



BUDDHIST CENTRES IN TELANGANA – A STUDY

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Buddhism in Telangana

Buddhism is a religion and dharma that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to the Buddha. Buddhism originated in India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, from where it spread through much of Asia, whereafter it declined in India during the middle ages. Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars: Theravada (Pali: "The School of the Elders") and Mahayana (Sanskrit: "The Great Vehicle"). Buddhism is the world's fourth-largest religion, with over 500 million followers or 7% of the global population, known as Buddhists. Telangana could emerge as the new address for Buddhism in the country if nearly 25 unexplored Mahastupas, Viharas and Chaityas spread across the State are brought to light. These explored and unexplored sites give a deep understanding about Buddhist activity during ancient times. The excavated sites revealed rich stories from the past which indicated the prevalence of trade relations, lifestyle and excellent craftsmanship.

Most of these are found to be in a dark-red ware, black and red ware, red ware, black polished ware, tan ware and pale red ware. Buddhism, started from a village Badankuri in Nirmal District between 2 Godavari rivulets in 5th Century BC. Gradually as Lord Budha propagated its teachings it spread to Kotilingala in Jagityal district, Dhulikatta in Peddapalli district, Phanigiri in Suryapet district, Nelakondapalli in Khammam district, Karukonda in Bhadradi Kothagudem district, Nagarjunakonda in Nalgonda district and then to Andhra and Maharashtra.

The various Buddhist sites include Kotilingala, Munulagutta, Dhulikatta, Pashigam, Tambalapalli, Geesukonda, Kondapur, Panigiri, Tirumalagiri, Nagaram, Chada, Wadamankota, Gopalayapalli, Yeleswaram, Nelakondapally, Mudigonda, Chaitanyapuri, Karukonda, Tummalagudem, Nagaram, Aravapalli, Mahuru, Kolanupaka, Bekkallu and Nagarjunakonda.

According to tourism officials, these Buddhist sites have a great potential to be developed into tourist spots. The department is also trying to bring in more of Buddhist tourists, so that the sites get the required attention on the global platform. There are plans to initiate a Buddhist circuit so that the tourists could visit this place at a stretch. Former, ASI, deputy superintending archaeologist, K Venkateswara Rao said, "There are many unexplored Buddhist sites in Telangana, as Buddhism was widely spread till 5th century AD.

In Telangana there are mostly Sariraka stupas and Viharas, which are square shaped rooms where the monks used to stay. The Phanigiri and Nelakondapalli sites have Sariraka stupas where Lord Buddha's ashes were found during the excavations. The other stupas which are likely to be traced are Paribhogika stupas which are built on ashes of Lord Buddha's disciple's and Uddesika stupas where Buddha visited during his journey.

In the ancient days, Karimnagar, Nizamabad were known Asmaka Desam where Buddhism prevailed, so there are high chances of finding more Buddhist sites in these regions during the future excavations." Sharing his views, State Archaeology official, who preferred anonymity, said, "Telangana has always been a place for Buddhists and there have been many traces of Buddhist sites in the State which date back to 1st and 2nd centuries. Driven by conviction, scores in Telangana have started walking along the eight-fold path or Ashtanga Marg to pursue the Buddhist way of life. The path which stresses on pursuit of the right view, intension, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration, has found a record number of 750 followers distributed across the 20 Buddha Viharas in Hyderabad, only the previous year. And 300 of those who adopted the religion did so at a Buddha Sammelan, a massive gathering organised by the Buddhist society of India held at Nagarjunasagar of Nalgonda district in 2014.

Increasing enrolment in Ambedkarite organisations that follow Buddhism as a world view has directly contributed to improvement in the number of Buddhists. A sizeable population of those adopting Buddhism in Telangana are Ambedkarites who follow the ideology, life and teaching of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. "Following Dr. Ambedkar's teaching I set aside 25 per cent of my monthly salary to aid the propagation of Buddhism and also education among Dalits in the community," said M.B. Sudhakar, a Buddhist and deputy engineer at South Central Railway who started following Buddhism as early as in 1997.

