



India's Archaeological Tapestry: From Prehistoric Settlements to Buddhist Monasteries

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ABSTRACT

Indian archaeology is a multidisciplinary field that unveils the profound cultural, religious, and historical heritage of the subcontinent. From prehistoric settlements to colonial-era discoveries, it spans a wide range of studies including ancient civilizations, religious monuments, inscriptions, coins, and architectural developments. The Indus Valley Civilization exemplifies early urban planning, advanced trade networks, and sophisticated governance systems. The Buddhist period significantly enriched Indian archaeology, leaving behind monastic complexes, stupas, and rock-cut caves that offer critical insights into the evolution of religious practices, education, and art. Key architectural structures such as stupas, chaityas, and viharas, along with learning centers like Nalanda and Vikramashila, reflect India's rich tradition of intellectual and spiritual discourse.

Cultural syncretism is evident in the fusion of Greco-Roman and Indian artistic styles in regions like Gandhara and Mathura. Sites such as Ellora and Ajanta further illustrate the coexistence and integration of Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Although Buddhism eventually declined in India due to a Hindu revival and external invasions, its philosophical and artistic legacy continued to thrive across Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia. Modern archaeological techniques—like carbon dating, satellite imaging, and LiDAR have deepened our understanding of India's past, highlighting its globally significant and enduring cultural legacy.

Keywords: Archaeological Research, Cultural Exchange, Cultural Heritage, Hindu Resurgence, Historical Preservation, Indian Archaeology, Religious Pluralism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian Archaeology is a vast and fascinating field that highlights the country's rich and heterogeneous past. It encompasses prehistoric cultures, ancient civilizations like the Indus Valley, the Vedic and Mauryan periods, Medieval monuments architecture, and colonial-era findings (Chakrabarti, 1999). India's archaeological heritage stands as one of the most diverse and extensive in the world, spanning thousands of years and showcasing the evolution of human civilization. From prehistoric tools and rock art to grand Mughal structures, India's historical sites provide invaluable insights into its continuous cultural and architectural legacy (Singh, 2008).

The Indus Valley Civilization, with sites like Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Dholavira, highlights one of the world's earliest Urban societies, known for advanced city planning, trade networks, and undeciphered script (Possehl, 2002). These excavations demonstrate India's early achievements in governance, economy, and urban infrastructure. India's religious and artistic traditions are well-preserved in its Buddhist and Hindu archaeological sites. The Ajanta and Ellora caves, the Sanchi Stupa, and temples of Khajuraho and Hampi reflect exquisite craftsmanship and deep spiritual significance (Dehejia, 1997). These structures serve as testaments to India's artistic brilliance and religious harmony. Epigraphy and numismatics further enhance our understanding of India's past (Figure1). Ashokan edicts, temple inscriptions, and ancient coins provide crucial historical data on political events, linguistic evolution, and

economic exchanges (Salomon, 1998). They reveal India's long-standing trade relations with regions like Rome, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia (Thapar, 2003).



Figure 1. Ancient Buddhist Heritage-Glimpse of India's Archaeological Legacy (Generated Image)

The Buddhist era in Indian archaeology marks a significant period of cultural, religious, and artistic evolution, extending from the 6th century BCE to the early Medieval period. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka played a crucial role in spreading Buddhism, leaving behind a rich legacy of inscriptions, stupas, and monastic complexes. The Ashokan edicts, inscribed on rock pillars across the Indian subcontinent, provide insights into Buddhist philosophy and governance (Schopen, 1997). Prominent archaeological sites such as Sarnath, where Buddha delivered his first sermon, and Bodh Gaya, where he attained enlightenment, stand as testaments to Buddhism's deep-rooted influence. Additionally, stupas like those in Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati showcase remarkable craftsmanship, with intricately carved gateways and railings depicting scenes from Buddha's life (Shaw, 2013). These structures reflect the transformation of Buddhist religious practices and patronage over centuries (Coningham & Young, 2015).

