

Indian Tourist sites – In the footsteps of the Buddha

By

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Abstract

Across the world and throughout the ages, religious people have made pilgrimages. The Buddha himself exhorted his followers to visit what are now known as the great places of pilgrimage: Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Rajgir, Nalanda and Kushinagar. The actions of the Buddha in each of these places are described within the canons of the scriptures of the various traditions of his teaching, such as the sections on Vinaya, and also in various compendia describing his life. The sites themselves have now been identified once more with the aid of records left by three pilgrims of the past (The great Emperor Ashoka, The

Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien and Hsuan Chwang).

The practice of Buddhism flourished long in India, perhaps reaching a zenith in the seventh century AD. After this it began to decline because of the invading Muslim armies, and by the twelfth century the practice of the Dharma had become sparse in its homeland. Thus, the history of the Buddhist places of pilgrimage from the thirteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries is obscure and they were mostly forgotten. However, it is remarkable that they all remained virtually undisturbed by the conflicts and developments of society during that period. Subject only to the decay of time

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they remained dormant, waiting for rediscovery.

From the middle of the last century, the Archeological Survey of India, under the auspices of the British Government, and one Englishman in particular--General Sir Alexander Cunningham--unearthed and identified many sites. Since that time, owing to a renewed Indian interest in Buddhism and the devotion and hardship of many individuals, the pilgrimage sites have been revived.

The following account is intended less to present a purely historical record of the places of pilgrimage than to offer some information and perhaps inspiration to other pilgrims, with the wish that this revival may increase.

INTRODUCTION

In 566 BC, in the little state of Kapilvastu at the foot of the Himalayas, was born a son, Siddhartha, to Suddhodana, a Sakya prince, and his wife Mayadevi. Seers proclaimed that the new-born would either conquer the world or be a Buddha- the enlightened one. The prophesy came true when Gautama attained Supreme Knowledge (bodhi) and laid the foundation of a religion which is today practiced by one-third of the world's population.

In India, it is pilgrimage which is the most important segment of domestic

tourism. And yet India has failed to exploit the Buddhist angle, the most potential. Buddhism was born in India. But it almost disappeared from the country of its origin. It is, however, a major force in much of Asia – in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and so on.

NORTH EAST INDIA

100 kms from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, **Kapilavastu** (Piprahwa) on the Gorakhpur Gonda loop-line with Naugarh (35 kms.) is the nearest railway station. The capital city of the Sakya clan, and one of the earliest republics, it was in Kapilavastu's opulent environs, that the holy soul of prince Siddharth (Gautam Buddha) spent his childhood. Here he saw sorrow and pain, disease and death. Then, finally when he saw a radiant happy Sadhu who had conquered all these, he decided to renounce all worldly riches and pleasures to seek truth and embark on the path of salvation. The place holds significant value for Buddhist pilgrims and has several Stupas. The archaeological excavations have revealed stone caskets containing relics believed to be that of Buddha's.

Sarnath, about 10 kms. from the holy city of Varanasi, is the blessed locale where more than 2500 years ago Buddha chose to deliver his first

sermon, after attaining Enlightenment. The five disciples who had followed him were surprised to see the mesmerizing glowing countenance of Buddha, who then delivered his first sermon before them, now termed Dharamachakra Pravartan. This set in motion the great Buddhist tradition of the Sangha, for popularizing the teachings of the great ascetic, world-wide. Gautam Buddha with his five disciples formed the first Sangha alongwith Yasa of Varanasi and his 54 friends.

The beginning of the celebrated Mantra, '**Buddham Sharanam Gachhami**', owes its origin to Sarnath. The three Jewels

**“ I go for refuge to the Buddha,
I go for refuge to the Wheel of Law,
I go for refuge to the Sangha”**

first laid down here, have remained unchanged ever since. Hence rightly, every Buddhist Pilgrim after Bodhgaya, endeavors to be blessed with a visit to Sarnath in his life time.

Dhamekh Stupa bears particular significance at Sarnath as it signifies the “seat of the holy Buddha”, as he proclaimed his faith. It is about 34 mtrs. in height and including the foundations, it can be measured upto 42 mtrs. Besides Dhamekh Stupa, Sarnath also has the ruins of Dharmajajika Stupa and that of the original Mulgandhakuti Temple which according to Hieun Tsang was about 61 mtrs. high. Buddha

is said to have rested and meditated here while in Sarnath.

