



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

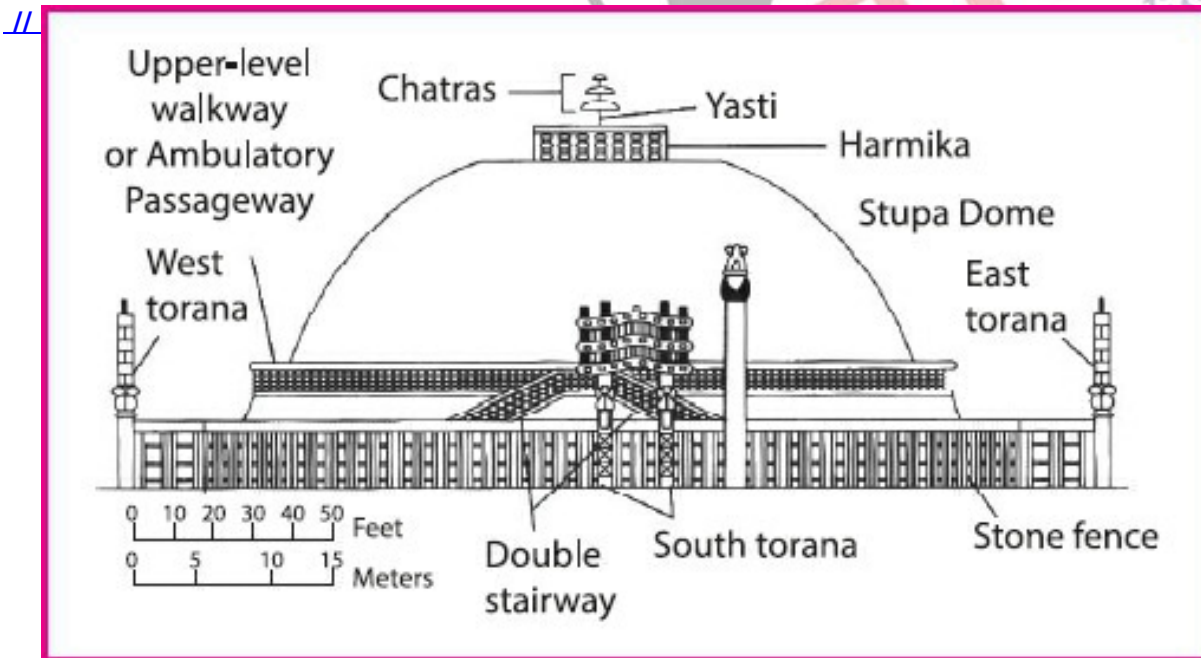
- The **East Gate of Sanchi Stupa** was cast in plaster by **Lieutenant Henry Hardy Cole** for the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) in the **late 1860s**.
- **Multiple copies of this cast were later made**, and displayed across Europe.
 - A plaster cast of the original gate was on **display** in the entrance 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

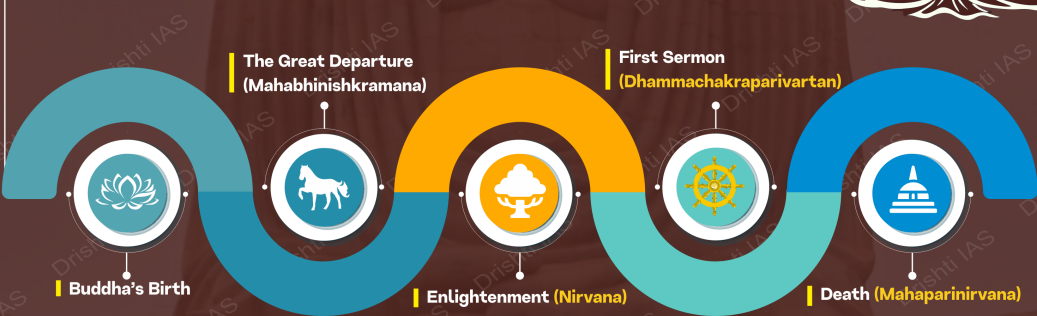
- ▶ Born as Siddhartha (563 BC)
- ▶ Birthplace - **Lumbini** (Nepal) near **Kapilavastu**

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 (Dharmachakraparivartan)
| 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)