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Vaishya Tekri in Ujjain: Proposed Fresh Excavation May Reveal New Evidence on Mauryan-Era Buddhist Architecture

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Recent Developments:

- The **Madhya Pradesh Government** is considering renewed archaeological work at **Vaishya Tekri**, an ancient mound near Ujjain associated with the remains of **brick stupas**. Recent reports indicate plans to develop the site as a Buddhist heritage destination, with the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** involved in its conservation and development.
- The site was investigated during the **1938–39 excavations** at ancient Ujjain, and subsequent archaeological work at Vaishya Tekri and nearby mounds yielded evidence of **brick stupas and other antiquities**.
- The proposed renewed excavation is significant because much of the archaeological potential of **Vaishya Tekri remains unexplored**, while the site is associated with the ancient Buddhist landscape of Ujjain.
- Claims that the mound contains a stupa **larger than Sanchi** should presently be treated as **archaeological estimates or reports rather than an established fact**, because the complete structure has not been exposed and documented through modern excavation. Recent reports describe the proposed monument as potentially substantially larger than the Great Stupa at Sanchi.

Vaishya Tekri: Archaeological Context:

Location and Nature of the Site:

- **Vaishya Tekri** is an ancient archaeological mound located near **Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh**, within the broader archaeological landscape of ancient Ujjain.
- Historical archaeological records identify **Vaishya Tekri, Kumbhar Tekri and Pallevalli/Kankar Tekri** among the ancient mounds around Ujjain where excavations produced evidence of **brick stupas**.
- The site is therefore important for understanding the **urban, religious and cultural history of ancient Ujjain**, rather than being significant only because of the possible size of its stupa.
- Earlier archaeological investigations established the wider antiquity of Ujjain through finds including **coins, terracotta objects, beads and pottery**, while later excavations revealed cultural remains belonging to several historical periods.

Possible Mauryan and Buddhist Association:

- The site has been associated in recent reports with the **Mauryan period and Emperor Ashoka**, although the precise attribution, chronology and original form of the large structure require archaeological verification.
- Ujjain itself was an important centre of the **Malwa region** and had strong political and commercial significance during the ancient period.
- Archaeological evidence from the wider Ujjain region demonstrates cultural activity from the **early historic period** and continued occupation through later dynasties.

Earlier Excavations:

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- Archaeologist **H. V. Trivedi and other investigators** contributed to the archaeological exploration of Ujjain, while the **1938–39 excavations under Garde** demonstrated the considerable archaeological potential of the ancient city.
- Subsequent excavations at different mounds around Ujjain produced **brick stupas and other archaeological remains**, establishing the presence of Buddhist architectural activity in the region.
- Later archaeological investigations were also undertaken during **1955–58 and 1964–65**, demonstrating that Ujjain possesses a complex archaeological sequence extending across several historical periods.

Why Vaishya Tekri Matters for Ancient Indian History:

Evidence of Buddhist Architecture:

- The identification of **brick stupas** at Vaishya Tekri and neighbouring mounds provides evidence of Buddhist architectural activity in the ancient Ujjain region.
- Further excavation may clarify the **chronology, architectural plan, construction techniques and cultural associations** of the surviving remains.
- Archaeological evidence from the site can contribute to the broader understanding of the spread of **Buddhist institutions beyond the major centres traditionally highlighted in textbooks**.

Ujjain as an Ancient Urban Centre:

- Ujjain was one of the important cities of ancient India and was strategically located within the **Malwa region**, which connected northern, western and central Indian cultural and commercial zones.
- Archaeological remains from Ujjain demonstrate successive cultural phases extending from the **early historic period to the medieval period**.
- The Buddhist remains at Vaishya Tekri therefore need to be studied within the wider context of **urbanisation, trade, political authority and religious interaction** in ancient Ujjain.

Archaeology and Historical Verification:

- Renewed excavation can help distinguish between **traditional associations, historical references and archaeologically demonstrable evidence**.
- Scientific excavation can establish chronology through **stratigraphy, pottery typology, inscriptions, coins, architectural remains and scientific dating techniques**.
- Such evidence is particularly important when monuments are traditionally attributed to major historical personalities such as **Ashoka**.

