



Journey of Sanchi Stupa to Europe

For Prelims: [East Gate of Sanchi Stupa](#), [Sanchi Stupa](#), [Toranas](#), [Buddha](#), Satavahana Dynasty, [Jataka Tales](#), [Shalabhanjika](#), [Manushi Buddhas](#), [Enlightenment](#), [Shunga Period](#), [Archaeological Survey of India \(ASI\)](#)

For Mains: Significance and preservation of India's heritage sites, Buddhism

Source: [IE](#)

Why in News?

Recently, India's External Affairs Minister visited the **replica** of the [East Gate of Sanchi Stupa](#) standing in front of **Humboldt Forum museum** in Berlin, Germany.

- It is a **1:1 reproduction** of the original structure standing at almost **10 metres high and 6 metres wide**, and weighing roughly 150 tonnes.

Journey of East Gate of Sanchi Stupa to Europe

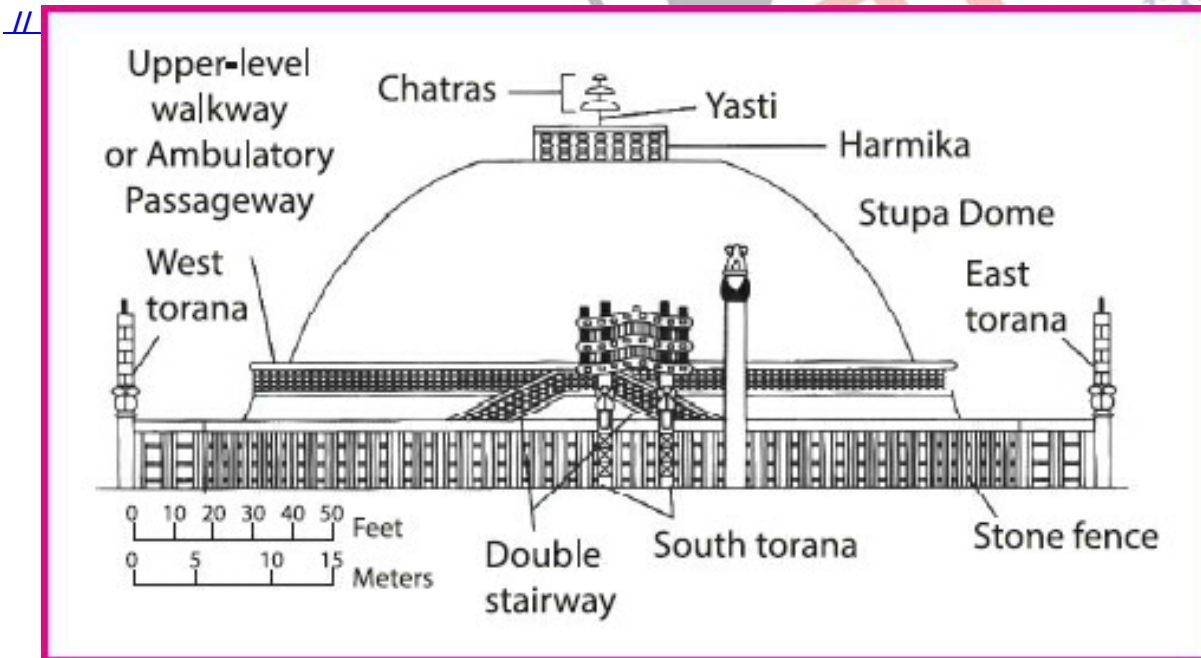
- The **East Gate of Sanchi Stupa** was cast in plaster by **Lieutenant Henry Hardy Cole** for the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) in the **late 1860s**.
- **Multiple copies of this cast were later made**, and displayed across Europe.
 - A plaster cast of the original gate was on **display** in the entrance hall of the **Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin** from **1886**.
 - A cast of this preserved copy was made of **artificial stone in 1970**.
- **The latest Berlin replica too traces its origin to this original cast.**
 - It was made with the help of [3D scanning](#), modern robots, skilled German and Indian sculptors, and enlarged photos of the **original torana** for aid.

