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MODERN ISSUES IN THE STUDY AND PRESERVATION OF BUDDHIST HERITAGE

This paper addresses the challenges in identifying and preserving Buddhist heritage, emphasizing the complexities of iconography, script decipherment, and site encroachment, transformation. Case studies from India and Nepal illustrate these issues.

Keywords: Buddhism, heritage, history, preservation, encroachment, transformation.

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СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ И СОХРАНЕНИЯ БУДДИЙСКОГО НАСЛЕДИЯ

В статье рассматриваются проблемы идентификации и сохранения буддийского наследия, подчеркивая сложность иконографии, расшифровки письменности и вторжения на территорию, трансформации. Иллюстрацией этих проблем служат примеры из Индии и Непала.

Ключевые слова: буддизм, наследие, история, сохранение, вторжение, трансформация.

Introduction

Buddhism, one of the oldest religions in the world, has profoundly shaped entire civilizations through its teachings and philosophies, which continue to resonate across time. Emerging in the 6th century BCE with the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha, Buddhism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding human aspirations and achieving spiritual liberation. Its influence extends far beyond spiritual and religious realms, providing invaluable insights into the culture, society, and way of life of ancient times. The legacy of Buddhism is enshrined not only in its profound philosophical texts but also in its extensive archaeological evidences including Stupas, Sanghaaram, Mahaviharas, Chaityas, Temples, Caves, Carvings, Relics, Sculptures, Images, Seal & sealings, Tablets, Decorated railings and bricks, Ashokan Pillars and Rock edict etc.

However, studying Buddhism's archaeological heritage presents challenges. Many significant sites remain unexplained due to factors like interpreting findings is complex due to the intricate iconography of Buddhist art and the diverse languages of inscribed texts. The challenges in correctly identifying Buddhist images and sculptures, as well as deciphering and translating ancient scripts, further hinder accurate historical interpretation. The following issues are discussed in this paper to highlight the current problems of studying and preserving Buddhist heritage. These include the conversion of Buddhist sites to other religious sects, which often leads to the loss of original artifacts and the alteration of

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historical contexts. Encroachment on these sites threatens the integrity and preservation of invaluable archaeological evidence. Additionally, the transformation of Buddha into a local deity complicates the identification and interpretation of Buddhist iconography. These issues highlight the urgent need for an international platform where Buddhist scholars can collaborate, share knowledge, and develop strategies to protect and preserve this Invaluable Ancient Buddhist heritage.

Challenges in Identifying Buddhist Images and Sculptures

Working on Buddhist archaeological sites, especially those of significant historical and religious importance presents unique challenges. After the excavation of the site, researchers often encounter difficulties in interpreting the findings. The iconography of Buddhist art, for instance, is rich and complex, with symbols and motifs that evolved over centuries and across different cultures. Understanding these artistic representations requires not only expertise in art history but also a deep knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and mythology. One of the most significant challenges faced by Scholars working on Buddhist sites is the identification of images and sculptures other than those of the Buddha. Buddhist art is rich and varied, encompassing a wide range of deities, bodhisattvas, and symbolic representations. Each of these figures has specific iconographic attributes that distinguish them from one another.

Case study: Mogalmari Buddhist Archaeological site, West Bengal, India



For instance, at the Mogalmari Buddhist Archaeological site, researchers have encountered problems in identifying various Buddhist icons and sculptures. While the depiction of the Buddha is generally well understood due to his distinct iconographic features, other figures such as bodhisattvas or protective deities may not be as easily recognizable. These figures often have specific attributes, postures, and symbols associated with them, which may be eroded or missing due to the site's age and condition. Misidentifying these figures can lead to incorrect interpretations of the site's historical and religious significance.

