

2. India's Buddhist Civilisational Legacy – History

PM Modi inaugurated the Grand International Exposition of Sacred Piprahwa Relics, titled “The Light & the Lotus- Relics of the Awakened One”, in New Delhi, marking the return of sacred Buddhist relics to India after more than a century

Piprahwa Relics- Discovery, Significance and Legal Status

Discovery and Archaeological Context – The Piprahwa relics were discovered in 1898 by William Claxton Peppé, a British civil engineer, during excavations at Piprahwa. The relics were excavated from the Piprahwa Stupa, which many archaeologists identify with Kapilavastu, the capital of the Sakya clan and traditionally regarded as the birthplace of Gautama Buddha. The stupa is considered one of the earliest Buddhist stupas, likely constructed soon after the Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha.



Nature and Composition of the Relics

The Piprahwa findings include

1. Bone fragments believed to be mortal remains of the Buddha.
2. Soapstone and crystal reliquary caskets.
3. A large sandstone coffer.
4. Offerings such as gold ornaments, beads, pearls, and semi-precious gemstones.

These offerings reflect early Buddhist funerary practices and the veneration of relics (śarīra) in Buddhism.

Epigraphic Evidence and Authenticity – One of the most critical discoveries was an inscription in Brahmi script on a reliquary casket. The inscription explicitly states that the relics belong to the Buddha and were deposited by the Sakya clan, lending strong epigraphic support to their authenticity. This makes Piprahwa one of the most important archaeological confirmations of early Buddhism.

Legal Status and Current Custody – In 1899, most of the relics were transferred to the Indian Museum, Kolkata. They are classified as ‘AA’ antiquities under Indian law, which means–

1. Sale, export, or removal is strictly prohibited.
2. They are subject to the highest level of legal and cultural protection.

Some bone relics were historically gifted to the King of Siam (Thailand) for enshrinement, while a small portion remained with Peppé’s descendants, leading to later ethical and diplomatic debates on cultural heritage.

Civilisational and Cultural Significance

The Piprahwa relics serve as

1. Tangible evidence of the historicity of the Buddha.
2. Proof of early Buddhist political and social organisation, especially the role of clans like the Sakyas.
3. A cornerstone for India’s claim as the cradle of Buddhism, reinforcing cultural diplomacy with Buddhist-majority countries.

Major Schools of Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism – Emphasises individual liberation (Arhat ideal) through strict monastic discipline. Relies primarily on the Pali Canon (Tipiṭaka). Predominantly practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Focuses on meditation practices such as Vipassana.

Mahayana Buddhism – Centres on compassion (karuṇā) and the Bodhisattva ideal, where enlightenment is postponed to help others. Introduces a wider philosophical corpus, including concepts like Śūnyatā (emptiness). Spread across China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Encouraged adaptability and inclusiveness, aiding Buddhism's global spread.

Vajrayana Buddhism – A later development incorporating tantric rituals, mantras, mandalas, and esoteric practices. Seeks rapid enlightenment through guided initiation. Practised mainly in Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, and the Himalayan regions of India. Integrates Mahayana philosophy with ritual symbolism.

Core Philosophical Foundations of Buddhism

Four Noble Truths

1. Dukkha- Existence is characterised by suffering, impermanence, and dissatisfaction.
2. Samudaya- The origin of suffering lies in tanhā (craving) driven by ignorance.
3. Nirodha- Liberation from suffering is possible through the cessation of craving.
4. Magga- The Noble Eightfold Path is the means to attain liberation (Nirvana).

Noble Eightfold Path

1. Wisdom (Prajñā)- Right Understanding, Right Intention.
2. Ethical Conduct (Śīla)- Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood.
3. Mental Discipline (Samādhi)- Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.
4. The path represents a holistic framework combining ethics, meditation, and wisdom.

Relevance of Buddhism in the Contemporary World

Mental Health and Well-being – Buddhist meditation practices such as Vipassana and mindfulness are globally used to address

1. Stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout.
2. Emotional regulation in high-pressure professional environments.

Many modern psychological therapies draw directly from Buddhist techniques.

Ethical Response to Consumerism – Teachings of non-attachment (aparigraha) and impermanence challenge

1. Excessive materialism.
2. Status anxiety and social comparison amplified by digital culture.

Encourages contentment and inner balance.

The Middle Way– Advocates a balanced approach between sensory indulgence and extreme asceticism. Highly relevant for sustainable living, work-life balance, and public policy debates.

Compassion and Social Harmony – Core values of karuṇā (compassion) and mettā (loving-kindness) promote

1. Social justice and empathy.
2. Peaceful coexistence in conflict-prone and unequal societies.

Influences non-violent movements and ethical leadership models.

Inclusive and Universal Appeal – Buddhism does not emphasise dogma or exclusivism. Its experiential and rational approach makes it compatible with

1. Scientific inquiry.
2. Democratic and pluralistic societies.

Enhances India's soft power and cultural diplomacy, especially with East and Southeast Asia.

Source- <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/pm-modi-inaugurates-international-exposition-of-sacred-piprahwa-relics-in-new-delhi/>

