated Ashoka's patronage but also integrated Sanchi within the Mauryan state's ideological framework.

Symbolism and Religious Significance

The early stupa functioned as a reliquary monument, enshrining the corporeal relics of the Buddha, or objects associated with him. This relic-cult formed the foundation of Buddhist devotional practices in the early centuries BCE. As Trainor (1997) explains, relics were not inert remains but living embodiments of the Buddha's spiritual presence, and the stupa was the architectural expression of this belief.

Legacy of the Mauryan Phase

Ashoka's Mauryan stupa at Sanchi embodied simplicity, sanctity, and imperial vision, forming the nucleus for later embellishments. Though enveloped by Sunga and Satavahana layers, its core remained central, symbolizing both continuity and transformation. As a prototype and precedent, it anchored centuries of artistic innovation and became a cornerstone of world heritage.

Section II: Sunga and Satavahana Modifications (Artistic & Architectural Embellishments)

The second major developmental phase of Sanchi Stupa unfolded during the Sunga (2nd–1st century BCE) and Satavahana (*circa* 1st century BCE–2nd century CE) dynasties. These centuries were crucial for transforming the monument from a modest Mauryan brick mound to an elaborately decorated architectural complex. This phase was characterized by architectural enlargement, artistic innovation, and the introduction of narrative reliefs, which collectively established Sanchi as the archetype of Buddhist monumental art in India.

Sunga Dynasty: Expansion and Architectural Innovation

Following the decline of the Mauryan Empire, the Sunga Dynasty (185–73 BCE) emerged in northern India. Despite their association with the Brahmanical revival, archaeological and artistic evidence indicate that Sungas patronized Buddhist monuments, particularly at Sanchi, Bharhut, and Bodhgaya (Mitra, 1971). Their contributions to Sanchi were primarily architectural and involved the expansion of Ashoka's modest brick stupa into a monumental stone structure.

Sungas rebuilt its original stupa by encasing the brick core within the stone, thereby doubling its diameter and height. The new structure was crowned with triple-tiered *chhatra* and encircled by a massive stone balustrade with four entrances, thus creating a more imposing and durable monument (Marshall, 1940). This expansion not only enhanced the scale of the stupa but also established a spatial framework for ritual circumambulation, emphasizing the Buddhist practice of pradakshina.

The Sunga period also witnessed the construction of the *vedika* (stone railing), which demarcated the sacred precinct. Modeled after wooden prototypes, the *vedika* displayed rail-posts, crossbars, and coping stones, demonstrating a transition from perishable materials to stone while retaining earlier stylistic forms (Fergusson, 1873). This adaptation revealed continuity with earlier traditions and innovations in stone carving.

Artistic Developments under the Sungas

Although Sunga's contribution to Sanchi was largely structural, it laid the groundwork for later artistic embellishments. The railing surfaces bore geometric motifs such as lotus medallions

and simple floral patterns, which are precursors to narrative art that would flourish under the Satavahanas. Thus, the Sunga phase represents a pivotal moment in the fusion of architectural functionality with symbolic ornamentation. At Bharhut, another Sunga site, one finds extensive narrative reliefs depicting Jataka tales, processions, and *yaksha* figures (Coomaraswamy, 1927).

Satavahana Dynasty: Narrative Reliefs and Sculptural Flourishing

The most transformative phase in Sanchi's artistic history occurred under the Satavahanas (*circa* 1st century BCE to 2nd century CE). As a dynasty that controlled much of the Deccan, the Satavahanas played a vital role in fostering Buddhism through extensive architectural patronage, which was evident in Amaravati, Karle, and Sanchi. Their contribution to Sanchi centered on the construction of elaborately carved *toranas* (gateways), which remain the most iconic elements of the site.

Each of the four *toranas*, situated at the cardinal points, was adorned with intricate narrative reliefs that depicted scenes from the Jatakas, episodes from the life of the Buddha, and symbolic representations of Buddhist ideals (Dehejia, 1992). These gateways transformed the otherwise austere stupa into a dynamic visual text accessible to both literate and non-literate devotees.

Narrative Art and Aniconism

A distinctive feature of Satavahana art in Sanchi is the use of aniconic representation. Instead of depicting the Buddha in human form, the artists symbolized his presence through motifs such as the Bodhi tree, footprints, the *dharmachakra* (wheel of law), or an empty throne (Brown, 1942). This practice aligns with the early Buddhist doctrinal preferences, emphasizing the transcendence of the Buddha beyond his corporeal representation.

