



BUDDHIST SACRED SPACE IN HINDU HOLY CITY VARANASI

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Varanasi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, is widely recognised as a main Hindu sacred landscape; however, it also occupies a significant place in Buddhist sacred geography. Located 10 km north from the city, Sarnath represents a foundational sacred space where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta or Dharmacakra Pravartana Sūtra, marking the beginning of the Buddhist Sangha. This spatial proximity between Varanasi and Sarnath creates a complex sacred network in which religious meanings are layered over time and through practice. A combination of archaeological remains, monastic establishments, stupas, and contemporary pilgrimage infrastructures characterises the Buddhist sacred space in the Varanasi region. These elements reflect both the historical evolution of Buddhism and its revival in the modern period. The landscape embodies a palimpsest of religious traditions, where Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain spatial practices intersect, contributing to a pluralistic sacred geography. Pilgrimage, ritual performances, and international tourism further reinforce the global significance of this sacred zone. From a cultural-geographical perspective, the Buddhist sacred space around Varanasi illustrates how religious landscapes are continuously produced and reproduced through memory, ritual, and heritage conservation. It also highlights the role of state and international agencies in shaping sacred sites as heritage destinations. Thus, the Varanasi–Sarnath region stands as a dynamic example of living heritage, where ancient spiritual traditions coexist with contemporary socio-cultural transformations.

Keywords: *Buddhist sacred space; Varanasi; Sarnath; pilgrimage; cultural landscape*

Introduction

India is widely characterised by a civilisational ethos of “unity in diversity,” wherein multiple religions, languages, and cultural traditions coexist within a shared socio-spatial framework. Religion constitutes a central component of Indian society, shaping everyday practices, value systems, and spatial organisation across historical periods. According to the Census of India (2011), while Hinduism is practised by nearly 79% of the population, other major religions - including Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism – make up the country’s pluralistic religious fabric. Notably, India is the birthplace of three major religious traditions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism – each of which has generated distinct yet overlapping sacred geographies (Eck, 1981; Singh, 2009).

Within this broader context, Varanasi occupies a pre-eminent position as a prime sacred city that encapsulates India’s cultural and religious plurality. As noted by Diana L. Eck (1981), Varanasi represents a “microcosm of India,” where diverse religious traditions, ritual practices, and cultural expressions are spatially and symbolically integrated. The city’s sacred landscape is not merely a reflection of Hindu religious practices but also a site of interaction among multiple faiths, including Buddhism and Jainism, thereby reinforcing its status as a multi-religious urban centre (Singh, 2009).

The cultural geography of Varanasi is further distinguished by its long history of migration and settlement. People from different regions of India—speaking varied languages and adhering to distinct customs – have historically congregated in the city. This process has produced a unique socio-cultural synthesis, wherein communities retain elements of their regional identities while simultaneously contributing to a shared urban cultural milieu. Rana P. B. Singh (2009) conceptualises this phenomenon as a “cultural mosaic,” in which diversity is not homogenised but rather articulated through coexistence and interaction.

Consequently, Varanasi emerges as a living repository of India’s intangible and tangible heritage, encompassing multi-ethnic traditions, ancient systems of knowledge, ritual practices, and a rich assemblage of sacred architecture and spaces. The city thus exemplifies how religious belief, cultural continuity, and spatial practice intersect to produce a dynamic and enduring sacred landscape.

Objectives of the Study

- I) To examine the historical evolution of Buddhist sacred spaces in the Varanasi region, with particular reference to Sarnath.
- II) To analyze the spatial organization and cultural significance of Buddhist sites within the broader multi-religious sacred landscape of Varanasi.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine the evolution, spatiality, and contemporary relevance of Buddhist sacred spaces in the Varanasi region, with special reference to Sarnath. The methodological framework integrates historical, spatial, and ethnographic approaches to capture the multi-layered character of sacred landscapes.

The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including historical texts, travel accounts, archaeological reports, and contemporary academic literature on cultural geography and religious studies. These sources are used to trace the historical evolution of Buddhist sacred spaces and to contextualise their transformation within broader socio-cultural and political processes.

Field-based observations were conducted at selected sites in Varanasi and Sarnath, including major stupas, monasteries, temples, and key pilgrimage nodes associated with Gautama Buddha.

The study employs basic geospatial techniques, including location mapping and spatial correlation of sacred sites, to examine the distribution and connectivity of Buddhist places within the regional sacred network. This approach helps to interpret the Varanasi–Sarnath complex as an integrated cultural landscape rather than isolated religious sites.