8 Buddhist sites to be explored in Telangana

Eight new sites which are suspected to have stupas, viharas and aramas have been identified in Telangana state and a presentation has been made to the state archaeology department on Sunday. The new sites are in Dharmapuri, Makkatropet, Nerella, Sarangapur, Buddeshpalli, Donuru, Pochampalli and Dharmaram. The other sites in the state with a significant Buddhist presence are Kotilingala, Pashigam, Sthambampalli, Dhoolikatta, Phanigiri, Gajula Banda,

Tirumagiri, Nelakondapalli and Jaggaiahpetta. These sites have already been identified earlier and are listed with the government. Historian Dr S. Jaikishan explained, “Buddha’s Suttanipata mentions that where the river Godavari splits into two and meets again creating an islet is Badankurthi which is the present-day Adilabad. The spread of Buddhism began from here and early Buddhist influence has been recorded in this region. From here, Buddhism moved to Bodhan in Nizamabad and spread to the Telugu regions of South India.”

The new sites were identified from Buddhist literature and the presentation made to the government was required to get approval for the excavation of these sites. The road taken by Buddhism in South India is the pretext for this excavation process. The first stage of excavation of Phanigiri, which was earlier identified by the state archaeology department, has been completed. The team has found remains of viharas in this area. Due to this, the historians and archaeologists have asked for the second stage of excavation. This is to be taken up in the first week of December. After the completion of the excavation at these sites, the work on the other sites will also be taken up.

Buddhist Sites



.No	Buddhist site (Village)	Mandal	District
1	Amanagal		Suryapaet
2	Bekkallu	Jangoan	Jangoan
3	Bodhan	Bodhan	Nizamabad
4	Dilwarpur		Nirmal

.No	Buddhist site (Village)	Mandal	District
5	Gajulabanda (Eтуру)	Tirumalagiri	Suryapet
6	Gandharikota		
7	Kokkireni	Huzurnagar	Suryapet
8	Nagaram (Musi River Bed)	Valigonda	Yadadri Bhuvanagiri
9	Sthambampally	Velgatur	Jagityal

Buddhavanam: A Buddhist Heritage Theme Park in Telangana

Buddhavanam, located at Nagarjunasagar, Nalgonda District in Telangana state is a serene and spiritual destination that offers visitors a golden opportunity to connect with their inner selves and immerse themselves in the teachings of Buddhism.

Telangana Situated in the midst of lush greenery and surrounded by the peaceful sounds of nature, Buddhavanam is a place of tranquillity and contemplation. The entire project has been illuminated with monument-friendly dynamic lighting.

The word 'Buddhavanam' means 'The Forest of the Buddha' in Sanskrit, and this beautiful retreat lives up to its name. Situated in the midst of lush greenery and surrounded by the peaceful sounds of nature, Buddhavanam is a place of tranquillity and contemplation. The entire project has been illuminated with monument-friendly dynamic lighting.



In order to build the Buddhist Theme Park of Buddhavanam, the Telangana State Tourist Development Corporation (TSDTC) acquired 279 acres of land on the northern banks of the river Krishna near the Nagarjunasagar reservoir. The reservoir was created when a dam was built over the Krishna River. Throughout the third and fourth century AD, the Ikshvaku dynasty dominated Andhradesa, and the city of Vijayapuri (present-day Nagarjunakonda) served as the empire's capital. Nagarjunakonda was named after Acharya Nagarjuna, a well-known Buddhist scholar and Madhyamika philosopher of ancient times. Many different Buddhist sects had their monasteries, shrines, and stupas built in Nagarjunakondabuilt in that era to help spread the Dhamma.

One of the main attractions at Buddhavanam is the large Buddha statue that welcomes visitors upon their arrival here. This impressive structure, standing at a height of 27 feet, is one of the tallest Buddha statue in the state of Telangana

Between 1954 and 1960, archaeologists at Nagarjunakonda uncovered several Buddhist sculptures, panels, and artefacts, including a Maha Stupa, votive stupas, chaityas, silamantapas, and more. Brick Brahmanical temples and a royal complex were also among the uncovered buildings. The sculpture panels portrayed pivotal moments in Buddha's life and the Jataka tales. When the Nagarjunasagar reservoir threatened to flood these sites, they were relocated to Nagarjunakonda Island and the ferry terminal at Anupu on the Krishna's right bank. The island museum is open to the public and features displays of the recovered antiquities, including sacred Buddha relics.

One of the main attractions at Buddhavanam is the large Buddha statue that welcomes visitors upon their arrival here. This impressive structure, standing at a height of 27 feet, is one of the tallest Buddha statue in the state of Telangana. It is a magnificent sight to behold and is a symbol of the Buddhist teachings of peace, love, and compassion.