Kaushambi, 54 kms from Allahabad, was visited by Buddha in the 6th and 9th years after his enlightenment. He delivered several sermons here, elevating it to a center of learning for Buddhists. Today one can see the ruins of an Ashokan Pillar, an old fort and the Ghositaram Monastery. The archaeological excavations here have yielded a large number of sculptors and figurines, coins, punch-marked and cast coins and terracotta sculptures which show the reverence the city was held in by the devout, in times gone by. All these religious finds of historical and archaeological importance can be viewed at the Allahabad Museum.

Kushinagar (Kushinagar of Yore) is a revered place for Buddhist pilgrims, 55 kms away from Gorakpur. It was here that the Tathagata, the reciter of truth, breathed his last with the last words. *"Behold now, brethren, I exhort you, saying, decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence!"* A temple dedicated to the event the Mahaparinirvana temple today stands amidst a serene 'sal' grove as if still reminiscing the great demise. The huge statue of the Reclining Buddha excavated in 1876 at the temple, is one of the most momentous of all sights for the devout. It was brought from Mathura by a devout monk, Haribala during the reign of King Kumara Gupta

in the 5th century AD.

The whole of Kushinagar, since the Mahaparinirvana of Gautam Buddha, was turned into a memorial site with Stupas including the relic stupa-Mukutbandhana and Gupta period Chaitayas and Viharas, built by the devout kings. The Chinese travelers Fa Hien, Hieun Tasang and T. Ising visited Kushinagar during different centuries and recorded a graphic account of the place which later fell to bad times, due to lack of patronage. These recordings provided the vital clues for excavations done centuries later by Sir Alexander Cunningham.

The visiting sites of Kushinagar fall in three categories: The Mahaparinirvana Temple, commemorating the place of the great decease with a reclining statue of Lord Buddha. Mata Kunwar Shrine contains a 10th Century blue schist image of Buddha and; Rambhar Stupa, which is supposedly the spot where Lord Buddha was cremated and his relics divided into eight equal parts. Apart from this, a Chinese Temple, a Buddhist Temple, a Tibetan Temple and the Indo-Japan-Srilanka Buddhist Center hold significant religious value for pilgrims.

Situated 134 kms. from Lucknow and 29 kms. from Balrampur, *Sravasti*, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kosala, has the honor for sheltering Buddha for 24 rainy seasons in the Jetvana Gardens. The city believed to be founded by the mythological king

Sravast has age-old Stupas, majestic monasteries and several temples. Buddha is said to have performed some miracles here. This holy place also has the famous Anand Bodhi tree, an offspring of the one said to have been planted by Buddha's main disciple Anand.

EASTERN INDIA

Bodhgaya, in the state of Bihar, reckoned as the most important Buddhist pilgrimage center, is the place where Lord Sakyamuni (Gautam Buddha) entered into mediation after being moved by the sufferings of mankind. The giant Bodhi Tree (Peepal) that we see today is believed to have grown from the original Bodhi Tree under which, sitting on the raised platform, Prince Siddharth mediated and finally attained Nirvana. Monasteries raised here by Burmese, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese and Thai devotees, in their native architectural styles, are worth visiting. Then there is Chaukramana, the Jewel Walk, where it is believed that the Buddha strolled while in deep thought.

The magnificent Maha Bodhi temple in Bodhgaya is an architectural amalgamation of many cultures. The temple bears the stamp of the architecture of the Gupta Dynasty and subsequent ages. On the walls of the temple, one sees Buddha carved in different aspects, and in the sanctum sanctorum, a colossal Buddha, is seen

touching the ground, which has mythological significance in the Buddhist lores. The temple carries inscriptions recording the visits of pilgrims from Sri Lanka, China and Myanmar. In the 7th and 10th Centuries AD Hieun Tsang, the Chinese traveler, also visited the temple in the 7th Century. Finally a visit to the Bodhgaya Archaeological Museum is a must for a religious art lover as it initiates one into the age of Buddha's centered art forms. The Buddhist sculpture collection from 1st Century BC to 11th Century AD is housed here at one place. Reflected through several art forms, it is more like a treasure house of artistic expression. Bodhgaya is 245 kms. from Varanasi and 178 kms. from Patna via Rajgir and Nalanda.

