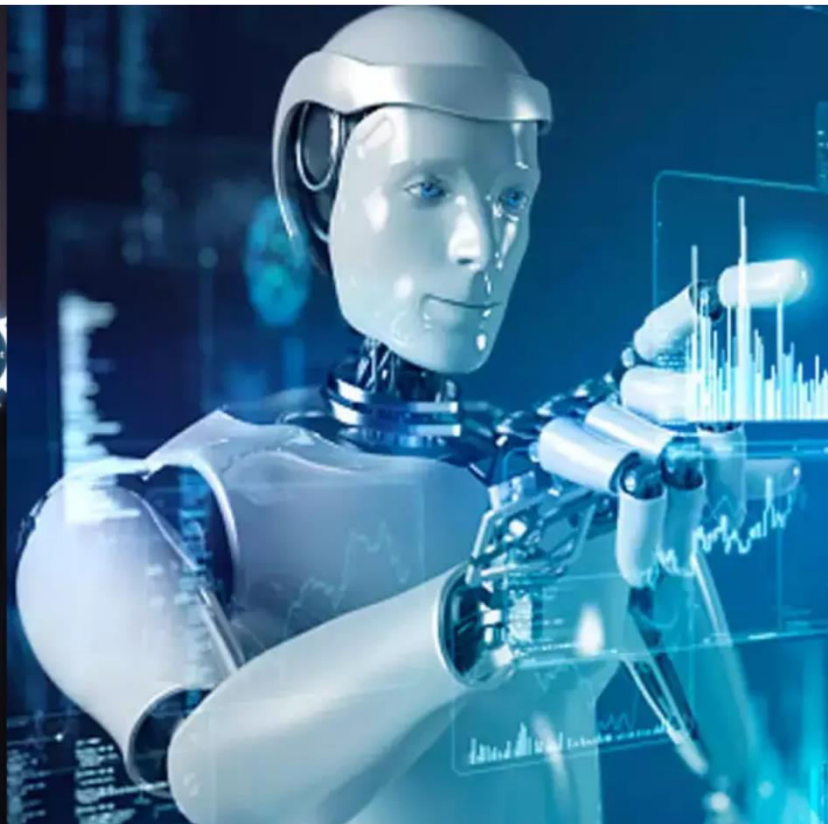




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Buddhism in Andhra Pradesh: Historical Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

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ABSTRACT: Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the religious, cultural, and architectural landscape of Andhra Pradesh. This paper explores the evolution, spread, and present status of Buddhism in this region, highlighting prominent archaeological sites, cultural integration, and state efforts in preservation. Through a comprehensive study of historical records, inscriptions, and monuments, alongside current practices and tourism initiatives, the research emphasizes the importance of Andhra Pradesh in India's Buddhist heritage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, a spiritual tradition founded in the 6th century BCE by Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), spread rapidly across India, leaving a profound impact on various regions, including Andhra Pradesh. The state's coastal location and proximity to trade routes facilitated the dissemination of Buddhist teachings and the establishment of significant religious and educational centers.

From the 3rd century BCE under the Mauryan Empire to the Satavahana and Ikshvaku dynasties, Andhra Pradesh witnessed the construction of stupas, viharas, and chaityas, as well as the development of Buddhist art. Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, and Salihundam became thriving hubs for Buddhist scholars and monks. These sites housed relics, hosted councils, and contributed richly to Mahayana Buddhism.

Despite the decline of Buddhism in mainland India by the 12th century, its imprints in Andhra Pradesh remain robust through archaeological remains, inscriptions, and a growing revivalist movement. Today, the state promotes Buddhist tourism, and several educational institutions are rekindling academic interest in Buddhist philosophy. This paper aims to:

- Trace the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Andhra Pradesh.
- Analyze key sites and their significance.
- Examine modern initiatives for revival and heritage preservation.
- Offer insights into Buddhism's cultural synthesis in the region.

II. PRELIMINARIES

To understand Buddhism's evolution in Andhra Pradesh, it is essential to recognize the broader historical and geographical factors. Andhra Pradesh, located on India's southeastern coast, served as a cultural bridge between the northern and southern parts of India. The presence of rivers like the Krishna and Godavari aided agricultural prosperity and human settlement, while its coastal belt connected it to trade routes with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Chronological Framework:

- **Mauryan Period (3rd Century BCE):** Ashoka's influence reached Andhra; stupas and inscriptions testify to early adoption.
- **Satavahana Period (1st Century BCE–2nd Century CE):** Major patronage of Buddhism; Amaravati flourished.
- **Ikshvaku and Vishnukundin Dynasties (3rd–6th Century CE):** Nagarjunakonda became an intellectual and spiritual center.
- **Post-Classical Period (7th–12th Century CE):** Gradual decline of Buddhism; emergence of Hindu temples and assimilation.