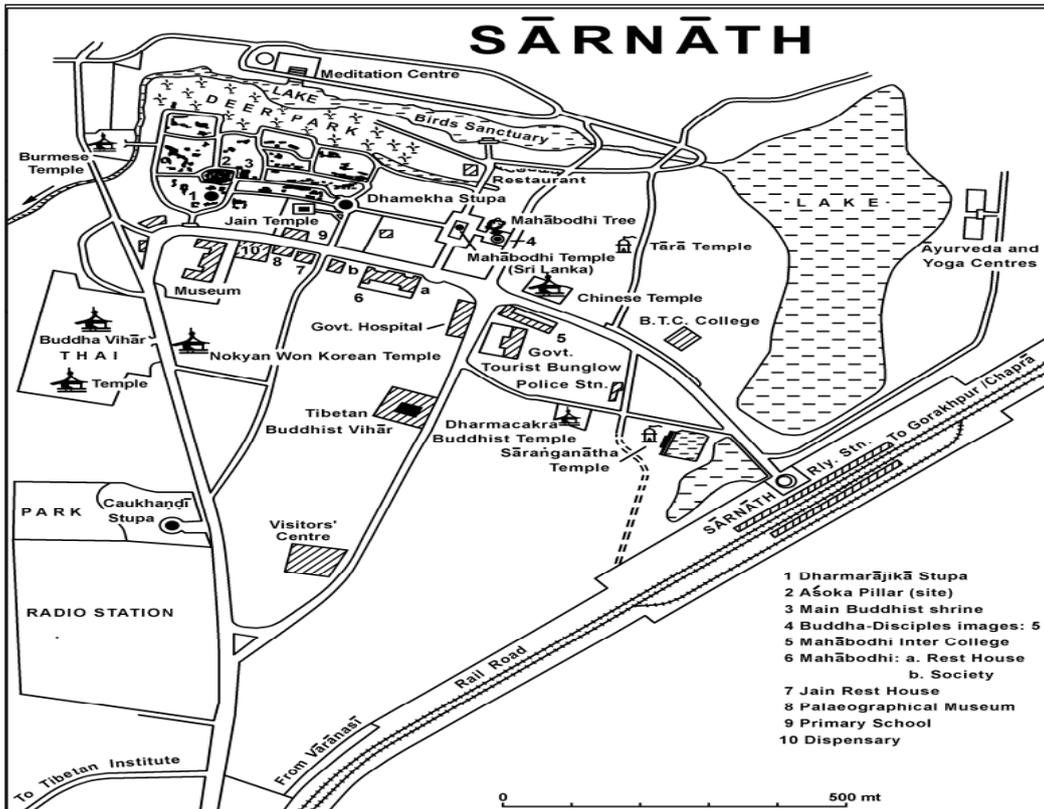
Finally, an interpretative analytical framework is applied to synthesise historical evidence, spatial patterns, and ethnographic insights. This enables a critical understanding of how Buddhist sacred spaces are continuously produced, negotiated, and reinterpreted within a pluralistic and dynamic religious environment.

