



## Mains Practice Question

**Q.** "The stupa architecture of ancient India reflects not just religious beliefs but also the political and social dynamics of its time." Discuss with special reference to the stupas of Sanchi. **(150 words)**

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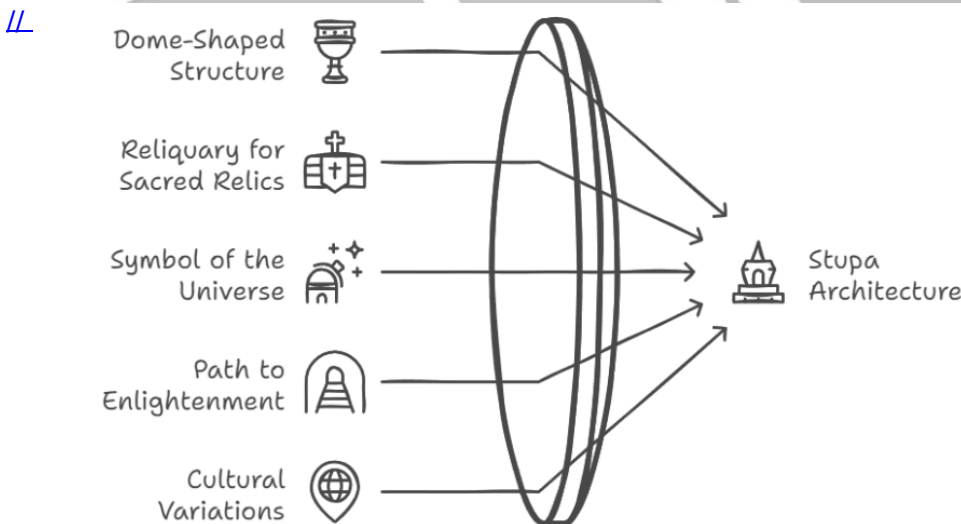
### Approach

- Introduce the answer by mentioning the significance of Stupa Architecture
- Give its role in understanding Religious, Political, and Social Dynamics of Ancient India
- Conclude suitably.

### Introduction

The **stupa architecture of ancient India** serves as a profound testament to the **religious, political, and social landscape of its time**. These monumental structures, particularly exemplified by the **stupas of Sanchi**, offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between **Buddhist theology, royal patronage, and societal norms**.

### Body



### Stupas- Window into Ancient India's Religious, Political, and Social Dynamics:

- **Religious Significance:** Its development reflects the evolution of Buddhist practices and beliefs:
  - **Aniconic Representation:** The earliest art at Sanchi, dating to the **Mauryan period**, represents Buddha through symbols rather than human form.
    - This reflects early Buddhist reluctance to **depict the Buddha figuratively**.

- **Jataka Tales:** The **gateways (toranas)** are adorned with scenes from **Buddha's life and Jataka tales**, illustrating the growing importance of narrative traditions in Buddhism.
- **Relics:** Stupa 3 at Sanchi contained relics of **Sariputra and Maudgalyayana**, chief disciples of Buddha.
  - This highlights the importance of relic worship in early Buddhism.
- **Political Dynamics:** The development of Sanchi over centuries reflects changing political landscapes:
  - **Mauryan Patronage:** Emperor Ashoka's establishment of the site in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE demonstrates the Mauryan empire's role in spreading Buddhism.
    - The **Ashoka pillar at Sanchi** symbolizes imperial power aligned with Buddhist values.
  - **Sunga Expansion:** The enlargement of Stupa 1 during the Sunga dynasty (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) shows continued royal patronage despite the Sungas' **reputation for favoring Brahmanism**.
  - **Satavahana Contributions:** The **ornate gateways added during the Satavahana period (1<sup>st</sup> century CE)** reflect the expanding wealth and artistic sophistication of this dynasty.
- **Social Dynamics:** The art and architecture at Sanchi provide insights into ancient Indian society:
  - Inscriptions at Sanchi reveal donations from various social groups, including **monks, nuns, laypeople, and guilds**. This reflects the **broad social base of Buddhism** and the participatory nature of stupa construction.
  - The reliefs on the gateways **depict scenes of city life**, showing the **growing urbanization of ancient India** and Buddhism's appeal to urban populations.
  - The presence of **non-local artistic influences (such as Achaemenid-inspired lion capitals)** suggests Sanchi's connection to wider trade networks.

## Conclusion

The **stupa architecture of ancient India**, particularly exemplified by the Sanchi complex, stands as a **multifaceted cultural artifact**. It not only embodies core Buddhist principles but also **reflects the political aspirations of rulers, the social dynamics of communities**, and the artistic and technological achievements of the time.