

# Buddhist Sites of Telangana: A Historical and Cultural Study

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**Abstract**—Telangana occupies a distinguished place in the history of Buddhism in South India. Archaeological excavations, literary references, inscriptions, and material remain reveal that Buddhism flourished in this region for nearly two millennia. The Godavari and Krishna river valleys served as important corridors for the spread of Buddhist teachings, monastic institutions, trade networks, and cultural exchanges. Sites such as Dhulikatta, Kotilingala, Kondapur, Phanigiri, Nelakondapalli, Gazulabanda, Chaitanyapuri, and Pasigam preserve valuable evidence of Buddhist activity from the Early Historic Period to the early medieval era. These centres functioned not only as religious establishments but also as hubs of education, commerce, art, and social interaction. The present study examines the historical development of Buddhism in Telangana and evaluates the significance of major Buddhist sites in understanding the region's cultural heritage. The paper also highlights the contribution of Buddhist institutions to architecture, sculpture, trade, and social transformation in the Deccan. Through a historical and archaeological approach, the study demonstrates that Telangana played a crucial role in the growth and dissemination of Buddhism in peninsular India.

**Index Terms**—Buddhism, Telangana, Stupas, Monasteries, Satavahanas, Archaeology, Phanigiri, Dhulikatta, Cultural Heritage.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism emerged in the sixth century BCE as a reformist movement under the leadership of Gautama Buddha. Rejecting ritualism and emphasizing ethical conduct, compassion, and spiritual enlightenment, Buddhism soon spread beyond the Gangetic plains into various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Among the regions that embraced Buddhism, the Deccan occupied a particularly important position. Telangana, situated in the heart of the Deccan Plateau, became one

of the most active centres of Buddhist learning, religious practice, and artistic development.

Historical evidence suggests that Buddhist ideas reached the Telangana region at a very early stage. Ancient literary sources refer to the Assaka and Mulaka territories, which are generally associated with areas of present-day Telangana. Trade routes connecting northern India with the Deccan facilitated the movement of monks, merchants, and scholars, creating favourable conditions for the spread of Buddhism.

The prosperity of the Satavahana period further accelerated Buddhist expansion. Merchant guilds, local elites, and ruling dynasties provided patronage for the construction of stupas, monasteries, chaityas, and educational institutions. As a result, numerous Buddhist centres emerged across Telangana, many of which have been identified through archaeological excavations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Today, the remains of these centres provide invaluable evidence regarding the religious, social, economic, and artistic history of the region. The study of Buddhist sites in Telangana is therefore essential for reconstructing the historical landscape of the Deccan and understanding the role of Buddhism in shaping regional identity.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical development of Buddhism in Telangana.
2. To identify and analyse major Buddhist archaeological sites in the region.
3. To evaluate the role of Buddhist institutions in cultural and social transformation.

4. To study the contribution of Buddhist centres to trade, education, and artistic development.
5. To assess the significance of archaeological discoveries for understanding the history of Telangana.
6. To highlight the need for preservation and promotion of Buddhist heritage sites.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study is primarily based on historical and descriptive research methods. Information has been collected from archaeological reports, inscriptions, literary sources, published books, research articles, and excavation findings. Secondary sources have been critically analysed to understand the chronology and significance of Buddhist sites in Telangana.

The methodology includes:

- **Historical Analysis:** Ancient literary references, inscriptions, and historical records have been examined to trace the development of Buddhism in Telangana.
- **Archaeological Interpretation:** Material remains such as stupas, monasteries, sculptures, coins, pottery, and inscriptions have been studied to understand the cultural and religious significance of the sites.
- **Comparative Approach:** Different Buddhist centres have been compared to identify similarities and differences in architectural patterns, patronage, and historical development.
- **Cultural Assessment:** The contribution of Buddhist institutions to society, trade, education, and artistic traditions has been evaluated through available evidence.

### IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BUDDHISM IN TELANGANA

The history of Buddhism in Telangana begins long before the rise of large imperial states in South India. Buddhist literature refers to regions corresponding to present-day Telangana, indicating that the area had established connections with northern India during the lifetime of the Buddha.