Narrative relief about the *toranas* served both didactic and devotional purposes. By illustrating *Jataka* tales- stories of the Buddha's previous births- they conveyed moral lessons and emphasized the continuity of the Buddha's compassionate acts across their lifetime (Schopen, 1997). These visual narratives engaged devotees in religious storytelling and reinforced Buddhist teachings within a rich symbolic framework.

Artistic Style and Iconography

The sculptural style of the Satavahana *toranas* reveals a high degree of technical sophistication. The carvings exhibit lively naturalism, with figures rendered in dynamic poses and expressive gestures. The inclusion of elephants, horses, *yakshis*, and floral motifs reflects both religious symbolism and regional artistic idioms (Dehejia, 1992). The voluptuous *yakshi* figures adorning the gateways symbolize fertility and auspiciousness, blending local folk traditions with Buddhist iconographies.

The *toranas* also illustrate the integration of the cosmological and ritual themes. Scenes of worship at stupas, processions, and celestial beings highlight the interconnectedness of the earthly and divine realms, while simultaneously portraying the collective participation of monks, lay devotees, and royalty in the Buddhist faith (Falk, 2006).

Religious and Social Implications

The embellishments of the Sunga and Satavahana periods not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal of Sanchi but also reflected broader socio-religious transformations. The proliferation of donor

inscriptions on railings and gateways indicates the participation of a wide spectrum of societies in supporting Buddhist institutions (Marshall, 1940). These inscriptions mention contributions from guilds, merchants, and laywomen, underscoring the democratization of religious patronage.

Furthermore, narrative reliefs served as visual scriptures that were particularly significant in the age of limited literacy. The accessibility of these images allowed Sanchi to function as both a religious sanctuary and a pedagogical site, where devotees could engage with Buddhist doctrine through visual means (Trainor, 1997).

Continuity and Transition

The Sunga and Satavahana phases transformed Sanchi from a modest reliquary into a richly ornamented monument, blending symbolic austerity with narrative vitality. Their innovations established an enduring aesthetic template for Buddhist stupas, positioning Sanchi as a dynamic cultural canvas and a lasting legacy in South and Southeast Asian art.

Section III: Gupta and Post-Gupta Transformations (4th–7th Centuries CE)

The Gupta period (4th–6th century CE), often celebrated as the 'Golden Age of India', marked a new chapter in the development of Buddhist art and architecture at Sanchi. While Mauryan, Sunga, and Satavahana contributed to the structural and narrative foundations of the monument, Gupta introduced stylistic refinement, iconographic innovation, and devotional imagery that redefined the stupa's artistic identity. This phase witnessed the emergence of anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, the construction of subsidiary shrines, and the establishment of Sanchi as a center of pilgrimage and ritual devotion.

The Gupta Era: Context and Patronage

The Gupta dynasty, which ruled northern India, was characterized by political consolidation, economic prosperity, and cultural efflorescence (Thapar, 2002). Although predominantly associated with the revival of Brahmanical traditions, the Guptas extended patronage to Buddhism, particularly in regions like Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, where established monastic centers continued to flourish. Sanchi, a thriving Buddhist complex, benefited from this patronage, with significant architectural additions and sculptural innovations attributed to this period (Marshall, 1940).

Introduction of Buddha Images

One of the most striking developments in the Gupta phase in Sanchi was the introduction of Buddha images in an anthropomorphic form. This marked a departure from earlier aniconic traditions, where the Buddha was symbolized through footprints, stupas, or *dharmachakra* (Brown, 1942). Influenced by earlier Gandhara and Mathura schools, Gupta sculptors at Sanchi created serene and idealized images of the Buddha, characterized by graceful proportions, subtle modeling, and a meditative expression.

The seated Buddha in the *dharmachakra-pravartana mudra* (gesture of teaching) became a defining motif, symbolizing the Buddha's first sermon in Sarnath (Huntington, 1985). At Sanchi, such images were installed in shrine-like structures surrounding the Great Stupa, effectively

transforming the site from a purely symbolic reliquary into a devotional hub centered on the worship of the Buddha's image.