In addition to the Buddha statue, there are several other features at Buddhavanam that make it an ideal destination for those seeking a spiritual experience. The meditation hall is a quiet and calming space where visitors can practice mindfulness and learn techniques for inner peace and relaxation. The meditation hall is open to all, regardless of religion or background, and welcomes individuals of all ages.

TelanganaThe advent of Buddhism into Telangana is a fascinating tale which can be traced back to the lifetime of the Buddha as attested by the Parayanavagga and Suttanipata.

One of the most unique aspects of Buddhavanam is the opportunity to participate in a Vipassana meditation retreat. Vipassana is a technique that involves introspection and self-examination, with the goal of achieving a deeper understanding of oneself and the world around us. The retreats are typically 10 days long and are conducted in complete silence, allowing participants to focus entirely on their inner journey.



Apart from these attractions, the natural beauty of Buddhavanam is also a sight to behold. The surrounding forests and hills provide a breathtaking backdrop, making it an ideal destination for nature lovers and hikers. There are several walking trails around the centre that visitors can explore, taking in the sights and sounds of the local flora and fauna. The advent of Buddhism into Telangana is a fascinating tale which can be traced back to the lifetime of the Buddha as attested by the Parayanavagga and Suttanipata. According to these ancient texts, a Brahmin sage Bavari who was settled on an island called Kavittavana on the Godavari River in Nirmal district, dispatched his 16 disciples to Magadha to hear the teachings of the Buddha. They became followers of the Buddha. Pingiya, the chief disciple, brought Buddha's teachings back to Bavari and became an Arhant. Since then, Telangana witnessed all the three phases of Buddhism, that is, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, as seen at places like Kotalingala, Kambalapalli, Pashigaon, Dhulikatta, Phanigiri, Tirumalagiri, Wardhamanukota, Gajulabanda, Nelakondapalli, and Siri Parvata (Vijayapuri) or the present-day Nagarjunasagar region or Nagarjunakonda.

BUDDHAVANAM

TSTDC developed the Buddhist Heritage Theme Park of Buddhavanam at Nagarjunasagar to create awareness about Telangana's Buddhist heritage for both domestic and foreign tourists. Buddhavanam has many thematic segments depicting major events from the life of Siddhartha Gautama. The Jataka Park, for instance, depicts his previous birth stories. Other

attractions here include the Stupa Park with Miniature Stupas, Mahastupa, Buddhist Heritage Museum, Acharya Nagarjuna Statue on the ground floor of Mahastupa, a 27-foot-high replica of the Avukana Buddha Statue and a Dhamma Bell donated by the Government of Sri Lanka which is a first of its kind in India.



ENTRANCE PLAZA

The spectacular entrance plaza is a square having eight quadrants with four openings. All the quadrants are embellished with panels with relief sculptures depicting a variety of themes. These include asthamangala (eight auspicious) symbols, Buddha in iconic form, animals, birds, Bodhi tree, the central themes including Buddhapadas, pillar of fire carrying the crown(hair) of Siddhartha, Nagamuchilinda, worship of holy relic and Siddhartha carrying a mighty bow with an Ashoka Dharma Chakra on the pillar at the centre.

BUDDHA CHARITAVANAM (LIFE OF THE BUDDHA)

The principal attractions of this segment at the entrance of the park are depictions of the major events from the life of Siddhartha Gautama, like his birth, the four encounters, the Great Departure, the Enlightenment, the first discourse and the Mahaparinirvana (the Great Extinction). These are cast in bronze and there's a Buddhapada slab with asthamangala (eight auspicious) symbols carved in Palnadu lime stone.



JATAKAVANAM (BODHISATTVA PARK)

The Bodhisattva goes through several lives practicing dasaparamitas or ten perfections before he becomes the Buddha. The practice of ten perfections (dasaparamita) required for the Buddhahood are Dana (Generosity), Sila (Virtue), Kshanti (Patience), Virya (Courage), Dhyana (Concentration), Prajña (Wisdom), Tyaga (Renunciation), Satya (Truth), Karuna (Loving kindness) and Samata (Equanimity). Out of the 547 Jataka stories, 40 Jataka stories are illustrated here in Palnadu limestone in the Amaravati schools of art, based on the original sculptural panels of Amaravati, Phanigiri, Nagarjunakonda, Goli, Jaggayyapeta and Chandavaram Buddhist sites.

DHYANAVANAM (MEDITATION PARK)

A replica of the Avukana Buddha (27 ft high), donated by the Government of Sri Lanka is erected in the Meditation Park.



