

The Buddha's Journey



BUDDHIST CACHE

I. The Birthplace of the Buddha



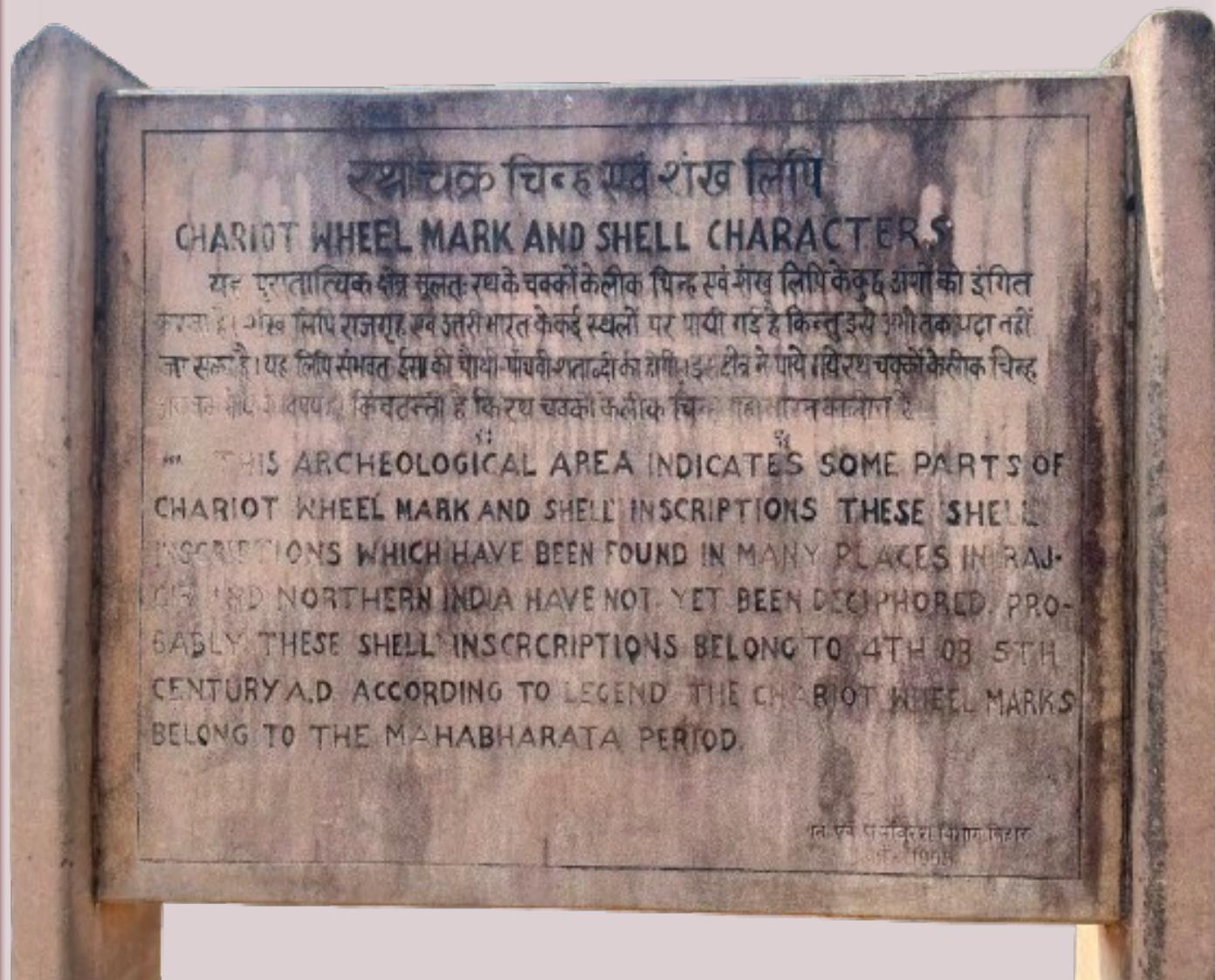
Lumbini, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on Nepal's southern Terai plain, is revered as the birthplace of the Buddha. According to inscriptions and Buddhist texts, Queen Māyā gave birth to Siddhārtha Gautama here in 623 BCE. Emperor Ashoka visited in 249 BCE, erecting the sandstone pillar that confirms the site and granted tax relief for its upkeep. Kushan and Gupta rulers later built stupas and cloisters admired by Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang, but the complex was lost to silt and forest until its rediscovery in 1896 and subsequent conservation.