Shrines and Temple Architecture

The Gupta period also introduced free-standing temple architecture for the Sanchi Complex. The most notable example is Temple 17, one of the earliest surviving Hindu-Buddhist temples in India (Marshall, 1940).

The construction of these shrines signaled a shift in Buddhist rituals. While earlier worship revolved around the circumambulation of the stupa, Gupta temples facilitated *darshan*- direct viewing and veneration of the Buddha image (Dehejia, 1992).

Artistic Refinement and Iconography

At Sanchi, Gupta sculptors managed to introduce grace and mysticism to their work and created Buddhas with flowing lines and peaceful faces which made one ponder. These works shared sacred ideals rather than the mere fulfillment of aesthetic achievements. Such also incorporated the Bodhisattvas like Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya, indicating the presence and the expansion of the Buddhist thinking of Mahayana.

Inscriptions and Religious Patronage

Numerous inscriptions from the Gupta and post-Gupta phases at Sanchi attest to continued patronage by local rulers, merchants, and lay devotees (Marshall, 1940). These inscriptions, often carved on pillars and railings, provide valuable insights into donors' social compositions. Significantly, several donations were made by women, highlighting laywomen's active participation in sustaining Buddhist institutions (Schopen, 1997). The inscriptions also reflect an evolving devotional emphasis.

Post-Gupta Developments (7th Century CE)

Following the decline of Gupta's political power in the 6th century CE, regional dynasties such as the Vakatakas and later the Maitrakas continued to support Sanchi. This period saw the addition of further shrines, elaboration of temple structures, and continued production of Buddha images (Mitra, 1971). The stylistic features of these sculptures, though influenced by Gupta ideals, reveal greater rigidity and ornamentation, foreshadowing medieval trends in Indian art.

The 7th century also witnessed the growing presence of Hindu shrines within the Sanchi complex, indicating the gradual decline of Buddhism in central India and the assimilation of sacred spaces into broader religious landscapes (Thapar, 2002). Nevertheless, Sanchi retained its sanctity as a Buddhist pilgrimage site, visited and documented by foreign travellers such as the Chinese monk Xuanzang.

Religious and Cultural Significance

The Gupta and post-Gupta period at Sanchi represented a definitive turning point in religion and art. The shift from relic veneration to image worship, influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, re-identifies the Buddha from a historical figure to a figure of transcendence. The use of temple architecture

and the sophistication of sculpture brought together devotion and aesthetics. The Gupta and post-Gupta periods laid the foundations for what will become independent and distinctive Buddhist and Hindu traditions in Southeast Asia from the 12th Century onwards.

Concluding Reflections

The Gupta and post-Gupta periods were the height of Sanchi's art, combining simple symbols with rich devotion. Sanchi grew into a mature religious complex through peaceful Buddha statues, fine sculpture, and new temple architecture. Even though Buddhism was losing followers in central India, the Gupta period made sure that it would always be a part of South Asia's cultural history.

Section IV: Medieval Decline and Colonial Rediscovery (8th–19th Centuries CE)

After the Gupta era, Sanchi declined into obscurity amid Buddhism's retreat in central India and shifting religious-political contexts. Neglect persisted until its 19th-century colonial rediscovery, reflecting broader transformations in India's sacred geography and cultural priorities.

Decline of Buddhism and Changing Religious Landscapes

By the 7th century CE, Buddhism in central India had begun to lose its institutional strength. Although Sanchi retained some vitality during the post-Gupta period, foreign accounts such as those of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (7th century CE) indicate that while the site remained at the centre of worship, it was no longer as prominent as other Buddhist establishments, such as Nalanda or Bodh Gaya (Beal, 1884).

The decline was precipitated by multiple factors: the resurgence of Brahmanical Hinduism, the increasing appeal of devotional movements centred on Vishnu and Shiva, and the assimilation of Buddhist practices into Hindu traditions (Thapar, 2002). The gradual withdrawal of royal patronage compounded this decline, as dynasties such as the Pratiharas and Paramaras directed their resources toward Hindu temple building, rather than Buddhist monasteries.

The Medieval Phase: Neglect and Local Memory

Between the 9th and 12th centuries CE, Buddhism declined in Central India as monasteries lost patronage and pilgrimages moved eastward (Mitra, 1971). Sanchi's monuments deteriorated through neglect and overgrowth, yet the site remained significant. Local communities adapted its structures, and Buddhist icons persisted through syncretic practices and Hindu reinterpretations (Schopen, 1997).