The Assaka kingdom, with its capital at Potali, often identified with modern Bodhan, occupied an important

position among the sixteen Mahajanapadas. The Mulaka region also formed part of the larger Deccan cultural landscape. These territories served as early centres of interaction between northern and southern traditions.

The Godavari River played a significant role in facilitating communication and trade. Merchants travelling along river routes often supported Buddhist monasteries, leading to the establishment of religious centres near trade corridors. Such institutions provided accommodation, education, and spiritual guidance to travellers and local communities.

The rise of the Satavahanas marked a turning point in the history of Buddhism in Telangana. Although the dynasty supported multiple religious traditions, Buddhist establishments received considerable patronage. The prosperity generated through trade with the Roman world and other regions contributed to the construction of monumental stupas and monasteries.

From the early centuries BCE to the early medieval period, Buddhism remained an influential force in Telangana. Even after the decline of political patronage, Buddhist cultural influences continued to shape regional art, architecture, and philosophical thought.

### V. MAJOR BUDDHIST SITES OF TELANGANA

#### 5.1 Dhulikatta

Dhulikatta, located in present-day Karimnagar district, is one of the earliest Buddhist sites discovered in Telangana. Excavations have revealed a massive stupa, brick structures, fortifications, pottery, beads, and Satavahana coins.

The site demonstrates the close relationship between Buddhism and urban development. The large stupa indicates the existence of an organized monastic community supported by local patrons. Sculptural remains discovered at Dhulikatta display artistic features comparable to those of Bharhut and Sanchi.

One of the most remarkable findings is the depiction of the Buddha sheltered by a multi-hooded serpent. Such imagery reflects the evolution of Buddhist symbolism and regional artistic traditions.

Dhulikatta also highlights the strategic location of Buddhist establishments along trade routes. The site's prosperity was closely linked to commercial activities that connected the Deccan with other parts of India.

### 5.2 Kotilingala

Kotilingala occupies a unique place in the history of Telangana. Situated on the banks of the Godavari River, it served as an important political and economic centre before the emergence of the Satavahana Empire.

Excavations have revealed fortifications, residential structures, drainage systems, inscriptions, and Buddhist remains. Numerous coins belonging to local rulers, Satavahanas, Ikshvakus, and Roman trade networks have also been discovered.

The archaeological evidence suggests that Kotilingala functioned as a major urban settlement where trade, administration, and religion flourished simultaneously. The presence of a Buddhist stupa demonstrates the integration of religious institutions into the urban landscape.

The site provides valuable insights into the interaction between political authority and Buddhist patronage during the Early Historic Period.

### 5.3 Kondapur

Kondapur in Medak district is among the most significant archaeological sites in Telangana. Excavations have uncovered evidence of a thriving urban centre associated with the Satavahana period.

The discoveries include stupas, monasteries, coins, ornaments, pottery, molds for minting, workshops, and residential structures. Such findings indicate a prosperous economy supported by craft production and long-distance trade.

Buddhist institutions at Kondapur likely benefited from merchant patronage. The abundance of imported and locally manufactured goods demonstrates the site's participation in extensive commercial networks. The architectural remains reveal advanced planning and construction techniques, reflecting the high level of urbanization achieved during this period.

### 5.4 Gazulabanda

Gazulabanda, located in Nalgonda district, represents an important monastic centre. Situated on elevated terrain, the site contains the remains of a monastery built with brick and stone.

The structural layout suggests a well-organized residential complex designed for monks. The arrangement of rooms around a central space reflects architectural patterns commonly associated with Buddhist monastic establishments.

The site contributes significantly to our understanding of monastic life and religious practices in ancient Telangana.

### 5.5 Chaitanyapuri

Chaitanyapuri, now part of Hyderabad city, preserves traces of Telangana's Buddhist past through inscriptions and historical records. During the Vishnukundin period, Buddhist institutions continued to receive support despite the growing prominence of Brahmanical traditions.