A place of religious sanctity for Hindus, **Gaya** lies 12 kms. from Bodhgaya between Pretshila and Ramshila hills and is washed by the shores of river Phalgu. Gaya has a large number of Buddhist temples also. While Buddha was doing severe penance, he became weak, tired and hungry. He rested under a tree, where he was offered food by a condemned village woman named Sujata. To everybody's surprise Buddha accepted her offerings. Legend has it that after having consumed the food, Buddha's countenance assumed a divine glow and he realized the **Supreme Truth**; *that neither extreme self indulgence nor self mortification is ever required. What is needed is to follow the Middle Path*

(Department of tourism). Sujata Sthan or Durgeshwari Temple stands as a symbol commemorating this event.

Nalanda, 90 kms south of Patna, literally means the place that confers the lotus. It was one of the oldest universities of the world. It has nine million books, ten thousand students, two thousand teachers and was a center of great learning which reached its zenith between 5th and 12th century AD. Both Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira visited this place. Emperor Ashoka built a Vihara, while Emperor Harshvardhan donated a 26 mtr. high copper image of Buddha and Emperor Kumar Gupta built a college of fine arts. In 1951, an International Center for Buddhist Studies was established in Nalanda. Nava Nalanda Vihar, 2 kms from here, is a similar institution.

The recent findings from excavations and the identifications of number of sites with Buddhist remain open up a new vista in the field of Buddhist Tourism in **Orissa**. Dhauli hill on the bank of the river Daya is a little away from the main road to Puri/Konark from Bhubaneswar. Ashoka changed his mind in favor of spiritual conquests in preference to war exploits after the Kalinga war which was fought here in the 3rd century BC. This place motivated the Kalinga Nippon Buddha Sangha to establish a peace pagoda or Shanti Stupa at Dhauli along with the construction of a monastery called Saddharma Vihar.

Lalitagiri, the earliest buddhist complex of Ist Century AD, has a huge brick monastery, the remains of a Chaitya hall, a number of votive Stupas and a renovated stone Stupa at the apex of sand stone hill. At **Ratnagiri**, excavations revealed the establishment of a Buddhist center from the time of Narasimha Gupta Baladitya (first half of the sixth century AD). At **Udaigiri** excavations brought to light a sprawling complex of brick monastery with a number of Buddhist sculptures. Infact the entire area is found located at the foot hills of a large hill acting as the backdrop of the area.

Rajgir, meaning “the Royal Palace”, (Raja Griha) lies 12 kms. south of Patna. Rajgir is a site of great sanctity and significance for Buddhists. The Gridhakuta Hill, in Rajgir, was the seat from where Buddha delivered many of his sermons. It was here that the teachings of Buddha were recorded in writing for the first time. An aerial ropeway takes visitors up the hill where the Japanese have built a beautiful Stupa.

Ajatashatru’s Fort is another place of tourist attraction. The sculpture which depicts the ‘Parinirvana’, or the ‘great cession’ of Buddha is another monument of artistic and historical importance. It shows the Buddha lying on his right side with the right forearm resting under his head to commemorate the final salvation or ‘Mukti’, of the great founder of the Buddhist Faith.

Sikkim is situated in the Eastern Himalayas, along the borders of Bhutan (East), Tibet (North), Nepal (West) and West Bengal (South). Its capital, Gangtok has a lot to see, specially the Research Institute of Tibetology, a World center for the study of Buddhist philosophy and religion and has a rare collection of Thankas, statues and over 200 Buddhist icons. The Rumtek Monastery about 24 kms away houses the most unique art objects in the world. Enchey Monastery, near Gangtok, built almost 200 years ago, was blessed by the great tantric master Lama Druptab Karpa.

Not very far from Bomdila in Arunachal Pradesh lies the **Tawang** Headquarters, a beautiful district in the center of which emerges the walled and fortified Tawang Monastery. The monastery overlooks the valley and is surrounded by mountains which seem to be guarding the valley and its inhabitants. Over 500 Lamas live in its 65 residential buildings. One can witness a superb collection of ancient scriptures, images, Thankas and a 8 meters high gilded image of Buddha. The monastery is locally known as Gompa, like any other and is believed to be 400 years old.

Vaishali, believed to be the first republic of the world, having an elected body of representatives, holds special significance for Buddhist devotees. At Kolhua, Lord Buddha delivered his last sermon, hinting at his impending departure from the mortal world. Later,

Emperor Ashoka erected a huge pillar to commemorate the spot where the last sermon was delivered. Vaishali was also the center of the IInd Buddhist Council congregation, held after 100 years of Buddha's Parinirvana to discuss the ten points of Vinaya, the rule of conduct under dispute.

