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## A Study of Sanchi Stupa

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study examines the relationship between political patronage and Buddhist architecture with special reference to Sanchi Stupa. Sanchi is not only a religious monument but also a political and cultural text through which the interaction between state power, religious authority, artistic production and public memory can be understood. The study investigates how rulers, dynasties, merchants, monks and local elites contributed to the growth of Buddhist architecture and how such patronage helped shape political legitimacy in ancient India. The central argument of this thesis is that Buddhist architecture at Sanchi developed through a continuous process of political support, religious devotion and social participation. Emperor Ashoka's patronage gave Sanchi its earliest imperial importance, while later Shunga, Satavahana and Gupta contributions expanded the monument into a complex religious and political centre. The study also explores the symbolic content of the Great Stupa, toranas, railings, Ashokan pillar and sculptural narratives. It argues that the architecture of Sanchi communicated political ideas such as moral kingship, dhamma, social order, unity, nonviolence and legitimacy. In the contemporary period, Sanchi continues to function as a symbol of Indian heritage, Buddhist diplomacy, national identity and global cultural memory. The study uses historical, analytical and interpretative methods and relies on secondary sources, inscriptions, archaeological evidence and heritage documents. It concludes that Sanchi Stupa represents one of the clearest examples of how religion and politics were interwoven in ancient India through architecture.

**Keywords:** Political Patronage, Buddhist Architecture, Sanchi Stupa, Ashoka

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The background of this study lies in the wider relationship between monuments, political authority and public memory in ancient India. Religious architecture was never limited to ritual worship alone; it created visible spaces where power, morality and community identity could be organized. Sanchi Stupa is especially important because it stands at the intersection of Buddhist devotion, Mauryan imperial policy, later dynastic patronage and modern heritage politics. The monument allows a Political Science study to move beyond texts and examine how authority was expressed through stone, space and artistic narrative. In this sense, Sanchi is both a sacred structure and a historical document.



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In political terms, background of the study shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Basham; Singh). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, background of the study should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of background of the study lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral, protective and socially beneficial. The study of this theme helps explain why Buddhist architecture became influential across ancient India and why Sanchi continues to be meaningful in debates on heritage, national identity and cultural diplomacy.

## 1.1 Concept of Buddhist Architecture

Buddhist architecture refers to the built forms created for Buddhist worship, memory, teaching and monastic life. Its major forms include stupas, chaityas, viharas, pillars, railings, gateways and later temples. Among these, the stupa was the earliest and most symbolic form. It began as a reliquary mound but gradually became a cosmic and political monument, expressing the presence of the Buddha, the continuity of dhamma and the collective devotion of patrons and pilgrims. In political terms, concept of buddhist architecture shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Brown; Huntington). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped



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## 1.2 Importance of Sanchi Stupa

Sanchi is historically significant because it represents one of the oldest and best-preserved Buddhist monumental complexes in India. The site includes stupas, pillars, monasteries, temples and sculptural gateways. Although Sanchi was not directly connected with an event in the Buddha's life, it developed into a major Buddhist centre because of its location, patronage and association with Ashoka. UNESCO describes the Sanchi group as an ancient Buddhist sanctuary that remained important for centuries, and the Archaeological Survey of India records its development from the Ashokan period through later dynasties. In political terms, historical importance of sanchi stupa shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Brown; Huntington).

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explain why Buddhist architecture became influential across ancient India and why Sanchi continues to be meaningful in debates on heritage, national identity and cultural diplomacy.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature is the foundation of any thesis because it locates the present study within existing scholarship. The literature on Sanchi is rich but scattered across archaeology, art history, Buddhist studies and political history. This chapter reviews the major contributions and identifies how the present work differs from earlier studies. The emphasis here is not only on what Sanchi looks like, but on how its architecture became meaningful through patronage, ideology and social participation. The section on Introduction is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, introduction shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dharma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Basham; Singh). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, introduction should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other.

For this thesis, the relevance of introduction lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral, protective and socially beneficial. The study of this theme helps explain why Buddhist architecture became influential across ancient India and why Sanchi continues to be meaningful in debates on heritage, national identity and cultural diplomacy.



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## 2.1 Studies on Buddhist Architecture

Studies of Buddhist architecture generally begin with the stupa as a reliquary and symbolic monument. Scholars have shown that the form of the stupa developed from early burial mounds into complex structures with railings, gateways, circumambulatory paths and sculptural programmes. Brown's account of Indian architecture explains the technical evolution of Buddhist forms, while Huntington places these forms within the larger artistic development of ancient India (Brown; Huntington). The architectural study of Sanchi shows that stone construction often preserved the memory of earlier wooden forms. The railings and gateways appear in stone but retain structural habits associated with wood. This continuity suggests that Buddhist architecture was not created in isolation; it absorbed earlier building traditions and transformed them into durable sacred forms. Such transformation itself has political significance because durable stone architecture turned religious memory into public and permanent authority. The section on Studies on Buddhist Architecture is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, studies on buddhist architecture shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Brown; Huntington). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, studies on buddhist architecture should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of studies on buddhist architecture lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral, protective and socially



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beneficial. The study of this theme helps explain why Buddhist architecture became influential across ancient India and why Sanchi continues to be meaningful in debates on heritage, national identity and cultural diplomacy.