Challenges in Script Decipherment and Translation

In addition to iconographic challenges, deciphering and translating scripts found at archaeological sites is another significant hurdle. Buddhist inscriptions inscribed on seals, tablets, are often written in ancient languages and scripts, such as Pali, Sanskrit, or regional dialects, using scripts that may no longer be in common use. Deciphering these scripts requires not only linguistic expertise but also a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context in which they were written. Incorrect decipherment can lead to misunderstandings of the inscriptions' meanings, resulting in the loss of valuable historical and religious information. Accurate interpretation of these texts is crucial for understanding the site's history, the messages conveyed by its inhabitants, and its role in the broader Buddhist tradition.

Inadequate Preservation and Conservation of Buddhist Sites

Proper preservation and conservation of Ancient Buddhist Sites are crucial to safeguarding the rich heritage and historical significance of Buddhism. Many Buddhist sites are not preserved adequately and receive minimal care, resulting in their gradual degradation. India is home to numerous Ancient Buddhist sites, many of which date back to 3rd century BC and hold immense historical and cultural value. However, a significant number of these sites are not well-preserved, leading to their deterioration. As a result, these sites suffer from neglect and are vulnerable to both natural and human-induced damage.

Case Study: Lauriya Nandangarh Stupa, Bihar, India



The Lauriya Nandangarh Stupa, located in the West Champaran district of Bihar, is a substantial and historically significant site. This large stupa, believed to date back to the Mauryan period, has not been fully excavated, leaving much of its historical value unexplored and unprotected. Despite some efforts to safeguard it, the site faces numerous threats due to local practices such as cattle grazing, playing cards, and drinking liquor at the Stupa mound. These activities not only compromise the site's physical integrity but also disrespect its cultural and religious significance.

The Conversion of Ancient Buddhist site by establishing newly built Shiva Lingas - The Case of Nigrodhha Aaram, Kudan, Nepal

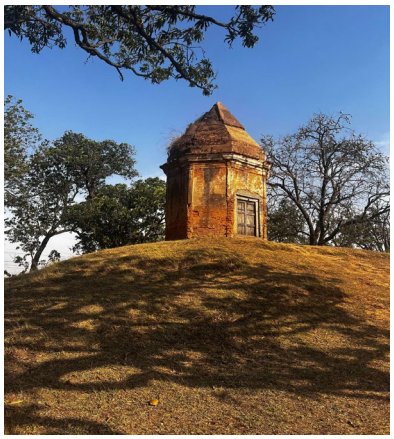


Nigrodhha Aaram, located 2.5 kilometers south of Taulihawa in Nepal, is a significant site in the life of the Buddha. It is famously known as the place where Buddha's stepmother, Mahaprajapati Gautami, welcomed him for the first time after his enlightenment and presented him with a chivar (robe). The site is also notable for being where King Suddhodhan Shakya, Buddha's father, built a large vihara to meet his son post-enlightenment.

In recent times, Nigrodhha Aaram has witnessed a significant transformation. The vihara now houses a newly built Shiva linga on top of it. This conversion reflects broader patterns of religious and cultural changes in the region, where Buddhist sites have been repurposed or assimilated into Hindu traditions. The conversion alters the original identity

and purpose of the site. Nigrodhha Aaram's transformation from a Buddhist vihara to a site dedicated to Shiva worship changes the narrative and historical context, leading to a potential loss of its significance in Buddhist history. The construction of new religious symbols over ancient stupas can result in the loss of invaluable archaeological evidence.

Preservation Challenges and Encroachment at the Kudan Stupa, Nepal



The Kudan stupa, located in Kudan, Nepal, holds significant historical and religious importance as it is traditionally associated with Rahula, the son of the Buddha. The stupa is believed to be linked with Buddha's family and their early interactions following his enlightenment. However, the site faces substantial preservation challenges due to encroachment, specifically the construction of a Hindu temple over the stupa. This development complicates efforts to study and excavate the site further, presenting significant issues for historical research and conservation.