The Buddhist era also contributed significantly to cave architecture, as seen in the rock-cut monasteries of Karle, Bhaja, Junnar, Ajanta and Ellora. These caves, adorned with exquisite frescoes and sculptures, reflect the artistic advancements of Ancient India (Shaw, 2007). The Gandhara and Mathura Schools of Art emerged during this period, blending Greco-Roman and Indigenous styles to create lifelike Buddha statues and narrative reliefs. Monastic sites such as Nalanda and Vikramshila, renowned centers of learning, further emphasize the scholarly and philosophical contributions of Buddhism to Indian civilization (Stewart, 2018). The archaeological remains of this era not only provide a glimpse into the spiritual and artistic traditions of the time but also highlight India's role in the global spread of Buddhism, influencing regions as far as Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia.

2. CENTRAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES OF THE BUDDHIST ERA

Many such Archaeological sites highlight legacy of Buddhist Era. However, these sites collectively offer profound insights into the development of Buddhist art, architecture, and educational traditions, underscoring their enduring cultural and historical significance (Figure 2).

Rajgir (Bihar)- It is an important site in Buddhist history, and served as one of Buddha's primary retreats where he meditated and preached for several years. It was the ancient capital of Magadha and the site of the First Buddhist Council after Buddha's Mahaparinirvana. The Griddhakuta Hill (Vulture's Peak) is particularly significant as the location where Buddha delivered many sermons, including those on the Lotus Sutra. Archaeological excavations have uncovered stupas, inscriptions, and monastic remains, affirming Rajgir's place as a prominent Buddhist center (Sharma, 2016).

Shravasti (Uttar Pradesh)- Shravasti holds immense significance in the Buddhist tradition, as Buddha spent 24 monsoon retreats (vassa) here. It was once the prosperous capital of the Kosala kingdom and is home to the famous Jetavana Monastery, donated by the wealthy merchant Anathapindika. Excavations at Shravasti have revealed ancient inscriptions, seals, and sculptures, providing insights into monastic life and Buddhist practices. The findings affirm the city's historical importance as a spiritual and commercial hub during the early Buddhist period (Singh, 2018).

Kapilvastu (Uttar Pradesh)- It is widely regarded as the birthplace of Prince Siddhartha, who later became the Buddha. The site contains extensive ruins of ancient monasteries, stupas, and palaces that align with descriptions from Buddhist texts. Recent excavations have unearthed terracotta figurines, pottery, and inscriptions, strengthening the identification of the site as ancient Kapilvastu. These discoveries have contributed to a deeper understanding of the social and political structures that shaped early Buddhism (Ghosh, 2019).

Vaishali (Bihar)- It's the place where Buddha delivered his last sermon before attaining Mahaparinirvana. It was the seat of the Vajji Republic and played a crucial role in early Buddhist development. The Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, topped with a single lion capital, is one of the best-preserved Mauryan inscriptions and signifies the site's importance. The Second Buddhist Council was held in Vaishali, making it a center of Buddhist doctrine and monastic discipline. Excavations have uncovered coins, inscriptions, and sculptures, shedding light on Vaishali's historical and religious contributions (Mehta, 2020).

Ratnagiri (Odisha)- It was a major Buddhist center and played a key role in the spread of Vajrayana Buddhism. The site features an extensive monastic complex with large stupas, votive stupas, and intricately carved Buddha images. The discovery of bronze and stone sculptures, including depictions of Buddhist deities like Tara and Avalokiteshvara, highlights the site's artistic and religious significance. (Tripathi, 2017).

Lalitgiri (Odisha)- It is renowned for its relic caskets, which were discovered inside a large stupa, containing bone fragments believed to be associated with Buddhist monks. Lalitgiri, along with Ratnagiri and Udayagiri, forms the "Diamond Triangle" of Buddhist heritage in Odisha. The findings indicate that it was an important center for Buddhist learning and religious activities, linking it to ancient trade routes (Panda, 2021).

Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh)- Sanchi, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is home to the Great Stupa, one of the most significant monuments of early Buddhist architecture. The site is renowned for its intricately carved gateways that depict Jataka tales of Buddha's previous lives. Excavations at Sanchi have also revealed monasteries, inscriptions, and smaller stupas that highlight the site's role as a major Buddhist pilgrimage center for centuries (Mitra, 2001).

Ajanta Caves (Maharashtra)- The Ajanta Caves, carved into a horseshoe-shaped cliff, consist of 30 rock-cut structures. These caves primarily served as monastic retreats for Buddhist monks and are famous for their vibrant murals and frescoes that illustrate various episodes from the life of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The paintings depict remarkable details of contemporary life, court scenes, and devotional imagery. The caves played a crucial role in spreading Mahayana Buddhist traditions (Spink, 2006).

