



# Archaeological Museum Sarnath



Archaeological Survey of India  
Sarnath Circle, Varanasi



Sarnath (Lat. 25° 22' N.; Long. 83° 1' E.) District Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, is situated in the north eastern end of Varanasi city at a distance of about 12 kms. from Varanasi Railway station and Bus stand and 30 kms. approx from the Varanasi Air Port.



### MUSEUM

Repositories of cultural wealth

Preserves past for future

A synonym of education and entertainment

A mirror of our traditions

Promotes national integration

A show window of knowledge

Brings people together

A mine of knowledge and source of recreation



CONJECTURAL VIEW  
OF INSCRIBED  
ASHOKAN PILLAR  
& LION CAPITAL



**For further information please contact:**

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### Visiting Hours

9 A.M. To 5 P.M.

(Friday Closed)

Entry fee: ₹ 5/-

(Free entry for children below  
the age of 15 years)



Sarnath is one of the four most important Buddhist pilgrimage centres, where Buddha, the Great Teacher, preached his first sermon known as the *dharma-chakra- pravartana*. In ancient Buddhist literature the place has been referred to as Rishipatana, Mrigadava or Mrigadaya. The place was called Rishipatana, as supposedly the bodies of five hundred *Pratyeka* Buddhas or *Rishis* (sages) fell here after their attainment of *nirvana* or salvation. The inscriptions of early medieval period found from Sarnath referred to this place as Dharmachakra or Saddharma-chakra-pravarttana-vihara (Convent of the Turning of Wheel of the law). The modern name

Sarnath seems to be a contraction of Saranganatha (Lord of deer) a local temple dedicated to Lord Siva. Sarnath is also sacred to the Jainas because they take it as the place of asceticism and death of Sreyansanatha, the eleventh Tirthankara.



DHAMEKH STUPA, 1831

Asoka (273-32 B.C.E.), the great Mauryan emperor, constructed Dharmarajika *Stupa* to enshrine the corporeal relics of Lord Buddha. The remains of the monolithic Asokan pillar once surmounted by four lion capital is containing an edict of Ashoka in Brahmi script. The pillar bears two more inscriptions of later period, viz. one of the Kushana period and another of the early Gupta period.

Archaeological excavations have brought to light about a dozen railing pillars ascribable to the Sunga period (second-first century B.C.E.) and few architectural and sculptural pieces datable to the Kushana period. These are, now housed in the Museum and most important among those is the colossal image of Bodhisattva in standing posture made of red sand stone which was imported from Mathura. An inscription on the pedestal gives a date of this sculpture as the 3<sup>rd</sup> regnal year of King Kanishka (78 C.E.).

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main centre of structural and artistic activities known as the Sarnath School of Art. These activities continued till Pala and Gahadvala period also. By the end of 12th century the place went into oblivion due to attacks of Muslim invaders in this region. The veil was lifted in 1798 when Mr. Duncan, the then Commissioner of Benares informed the discovery of a casket made of green marble inside a stone box exposed by the workmen of Jagat Singh, *Diwan* of Raja Chet Singh of Benares while dismantling the Dharmarajika *stupa* in order to procure building materials in 1794.

Later on, excavations conducted at the site by Sir Alexander Cunningham (1835-36), Major Kittoe (1851-52), Mr. C. Horne (1865), Mr. F.O. Oertal (1904-05), Sir John Marshall (1907), Mr. H. Hargreaves (1914-15) and Mr. Daya Ram Sahni (1927-32) have brought to light numerous structural and artistic remains. Most of the objects are, now housed in the Archaeological Museum at Sarnath, the oldest site museum established in 1910 C.E. due to initiative of Sir John Marshall, the then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India. The plan of the Museum, was prepared in the year 1904 by Mr. James Ransome, the then Architect of the Government of India.

There are five galleries and two verandahs, for displaying sculptures, architectural members and the antiquities datable from third century B.C.E. to twelfth century C.E. found at Sarnath.

Entrance to the museum is provided through the main hall (Gallery No. 3) where in the priceless master piece of the museum, i.e. lion capital of the Asokan pillar (the National Emblem of the Republic of India) is displayed. It bears the lustrous polish, a typical feature of the Mauryan art of third century B.C.E. It consists of an inverted lotus, circular abacus and the crowning quadripartite semi-lions, seated back to back. Once it was surmounted by a wheel (*dharmachakra*) with thirty two spokes, pieces of which were found from this place. The abacus is adorned with the figures of four animals in motion namely a lion, an elephant, a bull and a horse



LION CAPITAL





BODHISATTVA

each separated by a smaller wheel consisting twenty four spokes. The inscribed colossal standing image of a Bodhisattva in red sand stone, a fine product of Mathura School of Art is also displayed in this gallery.

The most notable example of Sarnath School is undoubtedly the image in gallery no. 1 of 'preaching Buddha', exhibiting the famous *Dharma-chakra-pravartana mudra* (turning the wheel of Law). This image is a fine example of artistic expression exhibiting in the form of compassion, spirituality and inner-bliss.



BUDDHA'S LIFE SCENE

Images of seated and standing Buddha in different postures displayed in this gallery are also very remarkable. Gallery no. 02 shows Images of Siddhaikavira one of the forms of Manjusri, god of wisdom, standing on a double lotus, Uchchhusma Jambhala, god of wealth and prosperity with protuberant belly alongwith his female consort



SIDDDHAIKAVIRA

Vasudhara, goddess of abundance. Besides, the image of seated Bodhisattva Padamapani, god of compassion, with stem of full bloomed (Shadakshari mandal, Shadakshara Lokeshvara, Shadakshari Mahavidya and Manidhara) seated cross-legged and shown with folded



SHADAKSHARI MANDAL

hands; two Steles, the first depicting miracle of Sravasti where Buddha multiplied his form a thousand fold in order to defeat heretical teachers; and another depicting eight great places (ashthamahasthana) i.e. main events of his life viz. nativity at Lumbini, enlightenment at BodhGaya, deliverance of fist sermon at Sarnath and great decease at Kusinagara descending of



PREACHING BUDDHA