What are Key Facts about the Sanchi Stupa?

- **Construction of Sanchi Stupa:** It was built by **Ashoka** in the **third century BC**.
 - Its construction was overseen by **Ashoka's wife Devi**, who hailed from the nearby trading town of **Vidisha**.
 - The development of the Sanchi complex was supported by patronage from Vidisha's **mercantile community**.
- **Expansion:** During the **2nd century BC (Shunga period)**, the stupa was enlarged with sandstone slabs, a **circumambulatory walkway**, and a **harmika** with a **chattra (umbrella)**.
 - From the **1st century BC to the 2nd century AD**, four stone gateways or **toranas were added**, adorned with detailed carvings depicting Buddhist iconography and stories.
- **Rediscovery of Sanchi Stupa:** It was in abject ruins when it was **discovered** by British

officer **Henry Taylor in 1818.**

- **Alexander Cunningham** led the **first formal survey** and excavations at Sanchi in **1851.**
- **Preservation Efforts:** In **1853, Sikander Begum of Bhopal** offered to send Sanchi gateways to **Queen Victoria**, but the removal plans were delayed due to the **1857 revolt** and transportation issues.
 - In 1868, the Begum renewed the offer, but the colonial authorities declined it, opting for **in-situ preservation**. A **plaster cast** of the eastern gateway was created instead.
 - The site was restored to its present condition by **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** director-general **John Marshall in the 1910s** with funding from the begums of nearby Bhopal.
 - Marshall's efforts led to the creation of a **museum in 1919** at the site to preserve artefacts and manage conservation.
- **Architecture of Sanchi Stupa:**
 - **Anda:** It is a **hemispherical mound** built on earth.
 - **Harmika: Square railing** on top of the mound. It is believed to be the living place of god.
 - **Chattra:** It is the **umbrella** built on the top of the dome.
 - **Yashti:** It is the **central pillar** supports a triple umbrella structure called chattra.
 - **Railing:** It **surrounds the stupa**, demarcating the sacred area and providing a physical boundary between the holy space and the external environment.
 - **Pradakshinapatha (Circumambulatory Path):** It is a **walkway around the stupa** that allows devotees to walk in a clockwise direction as a form of worship.
 - **Torana:** Torana is a monumental **gateway or entrance** structure in Buddhist stupa architecture.
 - **Medhi:** It refers to the **base** which forms a platform on which the main structure of the stupa stands.




- **UNESCO Recognition:** Sanchi Stupa was inscribed as a **UNESCO World Heritage site** in 1989.

What are the Key Features of the Gateways of Sanchi Stupa?

- **Construction:** The **four gateways (toranas)**, oriented to the four cardinal directions, were constructed in the **first century BCE.**
 - Gateways were built over a period of a few decades during the **Satavahana dynasty's rule.**
- **Structure:** These gateways are made of **two square pillars** which support a superstructure comprising **three curved architraves (or beams)** with spirally-rolled ends.

- **Engravings:** The pillars and the architraves are adorned with beautiful **relief and sculptures** depicting scenes from the **Buddha's life**, stories from the **Jataka tales**, and other Buddhist iconography.
 - It includes the **shalabhanjika** (a fertility emblem represented by a **yakshi** grasping the branch of a tree), elephants, winged lions, and peacocks.
 - However, the gates **do not represent the Buddha** in his **human form**.
- **Philosophical Significance:** The three curved **architraves (or beams)** have the following philosophical significance.
 - **Upper Architrave:** It represents the **seven Manushi Buddhas** (previous Buddhas incarnation).
 - **Middle Architrave:** It depicts the scene of the **Great Departure**, when prince **Siddhartha leaves Kapilavastu** to live as an ascetic in search of **enlightenment**.
 - **Lower Architrave:** It depicts **Emperor Ashoka** visiting the **Bodhi tree** under which the **Buddha attained enlightenment**.