Ellora Caves (Maharashtra)- A rock-cut cave complex, that stands out for its religious diversity, comprising Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain structures built between the 6th and 10th centuries CE. Among the 34 caves, Cave 10, known as the Vishvakarma Cave, features a grand *chaitya* with a towering seated Buddha statue. It remained an active religious site throughout history, reflecting the coexistence of multiple religious traditions in Ancient India. Its architectural sophistication is evident in its multi-storied monastic complexes and elaborate sculptures (Gokhale, 2017).

Nalanda (Bihar)- Nalanda was one of the World's first residential universities and a major center for Buddhist learning from the 5th to 12th centuries CE. Excavations at Nalanda have uncovered monastic complexes, stupas,

temples, and a vast library known as Dharmaganja. It was an international hub for Buddhist scholars, hosting visitors like the Chinese travellers Xuanzang and Yijing. Archaeological evidence has provided valuable insights into the curriculum, and architectural advancements of this institution (Balasubramaniam, 2018).



Figure 2. Central Archaeological Sites of the Buddhist Era (Generated Image)

Bodh Gaya (Bihar)- It is the most sacred Buddhist site, as it marks the place where Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and became the Buddha. The Mahabodhi Temple, initially built by Emperor Ashoka, has undergone multiple restorations, the latest being during the Pala period. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the temple is adorned with intricate carvings and features a massive central stupa. Archaeological excavations have revealed votive stupas, inscriptions, and terracotta sculptures, reaffirming Bodh Gaya's long-standing religious significance (Fogelin, 2015).

Lumbini (Nepal, close to India)- Lumbini, located in present-day Nepal, is revered as the birthplace of Buddha. Excavations have uncovered ancient monastic ruins, ritual bathing ponds, and stupas dating back to the 3rd century BCE. Lumbini's significance was further established by the rediscovery of its sacred markers by archaeologists in the 19th century. The site remains crucial in tracing the early history of Buddhism and its expansion across Asia (Cunningham et al., 2013).

3. ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENTS IN BUDDHIST INDIA

Buddhist India witnessed remarkable architectural developments, including stupas, rock-cut caves, and monasteries. The Great Stupa at Sanchi (3rd century BCE) exemplifies early stupa design, while Caves showcase intricate murals and sculptures. Monastic universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila highlight the evolution of Vihara architecture (Dutt, 1962; Spink, 2006). It can be broadly classified into four sub-categories-

3.1. Stupas- Symbol of Buddha's Teachings

Stupas were originally burial mounds that evolved into Buddhist monuments. These structures enshrine relics of the Buddha and prominent monks. Major Stupas were Sanchi Stupa (Madhya Pradesh), which was built by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, later expanded by the Satavahanas; Bharhut Stupa (Madhya Pradesh) which is a 2nd century BCE structure with elaborate stone railings and carvings, now preserved in museums and Amaravati Stupa (Andhra Pradesh), built by the Satavahanas, known for its sculptural panels depicting the Buddha's life.

3.2. Rock-Cut Caves- Monastic Retreats:

Early Buddhist monks sought refuge in natural caves, which later evolved into elaborate rock-cut monasteries. These caves were adorned with murals, sculptures, and stupas. The major rock-cut Buddhist caves of India stand as remarkable testaments to ancient architectural and artistic achievements, reflecting the evolution of Buddhist monastic life. The Ajanta Caves are renowned for their exquisite fresco paintings, which illustrate episodes from the Jataka tales and scenes from Buddha's life, showcasing a sophisticated use of natural pigments and shading techniques (Spink, 2006). The Ellora Caves, distinct for their religious diversity, contain Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain paintings, with the Vishvakarma Cave housing an awe-inspiring Chaitya hall (Gokhale, 2017). The Karle Caves are significant for possessing one of the largest and best-preserved Chaitya halls, with intricately carved pillars and a grand stupa at its center (Dhavalikar, 1984). Another crucial monastic site, the Kanheri Caves, serves as a vital center for Buddhist learning and housing numerous inscriptions, stupas, and viharas (Shimada, 2013).