Buddhist Stupa: Concept and Architectural Features:

Meaning and Purpose:

- A **stupa** is a Buddhist commemorative monument traditionally associated with **relics, sacred memory and Buddhist worship**.
- Early stupas generally developed from funerary and commemorative mound traditions and gradually acquired a distinctive architectural vocabulary.
- The stupa became one of the most important architectural forms associated with the spread of **Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent and beyond**.

Major Architectural Elements:

- The principal elements of a mature Buddhist stupa include the **anda, harmika, yasti, chhatra, vedika and torana**, although their arrangement and elaboration vary across periods and regions.
- The **anda** is the hemispherical dome forming the principal mass of the stupa.
- The **harmika** is the small railing-like structure placed above the dome.

- The **yasti** is the central pillar rising above the dome and supporting the umbrella structure.
- The **chhatra** represents the umbrella or parasol element above the stupa.
- The **vedika** is the railing surrounding the sacred structure or its circumambulatory space.
- The **torana** is an ornamental gateway, particularly prominent at Sanchi.

Great Stupa at Sanchi: Comparison and Historical Significance:

Origin and Development:

- The **Great Stupa at Sanchi, Stupa 1**, originated during the reign of **Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE** as a brick stupa.
- The monument was subsequently enlarged and embellished, particularly during the **Shunga period**, while further architectural and decorative additions were made during the **Satavahana and Gupta periods**.
- Sanchi therefore represents not a single-period monument but a **long process of architectural expansion and artistic development** extending over several centuries.

Architectural Characteristics:

- The Great Stupa consists of a large **hemispherical dome**, a raised terrace, a harmika, a central yasti and chhatras, with circumambulatory arrangements.
- Its four **toranas** contain elaborate sculptural representations associated with Buddhist narratives, symbols, animals, plants and Jataka traditions.
- Sanchi is particularly important for the study of **aniconic Buddhist art**, in which the Buddha was represented through symbols rather than a direct anthropomorphic image in the earlier artistic phase.
- Important Buddhist relics associated with **Sariputra and Maudgalyayana**, two principal disciples of the Buddha, were preserved at Sanchi.

UNESCO World Heritage Status:

- The **Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi** were inscribed on the **UNESCO World Heritage List in 1989** under criteria **(i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi)**.
- UNESCO recognises Sanchi as an exceptional ensemble of **stupas, temples, monasteries and pillars** documenting the development of Buddhist architecture and art from the **3rd century BCE to the 12th century CE**.
- The site is managed and conserved by the **Archaeological Survey of India** under the applicable heritage protection framework.

Vaishya Tekri and Sanchi: Comparative Perspective:

Parameter

Vaishya Tekri

Great Stupa at Sanchi

Location

Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

Raisen district, Madhya Pradesh

Nature

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Archaeological mound with evidence of brick stupas

Extant monumental Buddhist complex

Chronology

Ancient, with possible Mauryan association requiring further verification

Origin associated with Ashoka, 3rd century BCE

Archaeological status

Much remains to be investigated

Extensively excavated, conserved and documented

Architecture

Large stupa remains are reported; complete plan requires further excavation

Mature stupa architecture with dome, harmika, chhatras, vedika and toranas

Heritage status

Protected archaeological site

UNESCO World Heritage Site

UPSC relevance

Mauryan history, Buddhism, archaeology, urban history of Ujjain

Ashokan architecture, Buddhist art, heritage conservation and UNESCO

Broader Historical Context: Buddhism under the Mauryas:

Ashoka and Buddhist Expansion:

- Emperor **Ashoka** played a major role in the expansion and institutional consolidation of Buddhism during the **3rd century BCE**.
- His reign is associated with the construction and patronage of Buddhist monuments, pillars and other forms of religious architecture.
- The **Ashokan inscriptions** provide important primary evidence for understanding his political ideas, ethical policy and relationship with Buddhism.
- The archaeological association of a monument with Ashoka should, however, be established through **material and epigraphic evidence**, rather than architectural size or later tradition alone.

Ujjain and the Mauryan Empire:

- Ujjain occupied an important position within the Mauryan imperial system and was strategically significant in the western and central Indian region.

