



# Sankissa: A Spiritual Pilgrimage to an Ancient Buddhist Site of Historical Significance

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the historical and spiritual significance of Sankissa, an ancient town situated in Uttar Pradesh, India. Known for its pivotal role in Buddhism, Sankissa is revered as the site where the Buddha descended from the celestial Tushita Heaven, imparting teachings to his departed mother. This event, termed "The Great Descent," stands as a testament to compassion and filial devotion. Sankissa's importance transcends religious boundaries, extending to cultural heritage, architectural remnants, and economic impact. With archaeological ruins that echo its illustrious past, Sankissa remains a pilgrimage hub and a spiritual retreat for seekers worldwide. This abstract encapsulates the multifaceted dimensions of Sankissa's legacy a living bridge between history and contemporary reverence.

**Key Words:** Sankissa, Buddhism, historical significance, spiritual pilgrimage.

## I. Introduction

Sankissa, also known as Sankassa or Sankasia, is an ancient town located in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh, India. It holds historical and religious significance in Buddhism, as it is believed to be the place where the Buddha descended from the Tushita Heaven after giving teachings to his mother, Queen Mahamaya, who had passed away seven days after his birth. According to Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha visited Sankissa for three days and performed a miracle by creating a thousand-fold image of himself. This event is known as "The Great Descent" or "The Descent from Tushita Heaven" (Mahasamnipata). Sankissa was an important Buddhist pilgrimage site for centuries, and many ancient stupas, monasteries, and other structures were built to commemorate the Buddha's visit. However, over time, the site was abandoned and forgotten. The modern town of Sankisa, located near the ruins of the ancient site, continues to attract Buddhist pilgrims and tourists interested in its historical and religious significance. Sankissa, nestled in the heart of Uttar Pradesh, India, is a place steeped in ancient history and rich religious significance. This sacred town holds a special place in Buddhism as the site where the Buddha is believed to have descended from the celestial realm to impart teachings to his departed mother, Queen Mahamaya. Known as "The Great Descent," this miraculous event has drawn Buddhist pilgrims and history enthusiasts to Sankissa for centuries. As one explores the modern town of Sankissa, its ancient ruins and archaeological treasures offer glimpses into a bygone era when Buddhism flourished in the region. The remains of stupas, monasteries, and other structures stand as silent witnesses to the spiritual vibrancy that once permeated the area. Today, Sankissa continues to hold its allure as a cherished pilgrimage site, attracting devotees and travelers seeking to connect with the roots of Buddhism and immerse themselves in its profound teachings. With its tranquil ambiance and historical significance, Sankissa invites all who visit to embark on a journey of reflection, reverence, and discovery.



**Fig 1.1:** Elephant capital at Sankissa, one of the Pillars of Ashoka, 3rd century BCE  
Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankissa>



**Fig 2:** <https://www.wikiwand.com/>

The Elephant Capital at Sankissa, a 3rd-century BCE artifact, is one of Ashoka's Pillars, erected by the Indian Emperor Ashoka the Great. It features a unique capital adorned with four intricately carved elephants standing back-to-back, supporting a circular abacus. Ashoka commissioned these pillars across his empire, inscribing them with edicts in various ancient Indian languages, including Prakrit and Greek. These inscriptions propagated moral and ethical teachings influenced by Buddhism, emphasizing the importance of Dharma and the welfare of his subjects. Sankissa, located in modern-day Uttar Pradesh, India, is an important archaeological site that sheds light on ancient India's cultural and political history.

### 1.1 Significance of Sankissa

The significance of Sankissa lies in its historical and religious importance, particularly within the context of Buddhism. Below are some key aspects of Sankissa's significance:

- a) **Buddhist Pilgrimage Site:** Sankissa is considered one of the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India. It is one of the eight places of religious significance, known as the "Ashtamahasthanas," where important events from the life of the Buddha took place. Buddhist pilgrims from around the world visit Sankissa to pay homage to the place where the Buddha descended from Tushita Heaven and to reflect on his teachings.
- b) **The Great Descent:** The most prominent event associated with Sankissa is "The Great Descent" or "The Descent from Tushita Heaven" (Mahasamnipata). According to Buddhist scriptures, after spending time in the Tushita Heaven, the Buddha descended to Earth at Sankissa to teach his mother, Queen Mahamaya, who had passed away seven days after his birth. This event marks the Buddha's act of filial piety and is considered a significant miracle in Buddhist tradition.
- c) **Ancient Ruins:** Sankissa boasts a rich archaeological heritage with numerous ancient ruins, including stupas, monasteries, and other structures. These remnants serve as a tangible connection to the ancient Buddhist civilization that thrived in the region centuries ago. Exploring these archaeological sites provides valuable insights into the history and architecture of Buddhism in ancient India.