3.3. Viharas- Monasteries for Monks:

Viharas, originally built as residential quarters for Buddhist monks, played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism and later evolved into prominent centers of learning that attracted scholars from across Asia. Among the most renowned was Nalanda University in Bihar, which became a hub for Buddhist studies, drawing intellectuals like Xuanzang and Yijing from China, and housing an extensive library containing manuscripts on philosophy, science, and medicine (Balasubramaniam, 2018). Another major institution, Vikramashila University, established by the Pala dynasty, specialized in Buddhist philosophy, logic, and tantric studies, further contributing to the development of Vajrayana Buddhism (Dutt, 1962). These monastic institutions not only served as centers for spiritual growth but also played a vital role in preserving and disseminating Buddhist teachings and intellectual traditions across Asia.

3.4. Buddhist Prayer Halls (Chaityas)

These were long, vaulted spaces housing stupas for worship. The Karle Chaitya Hall is a prime example, featuring intricately carved pillars and a grand stupa. Similarly, Ajanta Cave 19 showcases elaborate rock-cut architecture with sculpted facades (Spink, 2006; Dhavalikar, 1984).

4. BUDDHIST ART AND ICONOGRAPHY

Buddhist art evolved over centuries, transitioning from early Aniconic representations to Anthropomorphic depictions.

4.1. Aniconic Phase (Pre-1st Century CE)

This phase of Buddhist art avoided direct human depictions of Buddha, instead representing him symbolically through stupas, Dharmachakra (wheel of Dharma), lotus flowers, and footprints. This artistic tradition is evident in the **Sanchi Stupa** and Bharhut sculptures, dating back to the Mauryan and early Satavahana periods (Cunningham, 1879). These carvings depict key events from Buddha's life using symbolic imagery, such as an empty throne for enlightenment or a bodhi tree for his awakening. This phase reflects early Buddhist teachings, emphasizing non-material representations of the spiritual journey (Huntington, 1985).

4.2. Anthropomorphic Phase (1st Century CE Onwards)

This marked a significant shift in Buddhist art, as Buddha began to be depicted in human form. Under the Kushan Dynasty (1st to 3rd century CE), particularly during King Kanishka's reign, Buddhist iconography flourished, leading to the creation of lifelike sculptures (Dhar, 2014). Two major artistic schools emerged: Gandhara Art, influenced by Greco-Roman styles, featured Buddha with wavy hair, draped robes, and deep carvings, as seen in sculptures from

present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan (**Boardman, 1993**). In contrast, Mathura Art in Uttar Pradesh, India, developed a more indigenous style, portraying Buddha with a robust physique, simplified robes, and a spiritually serene expression, reflecting Indian sculptural traditions (**Huntington, 1985**).

5. Decline of Buddhism in India and challenges in preservation

During the 8th to 12th Century CE, Buddhism expanded and flourished beyond India, influencing cultures, especially in Central Asia, China, Southeast Asia, and Japan. However, its decline in India was driven by multiple socio-religious and political factors. One major reason was the revival of Hinduism, particularly through the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion to deities like Vishnu and Shiva. This movement, along with royal patronage from Gupta and later Rajput rulers, led to a resurgence of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, reducing Buddhist influence (**Thapar, 2002**). Additionally, Hinduism began integrating Buddhist elements, with Buddha being recognized as an incarnation of Vishnu, leading to a gradual assimilation of Buddhist traditions into mainstream Hindu practices (**Dutt, 1962**). This religious shift weakened Buddhism's institutional presence in India, as many former Buddhist centers of worship transitioned into Hindu temples and pilgrimage sites (**Figure 3**).

The final drive to Buddhism in India came with the Turkish invasions in the 12th century CE, which led to the large-scale destruction of Buddhist monasteries, particularly Nalanda and Vikramashila (**Eaton, 2000**). These centers of learning, which had flourished for centuries, were burned down, causing the displacement of Buddhist monks and scholars. Many of them migrated to Tibet, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, contributing to the growth of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in these regions (**Gokhale, 1994**). While Buddhism declined in its birthplace, its teachings continued to thrive beyond India, influencing religious and philosophical traditions across East and Southeast Asia. Despite its decline, remnants of Buddhist heritage still exist in India through archaeological sites, inscriptions, and cultural practices that preserve its historical significance.

Preserving India's Buddhist heritage faces numerous challenges, with many historical sites suffering from neglect, urban encroachment, and environmental damage. Weathering, pollution, and inadequate conservation efforts have led to the deterioration of stupas, monasteries, and cave temples. Additionally, looting and illegal excavations pose a major threat, as valuable antiquities are often smuggled out of the country, leading to an irreversible loss of cultural heritage. The destruction and theft of Buddhist relics diminish the historical and spiritual significance of these sites, making their protection an urgent priority.