Islamic Period and Further Obscurity

With the advent of Islamic rule in central India, particularly after the 13th century CE, Buddhist monuments such as Sanchi experienced further marginalization. While Islamic dynasties such as the Delhi Sultanate and the Malwa Sultanate did not directly target Sanchi for destruction, unlike some other temple sites, the site suffered from neglect, lack of patronage, and the steady encroachment of nature (Eraly, 2011).

By the medieval period, Buddhism virtually disappeared from most of the Indian heartland, Sanchi became a silent ruin, and its historical and religious significance was largely forgotten.

Colonial Rediscovery in the 19th Century

The obscurity of Sanchi ended with its rediscovery in 1818 by General Henry Taylor, a British officer (Marshall, 1940). British antiquarians and surveyors, motivated by the dual imperatives of colonial knowledge production and archaeological curiosity, soon recognized the significance of the site.

The earliest descriptions, although often fragmentary, highlighted monumental stupas, gateways, and sculptures. Antiquarians, such as James Fergusson and Alexander Cunningham undertook surveys that placed Sanchi within the emerging discipline of Indian archaeology (Cunningham, 1854). Cunningham conducted extensive documentation of the site and mapped its stupas, railings, and inscriptions.

Early Excavations and Challenges

In the 19th century, attempts to excavate and clear Sanchi's stupas were largely unsystematic, reflecting the early stage of archaeology. Treasure hunters damaged monuments, removing relic caskets and artifacts without records, dispersing them across museums in India and abroad (Marshall, 1940). Despite such losses, Sanchi's rediscovery proved vital. Its inscriptions, sculptures, and architecture provided concrete proof of Buddhism's lasting presence, countering colonial claims of its disappearance. Sanchi instead demonstrated the resilience, richness, and continuity of Buddhist traditions in India's cultural landscape.

Restoration and Preservation Efforts

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a notable transition away from treasure-hunting approaches in conservation. Under the leadership of John Marshall, Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), systematic restoration was implemented at Sanchi in the early twentieth century (Marshall, 1940). Marshall emphasized conserving the integrity of the monuments while stabilizing them for future generations. His work remains fundamental to Sanchi's modern understanding and demonstration.

These restoration efforts have transformed Sanchi from a neglected ruin to a curated archaeological site. The Great Stupa was cleared of encroachment, railings and gateways were reassembled, and the inscriptions were catalogued. Thus, the site has entered both scholarly and public consciousness as one of the most significant Buddhist monuments in India.

Colonial Interpretations and Knowledge Production

The colonial rediscovery of Sanchi was not merely an archaeological event but also part of the broader politics of knowledge under British rule. The documentation and interpretation of the site reflected Orientalist perspectives that sought to frame Indian history within categories defined by Western scholars (Guha, 1997). While this facilitated the preservation of Sanchi, it also meant that its history was often narrated in ways that minimized the role of local memory and indigenous knowledge.

Concluding Reflections

Sanchi's medieval decline and colonial rediscovery reflect the shifting fortunes of sacred monuments. Neglect preserved its structures, while archaeology revived its global relevance.

Today, Sanchi endures as a testament to India's Buddhist heritage and as a reminder of how history, memory, and heritage are continuously reconstructed.

Section V: Sanchi in Modern Heritage and Global Recognition (20th–21st Centuries CE)

The epic of Sanchi was not ended with its colonial rediscovery in the 19th century. In its place, the 20th and 21st centuries were marked by the location developing into a well-known monument that has undergone the complete metamorphosis of a deconstructed structure to become one of the major monuments of Buddhist art and architecture. Structural conservation was made and some preservation activities were continued on the site, such as being declared as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and grew up to become an international symbol of the culture of India and a star of world Buddhism.

Early 20th-Century Conservation and Nationalist Appropriations

In the early 20th century, Sanchi was changed into a heritage site. The irresponsible clearances driven by the 19th century were followed by the cautious conservation movement led by Sir John Marshall of the ASI in 1912-1919 CE. Instead of constructing anew, he repaired the buildings, fused the Great Stupa, and repaired railings and gateways to retain their originality. Meanwhile, Sanchi found himself in nationalistic thinking. It was a source of pride to Indian academics and leaders as it was testimony to the rich Indian cultural background and the Buddhist tradition that stood against the claims of historical amnesia by colonialists. Sanchi was to them a monument of the pluralism of the Indian people and the antique cosmopolitanism.