Misidentification of Buddhist Artifacts as Shiva Lingas in Indian Museums

The accurate identification and presentation of historical artifacts are crucial for preserving cultural heritage and ensuring public understanding of the past. However, in many Indian museums, there have been instances where Buddhist votive stupa, excavated from an ancient buddhist site, clearly adorned with images and sculptures of the Buddha, have been incorrectly labeled as Shiva lingas by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). This misidentification not only misleads the public but also represents a significant mismanagement of cultural heritage at the governmental level. The transformation of Buddhist votive stupas into Shiva lingas has been a trend observed in several Buddhist historical sites across South Asia.

Instances of Misidentification: Case Study of Vaishali Museum, Bihar, India



Several museums across India have exhibited Ancient artifacts that were incorrectly identified by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Buddhist votive stupas, which are small, often intricately carved structures containing images of the Buddha, have been mislabeled as Shiva lingas. These misidentifications have been observed in various state and national museums, leading to widespread dissemination of incorrect historical information. The museum at Vaishali, a significant Buddhist site associated with the life of Buddha and the location of the Second Buddhist Council, presents a troubling issue of misrepresentation. Despite Vaishali's deep historical and religious connections to Buddhism, the museum inaccurately labels artifacts. For instance, a clearly visible votive stupa is misleadingly identified, contributing to false information about its origins and significance. This mislabeling undermines the

educational and cultural value of the museum, distorting the true history of Vaishali and its pivotal role in Buddhist heritage.

Absence of On-Site Museums at many Buddhist Sites

One of the significant challenges in the preservation of Ancient Buddhist heritage is the absence of museums at excavated sites. The lack of on-site museums at these locations means that excavated artifacts are often stored hundreds of kilometres away, making it difficult for visitors and researchers to study and gain proper insight into the history and cultural significance of these sites. Several Buddhist sites in India exemplify these challenges. For instance, Bodh Gaya, where Buddha attained enlightenment, attracts thousands of pilgrims and tourists annually. However, many artifacts excavated from this site are housed in a museum at Patna, far from Bodh Gaya, limiting the ability of visitors to fully engage with the site's historical artifacts. Similarly, the ancient university of Nalanda, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has numerous artifacts that are kept in museums far from the excavation site. This separation diminishes the overall understanding and appreciation of sites historical and educational significance.

The Significance and Preservation Challenges of Ashokan Pillars in Buddhist History

The Ashokan pillars, erected by Emperor Ashoka during the 3rd century BCE, are crucial to understanding Buddhist history. Ashoka, a prominent patron of Buddhism, played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings across the Indian subcontinent and beyond. These pillars, inscribed with edicts and commemorations, mark important sites associated with the life of Buddha and the spread of Buddhism. However, the preservation of these historical artifacts faces significant challenges, as evidenced by following case studies.

Preservation Challenges: Case Study of the Gotihawa Pillar, Nepal



The Ashokan pillar at Gotihawa, located in Nepal and associated with the birthplace of Buddha Krukachandda, serves as a poignant example of the preservation challenges faced by these historical monuments. During a recent visit to Gotihawa, it was observed that parts of the Ashokan pillar had been damaged and broken into pieces. Local residents reported that the broken fragments of the pillar had been moved to a nearby Hanuman temple. In this new context, the fragments are venerated as a Shiva linga, with local devotees applying oil to them and performing rituals.

Conversion of the Ashokan Pillar at Sravasti Purvaram Mahavihar, India



Sravasti, an ancient city of great significance in Buddhist history, is renowned for its association with the Buddha's life, particularly his monastic activities. The site includes the Purvaram Mahavihar, a prominent monastery where the Buddha is said to have spent several rainy seasons. An Ashokan pillar, erected by Emperor Ashoka, stands as a testament to the historical and religious importance of Sravasti. However, the pillar's misidentification and repurposing as a Shiva linga by local communities exemplify broader issues in the preservation and interpretation of historical artifacts. Such practices can lead to the deterioration of the artifact's integrity and its loss as a Buddhist historical source.

Encroachment and Repurposing of the Ashokan Stupa and Pillar, Tamralipta, West Bengal, India.

