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Premium

From Ashokan times to now, Sanchi to Europe, story of the Great Stupa

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The East Gate of the Sanchi Stupa during the process of its restoration, c.1910. Replicas of the gate became famous in Europe after casts were made. (Wikimedia Commons)

==External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday stopped by the replica of the East Gate of Sanchi's Great Stupa standing in front of Humboldt Forum museum in Berlin.==

The ornate red sandstone gateway, which was unveiled in December 2022, is a 1:1 reproduction of the original structure standing at almost 10 metres high and 6 metres wide, and weighing roughly 150 tonnes.

The Great Stupa of Sanchi

==A stupa is a Buddhist commemorative monument usually containing sacred relics of the Buddha or other venerable saints. The archetypal stupa is a hemispherical structure, whose origins can be traced to pre-Buddhist burial mounds found in India.==

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The Great Stupa of Sanchi exemplifies this form. Commissioned in the third century BCE by Emperor Ashoka, it is the largest and oldest structure in a complex of Buddhist monuments comprising numerous other stupas, temples, and monasteries. The most recent construction in Sanchi can be dated to as late as the twelfth century CE.

"Sanchi is unique not only in its having the most perfect and well-preserved stupas but also in its offering a wide and educative field for the study of the genesis, efflorescence and decay of Buddhist art and architecture [in India]," Debala Mitra, the director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1981 to 1983, wrote in Sanchi (1957).

The Great Stupa is one of the oldest standing stone structures in India, believed to have been built over the Buddha's relics. Its construction was overseen by Ashoka's wife Devi, who hailed from the nearby trading town of Vidisha. The development of the Sanchi complex was supported by patronage from Vidisha's mercantile community.

Gateways of the Great Stupa

While the original stupa itself is a rather plain hemispherical structure crowned by a chhatra (parasol), what makes it instantly recognisable are the ornamental gateways or toranas that stand in front of it.

The four toranas, oriented to the four cardinal directions, were constructed in the first century BCE, likely within a few decades of each other during the reign of the Satavahana dynasty.

These gateways are made of two square pillars which support a superstructure comprising three curved architraves (or beams) with spirally-rolled ends. The pillars and the architraves are adorned with beautiful bas relief and sculptures depicting scenes from the Buddha's life, stories from the Jataka Tales, and other Buddhist iconography.

"The art impresses greatly by its rhythm, symmetry, decorative beauty and perfect handling of the floral and plant motifs… They even admitted flagrantly amorous scenes on their sacred monuments, which do not fit in with Buddha's teachings," Mitra wrote. The gates do not, however, represent the Buddha in his human form, as was the norm in the period of their construction.

The toranas and the balustrade surrounding the Great Stupa were once painted.

The East Gate and its replica

In Europe, the East Gate is the most famous of the Sanchi toranas. There is a historical reason behind this.

The Sanchi complex was in abject ruins when it was "discovered" by British officer Henry Taylor in 1818. Alexander Cunningham, who later founded the ASI, led the first formal survey and excavations at Sanchi in 1851. The site was restored to its present condition by ASI director-general John Marshall in the 1910s with funding from the begums of nearby Bhopal.

Till restoration work began in the late ninteenth century, however, Sanchi was frequently ravaged by treasure hunters and amateur archaeologists, some of whom

wanted to take its gates to Europe. They were unable to do so, and had to make do with plaster casts instead.

The East Gate was cast in plaster by Lieutenant Henry Hardy Cole for the Victoria and Albert Museum in the late 1860s. Multiple copies of this cast were later made, and displayed across Europe. The latest Berlin replica too traces its origin to this original cast.

According to the website of the Humboldt Forum, "A plaster cast of the original gate, purchased from London, was on display in the entrance hall of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin from 1886. A cast of this preserved copy was made of artificial stone in 1970…"

This is what was used for the Humboldt Forum replica, with 3D scanning, modern robots, skilled German and Indian sculptors, and enlarged photos of the original torana for aid.

The upper architrave of the gate represents the seven Manushi Buddhas (previous Buddhas, with the historical Buddha being the latest incarnation). The middle architrave depicts the scene of the Great Departure, when prince Siddhartha leaves Kapilavastu to live as an ascetic in search of enlightenment. The lower architrave depicts Emperor Ashoka visiting the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Other decorative elements include the shalabhanjika (a fertility emblem represented by a yakshi grasping the branch of a tree), elephants, winged lions, and peacocks.

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