Post-Independence India and the Revival of Buddhist Heritage

After 1947, Sanchi gained renewed prominence through the 'Sanchi Declaration' in 1952 CE (Mukherjee, 1966) and the re-enshrinement of Sariputta and Moggallana's relics at Chetiyagiri Vihara at Sanchi, revitalizing pilgrimage and reinforcing India's role as custodian of Buddhist heritage and regional diplomacy.

UNESCO World Heritage Status

Sanchi's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1989 CE affirmed its outstanding universal value. Recognized for antiquity, architectural integrity, and testimony to Buddhist diffusion, Sanchi gained worldwide prominence, linking heritage preservation with tourism and pilgrimage circuits while showcasing early Buddhist art and architecture (UNESCO, 1989).

Heritage Management and Challenges in the 21st Century

The ASI still maintains Sanchi, and visitor facilities are being explained to change its heritage through museums. Nonetheless, the increase in the number of tourists, pilgrims, and climate change is a serious threat. The conservation of Sanchi needs to have a sustainable management approach that will uphold cultural values and environmental facts. The participation of the local community is emphasized by scholars as it makes long-term preservation guaranteed. The protection of heritage is easier when some communities enjoy the benefits of tourism and they consider themselves

stakeholders (Singh 2010). The recent development of eco-tourism and community involvement precedents are significant, even disparate measures in that regard.

Sanchi in Global Buddhist Networks

Sanchi has become a vibrant centre of inter-religious connection of Buddhists around the world in recent decades. Pilgrims each year relate the location to broader transnational networks of religion and cultural transfer, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Japan, and the rest of the countries oriented to Buddhism. The frequency of Buddhist conclaves in different parts of the world also does not fail to underline its role as a common hub of the tradition at Sanchi. The monument has been a part and parcel of the cultural diplomacy to India, mainly through projects such as the Buddhist Circuit, which is an attempt toward the integration of the major sites into a functional pilgrimage and tourism circuit. These measures strengthen India as a custodian of Buddhist inheritance in the Asian region and hence international relations soft power (Mishra, 2015).

Sanchi in Contemporary Imagination

Sanchi's presence in curricula, scholarship, and design illustrates how heritage transcends archaeology to shape identity and memory. Revered as sacred by Buddhists, celebrated as a figure of cultural pride in India, and recognized globally for its universal value, Sanchi remains a dynamic symbol of artistic and spiritual legacy.

Concluding Reflections

The Sanchi trail, since being rediscovered on a colonial basis, has been placed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites actually helps bring into highlight the constant re-interpretation of ancient sites. Sanchi is straddling on the crossroads between archaeology, religion, and international relations as it is an important local monument as well as a place of connexion in the world. It still serves as a symbol of strength, wonderful aesthetic skills, and the enduring spiritual impact of the Buddha.

Table 1: Chronological Development of Sanchi Stupa

Sl	Period/ Dynasty	Approx. Date	Key Architectural Features	Artistic & Aesthetic Contributions
1	Mauryan (Ashoka)	3rd century BCE	Original brick hemispherical stupa; simple railing	Monumental simplicity; emphasis on symbolic geometry
2	Sunga	2nd-1st century BCE	Enlargement with stone casing; stone railings, stairs	Yaksha–Yakshi figures, floral motifs, early sculptural work
3	Satavahana/ Kanva	1st century BCE-1st century CE	Addition of elaborately carved toranas (gateways)	Narrative reliefs of Jataka tales; aniconic depictions of Buddha
4	Kushan	2nd-3rd century CE	Minor structural repairs; additions to railings	Transition to anthropomorphic Buddha imagery
5	Gupta	4th-5th century CE	Refinement of sculptures; structural conservation	Classical elegance, spiritual grace, refined Buddha images
6	Post-Gupta/ Medieval	6th-12th century CE	Decline in activity; minor regional interventions	Reduced artistic production; continuity of sacred use

Note: This table summarizes the chronological development of Sanchi Stupa's architecture and art from its Mauryan foundation through modern conservation.