GAUTAM BUDDHA


Believed to be 9th of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu (Dashavatar)

BIRTH

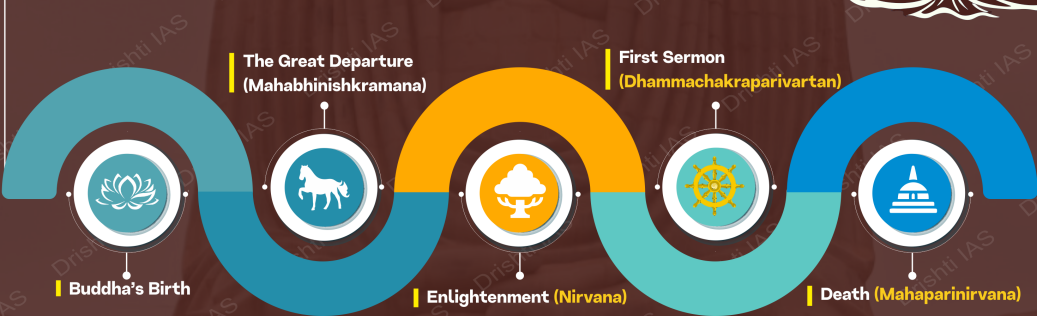
- ▶ Born as Siddhartha (563 BC)
- ▶ Birthplace - **Lumbini** (Nepal) near **Kapilavastu**

PARENTS

- ▶ Father - elected ruler of Kapilavastu; headed **Shakya republican clan**
- ▶ Mother - princess from **Koshalan dynasty**



IMPORTANT EVENTS



| Buddha's Birth
| The Great Departure (Mahabhinishkramana)
| Enlightenment (Nirvana)
| First Sermon (Dhammachakraparivartan)
| Death (Mahaparinirvana)

*Buddha referred to himself as **Tathagata** (one who has thus come/gone) and has been addressed as **Bhagavat** (in Buddhist texts)*

CONTEMPORARIES

- ▶ Vardhaman Mahavira
- ▶ Bimbisara
- ▶ Ajatshatru

OTHER IMPORTANT PLACES ASSOCIATED WITH BUDDHA

- ▶ **Bodh Gaya** (Enlightenment) (named Buddha after attaining enlightenment)
- ▶ **Sarnath** (first sermon)
- ▶ **Vaishali** (Last sermon)
- ▶ **Kushinagara** (death place (483 BC))

Conclusion

- The Sanchi Stupa stands as a monumental testament to ancient Buddhist architecture and devotion. As a **UNESCO World Heritage site**, the stupa continues to inspire reverence and scholarly interest, bridging the past with contemporary global appreciation. Recent examples, such as Germany's construction of a replica of the East Gate of Sanchi Stupa, underscore the universal

value of preserving such monuments.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. Discuss the architectural evolution and historical significance of the Sanchi Stupa

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Consider the following historical places: (2013)

1. Ajanta Caves
2. Lepakshi Temple
3. Sanchi Stupa

Which of the above places is/are also known for mural paintings?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 1, 2 and 3
- (d) None

Ans: (b)

Q. Some Buddhist rock-cut caves are called Chaityas, while the others are called Viharas. What is the difference between the two? (2013)

- (a) Vihara is a place of worship, while Chaitya is the dwelling place of the monks
- (b) Chaitya is a place of worship, while Vihara is the dwelling place of the monks
- (c) Chaitya is the stupa at the far end of the cave, while Vihara is the hall axial to it
- (d) There is no material difference between the two

Ans: (b)

Mains

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

Q. Early Buddhist Stupa-art, while depicting folk motifs and narratives successfully expounds Buddhist ideals. Elucidate (2016)