Vaishali is famous for Amrapali, the beautiful dancer and courtesan of Vaishali, who offered Buddha a mango orchard and, impressed by his teachings, became a nun (Bhikshu). The excavations carried out in Vaishali have brought to light Buddha Stupa I(4th Century BC) and II, built in brick with a casket containing part of the ashes of Buddha.

NORTHERN INDIA

Popularly known as "Hermit Kingdom", *Ladakh* is a land of snow carved peaks, translucent Lakes, barren terrain and mystic culture. Quite like Tibet it has a great Buddhist tradition which is evident from the high monk to people ratio of 1:8. It has about 13 major Gompas (Monasteries) of which HEMIS is considered the Gompa of Gompas. It has the patronage of the Royal Family. It is the most important monastery of Ladakh with a concealed entrance, a huge courtyard flanked by two big temples. In the month of June the famous Hemis festival is held, when a large number of tourists visit it.

Alchi, a little village, 70 kms from Leh in Jammu and Kashmir, is known as a jewel among the religious sites in Ladakh. Abandoned centuries ago, this monastery has been lovingly maintained by the monks at Likhir, the nearest functioning Gompa. It is popularly known as Chos-kor and comprises 5 temples which are perhaps the richest in their collection of paintings and images in the Du-Khang (the Assembly Hall), and the three storied Sum-Tsek. Its murals, dating back to the 11th and 12th Centuries, predate the Tibetan style of painting which is found in all other Gompas. Some of them are reminiscent of the painting of the far off Ajanta Caves and are presumed to be almost the sole survivors of the buddhist style, currently in Kashmir during the first millenium AD.

Sankisa lies in central Uttar Pradesh, 47 kms from Farrukhabad. It is believed to be the place where Buddha, along with Brahma and Devraj Indra (Rain God)descended after giving sermons to his mother in heaven. At the spot of descent stands a temple with a statue of the Buddha. The place is also known for a temple dedicated to Bisari Devi and an excavated Ashokan Elephant Pillar. There is also a colossal Shiva Linga here. A large fair is held at Sankisa in the month of Shravan (July-August). Nearest airport is Agra, and from there, one can travel up to Pakhna (12 km from Sankisa) by rail.

Tabo : A gompa was founded in 996 AD (Tibetan year of the Fire Ape) and the initiative is said to belong to the great teacher Rinchensang Po also known as Mahaguru Ratnabhadra. In June-July 1996, Tabo celebrated a millennium of its glorious existence. With breathtaking murals and stucco images, Tabo is often called “*The Ajanta of the Himalayas*”. And here is art that above all is born of religion and deep faith.

The Tabo Monastery at a height of 3050 Mts. is a complex that holds 9 temples, 23 chortens, a monks chamber and an extension that houses the nuns chamber. This core is bounded by an earthen wall and encloses an area of 6300 sq.mts. Just short of the complex are the contemporary monastic structures. On the sheer cliff-face above the enclave are a series of caves which were used as dwelling units by the monks and include an assembly hall. Here again, dim traces of the paintings that once adorned the rock face are visible.

CENTRAL INDIA

Sanchi is a serene hill crowned by a group of Stupas, monasteries, temples and pillars dating from 3rd Century BC to the 12th Century AD. The glory that was Sanchi, an ancient seat of Buddhist learning and place of pilgrimage, can still be experienced in its complex structures where many Buddhist legends found expression in the rich

sculpture. The Buddha is not represented through figures at Sanchi, but through symbols, as was the tradition in the early period of Buddhism. The lotus represents the Buddha’s birth, the tree signifies his enlightenment, the wheel represents his first sermon and the Stupa represents his nirvana or salvation. The footprints and the throne denote the Buddha’s presence. Sanchi was virtually forgotten after the 13th Century until 1818, when General Taylor, a British Officer rediscovered it, half buried and well preserved. Later in 1912, Sir John Marshall, Director General of Archaeology ordered the restoration work at the site.

WESTERN INDIA

Dating back to the 2nd Century BC, the monuments at **Karla** are at a distance of 11 km from Lonavola and just off the Mumbai-Pune road. The magnificent Chaitya hall at Karla is the largest (124ft x 46.5ft x 45ft) and most evolved example of its class. Three important features of the interior of the hall are columns of pillars, the roof vault and the great sun windows.