Literature Review

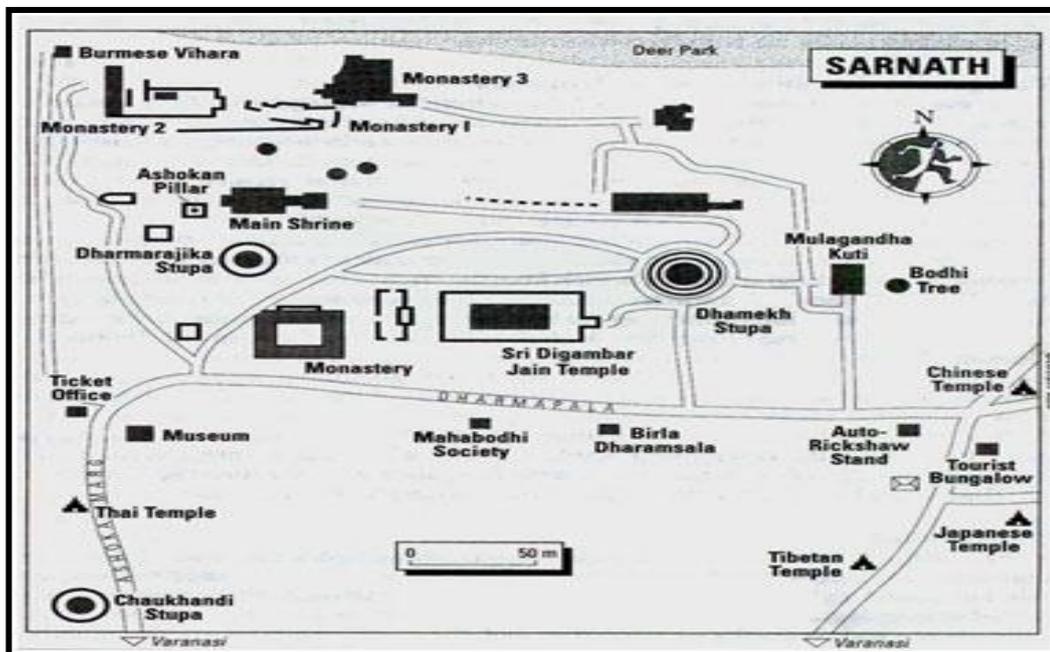
Varanasi, historically a symbol of Hindu-Muslim co-living with shared heritage, now faces contentious heritage discourses threatening intercommunity harmony. Sarnath is described as “the hub of Buddhism in India” and “a global pilgrimage destination for Buddhists,” attracting thousands of visitors annually. (Kanungo, P, 2021). The accounts of Fa-Hien and Hiuen-tsang offer key insights into the religious landscape of Sarnath and Varanasi, highlighting Buddhist institutions, sacred monuments, and monastic life. Their descriptions of teachings of Gautama Buddha and the formation of the Sangha are significant for historical geography (Tribe. A., 2013). Textual and travel-based studies, particularly Singh (2014), show that accounts of Chinese pilgrims provide detailed descriptions of monasteries, religious practices, and sacred geography, linking Varanasi with wider Buddhist networks. The study of Buddhism in Varanasi is closely linked with Sarnath, where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon, making it a core centre of Buddhist philosophy and pilgrimage. Existing literature highlights that Buddhism historically shaped the cultural landscape through stupas, monasteries, and ritual practices, many of which continue to define the spatial and religious identity of the region. However, contemporary studies reveal a complex “real situation” where Buddhism survives more as a heritage and tourism-driven phenomenon rather than a dominant living religion in the city (Tiwari, A. 2024). Recent research indicates that Sarnath functions as an archaeological and protected zone under the Archaeological Survey of India, where ritual practices are restricted, limiting its role as an active religious space and reducing the organic growth of a Buddhist urban economy (Shinde, K., & Singh, R. P. 2023). Asher’s (2020) historical analysis further emphasises the transformation of Sarnath from an ancient monastic centre to a modern global Buddhist site with renewed religious presence. Contemporary research also highlights the role of Buddhist tourism in sustaining the region’s economy while raising concerns about conservation and heritage management (Niyomthanawat, 2025)

Location and Religious Significance

The Sarnath (25° 22' 40.80" N, 83° 01' 30.36" E) area is located approximately 10 km north of Varanasi city centre. It holds global historical significance as the site where Gautama Buddha first preached his teachings in 528 BCE to five disciples, from which Buddhism subsequently spread worldwide. Consequently, Buddhists hold this site in deep reverence. In Buddhist literature, the area is referred to as Rishipattan or Mrigadaav. According to the early Buddhist text Mahavastu, 500 sages resided here and attained Nirvana, which led to the name Rishipattan. The name Mrigadaav derives from a royal decree by the king of Varanasi banning deer hunting in the forest, allowing deer to roam freely and creating a natural deer park. Medieval texts mention the site as Dharma-Chakra or sadharmachakrapravarta-vihar. Buddhism flourished here during the Mauryan and Gupta periods, and many physical remains such as stupas, monasteries, and sacred relics still exist. These features, along with ongoing rituals, festivals, and cultural practices, continue to maintain the spiritual importance of the site. In recent decades, Sarnath has developed as an important pilgrimage and tourist destination, attracting visitors from across the world. This has supported local livelihoods through tourism, handicrafts, and related activities, contributing to the local economy. At the same time, it has helped preserve cultural traditions and encouraged the growth of educational and religious institutions focused on Buddhism.



Source: Singh, Rana P.B. 2016. Urban Heritage and Planning - Banaras; Springer vol. II



Architecture of Sarnath

Source: <https://www.holydham.com/sarnath/>

Ancient Development

The modern name Sarnath originates from Sarangnath, meaning “Lord of the Deer,” a title also associated with Lord Shiva, whose temple is nearby. Approximately 200 years after the Buddha’s Mahāparinirvana (circa 400 BCE), significant developments occurred under King Ashoka’s reign (268-232 BCE). Sarnath reached its zenith during the Gupta period, when many exquisite idols were created, enhancing its status as a religious centre. The Chinese traveller Fa-Hien visited Sarnath during

