

## 6. Saranath Heritage Plaque Revision – Art& Culture

As UNESCO team arrives, ASI to rewrite history on Sarnath plaque, credit Benares ruler's family over British. India is correcting the historical record at Sarnath by crediting local ruler Raja Jagat Singh, instead of the British, for the site's rediscovery. This decolonization of heritage is a crucial step in India's official bid for Sarnath's UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination.

### ASI Corrects Historical Narrative at Sarnath ahead of UNESCO Bid

In a significant move to decolonize historical narratives, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is set to install a new plaque at the holy Buddhist site of Sarnath. This new plaque will credit Raja Jagat Singh, an 18th-century local ruler, for his crucial role in the site's preservation and rediscovery, a role historically attributed to British archaeologists. This initiative is a key part of India's official proposal to get Sarnath listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the 2025–26 cycle.

### The Historical Journey of Sarnath

Sarnath, located near Varanasi, is one of the most sacred sites in Buddhism. Its history is a long saga of glory, destruction, and rediscovery.

Time Period	Key Event / Development
<b>528 BCE</b>	Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) delivers his first sermon, "Dharmachakrapravartana" (Turning of the Wheel of Dharma), establishing the foundation of Buddhism.
<b>c. 268–232 BCE</b>	Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire erects magnificent stupas, monasteries, and the iconic Ashokan Pillar. The Lion Capital from this pillar is later adopted as the National Emblem of India.
<b>12th Century CE</b>	The site is sacked by the forces of Qutb-ud-din Aibak, leading to its eventual abandonment and centuries of neglect.
<b>1793–94</b>	Raja Jagat Singh of Banaras initiates excavations at the Dhamek Stupa, uncovering a significant relic casket.
<b>1799</b>	British official Jonathan Duncan reports on the findings at Sarnath.
<b>1836</b>	Alexander Cunningham, a key figure in Indian archaeology, conducts further excavations.
<b>1904–05</b>	F.O. Oertel leads the first systematic and large-scale excavation, unearthing 476 architectural and sculptural relics and 41 inscriptions in a single season.
<b>2025–26 Cycle</b>	India officially proposes Sarnath for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list, after a 27-year wait on the tentative list.

### Reclaiming the Legacy of Raja Jagat Singh

The correction of the plaque aims to restore the historical credit due to Raja Jagat Singh, whose role has been misunderstood for centuries.

**Identity and Role** – Also known as Babu Jagat Singh, he was a prominent 18th-century administrator in Banaras. He held control over several *parganas* (districts), including Shivpur, which encompassed the area of Sarnath.

**The 1794 Excavation** – In 1793–94, he began excavating the Dhamek Stupa, primarily to source building materials for a new market in Banaras being named after him.

**Significant Discoveries** – During this excavation, his team discovered a crucial relic casket containing bones, pearls, and gold leaves. While these relics were later ritually immersed in the Ganges, their discovery was a pivotal moment in bringing Sarnath back to public consciousness. The stupa even became locally known as the "Jagat Singh Stupa."

**Colonial Misrepresentation** – Over time, colonial and subsequent historical narratives portrayed him as a vandal who was merely plundering the stupa for bricks. This narrative overshadowed his instrumental role in the site's rediscovery and preservation.

**Modern Recognition** – Recent research, notably by the Jagat Singh Raj Pariwar Shodh Samiti, has

clarified his contributions. The ASI's decision to install a corrected plaque acknowledges his pioneering role and aligns with the decolonization of India's historical heritage, a key theme in the UNESCO nomination.

## Significance and Implications of the Move

The decision to change the plaque is more than a historical correction; it has wide-ranging implications across various domains.

Domain	Implication / Significance
<b>Polity &amp; Governance</b>	It represents a conscious assertion of indigenous credit over colonial narratives in the management of national heritage. It also strengthens India's cultural diplomacy by presenting an authentic, decolonized history to global bodies like UNESCO.
<b>Economy</b>	Achieving a UNESCO World Heritage tag would provide a massive boost to tourism, particularly for the Buddhist circuit. It would attract global investment in heritage management and local infrastructure.
<b>Society</b>	The move strengthens Buddhist identity and reinforces the importance of heritage preservation. It also corrects colonial-era historiography, promoting a sense of local ownership and pride in history.
<b>Global/IR</b>	It enhances India's soft power through Buddhist heritage diplomacy, strengthening ties with Buddhist-majority nations in Southeast and East Asia.

## A Critical Analysis

While the move is widely seen as positive, a balanced analysis reveals its core message, potential blind spots, and underlying dilemmas.

**Core Message** – The central theme is the transition from crediting colonial archaeologists to recognizing indigenous figures. It emphasizes historical continuity and the role of local actors in the rediscovery and preservation of heritage.

**Counter-Arguments / Missing Dimensions** – The discourse largely overlooks the present-day conservation challenges at Sarnath, such as air pollution, urban encroachment, and the pressures of mass tourism. It does not sufficiently acknowledge the role of contemporary Buddhist communities in the site's preservation and spiritual upkeep. There is a lack of detail on how the nomination will meet UNESCO's stringent evaluation criteria, including authenticity, integrity, and the site management plan.

**Ethical/Political Dilemma** – The initiative highlights a key dilemma – the necessity of rewriting plaques to correct the colonial legacy versus the risk of introducing political overtones into the process of assigning historical credit.

## Conclusion

The act of recognizing Raja Jagat Singh's contribution over that of colonial archaeologists is a powerful statement of reclaiming and asserting indigenous ownership of India's heritage. This correction strengthens the narrative for Sarnath's UNESCO nomination. If successful, the UNESCO listing will not only boost tourism and global recognition but also provide a crucial impetus for the sustainable management and preservation of this invaluable historical site, ideally with greater involvement from local communities.

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