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- The city's location within the **Malwa region** contributed to its importance in trade, administration and cultural exchange.
- The archaeological study of Vaishya Tekri can therefore contribute to understanding the relationship between **Mauryan political integration, urban centres and religious institutions**.

Archaeological Significance of Renewed Excavation:

Scientific Importance:

- Fresh excavation can establish the **exact dimensions, construction phases and chronology** of the monument.
- Archaeologists may recover **pottery, coins, inscriptions, sculptures, architectural fragments and organic material**, which can help reconstruct the site's history.
- Modern archaeological techniques can provide more reliable evidence than earlier exploratory excavations.

Conservation Importance:

- Excavation must be accompanied by **structural conservation**, because exposing buried remains can increase their vulnerability to weathering and human interference.
- The National Monuments Authority has specifically required that work involving the protected **Ancient Mound Vaishya Tekri** avoid heavy machinery where structural safety is concerned and that archaeological finds be immediately handed over to the ASI under appropriate supervision.
- Heritage management should therefore balance **archaeological research, structural stability, local development and long-term conservation**.

Heritage Interpretation:

- If further excavation establishes the scale and chronology of the stupa, the site could significantly strengthen the understanding of **Buddhist heritage in central India**.
- Interpretation centres, scientific conservation and responsible heritage tourism could connect Vaishya Tekri with the wider Buddhist heritage circuit of Madhya Pradesh.

Issues and Challenges:

Archaeological Uncertainty:

- The exact **date, patronage, architectural dimensions and original function** of the reported large stupa require further archaeological confirmation.
- Comparisons with Sanchi should therefore remain **provisional until systematic excavation and documentation are completed**.

Conservation Risks:

- Excavation exposes previously protected archaeological layers to **weathering, biological growth, erosion and human interference**.
- Agricultural activity and encroachment can also threaten archaeological remains around ancient mounds; recent reporting has highlighted such concerns in the wider site area.

Balancing Development and Heritage:

- Infrastructure development around archaeological sites must comply with heritage regulations and avoid damaging **archaeological deposits and protected structures**.
- Sustainable heritage tourism should prioritise **carrying capacity, conservation and community participation** rather than uncontrolled commercialisation.

Way Forward:

- Conduct **systematic scientific excavation** under the supervision of competent archaeological authorities.
- Use **stratigraphy, epigraphy, archaeometry and scientific dating** to establish an evidence-based chronology.
- Prepare a comprehensive **site management and conservation plan** before large-scale excavation.
- Digitise the site through **geospatial mapping, photogrammetry and three-dimensional documentation** for research and conservation.
- Protect the surrounding archaeological landscape from **encroachment, unregulated construction and agricultural damage**.
- Develop heritage tourism only after ensuring **structural conservation, visitor management and local community participation**.
- Integrate Vaishya Tekri into broader research on **Ujjain, Mauryan archaeology, Buddhist expansion and ancient Indian urbanisation**.

Conclusion:

- **Vaishya Tekri** is important not merely because of reports that it may contain a stupa larger than Sanchi, but because it forms part of the wider archaeological landscape of **ancient Ujjain**, where excavations have already revealed evidence of brick stupas and successive cultural phases.
- Renewed archaeological investigation can potentially provide valuable evidence regarding **Mauryan-era political authority, Buddhist institutional expansion, ancient urbanisation and the evolution of stupa architecture**.
- The key requirement is to distinguish **archaeological evidence from traditional attribution and preliminary estimates**, ensuring that the historical significance of the site is established through scientific investigation.
- The case also illustrates the broader principle that India's archaeological heritage requires an integrated approach combining **excavation, conservation, scientific research, heritage management and responsible tourism**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Pointers:

- **Vaishya Tekri:** Ancient archaeological mound near **Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh**, associated with evidence of brick stupas.
- **Sanchi:** Buddhist monument complex in **Madhya Pradesh**, inscribed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1989**.
- **Great Stupa at Sanchi:** Origin associated with **Ashoka, 3rd century BCE**, with subsequent enlargement and embellishment under later dynasties.
- **Important stupa elements:** **Anda, harmika, yasti, chhatra, vedika and torana**.
- **Sanchi art:** Important example of early **aniconic Buddhist art**