King Chandragupta II's reign (376-414 CE) and observed four stupas and two Buddhist monasteries. Later, during Harshavardhana's reign, the Chinese traveller Hiuen-tsang documented Sarnath's beauty in his travelogue, noting the Dhamekha Stupa and Ashoka Pillar. According to his account, 1,500 Heenyaan Buddhist monks resided in the monastery, and the main temple featured a large Buddha statue at the site of Dharmchakrapravartan (Singh. 2013),

Decline and Destruction

The site was largely destroyed during the Muslim invasion led by Sultan Qutb Uddin Aibak, with only a small portion of the Dhamek Stupa remaining intact. Extensive Buddhist temples and architectural structures were buried underground. Apart from scattered Buddhist ruins and relics north and northwest of the city (Shereeing, 1868), no complete Buddhist temple or settlement from the Middle Ages has been documented (Sawmi. M, 2002).

Colonial Rediscovery and Archaeology

The site remained abandoned until its rediscovery in 1794 during the early British colonial period. That year, Jonathan Duncan brought attention to the site by describing two boxes found by Babu Jagat Singh, chief at the court of King Chit Singh of Varanasi. Archaeological excavations commenced in 1815 under Colin Mackenzie. Sir Alexander Cunningham conducted further excavations between 1774 and 1835, focusing primarily on the Dhamek, Dharmarajika, and Chaukhandi Stupas, and documented his findings in the Department of Archaeological Survey's annual report. In 1851, Major Kitto and Mr. Thomas discovered Buddhist sculptures, artworks, and valuable relics. These findings provided crucial early historical material that supported the establishment of Buddhist temples, monasteries, and the rehabilitation of Sarnath during the second quarter of the twentieth century. To date, archaeological excavations have not uncovered any contemporary relics or monuments directly associated with the Buddha or his community at Sarnath. Archaeologists hypothesize that the original cottages were constructed from perishable materials such as bamboo and clay, which have not survived due to natural degradation over time.

Major Archaeological Structures

The oldest archaeological remains at Sarnath date to approximately 300 BCE, contemporaneous with Emperor Ashoka. Archaeologists estimate that three mounds were constructed during the Mauryan period, two of which are located within the deer park. The Dharmarajika Stupa, likely the oldest, contained a relic – a bone fragment of the Buddha. Presently, only its foundations remain; the stupa was a circular structure approximately 13.5 meters in diameter. It was demolished in the 18th century by order of Babu Jagat Singh, a minister to King Chit Singh, and its stones were repurposed for new constructions. During demolition, a stone box containing a green marble casket was discovered at a depth of about 8.25 meters within the stupa. Although the Buddha's relic was subsequently discarded into the Ganges, the casket is preserved in the Indian Museum in Calcutta. The second stupa, the Dhamek Stupa, is well preserved and serves as a primary attraction; it stands 39 meters high and 28 meters in diameter. Originally named the Dharmachakra Stupa, it commemorates the site where the Buddha delivered his first sermon. The third stupa, located in the Choukhandi area approximately one kilometre from Deer Park, dates to the fifth century BCE or earlier and marks the location where the Buddha met his first disciples. Numerous temples and monasteries have also been discovered in the Sarnath region. The principal ancient temple, Mulagandhakuti Vihara, lies north of the Dharmarajika Stupa. The renowned Sarnath Buddha statue depicting the "Dharmachakra pravartana mudra" was uncovered adjacent to this temple. It is believed that the Mahamati Buddha resided here during his stay in Sarnath. West of this temple is the site where the Ashoka Pillar, also known as the lion capital of Ashoka, was found; this lion capital now serves as the national emblem of India and is preserved in the Sarnath Museum. Seven monasteries and numerous small stupas were constructed in this area, with their ruins still visible today (Sinha. A, 1991).

Another recently constructed structure in the Sarnath region is the modern Mulagandhakuti Vihara temple, built by the Mahabodhi Society in 1930. This temple houses a replica of the renowned Sarnath Dharma Chakra Pravartana Mudra Buddha statue, which is venerated there.

Bakariya Kund

Bakariya Kund is an ancient archaeological site in northern Varanasi near south of City Station that contains the ruins of a Buddhist Vihara, shrine pillars, and a graveyard. This site would have been of great interest to archaeologists. This place also related to Sun God (Uttararka). In ancient times there were huge temples for worshipping the sun. Later in the Buddhist period it was used as a Buddhist monastery. Here in 1375 AD Feroze Shah Tughluq demolished this historic Buddhist temple. A converted Buddhist Chaitya is still visible at this place. Mr. Shering describes the ruins of Bakria Kund. Sherings writings reveal that he was hopeful of finding Buddhist remains in Varanasi, so he began searching at the Bakria Kund region in 1863 and discovered the ruins on the first day of his visit. Edwin Greaves (1901) described that at the time of his survey the area occupied by Muslims. To the south of the pond stood some buildings and to the south were three mosques, (still standing) with numerous tombs within their enclosure.