- d) **Cultural Heritage:** Sankissa's significance extends beyond the religious domain. It is an essential part of India's cultural heritage and reflects the country's historical and artistic achievements. The site holds value for scholars and enthusiasts interested in understanding the cultural and social fabric of ancient India.
- e) **Spiritual Reflection:** For Buddhists and spiritual seekers, Sankissa offers a serene and contemplative atmosphere, encouraging self-reflection and introspection. The pilgrimage to this sacred site is believed to bring merit and blessings to devotees and deepens their understanding of the Buddha's teachings.
- f) **Tourism:** As a major pilgrimage destination, Sankissa also contributes to the local economy through tourism. Pilgrims and tourists visiting the town support local businesses, hotels, and transportation services, contributing to the livelihoods of the residents.

The Sankissa's significance as an ancient Buddhist pilgrimage site, the site of "The Great Descent," and its well-preserved archaeological ruins make it a place of reverence, historical importance, and cultural value, attracting visitors from various backgrounds to this day.

## 1.2 About Sankissa

Sankissa, also known as Sankasia or Sankassa, is an ancient town located in the Farrukhabad district of the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. It is situated about 47 kilometers (29 miles) northwest of the city of Kannauj. The town is renowned for its historical and religious significance in Buddhism. According to Buddhist tradition, Sankissa is where the Buddha descended from the Tushita Heaven (one of the heavenly realms) after spending three months teaching his mother, Queen Mahamaya, who had passed away shortly after his birth. The event is referred to as "The Great Descent" or "The Descent from Tushita Heaven" (Mahasamnipata). It is said that during this occasion, the Buddha created a thousand-fold image of himself, demonstrating his supernatural abilities. Sankissa was once an important center of Buddhism and a thriving city in ancient India. It was a prosperous town with monasteries, stupas, and other religious structures. However, over time, the town declined, and its ancient glory was lost. The exact reasons for its decline are not entirely clear, but factors like changes in trade routes, political shifts, and possibly natural disasters might have contributed to its downfall. In modern times, Sankissa continues to be revered as a significant pilgrimage site for Buddhists. Pilgrims from various countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian nations, visit Sankissa to pay their respects and to connect with the profound teachings of Buddhism. The archaeological remains at Sankissa, which were rediscovered in the 19th century, provide valuable insights into ancient Indian architecture and the spread of Buddhism in the region. The site contains the ruins of stupas, monasteries, and other structures, which serve as a reminder of its illustrious past. Sankissa's importance as a pilgrimage site and its historical significance make it a place of deep reverence for Buddhists and an attraction for tourists and history enthusiasts alike. Visitors to Sankissa can experience the serene ambiance of the ancient town, explore its archaeological treasures, and immerse themselves in the spiritual aura that continues to endure to this day.

## 1.3 Biographic of buddha

The Buddha, whose birth name was Siddhartha Gautama, was a spiritual teacher and the founder of Buddhism. His life and teachings form the foundation of one of the world's major religions. Below is biographical overview of the Buddha:

**Early Life:** Siddhartha Gautama was born around the 5th century BCE (the exact date is debated) in Lumbini, in present-day Nepal. He was born into the Shakya clan, and his father, King Suddhodana, ruled over the small kingdom of Kapilavastu. His mother was Queen Maya. Legend has it that during her pregnancy, Queen Maya had a dream of a white elephant entering her womb, which was interpreted as a sign of a great being conceived. Siddhartha's early life was one of luxury and privilege. His father shielded him from the harsh realities of life, providing him with a life of luxury and ensuring he had little exposure to suffering and hardship.

**The Four Encounters:** Despite the efforts to shelter him, Siddhartha had four pivotal encounters that deeply impacted him and set him on the path of spiritual seeking. On four separate trips outside the palace, he encountered an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and finally, a wandering ascetic. These encounters exposed him to the realities of aging, sickness, death, and the existence of spiritual seekers who renounced worldly life.

**The Great Renunciation:** Disturbed by the suffering he witnessed; Siddhartha decided to seek a solution to the universal problem of human suffering. At the age of 29, he renounced his luxurious life, left his family and kingdom, and set out as a wandering ascetic in search of truth and liberation from suffering.

**The Ascetic Life:** For several years, Siddhartha practiced extreme asceticism, subjecting himself to severe fasting and harsh physical austerities. He studied with renowned spiritual teachers of his time but found their methods unsatisfactory in achieving true liberation.

**The Enlightenment:** At the age of 35, Siddhartha reached Bodhi Gaya, where he sat under a Bodhi tree and vowed not to move until he attained enlightenment. After a period of intense meditation and spiritual struggle, he experienced a profound realization and attained enlightenment. This event is known as the "Buddha's Awakening" or "Buddhahood." He understood the nature of suffering, its causes, and the path to liberation.

**Teaching and Ministry:** After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the next 45 years of his life traveling throughout northern India, teaching his insights to a diverse range of people, from kings and nobles to commoners and outcasts. He preached the Four Noble Truths, which form the core of Buddhist philosophy, and the Eightfold Path, a practical guide to living a moral and enlightened life.

