

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: Mauryan Art and Architecture [Art & Culture Notes for UPSC]

Introduction

- Religions of the Shramana tradition, i.e., Jainism and Buddhism emerged around the 6th century BCE.
- The Mauryas had established themselves as a great power in the 4th century BCE and by the 3rd century, they had large parts of India under their control.
- At this time there were many modes of religious practices including the worship of Yakshas and mother-goddesses. Nevertheless, Buddhism became the most popular.
- After the Harappan civilization, monumental stone sculpture and architecture appears only in the Mauryan period.
- There were pillars, sculptures, rock-cut architecture, buildings like stupas, viharas and chaityas that served many purposes. They are exquisite in aesthetic quality and brilliant in their design and execution.

Mauryan Pillars and Sculptures

Pillars & Sculptures

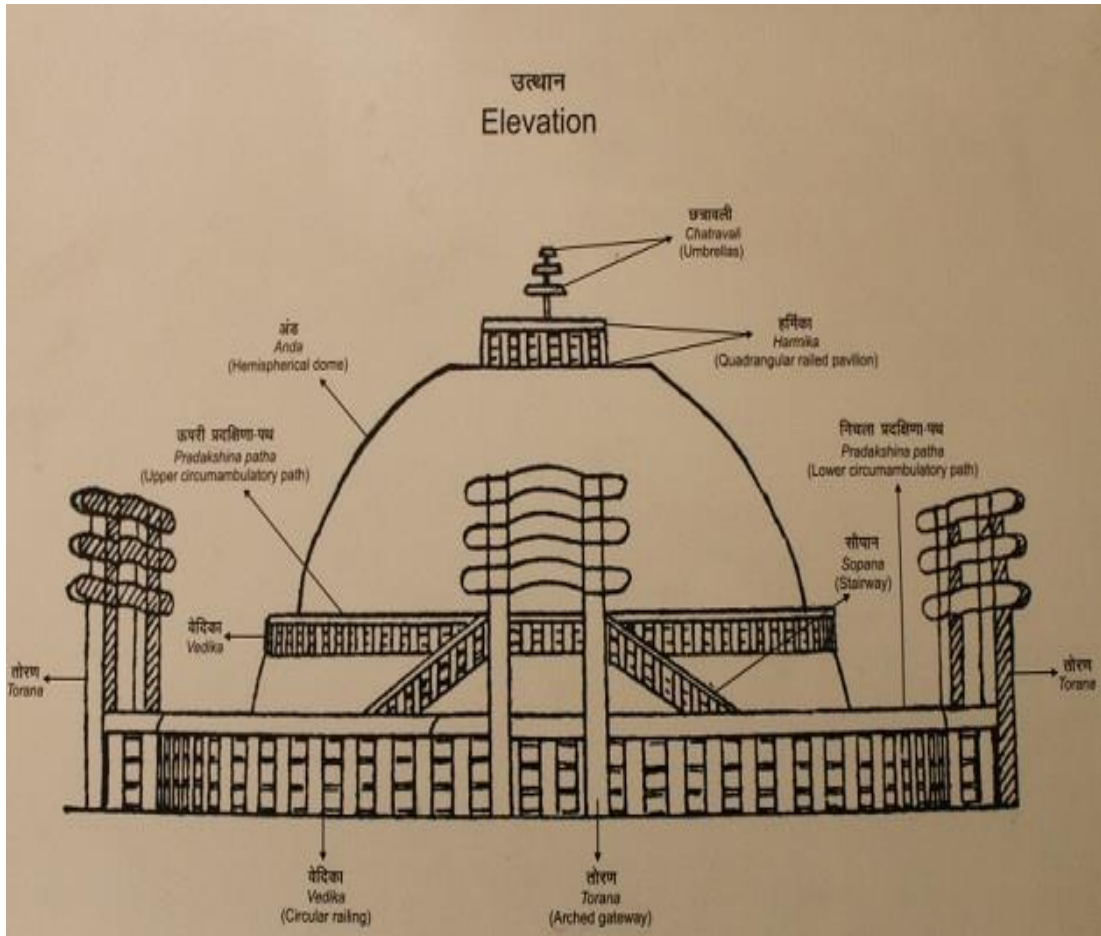
- Erection of pillars was common in the Achaemenian Empire (Persian Empire) also. While there were commonalities like the use of polished stones, motifs like lotus, there are also differences. While the Achaemenian pillars were constructed in pieces, the Mauryan pillars were rock-cut, displaying the superior skill of the carver.
- Stone pillars can be seen all over the Mauryan Empire. These had proclamations inscribed on them and were used to spread the message of the Buddha by Emperor Ashoka.
- The top portion of the pillar is called capital and it typically has animal figures like bull, lion, elephant, etc. These capital figures are carved standing on a square or circular abacus. The abacuses are on the base which could be a stylised inverted lotus.
- Example of pillars with capital figures: Sarnath, Basarah-Bakhira, Rampurva, Sankisa and Lauriya-Nandangarh.
- The **Lion Capital** at Sarnath is the most famous example.
- Monumental figures of Yakshas and Yakshinis have been found in various parts of India thus showing the popularity of Yaksha worship.