At the heart of the Sacred Garden, the Maya-devi Temple shelters the nativity marker-stone, ancient brick shrines, and the sacred Puskarini Pond. Nearby stand Ashoka's inscribed pillar, a central canal, the World Peace Pagoda, and a Global Monastic Zone of over thirty international monasteries created under architect Kenzo Tange's 1978 master plan.

Recognized as one of Buddhism's four supreme pilgrimage sites, Lumbini preserves an unbroken record of devotion and remains a major destination for millions of visitors, who now arrive via Gautam Buddha International Airport as conservationists work to protect its fragile landscape.



2. The Chariot Wheel Marks



The Shri Krishna Chariot Wheel Marks on the rocky northern slope of Rajgir in Bihar feature two perfectly parallel grooves about nine metres long and 25 cm deep, long linked to the Mahābhārata legend of Krishna racing to aid the Pāndavas. Archaeologists note that heavy carts or quarrying may have begun the scoring during Magadha's early historic period, while a cluster of ornate shell-character (Śankhalipi) inscriptions carved nearby between the 4th and 6th centuries CE ties the site to Gupta-era pilgrimage culture. Shallow palm-shaped hollows, venerated as Krishna's handprints, add a tactile dimension to the sacred outcrop, which is now protected by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Far to the north, Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu is Nepal's largest spherical stupa and a key centre of Tibetan Buddhism. First founded in the Licchavi era (5th–6th century CE) and rebuilt after 14th-century Mughal raids, it became a vibrant Tibetan enclave after 1959, with more than fifty surrounding monasteries. Its white dome, 36 m high and encircled by 108 prayer wheels, is crowned by thirteen gilded tiers and the Buddha's all-seeing eyes. A UNESCO World Heritage monument since 1979, Boudhanath remains a major pilgrimage site and a symbol of community resilience, restored by local monastic groups after the 2015 earthquake.

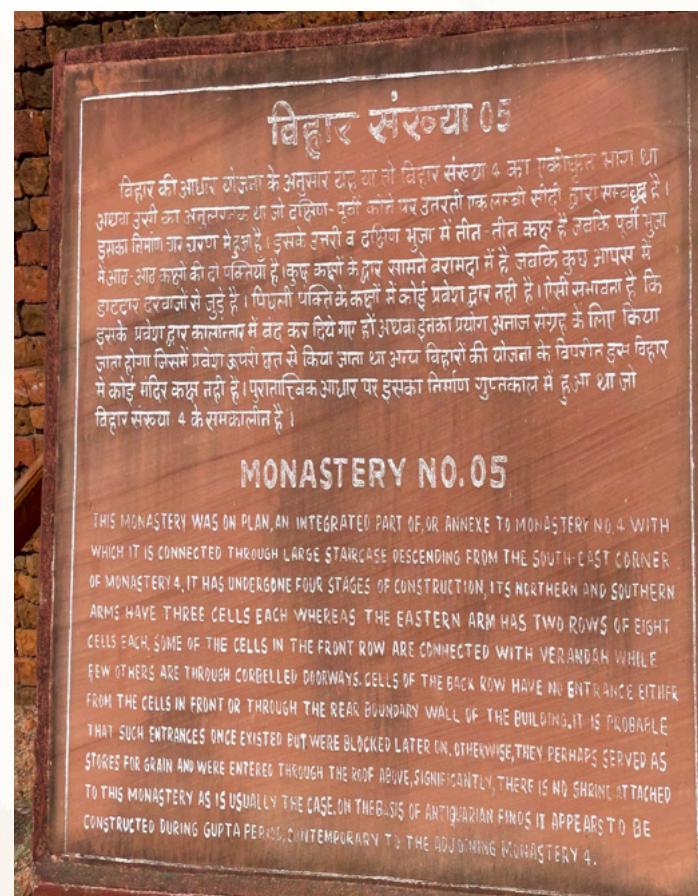
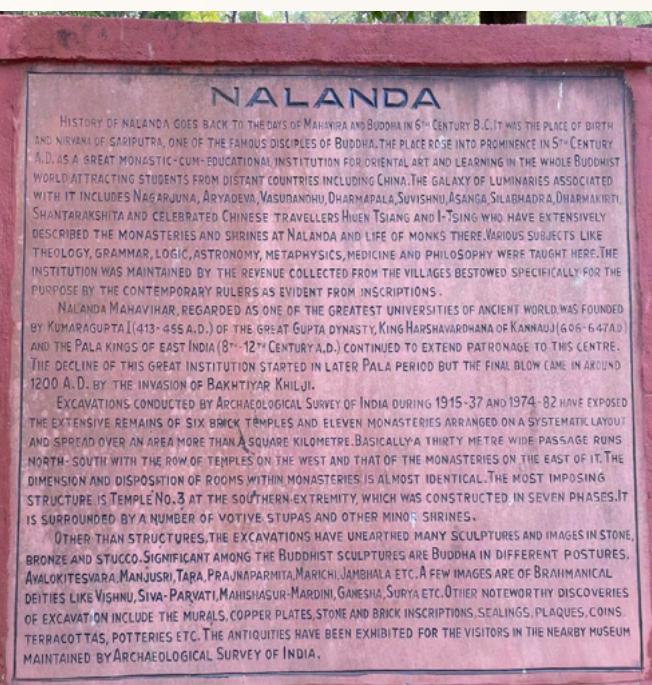