III. MAIN RESULTS

3.1 Archaeological Evidence and Monastic Complexes

Amaravati Stupa:

The Amaravati Stupa, also known as the Mahachaitya, stands as a crowning achievement of Satavahana-era Buddhist architecture. Dating back to the 2nd century BCE, the stupa was originally a solid hemispherical structure built to enshrine sacred relics. Over time, it was embellished with intricate limestone panels portraying scenes from the Buddha's life and Jataka tales. The railings and drum slabs depict symbols like the Bodhi tree, stupas, elephants, and lotuses—conveying spiritual narratives through aniconic imagery. The site's inscriptions, mostly in Brahmi and Prakrit, mention donations by lay followers and monks, reflecting communal involvement in the construction and upkeep.

Nagarjunakonda:

Nagarjunakonda, now submerged by the Nagarjuna Sagar dam, was once a bustling city under the Ikshvaku dynasty (3rd–4th century CE). Excavations conducted prior to the dam's construction yielded remains of more than 30 Buddhist viharas, chaityas, and stupas. One of the most significant finds was the Dharmachakra slab, symbolizing the Wheel of Dharma, along with inscriptions referring to the patronage of queens and officials to Buddhist causes. The presence of both Hinayana and Mahayana relics, including depictions of Avalokiteshvara and Tara, signals a rich doctrinal diversity.

Salihundam:

Located on the banks of the Vamsadhara River in Srikakulam district, Salihundam was a significant center of Mahayana Buddhism from the 2nd century BCE to the 12th century CE. The site houses brick stupas, sculptures, and remnants of viharas. Salihundam's location also made it a strategic point for maritime monks traveling to Southeast Asia, especially to Java and Sumatra. The iconography here—such as Bodhisattva images and stupas with niches—shows strong artistic influence from both mainland India and maritime Buddhist cultures.

Other Sites: Ghantasala, Bhattiprolu, Bavikonda, and Thotlakonda

- Bhattiprolu (Guntur district) features one of the oldest inscriptions in proto-Tamil-Brahmi script, indicating early script dissemination.
- Bavikonda and Thotlakonda (near Visakhapatnam) were hilltop monastic complexes housing meditation halls, dormitories, and storage units. These hill monasteries are dated between 3rd century BCE and 3rd century CE, indicating coastal Andhra's close ties with early Buddhist maritime networks.

3.2 Inscriptions and Language as Historical Markers

Epigraphical sources offer critical insights into the socio-religious life of ancient Andhra. The Brahmi inscriptions discovered at Amaravati, Bhattiprolu, and Nagarjunakonda mention gifts of land, clothing, lamps, and gold coins made to the sangha. The language used in most of these is Prakrit, although some later inscriptions adopt early Sanskrit.

Key insights from inscriptions include:

- Roles of royal women in promoting Buddhist institutions.
- Evolution of script styles from early Brahmi to Devanagari variants.
- Shifts in terminology from “Bodhisattva” and “Upasaka” to more Sanskritized terms, signaling the transition from Hinayana to Mahayana phases.

3.3 Artistic Contributions and Iconography

Buddhist art in Andhra Pradesh is distinctive for its narrative richness and stylistic innovation. The Amaravati School of Art, in particular, is celebrated for its fluid lines, rhythmic movement, and naturalistic expressions.

Aniconic to Iconic Shift

- Early depictions avoided anthropomorphic images of the Buddha, instead using symbols like footprints, stupas, and Bodhi trees.
- Gradually, influenced by Gandhara and Mathura schools, Andhra artists began depicting the Buddha in human form, often seated in dhyana mudra or delivering sermons.

Jataka Tales in Relief:

Many sculptures illustrate Jataka stories—previous lives of the Buddha—like the Chhaddanta Jataka, Vessantara Jataka, and Shibi Jataka. These were likely intended not only to inspire devotion but also to educate the laity on moral virtues.

Comparison with Other Schools

The Amaravati style, while indigenous, shares commonalities with the Gandhara (Northwest India) and Mathura (North India) styles. However, Amaravati figures are more graceful and elongated, with a pronounced emphasis on movement and decorative motifs like lotus scrolls, garlands, and celestial beings.

3.4 Cultural and Religious Influence in Andhra

Buddhism's integration into the local socio-political fabric is evident through temple donations, land grants, and participation of lay followers in rituals and festivals. The architectural blueprint of early Buddhist structures influenced later Hindu temples in layout and symbolism.

The use of Buddhist symbols—like the dharmachakra and lotus—continued in South Indian temple iconography long after Buddhism declined as a dominant religion. Furthermore, many Buddhist viharas were later repurposed into Shaivite or Vaishnavite shrines during the medieval period.

3.5 Modern Relevance and Revival

Tourism and Heritage Conservation:

The Buddhist Tourism Circuit developed by Andhra Pradesh Tourism links Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Thotlakonda, and Salihundam. These efforts have not only rejuvenated local interest in heritage but also drawn international pilgrims, especially from Southeast Asia.

Academic Interest and Research Institutions

- Institutions like Acharya Nagarjuna University and Andhra University have centers for Buddhist studies.
- International collaborations with scholars from Sri Lanka, Japan, and Thailand focus on digitizing inscriptions and preserving sculptures.