**Final Nirvana:** At the age of 80, the Buddha passed away in the town of Kushinagar, in present-day Uttar Pradesh, India. He achieved Parinirvana, a final and complete liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). The Buddha's teachings continued to spread after his death, and Buddhism became one of the major religions of the world, influencing the spiritual, cultural, and philosophical landscape of Asia and beyond. His life's journey and the wisdom he shared continue to inspire countless people seeking inner peace and enlightenment.

## II. Review of Literature

**Shakya (2021)** extensively performed the pilgrimage that involved visiting numerous sites for a long time in Hinduism. For example, the four Dhāmas, visits in India, were concluded by the final visit of Pashupatināth in Nepal. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Buddha also enumerated four sites that a wise disciple should have visited and venerated. When a pilgrim visited the sacred locations with an existing understanding of the Buddha's life, he or she felt a sense of reverence and devotion. Across the world and throughout the ages, religious people made pilgrimages. One such important but not so popular site of Buddhism in India was Sankassa. It was an ancient city of India. This ancient city had its existence from the time of Ramayana. But this city came into eminence at the time of Gautama Buddha. It was one of the sacred pilgrimages of Buddhism. The other important places of Buddhism were Lumbini, Sārnāth, Kuśinagara, Bodhgaya, Srāvasti, Rajgir, and Vaiśālī. In Pāli canons, these eight places were termed as Aśtamahāsthān. **Dehejia (1990)** stated that from the start of the century before Christ, Indian monuments displayed a wide range of sculptured and painted narratives portraying the legend of the Buddha. This article addressed the technique of presentation of these stories and analyzed the structure of visual narratives as opposed to their content. Seven distinct modes of narration were identified, and it was suggested that the artists might have considered them to be equally acceptable alternatives since they frequently occurred together on the same monument. In conclusion, the article considered the manner in which the viewer-cum-worshipper might have responded to these works of art. **Geary (2018)** pointed out that with the growing economic rise of Asia, most of the international spotlight had focused on the rapid growth and industrialization spearheaded by China and India, with little attention on the role of India's robust religious tourism market that remained a vital part of its economic growth. In recent years, the development and promotion of religious circuits had become a cornerstone of India's tourism marketing campaign that aimed to capture both domestic and foreign exchange earnings. To explore the relationship between tourism and India's religious circuits further, this article examined the role of India's Buddhist circuit and how a series of sacred places had become part of a larger commoditized itinerary and networked geography. The article also looked at some of the tensions surrounding the ritual activities associated with Buddhist pilgrimage, how the government looked to regulate and reproduce a sacred geography, and the role of cross-border cultural and economic processes in shaping Buddhist heritage in the early twenty-first century.

## III. Findings

Our exploration of Sankissa's significance has unearthed several key findings:

- Buddhist Pilgrimage Hub:** Sankissa's prominence as one of the Ashtamahasthanas underscores its status as a significant Buddhist pilgrimage destination, where devotees seek spiritual solace and divine connection.
- Miraculous Event:** "The Great Descent" marks a remarkable occurrence in the Buddha's life, embodying compassion, filial piety, and the interplay of the celestial and terrestrial realms.
- Archaeological Treasures:** The town's ancient ruins provide invaluable insights into the architectural prowess of ancient India and the vibrant Buddhist civilization that once thrived there.

- d) Cultural Heritage: Sankissa's role extends beyond its religious significance, serving as a window into India's cultural heritage and artistic achievements.
- e) Spiritual Retreat: The tranquil ambiance of Sankissa offers a retreat for introspection, reflection, and connection with the Buddha's teachings, fostering inner growth and transformation.
- f) Economic Impact: Sankissa's role as a pilgrimage site bolsters the local economy, sustaining businesses and livelihoods through tourism.

Our journey through the historical corridors of Sankissa has not only deepened our understanding of its significance but also unveiled its timeless appeal as a beacon of spirituality and cultural heritage. It remains a place where the ancient past and the present seamlessly intertwine, inviting all who tread its paths to partake in a journey of self-discovery and enlightenment.

#### IV. Conclusion

Sankissa, with its ancient roots and profound religious significance, stands as a testament to the enduring power of spirituality and human connection with the divine. This sacred town, nestled in the heart of Uttar Pradesh, India, carries within its ruins the echoes of a bygone era when Buddhism flourished and the Buddha's teachings reverberated through its streets. "The Great Descent," a pivotal event in the Buddha's life, unfolded here, bridging the realms of heaven and earth. As we traverse the landscapes of Sankissa, we're reminded that history's pages are imprinted not only with monumental events but also with the subtler threads of culture, heritage, and the quest for enlightenment. The ruins of stupas and monasteries whisper tales of devotion and dedication, while the gentle winds seem to carry echoes of the Buddha's teachings, inviting us to introspection and self-discovery. Sankissa's allure is not confined to any one facet; it's a tapestry woven from threads of faith, history, architecture, and spirituality. It's a living testament to the perseverance of ancient wisdom and the indomitable spirit of human seeking. Visitors, whether devout pilgrims or curious travellers, stand on hallowed ground, connecting with a lineage that has shaped lives for centuries.

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