Rock-cut architecture

- Ashoka also patronised rock-cut architecture.
- Rock-cut elephant at **Dhauli**, Odisha – shows modelling in round with linear rhythm. It also has an Ashokan edict.
- **Lomus Rishi Cave** – Rock-cut cave at **Barabar Hills** near Gaya. The cave entrance is decorated with a semicircle chaitya arch. An elephant is carved in high relief on the chaitya. The interior hall of the cave is rectangular; it also has a circular chamber at the back. Ashoka patronised this cave for the Ajivika sect.

Stupas, chaityas and viharas

- Stupas and viharas were constructed as part of the Buddhist and Jaina monastic tradition but most of the constructions belong to Buddhism.
 - Some Brahmanical gods were also represented in the sculptures here.
 - **Stupas** were constructed over the relics of the Buddha at Rajagriha, Kapilavastu, Vaishali, Ramagrama, Allakappa, Pava, Vethadipa, Pippalvina and Kushinagar.
 - Stupas consist of a cylindrical drum with a circular *anda* and a *harmika* and a *chhatra* on the top. Sometimes there were circumambulatory pathways and gateways. In many cases, additions were added in later centuries.
1. Anda: hemispherical mound symbolic of the mound of dirt used to cover Buddha's remains (in many stupas actual relics were used).
 2. Harmika: square railing on top of the mound.
 3. Chhatra: central pillar supporting a triple umbrella form.



- Stupa at Bairat, Rajasthan – 3rd century BCE; grand stupa with a circular mound and a circumambulatory path.
- Many stupas were built and not all of them with royal patronage. Patrons included lay devotees, gahapatis, guilds and kings.
- Not many mention the names of the artisans. But artisans' categories like stone carvers, goldsmiths, stone-polishers, carpenters, etc. are mentioned.
- Stupa at Sanchi – most famous and one of the earliest examples.
- **Chaityas** were basically prayer halls and most of them were with stupas. Generally, the hall was rectangular and it had a semi-circular rear end. They had horse-shoe shaped windows. They also had pillars separating the hall from the two aisles.
- **Viharas** were the residences of the monks.
- Both chaityas and viharas were made out of wood, and later were also stone-cut.

Depiction of the Buddha

- In the early periods, Buddha is represented through symbols like footprints, lotus thrones, chakras, stupas, etc.
- Later on, stories were portrayed on the railings and torans of the stupas. These were mainly the Jataka tales.
- The chief events from Buddha's life which are narrated in the arts are birth, renunciation, enlightenment, first sermon (dharmachakrapravartana) and mahaparinirvana (death).
- The Jataka stories that find frequent depiction are Chhadanta Jataka, Sibi Jataka, Ruru Jataka, Vessantara Jataka, Vidur Jataka and Shama Jataka.
- Were of various shapes disc-shaped, cylindrical, spherical, barrel-shaped, and segmented.