Religious Practices and Commemorations:

While Buddhism is a minority religion in modern Andhra Pradesh, the state hosts Buddha Jayanti, Dhamma talks, and Vipassana retreats. The visit of the Dalai Lama to Amaravati in 2006 for the Kalachakra Initiation was a landmark event, rekindling spiritual and scholarly engagement.

IV. EXAMPLES AND MODERN RELEVANCE

4.1 Buddhist Tourism Circuit: A Cultural and Spiritual Reconnection

In recent years, the Andhra Pradesh government has invested significantly in developing a **Buddhist Tourism Circuit** to promote historical awareness, attract domestic and international visitors, and economically empower local communities. This initiative is part of India's broader strategy to position itself as the "Land of the Buddha."

Key Sites in the Circuit:

- **Amaravati** – Home to the Mahachaitya and the Amaravati Heritage Centre.



- **Nagarjunakonda** – Located on an island in Nagarjuna Sagar Lake; accessible via boat.



- **Thotlakonda and Bavikonda** – Hilltop monastic complexes near Visakhapatnam offering panoramic views and meditative ambiance.



- **Salihundam** – Known for its Mahayana structures and seaside charm.



- **Ghantasala and Bhattiprolu** – Smaller but historically vital stupa sites. These sites are now equipped with amenities such as visitor centers, multilingual guides, digital walkthroughs, and heritage interpretation signage. Special packages target pilgrims from **Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Japan, and China**, rekindling ancient cultural linkages established through maritime Buddhism.



Bhuddhist Stupam – In Buddhism, a stupa is a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics, serving as a place of meditation and a sacred monument symbolizing the Buddha's teachings and the spiritual path.



4.2 Heritage Conservation and Museum Development

Preservation Projects:

Collaborations between the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** and state heritage bodies have led to conservation of delicate limestone sculptures, digital 3D mapping of stupa layouts, and protective shelters over relics. Important strides include:

- Digitization of Brahmi and Prakrit inscriptions.
- Reassembly of fragmented sculptures for museum display.

Museums as Learning Hubs:

- **Amaravati Heritage Centre** showcases replicas of Buddhist art, interactive displays, and multilingual exhibits.



- **Nagarjunakonda Museum** houses relics retrieved during the pre-dam excavations, including inscriptions, coins, and monk statues.



These museums not only educate but inspire pride in regional history, encouraging youth to engage with their cultural past.

4.3 Academic Interest and Institutional Research

University Programs and Research Centers:

- **Acharya Nagarjuna University** (named after the famous Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna) offers postgraduate programs and research in Buddhist Studies, archaeology, and epigraphy.
- **Andhra University, Visakhapatnam**, runs interdisciplinary projects connecting Buddhist philosophy with comparative religion, art history, and Southeast Asian studies.
- **Potti Sriramulu Telugu University** is involved in translations of early Buddhist texts found in Andhra inscriptions.
- Several international workshops and conferences have been held in recent years on topics such as:
 - The Satavahana patronage of Buddhism.
 - Maritime Buddhist networks between Andhra and Sri Lanka.
 - Conservation of Buddhist heritage in digital age.

4.4 Cultural Festivals and Religious Observances

Although the practicing Buddhist population in Andhra Pradesh is relatively small today, the cultural legacy is actively celebrated through festivals and public events.

Key Celebrations and Observances:

- **Buddha Purnima:** Observed at Amaravati with dharma talks, peace marches, and lighting of lanterns.
- **Annual Dhamma Conventions:** Held in Visakhapatnam and Guntur with participation from Theravada and Mahayana monks.
- **Vipassana and Meditation Retreats:** Offered at Amaravati, Visakhapatnam, and private Dhamma centers.
- The **Kalachakra Initiation in 2006**, presided over by His Holiness the **14th Dalai Lama** in Amaravati, was a pivotal moment that spotlighted the site globally. It drew over 100,000 attendees and led to infrastructure upgrades and increased scholarly attention to Amaravati's sacred status.

4.5 Social and Cultural Revivals

Dalit Buddhist Movement:

There is a growing interest in Ambedkarite Buddhism among Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh. Public conversions, Dhamma classes, and local readings of the **Dhammapada** are fostering identity-building and spiritual transformation rooted in non-violence and equality.

Media and Popular Culture:

Documentaries, YouTube channels, and social media pages now feature Andhra's Buddhist sites. Young scholars are using Instagram and short-form video content to showcase lesser-known locations like Adurru and Jaggayyapeta.

4.6 International Collaborations:

- **Sri Lankan and Thai monasteries** have funded the renovation of stupas and donated Buddhist texts to Andhra-based libraries.
- Buddhist scholars from **Japan, France, and the U.S.** are involved in joint publications and excavations.
- UNESCO has been petitioned to consider **Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda** for World Heritage status, given their transnational Buddhist relevance.

V. CONCLUSION

Buddhism in Andhra Pradesh represents a unique blend of spiritual, artistic, and intellectual history. Its stupas and sculptures stand as testaments to centuries of religious patronage and philosophical pursuit. The contemporary revival through tourism, education, and heritage management reflects the enduring legacy of the Buddha's teachings in the region. Continued academic inquiry and cultural preservation are essential to sustain this invaluable heritage for future generations.

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