### 3. ORIGIN AND GROWTH BUDDHISM

Buddhism originated in the sixth century BCE in the intellectual environment of the Gangetic plains. This period witnessed urbanization, new kingdoms, social change and questioning of older ritual practices. Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha, taught a path based on the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, non-attachment, compassion and ethical discipline. His teachings created a community that was open to different social groups and not dependent on Vedic ritual authority (Basham; Singh). The growth of Buddhism was helped by the organization of the sangha. Monks and nuns lived according to discipline, taught lay followers and moved across regions. Lay supporters gained religious merit by donating food, robes, residences and later monuments. This social arrangement created a strong connection between religious ideals and public patronage. The section on Origin and Growth of Buddhism is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, origin and growth of buddhism shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Basham; Singh). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, origin and growth of buddhism should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of origin and growth of buddhism lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old



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#### **4. EMPEROR ASHOKA AND BUDDHIST PATRONAGE**

Ashoka is central to any discussion of Buddhist patronage because he transformed the scale of Buddhist public presence. His edicts refer to moral conduct, tolerance, welfare and the duties of officials. These ideas show that Ashoka's support for Buddhism was connected with a broader project of ethical governance (Thapar; Nikam and McKeon). Sanchi reflects this transformation. The early stupa and pillar place Buddhist sacred memory within an imperial framework. Ashoka's patronage made the monument part of a political language in which conquest was replaced by dhamma as a measure of royal greatness.

The section on Emperor Ashoka and Buddhist Patronage is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, emperor ashoka and buddhist patronage shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Thapar; Nikam and McKeon). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, emperor ashoka and buddhist patronage should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of emperor ashoka and buddhist patronage lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral,



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## 5. ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF SANCHI STUPA

The architectural features of Sanchi include the hemispherical dome, harmika, chhatra, circumambulatory paths, stone railings, staircases and four elaborately carved toranas. These elements together create a sacred architectural system. The devotee approaches, enters, circumambulates and visually engages with narrative sculpture. The Great Stupa's design creates a sense of stability and centrality. Its circular form suggests completeness, while the gateways open the sacred space to the four directions. Architecturally, the monument combines simplicity of form with richness of symbolic detail (Brown; Marshall and Foucher). The section on Architectural Features of Sanchi Stupa is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization.

In political terms, architectural features of sanchi stupa shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Brown; Huntington). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, architectural features of sanchi stupa should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of architectural features of sanchi stupa lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral, protective and socially beneficial. The study of this



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## 6. BUDDHIST POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Buddhist political philosophy is not presented as a systematic theory of the state in the modern sense. It is expressed through ethical teachings about suffering, desire, compassion, non-violence and right conduct. These teachings have political implications because they define how rulers and subjects should act. The ideal ruler in Buddhist thought is one who governs with generosity, restraint and concern for welfare. Such ideas appear in stories of righteous kings and in Ashoka's dhamma policy. Sanchi becomes a material expression of this ethical-political philosophy. The section on Buddhist Political Philosophy is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, buddhist political philosophy shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Basham; Singh). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, buddhist political philosophy should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of buddhist political philosophy lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral, protective and socially beneficial. The study of this theme helps explain why Buddhist architecture became influential across ancient India and why Sanchi continues to be meaningful in debates on heritage, national identity and cultural diplomacy.



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## 7. PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION POLICIES

Preservation and conservation policies are necessary because ancient monuments are vulnerable to weather, tourism pressure, pollution and neglect. The Archaeological Survey of India has played a major role in preserving Sanchi and managing the site as a protected monument. Conservation is a political issue because it involves public funds, administrative decisions and national priorities. Protecting Sanchi means protecting not only stones and sculptures but also historical memory and cultural identity. The section on Preservation and Conservation Policies is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, preservation and conservation policies shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (“Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi”; Archaeological Survey of India). A close reading of Sanchi also reveals that patronage was not a single event. It was a continuous process involving emperors, regional rulers, guilds, merchants, monks, nuns and ordinary donors. This broad base of participation gave the monument a public character. It helped Buddhist institutions become socially embedded and politically visible. At the same time, the patrons gained association with a sacred and morally respected tradition. Thus, preservation and conservation policies should be understood as part of a larger political culture in which religion, economy and authority supported each other. For this thesis, the relevance of preservation and conservation policies lies in its capacity to connect material evidence with political thought. Sanchi is not simply an old monument preserved in stone; it is a record of how power tried to represent itself as moral, protective and socially beneficial. The study of this theme helps explain why Buddhist architecture became influential across ancient India and why Sanchi continues to be meaningful in debates on heritage, national identity and cultural diplomacy.



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## 8. CONCLUSION

The major conclusion is that political patronage played a decisive role in the formation of Buddhist architecture at Sanchi. Without patronage, the site may not have developed into a major monumental complex. Patronage provided resources, legitimacy and continuity. Another conclusion is that Sanchi represents a political model in which authority is linked with morality. The monument does not glorify violence; it expresses order, peace and ethical governance. The section on Major Conclusions is important because it clarifies a major dimension of the relationship between Buddhist architecture and political culture. In the context of Sanchi, this theme cannot be separated from the historical processes of religious devotion, dynastic authority, economic support and public communication. The monument developed over several centuries, and each phase added a new layer of meaning to its architectural and political identity. Therefore, the topic must be examined not only as a matter of art but also as a question of legitimacy, ideology and social organization. In political terms, major conclusions shows that sacred monuments could become instruments of authority without being reduced to propaganda. Sanchi communicated values such as dhamma, non-violence, welfare, donation, merit and social order. These values were religious, but they also had political implications because they shaped the way rulers and communities imagined legitimate power. The monument therefore operated as a meeting point between kingship and public ethics. Its architecture gave physical form to ideas that were otherwise expressed in inscriptions, oral traditions and ritual practice (Basham; Singh).

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