STUPAVANAM (MINIATURE STUPA PARK)

The replica's of the stupas of Karla (Maharashtra, India), Ajanta (Maharashtra, India), Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh, India), Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh, India), Mankiala (Punjab, Pakistan) and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), Kahu-jo-daro, Mirpur Khas (Pakistan), Boudhanath (Nepal), Topdarra (Afghanistan), Wat Mahathat Chedi (Thailand), Pardo Kaling Chorten (Tibet), Shwesandaw(Myanmar), and Gyeongju (South Korea) are replicated in smaller dimensions to present a glimpse of the Buddhist stupa architecture of India and Southeast Asia.



MAHASTUPA

The Mahastupa, the centre of attraction of the Buddhavanampark, is built according to the dimensions and architecture of the original Stupa of Amaravati, with a Vedika (drum), Dome (Anda) and a Harmika on its top. With a width of 42 metres and 21 metres in height, the stupa is embellished with sculptural panels of Buddhist themes on its drum and dome portions all around.

The ornate wall of the Mahastupa vedika is intricately carved with the scenes from the Buddha's life, important kings and patrons of Dhamma, the Dome portion is encased with sculptural panels depicting Buddhist symbols like the Stupa, the Vajrasana, Bodhi tree, pillar of fire and Jataka stories describing events from the life of the Buddha. The ground floor of the stupa houses the Acharya Nagarjuna Statue and a museum with a display of Buddhist sculptures and 100-year-old eye copies of the Ajanta frescoes and a conference hall.



VIRTUAL SKY VIEW INSIDE MAHASTUPA

The central stupa with a height of 25 feet has Panchadhyani Buddhas installed on all its eight sides. The Mahastupa's ceiling is decorated with lotus petals against a sky background. The circular dome reflects the natural sky effect on the inner concave curvature of the dome. The interior of the ceiling reflecting the sky with perforated trapezoidal panels, each different from the other and up to 2.5 metres in size, was designed exclusively to suit the overall design, considering the thermodynamics of the light and its effect that adds a special radiance. The lotus petals (960) and sky panels (528) are engineered and manufactured with German technology, a first-of-its-kind use in the world.



Buddhavanam has hosted several conferences and seminars themed on Buddhism over the years. In 2017, a two-day conference titled 'Global Celebrations on Buddhist Heritage of Telangana' was held at Hyderabad, followed by familiarisation tours of Buddhavanam. The conference saw participation from 32 foreign delegates from 16 countries and 31 delegates from different states of India besides 200 local delegates. A total of 28 presentations were made in the conference. A publication on the 'Buddhist Heritage of Telangana' was also brought out. In 2019, an International Seminar on Buddhist Archaeology called 'Telangana Bouddha Sangiti – 2019' was held at Hyderabad, followed by FAM tours of Buddhavanam. There were 8 foreign delegates from 8 countries and 16 delegates from different states of India besides 200 local delegates in attendance. A total of 22 presentations were made in the seminar. A publication titled 'Buddhist Archaeology in Telangana' and an Abstract on the International Seminar of 'Telangana BouddhaSangiti – 2019' was also published subsequently.

The Buddhavanam project was officially inaugurated on 14th May, 2022 followed by Buddha Jayanthi (Vaisakha Purnima) Celebrations on 16th May, 2022 with the participation of Buddhist Monks and Buddhists on a large scale. Special lectures were also organised on the occasion. The Buddhavanam Project organised Dhamma Diksha Divas on 14th October, 2022, duly illuminating the Mahastupa and entrance plaza in which a large number of Buddhist followers and the general public participated. The Buddhavanam Project also organised Dhamma Deepoosatavam on 25th October, 2022 duly illuminating the Mahastupa with 1,000 lamps lit by venerable Buddhist Monks. Apart from this, Buddhist Monks and dignitaries from Bhutan, Vietnam, Mongolia and Ladakh have visited Buddhavanam at different times.



The Buddhavanam Project with its unique attractions has bagged a few awards as well. Telangana Tourism has given it an award on the occasion of World Tourism Day 2022 for providing the best civic amenities and infrastructure to the tourists. Buddhavanam has also received the best documentary film award from the Public Relations Society of India. It has also bagged a prestigious International Award called 'Bhutan Bangladesh India and Nepal (BBIN) Tourism Mitra Award' in 2022 at Kolkata given by the Association of Buddhist Tour Operators (ABTO).

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