Table 2: Technological Practices and Innovations in the Development of Sanchi Stupa

Sl	Phase/ Period	Construction Materials & Techniques	Key Technological Innovations	Conservation/Restoration Approaches
1	Mauryan (Ashoka)	Brick masonry; lime plaster	Early large-scale stone architecture; symbolic geometry	Initial construction as a monumental brick stupa
2	Sunga	Stone casing; railings and stairways	Replacement of wood with stone; improved stone carving	Structural reinforcement and aesthetic enhancement
3	Satavahana/ Kanva	Sandstone toranas with intricate reliefs	Advanced narrative carving; integration of symbolic motifs	Maintenance of stupa; addition of narrative panels
4	Kushan	Sandstone; railings and minor reinforcements	Transition toward anthropomorphic Buddha representation	Limited conservation; symbolic-to-anthropomorphic shift
5	Gupta	Fine sandstone; high-relief sculpture	Refinement in drapery, human form, and spiritual imagery	Artistic conservation; stylistic harmonization
6	Post-Gupta/ Medieval	Regional stone additions; minor structural upkeep	Use of local stone; continuity of worship practices	Minimal conservation; ritual continuity
7	Colonial/ Modern	Scientific archaeology, cement and restoration stone	Archaeological conservation under John Marshall; systematic study	Structural restoration, museumization, and digital documentation

Note: This table highlights construction materials, technological innovations, and conservation practices across Sanchi Stupa's long history.

Table 3: Artistic and Aesthetic Phases of the Sanchi Stupa

Sl	Period/Phase	Artistic Characteristics	Aesthetic Significance
1	Mauryan (3rd century BCE)	Plain hemispherical brick dome; minimal ornamentation	Monumental simplicity; symbolic geometry
2	Sunga (2nd–1st century BCE)	Stone railings, stairways; yakshas, yakshis, floral motifs	Fusion of folk art with early Buddhist symbolism
3	Satavahana/Kanva	Elaborate toranas with Jataka tales in narrative reliefs	Visual storytelling; mastery of symbolic aniconism
4	Kushan (1st–3rd century CE)	Buddha symbolized and gradually anthropomorphized	Transition from symbols to human form
5	Gupta (4th–5th century CE)	Refined anthropomorphic Buddha; graceful drapery, serenity	Classical elegance; spiritual idealization of form
6	Post-Gupta/Medieval	Decline in new art; continuity of worship	Ritual preservation with limited artistic production
7	Colonial/Modern	Archaeological restoration; documentation of art	Heritage preservation and scholarly reinterpretation

Note: This table outlines the transformation of artistic expression at Sanchi Stupa, moving from early symbolic abstraction to refined Gupta classicism.

Conclusion

The Sanchi Stupa serves as one of the examples of the intersection of architecture, technology, and epigraphy in the construction of a monument, which is sacred, cultural, and political at the same time. Since its establishment by Ashoka in the 3nd century BCE known as Sanchi and its listing

as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1989 CE, Sanchi has been the site of continuity and change that is running through the history of South Asian civilization.

Architecturally, it can be seen as the advancement of the Buddhist practise and design. The brick mound created by Ashoka served as a base in the veneration of relics, and the dome was broadened by the Sungas, and also railings were added and boundary gates. The Satavahanas combined *toranas* making the place that was to be a canvas of the narrative Jataka reliefs and the Guptas perfected the monument by adding shrines and anthropomorphic images of the Buddha developing to the contemporary temple architecture. These strata trace its transition to symbolic traditions, as the conveyance of devotional traditions, as well as establish Sanchi as an evolving religious and an artistic hub.

There was technological advancement facilitating this also, beginning with primitive brick work to sophisticated stone building and refining Gupta art. Colonial archaeology went a further step in stabilising the monument so that it is preserved using scientific ways. The epigraphy used fills this image currency of a variety of clients: royal, mercantile, and lay- and with a change in ideology between Ashokan dhamma and Mahayana devotionalism.

Sanchi has become a national symbol and global heritage monument in the modern times. Heritage diplomacy has given it a new meaning, as has its admission in the Buddhist Circuit and matching its conservation to the international standards. As the basis of Sustainable Development and Tourism (SDT)'s work is guided by UNESCO and ICOMOS, Sanchi can be regarded as the model of how the collaboration in conservation practices, digital heritage, and transnational pilgrimage networks helps to keep the sacred sites in the memory of the populations as the ornaments of legacy.

Acknowledgments

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