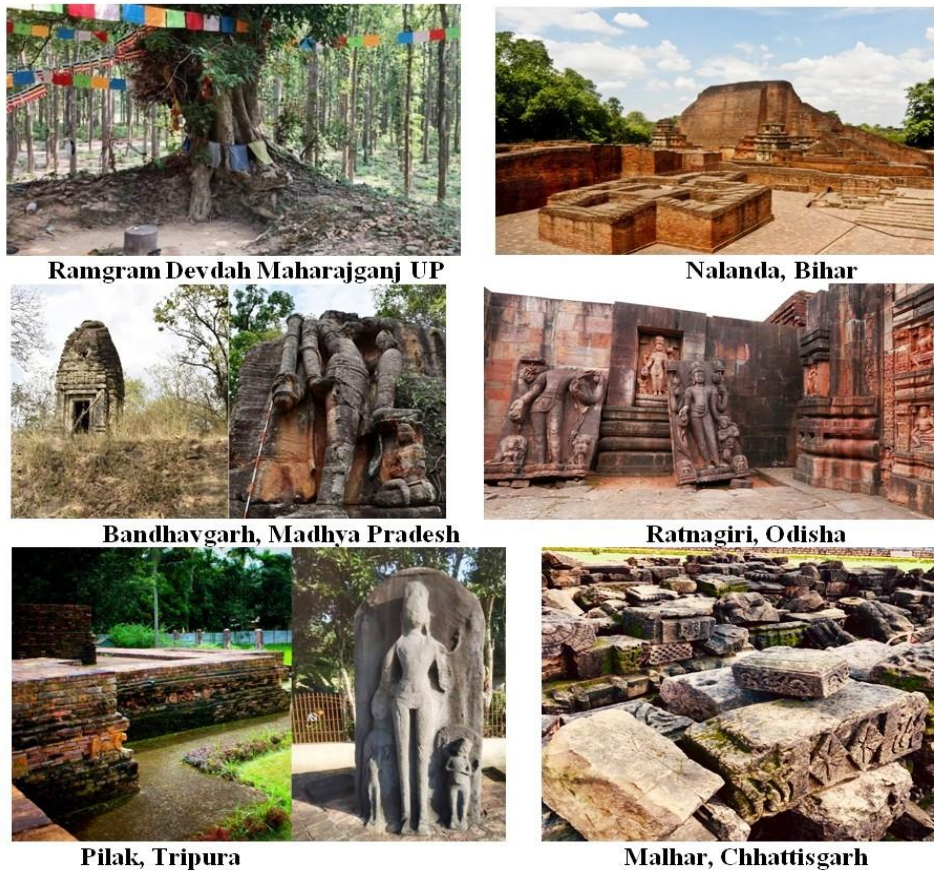


Figure 3. Remnants of Buddhist Archaeology in India

Another significant challenge is the lack of sufficient funding and research. Compared to Western nations, archaeological research in India receives relatively less financial support and international attention, limiting large-scale excavations and conservation efforts. Furthermore, the rapid pace of modern development and infrastructure projects sometimes threatens important heritage sites, as urban expansion takes precedence over conservation. Balancing economic growth with the need to protect India's Buddhist legacy remains a key challenge for archaeologists, historians, and policymakers. Increased funding, stricter laws against artifact smuggling, and greater public awareness are essential for ensuring the long-term preservation of these invaluable historical treasures.

6. REDISCOVERY OF BUDDHIST SITES AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Many Buddhist sites in India remained lost to time until their rediscovery by British and Indian archaeologists in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Buddhist era (6th century BCE to 12th century CE) is one of the most significant periods in Indian archaeology, marking the rise and spread of Buddhism across the subcontinent. This era saw the construction of grand monastic sites, stupas, and cave temples, many of which have now been excavated and studied.

Modern excavations and technological advancements continue to reshape historical narratives. Sites like Rakhigarhi and Keezhadi suggest even older civilizations and extensive cultural exchanges. Cutting-edge techniques such as satellite imaging, LiDAR, and DNA analysis are revolutionizing archaeological interpretations, providing insights that were previously inaccessible. Additionally, government and private organizations are actively promoting heritage tourism and conservation efforts, ensuring that India's rich Buddhist legacy is preserved for future generations. These initiatives not only safeguard historical sites but also encourage a deeper appreciation of India's diverse cultural heritage.

