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Sarnath Inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List, Reinforcing India's Global Leadership in Buddhist Heritage Conservation

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Recent Developments:

- The **Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath**, located in **Uttar Pradesh**, has been inscribed on the **UNESCO World Heritage List** during the **48th Session of the World Heritage Committee**.
- With the inscription of **Sarnath**, **India now has 45 UNESCO World Heritage Sites**, placing it **6th globally** and **2nd in the Asia-Pacific region** in terms of the total number of World Heritage properties.
- The inscription recognises **Sarnath's Outstanding Universal Value** as one of the most sacred centres of **Buddhism**, highlighting its enduring spiritual, historical and archaeological significance.

Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath:

Historical and Spiritual Significance:

- **Sarnath** is regarded as one of the holiest places in **Buddhism**, where **Gautama Buddha** delivered his **First Sermon** after attaining enlightenment at **Bodhgaya**, an event known as **Dharmachakra Pravartana (Turning of the Wheel of Law)**.
- The site marks the beginning of the public dissemination of **Buddha's teachings**, laying the philosophical foundation of the Buddhist tradition and introducing the **Noble Eightfold Path** for attaining liberation from suffering.
- **Sarnath** is also recognised as the birthplace of the **Sangha**, where **Buddha** accepted his first five disciples and formally established the **Buddhist monastic order**, ensuring the organised propagation of the **Dhamma**.
- According to Buddhist tradition, **Buddha** identified **Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar** as the four principal pilgrimage centres associated with the major events of his life.

Historical Identity and Cultural Heritage:

- Ancient Buddhist literature refers to **Sarnath** by several names, including **Rishipatana, Ishipatana and Mrigadava (Deer Park)**, reflecting its long-standing religious and cultural importance.
- Archaeological excavations have yielded the celebrated **Mauryan Lion Capital**, which later became the **National Emblem of India**, along with the renowned **Dharmachakra Pravartana Buddha** image representing the classical excellence of **Gupta art**.
- These invaluable antiquities are preserved in the **Sarnath Site Museum**, established in **1904**, making it one of India's earliest site museums dedicated to archaeological conservation.

UNESCO Inscription of Sarnath:

Selection Criteria and Outstanding Universal Value:

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- **Sarnath** was included in India's **Tentative List** in **1998** before being nominated for inscription on the **UNESCO World Heritage List**.
- The property was inscribed under **Criterion (iii)** for representing an exceptional testimony to a living religious tradition and under **Criterion (vi)** for its direct association with the life, teachings and spiritual legacy of **Gautama Buddha**.
- The inscription also recognises **Sarnath** as the birthplace of the **Triratna (Three Jewels)** comprising **Buddha, Dharma and Sangha**, which together form the core foundation of Buddhist philosophy and practice.
- The recognition strengthens the global acknowledgement of **Sarnath** as one of the most significant centres of Buddhist pilgrimage, learning and monastic culture.

Components of the UNESCO Property:

- The inscribed serial property includes the **Chaukhandi Stupa**, traditionally believed to mark the place where **Buddha** met his first five disciples before delivering his first sermon.
- The **Archaeological Remains of Sarnath** include the **Dhamekh Stupa, Dharmarajika Stupa, Mulagandhakuti Vihara, Ashokan Pillar**, ancient monasteries, shrines, temples and associated archaeological remains.
- The **Dhamekh Stupa** commemorates the exact location where **Buddha** delivered the **First Sermon**, making it the most revered monument within the complex.
- The **Dharmarajika Stupa** is regarded as one of the earliest Buddhist stupas and is traditionally believed to have been commissioned by **Emperor Ashoka** for enshrining sacred relics of **Buddha**.
- **Mulagandhakuti Vihara** is associated with **Buddha's** residence during his first **Varshavasa (Rain Retreat)** after enlightenment.
- The **Ashokan Pillar**, erected during the **3rd century BCE**, bears the famous **Lion Capital**, which was later adopted as the **National Emblem of India**, symbolising authority, peace and righteousness.
- The surviving remains collectively demonstrate **Sarnath's** continuous evolution as a major centre of **religious instruction, pilgrimage, artistic development and monastic life** for more than two thousand years.