The inscriptions found in the area indicate the existence of monasteries and religious establishments. Although many structures have not survived, the evidence demonstrates the persistence of Buddhist influence during the early medieval period.

### 5.6 Pasigam

Pasigam is located near the Godavari River and contains the remains of Buddhist stupas constructed using locally available stone. The site's geographical position suggests that it functioned as a religious centre connected to river-based trade networks.

The archaeological remains reveal the widespread distribution of Buddhism across rural and semi-urban settlements. Pasigam demonstrates that Buddhist institutions were not limited to major cities but also flourished in smaller communities.

### 5.7 Nelakondapalli

Nelakondapalli in Khammam district is one of the most important Buddhist centres in South India. Archaeological excavations have revealed a massive stupa, monasteries, chaityas, sculptures, terracotta objects, and inscriptions.

The site shows evidence of both Hinayana and Mahayana traditions. Particularly significant is the discovery of a bronze image of Bodhisattva Padmapani, reflecting the growing influence of Mahayana Buddhism.

The scale of architectural remains indicates that Nelakondapalli served as a major educational and pilgrimage centre. The site played a crucial role in preserving Buddhist traditions in the eastern Deccan.

### 5.8 Phanigiri

Phanigiri is widely regarded as one of the most spectacular Buddhist archaeological sites in Telangana. Located on a hilltop in Suryapet district,

the site contains extensive structural remains, sculptures, inscriptions, and ritual objects.

Excavations have revealed a large mahastupa, monastic complexes, assembly halls, and water-management systems. Stone panels depicting Buddhist themes demonstrate exceptional artistic craftsmanship.

The discovery of Buddha footprints, Dharma Chakra symbols, and narrative sculptures highlights the religious significance of the site. Phanigiri emerged as a major centre of Buddhist worship and learning and remains one of the most important archaeological sites in Telangana today.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The archaeological evidence from Telangana reveals that Buddhism was not merely a religious movement but also a significant force in shaping society and culture. Buddhist institutions contributed to the growth of urban centres, facilitated trade, promoted education, and encouraged artistic innovation.

One of the most striking features of Telangana's Buddhist heritage is the close association between monasteries and trade routes. Merchants played a major role in supporting Buddhist establishments, while monasteries provided services to travellers and traders. This mutually beneficial relationship contributed to economic and cultural integration across the Deccan.

The artistic achievements of Telangana's Buddhist centres are equally noteworthy. Sculptures, relief panels, architectural fragments, and inscriptions demonstrate a sophisticated artistic tradition influenced by both local and pan-Indian styles. These artistic developments later influenced Hindu and Jain temple architecture in the region.

Another important aspect is the role of Buddhism in promoting social inclusiveness. Buddhist teachings emphasized ethical conduct and spiritual equality, attracting followers from diverse social backgrounds. Monasteries served as centres of learning where knowledge could be disseminated beyond traditional social boundaries.

The distribution of Buddhist sites across Telangana indicates a widespread and vibrant religious network. Major centres such as Phanigiri and Nelakondapalli coexisted with smaller establishments like Pasigam

and Gazulabanda, creating a dense landscape of religious activity.

Despite its eventual decline, Buddhism left a lasting legacy in Telangana's cultural traditions, artistic expressions, and historical consciousness.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The Buddhist heritage of Telangana represents one of the most significant chapters in the cultural history of South India. Archaeological discoveries from Dhulikatta, Kotilingala, Kondapur, Gazulabanda, Chaitanyapuri, Pasigam, Nelakondapalli, and Phanigiri demonstrate the remarkable spread and influence of Buddhism across the region.

These centres functioned not only as places of worship but also as institutions of education, trade, artistic production, and social interaction. Their remains provide valuable insights into the religious and cultural life of ancient Telangana and highlight the region's contribution to the broader history of Buddhism in India.

The preservation of these monuments is essential for future research and public awareness. Continued archaeological investigations and heritage conservation efforts will help uncover new dimensions of Telangana's Buddhist past and ensure that this rich legacy remains accessible to future generations.

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