Several key Buddhist sites in India were rediscovered during the 19th century. The Sanchi Stupa, was rediscovered in 1818 by British officer General Taylor, bringing attention to its intricate carvings and historical significance. Similarly, the Aurangabad Caves, renowned for their exquisite Buddhist frescoes, were accidentally found in 1819 by British officers during a hunting expedition. Another major discovery was Nalanda University was excavated in the

19th century by archaeologists Alexander Cunningham and Hirananda Shastri. These discoveries played a crucial role in reviving interest in India's Buddhist past and preserving its archaeological heritage.

7. Diverse Heritage: A Window into the Past

India's rich and diverse archaeological heritage offers a profound glimpse into its long and continuous history. From prehistoric times to the grandeur of the Mughal era, India's archaeological sites provide invaluable insights into its cultural, artistic, and historical evolution. India's archaeological wealth is a testament to one of the world's oldest and most continuous civilizations. With remnants of human activity spanning thousands of years, the country is home to some of the most significant archaeological discoveries. From prehistoric tools and rock art to medieval forts and palaces, India's historical landscape offers a fascinating narrative of human advancement.

Prehistoric sites like Bhimbetka rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh, adorned with ancient cave paintings, provide evidence of early human settlements and artistic expression. The evolution of civilization in India can also be traced through the megalithic structures found in the Deccan Plateau, revealing early burial practices and social organization. Moving forward in history, the grand temples of South India, the architectural wonders of the Mughal period, and the colonial remnants of European influence further enrich the nation's archaeological diversity.

7. CONCLUSION

India's archaeological heritage is a profound reflection of its historical depth, cultural diversity, and artistic excellence. From the earliest urban settlements of the Indus Valley Civilization to the intricate rock-cut caves and grand Buddhist stupas, each site reveals a unique chapter in the subcontinent's past. The study of inscriptions, coins, and architectural remains provides valuable insights into India's dynamic linguistic, economic, and social transformations. Archaeological research continues to play a crucial role in uncovering these historical narratives, reinforcing India's position as a land of ancient wisdom and unparalleled heritage.

The Buddhist era, in particular, has significantly shaped Indian archaeology, leaving behind an extraordinary legacy of monastic complexes, stupas, and viharas that reflect the evolution of Buddhist thought and artistic traditions. Key sites such as Sarnath, Bodhi Gaya, Nalanda, and Ajanta provide invaluable evidence of Buddhism's influence on education, philosophy, and artistic development. Rajgir, Shravasti, Vaishali, and Ratnagiri further illustrate the spread and transformation of Buddhist traditions across different regions of India. The architectural advancements during this period, including chaityas and monastic universities like Nalanda and Vikramshila, highlight India's ancient contributions to global education and intellectual discourse.

Buddhist art evolved from early aniconic representations to detailed anthropomorphic depictions, with notable contributions from the Gandhara and Mathura schools. The Gandhara school, influenced by Greco-Roman styles, and the indigenous Mathura tradition collectively shaped the artistic dynamism of ancient India. The integration of Buddhist and Hindu elements at sites like Ellora and Ajanta further underscores India's religious pluralism and cultural syncretism. Despite the decline of Buddhism in India due to the resurgence of Hinduism and foreign invasions, its legacy continued to flourish in Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia, demonstrating the far-reaching influence of Indian culture and thought.

With advancements in archaeological research, modern techniques such as carbon dating, satellite imaging, LiDAR techniques, and DNA analysis have further enriched our understanding of India's past. These technological innovations enable archaeologists to uncover new dimensions of ancient trade routes, societal structures, and cultural practices, offering fresh perspectives on the subcontinent's extensive history. The continued study of Indian archaeology not only deepens our knowledge of the past but also fosters a greater appreciation of the cultural and historical roots that have shaped modern India.

The preservation and promotion of India's archaeological heritage are vital to safeguarding its historical narrative for future generations. Government initiatives, academic research, and international collaborations play a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of these sites. As archaeological exploration progresses, sustained conservation efforts will ensure that India's rich and diverse history remains accessible and appreciated worldwide.

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