UNESCO World Heritage Site:

Meaning and Objectives:

- A **UNESCO World Heritage Site** is a cultural or natural property recognised for possessing **Outstanding Universal Value**, requiring protection for the benefit of present and future generations under an international legal framework.
- Such recognition promotes international cooperation for conservation while preserving humanity's shared cultural and natural heritage.

World Heritage Convention, 1972:

- The **Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage**, adopted in **1972**, provides the international framework for identifying, conserving and protecting World Heritage properties.
- The **World Heritage Committee** administers the inscription process through the **World Heritage Programme**, evaluates nominations and monitors the conservation status of listed properties.
- **India** ratified the Convention in **1977**, enabling its cultural and natural heritage to be nominated under the Convention's provisions.
- The **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** functions as the nodal agency for preparing nominations, coordinating conservation efforts and managing UNESCO World Heritage matters within India.
- A property must first be included in the country's **Tentative List**, and each State Party may ordinarily nominate **one property annually** for consideration by the **World Heritage Committee**.

Categories of UNESCO World Heritage Sites:

Classification of Properties:

- **Cultural Heritage Sites** include archaeological remains, monuments, historic cities, architectural masterpieces and other cultural landscapes possessing exceptional historical significance.
- **Natural Heritage Sites** comprise outstanding geological formations, ecosystems, biodiversity-rich habitats and natural landscapes of exceptional scientific or ecological importance.
- **Mixed Heritage Sites** possess both exceptional cultural and natural values, reflecting the close relationship between human civilisation and the natural environment.

World Heritage in Danger:

- The **List of World Heritage in Danger** identifies properties facing serious threats such as **armed conflict, uncontrolled urbanisation, natural disasters, environmental degradation or inadequate conservation**, encouraging international cooperation for corrective measures.
- The **Emergency Nomination Procedure** enables rapid inscription of sites facing immediate threats requiring urgent international recognition and protection.

Significance of Sarnath's Inscription:

For India and Global Buddhist Heritage:

- The inscription enhances **India's cultural diplomacy** by reinforcing its position as the birthplace of **Buddhism** and a leading custodian of global Buddhist heritage.
- It strengthens the conservation of monuments associated with **Buddha's life**, preserving invaluable archaeological, artistic and spiritual traditions for future generations.
- International recognition is expected to promote **heritage conservation, academic research, responsible tourism and greater global awareness** of India's civilisational legacy.
- The inscription also contributes to preserving India's rich tradition of **religious pluralism, philosophical thought and cultural continuity**.

Challenges and Conservation Priorities:

- Increased international recognition may lead to **over-tourism**, placing additional pressure on fragile archaeological remains and surrounding heritage landscapes.
- Sustainable visitor management, scientific conservation, community participation and balanced tourism policies remain essential for maintaining the site's authenticity and integrity.
- Continuous archaeological research, documentation and preventive conservation are necessary to safeguard the site's Outstanding Universal Value over the long term.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Facts and Exam Linkages:

- **Four Principal Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites:** Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar.
- **First Sermon:** Dharmachakra Pravartana at Sarnath.
- **Birthplace of Sangha:** Sarnath.
- **National Emblem:** Derived from the **Lion Capital of Ashoka** discovered at Sarnath.
- **UNESCO Selection Criteria Applied:** Criterion (iii) and Criterion (vi).
- **Nodal Agency in India:** Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).
- **Convention:** Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972.

- **Major Monuments at Sarnath: Dhamekh Stupa, Dharmarajika Stupa, Chaukhandi Stupa, Mulagandhakuti Vihara and Ashokan Pillar.**
- **GS Paper I: Indian Heritage and Culture, Buddhism, Art and Architecture.**
- **GS Paper II: UNESCO, International Organisations and India's Cultural Diplomacy.**
- **Keywords: Dharmachakra Pravartana, Sangha, Triratna, Ashokan Pillar, Lion Capital, Gupta Art, World Heritage Convention, Outstanding Universal Value, Tentative List, Cultural Heritage, Archaeological Conservation, Buddhist Pilgrimage.**