Transformation of Cultural Landscape under Buddhist Influence

An analysis of Gautama Buddha's influence in Sarnath demonstrates that his religious teachings and philosophical doctrines have profoundly impacted the region's physical morphology, material culture, and socio-economic structure. The institutional development of Buddhism transformed Sarnath into a prime pilgrimage centre and a significant cultural landscape, where religious ideals are manifested through architecture, ritual practices, and social organization (Tiwari, A. 2024).

Architecturally and spatially, the proliferation of stupas, viharas, and other sacred structures has shaped the cultural geography of Sarnath. The Dhamek Stupa, the ruins of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, and the Ashokan pillar, erected by Ashoka, serve as tangible representations of Buddhist ideology, illustrating processes of sacred space formation, memory construction, and religious authority. The spatial organisation of these structures follows the fundamental principles of monastic life – seclusion, collectivity, and austerity—indicating a highly organised monastic settlement pattern.

Ritual practices and religious observances have consistently shaped the socio-cultural fabric of Sarnath. Activities such as meditation, chanting, and festivals like Buddha Purnima function not only as religious rites but also as mechanisms for constructing collective identity. The continuous influx of domestic and international pilgrims has reinforced Sarnath's status as a living religious centre, promoting spiritual engagement, social cohesion, and intercultural interactions within this sacred landscape.

Socio-Economic Transformations under Buddhist Influence

The socio-economic fabric of Sarnath has been significantly influenced by its historical and cultural legacy. As the place where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon, Sarnath has developed one of the famous centres of Buddhist pilgrimage, which has, over time, shaped its economic structure and community life.

The steady inflow of pilgrims and international tourists – particularly from countries such as Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar – has led to the expansion of a service-oriented economy. Sectors such as lodging, transportation, food services, and tour guidance have grown considerably, generating employment opportunities and supporting local livelihoods. In parallel, the production of Buddhist-themed handicrafts, including Buddha statues, ritual objects, and symbolic artefacts, has become a vital economic activity, preserving indigenous craftsmanship while catering to religious tourism.

Institutional development has further strengthened the region's socio-economic base. Establishments such as the Maha Bodhi Society, the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, and the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies have positioned Sarnath as an important centre of Buddhist education and intellectual exchange. These institutions contribute to the local economy through academic activities, residential facilities, and associated services.

Additionally, religious festivals such as Buddha Purnima play a crucial role in intensifying economic activities and reinforcing community cohesion. In sum, Buddhism has acted as a key driver in the socio-economic transformation of Sarnath, fostering a dynamic interaction between culture, economy, and space. Nonetheless, emerging challenges related to the sustainable management of this heritage landscape warrant critical attention.

Main Findings

Religious coexistence and cultural harmony in Varanasi are deeply rooted in its long historical evolution as a sacred urban centre. The presence of Buddhism, particularly through the nearby site of Sarnath, has significantly contributed to shaping a pluralistic cultural landscape. The teachings of Gautama Buddha, emphasising compassion, tolerance, and non-violence, have complemented the broader religious ethos of the region.

Over time, Varanasi has emerged as a space where diverse religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam—interact and coexist, creating a shared cultural fabric. Buddhist heritage sites, rituals, and pilgrimage activities continue to attract global visitors, fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. This coexistence is reflected not only in sacred spaces but also in everyday social practices, festivals, and economic interactions.

Thus, Buddhism has played a crucial role in reinforcing the spirit of inclusivity and cultural harmony, making Varanasi a unique example of living religious pluralism.

Concluding Remark

The study of Buddhism in Varanasi, particularly through the sacred landscape of Sarnath, highlights its enduring influence on the region's cultural, spatial, and socio-economic fabric. From the time of Gautama Buddha, the area has evolved into a significant centre of religious thought, architectural development, and pilgrimage activity. The material remains—stupas, monasteries, and pillars – along with continuing rituals and traditions, demonstrate the lasting imprint of Buddhist philosophy. Moreover, Buddhism has contributed to shaping a landscape of religious coexistence and cultural harmony, where multiple faiths interact within a shared sacred geography. The continued influx of pilgrims and tourists sustains both spiritual traditions and local economies. In conclusion, Varanasi and Sarnath together represent a dynamic and living cultural landscape, where the legacy of Buddhism continues to inform identity, heritage, and intercultural dialogue across time.

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