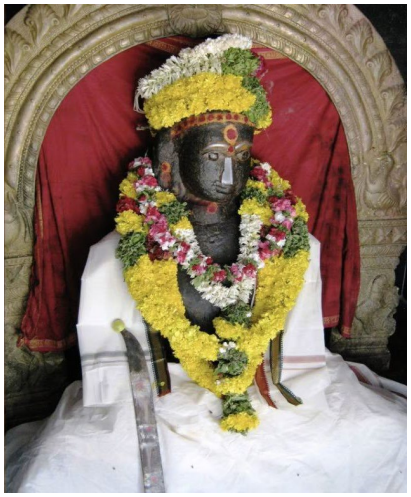


Tamralipta, an ancient site located in the Tamluk region of West Bengal, holds significant historical value as it was an important centre during the reign of Emperor Ashoka. Ashoka, a pivotal figure in the propagation of Buddhism, erected a notable pillar and a large stupa at Tamralipta to commemorate the site's importance. However, contemporary developments have raised concerns regarding the preservation and proper identification of these historical structures. Specifically, a Hindu temple has been constructed on top of the stupa, and the broken Ashokan pillar has been repurposed, with its lion capital now displayed atop the temple. This situation highlights ongoing challenges in preserving and accurately representing Buddhist historical artifacts. The transformation of the Ashokan pillar into a religious object in a different context removes it from its original historical and archaeological setting. This loss of context can obscure the pillar's true significance and hinder scholarly research and public education about its historical importance.

Transformation of Buddha into a Female Local Deity

A more subtle yet pervasive challenge is the transformation of Buddha into a local deity. In various regions, the ancient sculptures of the Buddha have been transformed into local religious and cultural contexts, sometimes resulting in the Buddha being worshipped as a local deity rather than as the historical figure central to Buddhism. It's not uncommon for Buddhist monasteries to be repurposed as local religious temples. Over the years, numerous sculptures of the Buddha have been transformed to represent local goddesses or other deities, often with makeup and modifications that obscure their original identities. For example, Buddha statues are sometimes modified with the application of makeup or additional features, making them any local deities instead of their original form and named as Mundeshwari mata, Teliya Baba, Surya Dev etc.

Case Study of Thalaivetti Muniyappan Temple, Tamil Nadu, India



In August 2022, the Madras High Court ruled that the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology must take over a temple in Salem where a Buddha statue is being worshipped as Thalaivetty Muniappan, a Hindu Deity. This is not one case This trend is particularly unfortunate for the historical legacy of Buddhism. Such alterations represent a significant loss, not only to the authentic history of Buddhism but also to the original cultural practices of India. These changes present a considerable challenge for Buddhist scholars, who are tasked with preserving the factual study and the genuine heritage of Buddhism. When original Buddhist symbols and structures are altered, the unique aspects of Buddhist heritage are at risk of being lost. This not only impacts the physical artifacts but also the intangible cultural practices, rituals, and traditions that are integral to Buddhism. It erases critical aspects of history and cultural practices, creating a complex challenge for scholars dedicated to maintaining the authenticity of Buddhism's legacy.

Conclusion: Risks to Ancient Buddhist Heritage

The authentic representation of Buddhist history is essential for understanding its philosophy, teachings, and influence on society. For scholars and historians, the challenge lies in documenting and safeguarding the original aspects of Buddhism. The conversion of sites to other sects, encroachment, and the transformation of Buddha into a local deity, all contribute to the erosion of Buddhist historical evidence. This erosion not only impacts the physical preservation of sites and artifacts but also hinders scholarly research and public understanding of Buddhism's rich historical legacy. The cumulative effect of all these challenges places Ancient Buddhist heritage sites at great risk. Establishing a platform for Buddhist scholars to exchange knowledge and collaborate would significantly enhance the accuracy and depth of research in Buddhist archaeology and history. By addressing these challenges collectively, the academic community can ensure that the rich heritage of Buddhism is preserved and accurately interpreted, providing valuable insights into the history and culture of ancient Buddhist societies.



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