3. Nalanda Mahavihara

Nalanda Mahavihara in Bihar, about 80 km southeast of Patna, was among the world's earliest great universities. Founded in the mid-5th century CE under Gupta patronage and thriving for seven centuries—especially under the Pāla rulers—it grew into a 23-hectare campus of brick monasteries, temples, and multi-storeyed libraries renowned across Asia. Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang and Yijing described thousands of scholar-monks pursuing advanced Buddhist and scientific studies.

The site's striking layout featured parallel rows of monasteries and red-brick stupas with finely carved images, while the famed Dharmaganja library reportedly held hundreds of thousands of manuscripts. Nalanda became the chief center of Mahayana Buddhist learning and shaped later institutions like Vikramashila and Odantapurī before its destruction in 1200 CE by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji. Recognized by UNESCO in 2016, its international, residential model anticipated Europe's medieval universities and inspires the modern Nalanda University founded nearby in 2014.

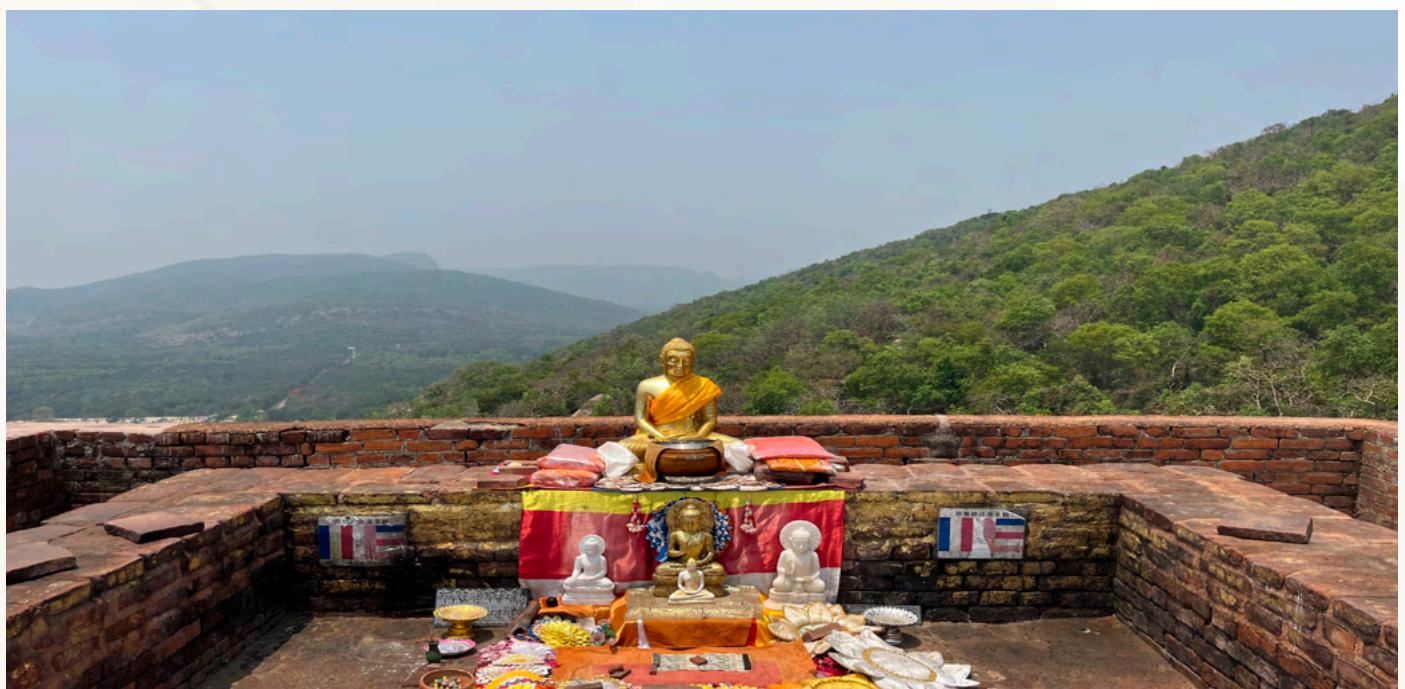


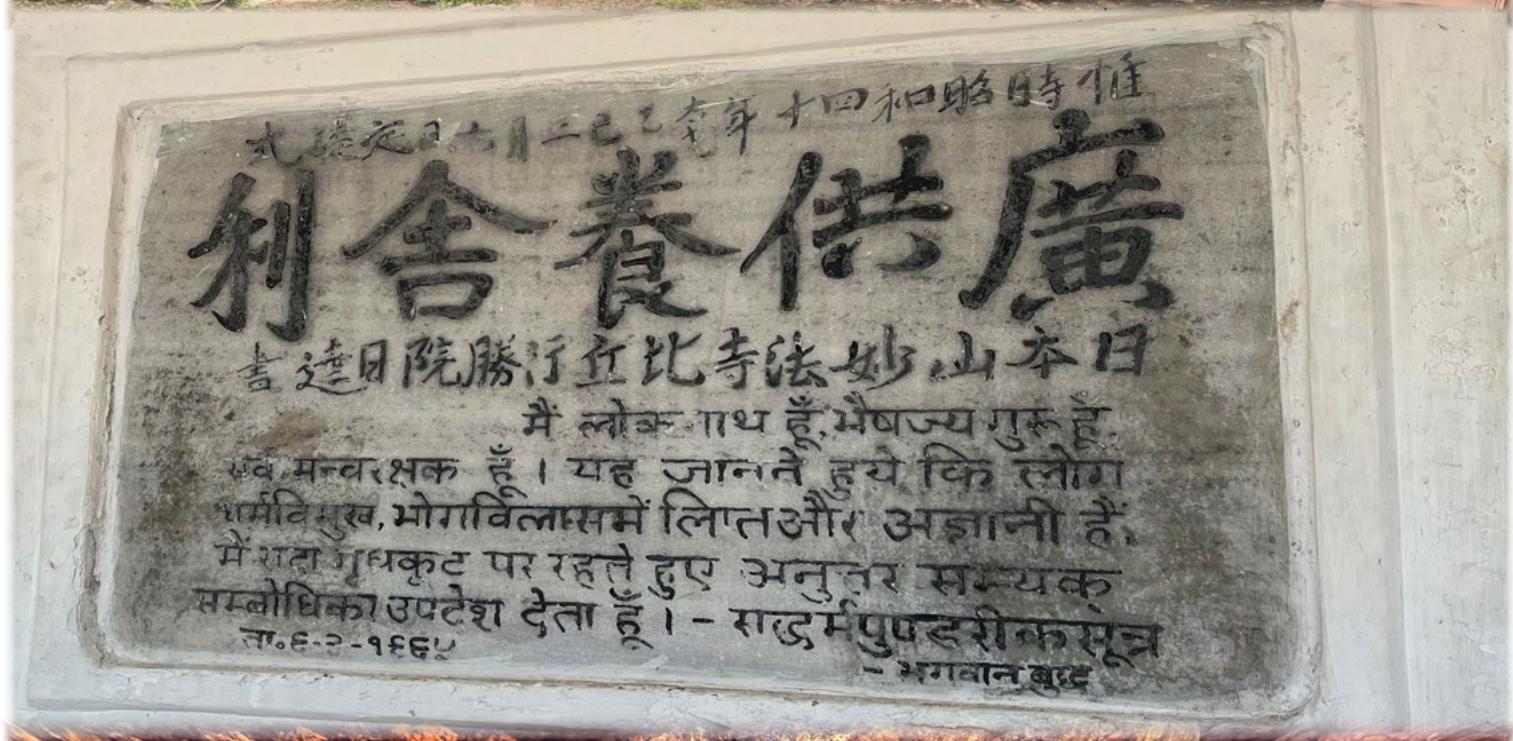


4. Brahmayoni Temple



Brahmayoni Temple rises above the southern edge of Gaya in Bihar, about a kilometre from the Vishnupad Temple and twelve kilometres from Bodh Gaya. Named for a natural rock fissure revered as the yoni of Brahmā, it has long been sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. According to tradition, the Buddha delivered his famed Fire Sermon (Ādittapariyāya Sutta) here around 528 BCE to a thousand fire-worshipping ascetics, all said to have attained enlightenment. Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang noted the site in the 7th century, and Maratha patron Balaji Pandit rebuilt the hill-top shrine in the 18th century.







The climb of roughly 423 steep stone steps—soon to be supplemented by a proposed ropeway—is itself a devotional act, leading to panoramic views of the Phalgu valley. Pilgrims pass through the narrow rock-cut yoni fissure for ritual purification and visit summit shrines and caves, including a five-headed image of Brahmā and bare terraces believed to be the Buddha’s preaching platform. Protected today as a State-Protected Monument, Brahmayoni remains a key stop on the Bodh Gaya circuit, illustrating Gaya’s enduring blend of Hindu and Buddhist traditions while balancing conservation with growing pilgrimage tourism.

5. Pragbodhi Cave



Pragbodhi—literally “Before Enlightenment”—is a rugged hill about 12 km northeast of Bodh Gaya where Prince Siddhartha is said to have practiced extreme asceticism for nearly six years. Tradition holds that after receiving milk-rice from Sujata at the hill’s base, he rejected self-mortification and set out for Bodh Gaya, shaping the Middle Way that defines Buddhism. Chinese pilgrim records and Pāla-era sources mention meditation caves and summit stupas, traces of which still dot the ridge.

Today visitors climb steep stone paths to the Mahakala Caves, where a striking “Fasting Buddha” statue captures Siddhartha’s emaciated form. From the summit’s ruined brick stupas, the Mahabodhi Temple is visible across the plain, visually linking the struggle for insight with the site of awakening.



Recent improvements—trails, visitor facilities, and a planned rope-way—highlight Pragbodhi’s growing role in the Bodh Gaya pilgrimage circuit and its enduring message of balance over extremes.

6. Sujata Temple



Sujata Temple, in Bakraur village across the Phalgu River from Bodh Gaya, commemorates the moment when the village girl Sujata offered milk-rice to a starving Prince Siddhartha. Re-energized, he embraced the Middle Path and soon attained enlightenment. Archaeological finds suggest a commemorative stupa was first built here in the late Mauryan–early Shunga era (2nd century BCE), later expanded through the Gupta and Pāla periods, with an inscription of King Devapāla attesting to continued royal support.

The site features an 11-meter-high double-terraced brick stupa with sockets for a lost wooden railing and four cardinal aya-ka platforms. A 20th-century whitewashed temple beside it displays reliefs of Sujata's offering and a "Fasting Buddha," linking myth and doctrine. Protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, Sujata Temple highlights the pivotal act of compassion that shaped Buddhism's Middle Way and offers rare evidence of early lay and female patronage in the Ganges plain.