There are 37 columns in all, of which 30 have interesting capitals showing prosperous men and women riding elephants and horses yet bowing in humility to the Great Buddha. The vaulted roof has wooden supports. This is the only place in India where 2000 year old wood work can be seen. At the

far end of the hall stands a Stupa, above which is held an umbrella, a symbol of royalty. The whole system of lighting depends on the enormous sun windows through which cleverly diffused light with its light and shadows gives a great sense of solemnity.

The *Ajanta Caves* consists of 30 caves including the unfinished ones, dating back from 200 BC to 250 AD. These caves are situated 104 kms from Aurangabad and 52 kms from Jalgaon Railway Station. The caves are cut from the volcanic lava of the Deccan in the forest ravines of the Sahyadri Hills and are set in beautiful sylvan surroundings. They were discovered accidentally by a British Captain, John Smith in 1819, while on a hunting expedition. Ajanta provides a unique combination of architecture, sculpture and paintings. Two basic types of monastic Buddhist architecture are preserved at Ajanta, the Chaitya or prayer hall (Cave Nos. 9,10,19,26 & 29) and Vihara or monastery (remaining 25 Caves). These caves suggest a well defined form of architecture, broadly resolving into two phases with a time gap of about 4 Centuries from each other. In the Hinayana Phase are included two Chaitya Halls (Cave Nos. 9 & 10) and 4 Viharas (Cave Nos.8, 12, 13, & 15). In the Mahayana Phase are included 3 Chaityas (Cave nos. 19 & 26 and 29 being incomplete) and 11 exquisite Viharas (Cave Nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11, 15, 17, and 20 to 24).

Situated 42 kms north of Mumbai, near Borivili, the *Kanheri Caves* are set in the heart of the Borivili National Park. There are 109 Caves dating from 1st Century BC to 9th Century AD, each connected with a flight of steps. The most important one is the Cave No. 3 of the 6th Century which has the last of the excavated Chaitya Hall of the Hinayana Order. It has 34 pillars and is like a colonnaded hall 28 mtrs.x13 mtr. in dimension. These encircle a 5 mtrs. high Dagoba or Stupa and have carvings depicting elephants kneeling and worshipping the Stupa. The other important caves are, Cave 11, the Durbar Hall or the Assembly hall with a statue of the Buddha occupying the central place as in the case of idols in Hindu temples and also a number of cells for Buddhist monk. Cave 34 is a dark cell and has paintings of the Buddha on the ceiling. Cave 41 has, besides other sculptures, a figures of the eleven headed Avalokiteshvara. Cave 67 is a big cell, with the figures of Avalokiteswara as saviour flanked by two female figures in the verandah. There are also images of the Buddha depicting the miracle of Sravasti.

Bhaja has 18 caves belonging to the 2nd Century BC. Cave No. 12 is the largest and has a fine stilted vault. The last cave to the south has excellent sculptures including that of the famous 'Dancing Couple'. Bhaja Caves are located 12 km. from Lonavala and can be reached by an uphill climb of half-hour from the Malavali Railway Station

on the Mumbai- Lonavala- Pune section
of the Central Railway.

SOUTH INDIA

Nagarjuna Sagar, earlier called Vijayapuri in ancient times, is an important Buddhist site located 150 kms from Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. It is named after the Buddhist Saint Acharya Nagarjuna and reveals one of the most outstanding Buddhist civilizations of the 3rd Century AD. A replica of the excavated site has been created and carefully preserved on an island known as Nagarjuna Konda. The excavations have uncovered Mahachaitya, the most sacred of the Stupas. An inscription in Brahmi characters states that the relics of Buddha lie within the Mahachaitya while others have revealed the existence of a Vihara and also an Aswamedha (sacrificial alter), besides tools from the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages.

CONCLUSION

The Buddhist Shrines of India have tremendous potential to attract large number of tourists from Buddhist Countries of the Far East and South-East Asia. Unfortunately due to lack of proper roads, road side amenities, other infrastructural facilities and inadequate promotional efforts on the part of tourism departments of both Central and State Governments, many such places are lying into oblivion. It is hoped that the recently inaugurated Indian Airlines flight between Bangkok and BodhGaya would greatly facilitate

travel from Thailand for pilgrims to the place of Lord Buddha's enlightenment.

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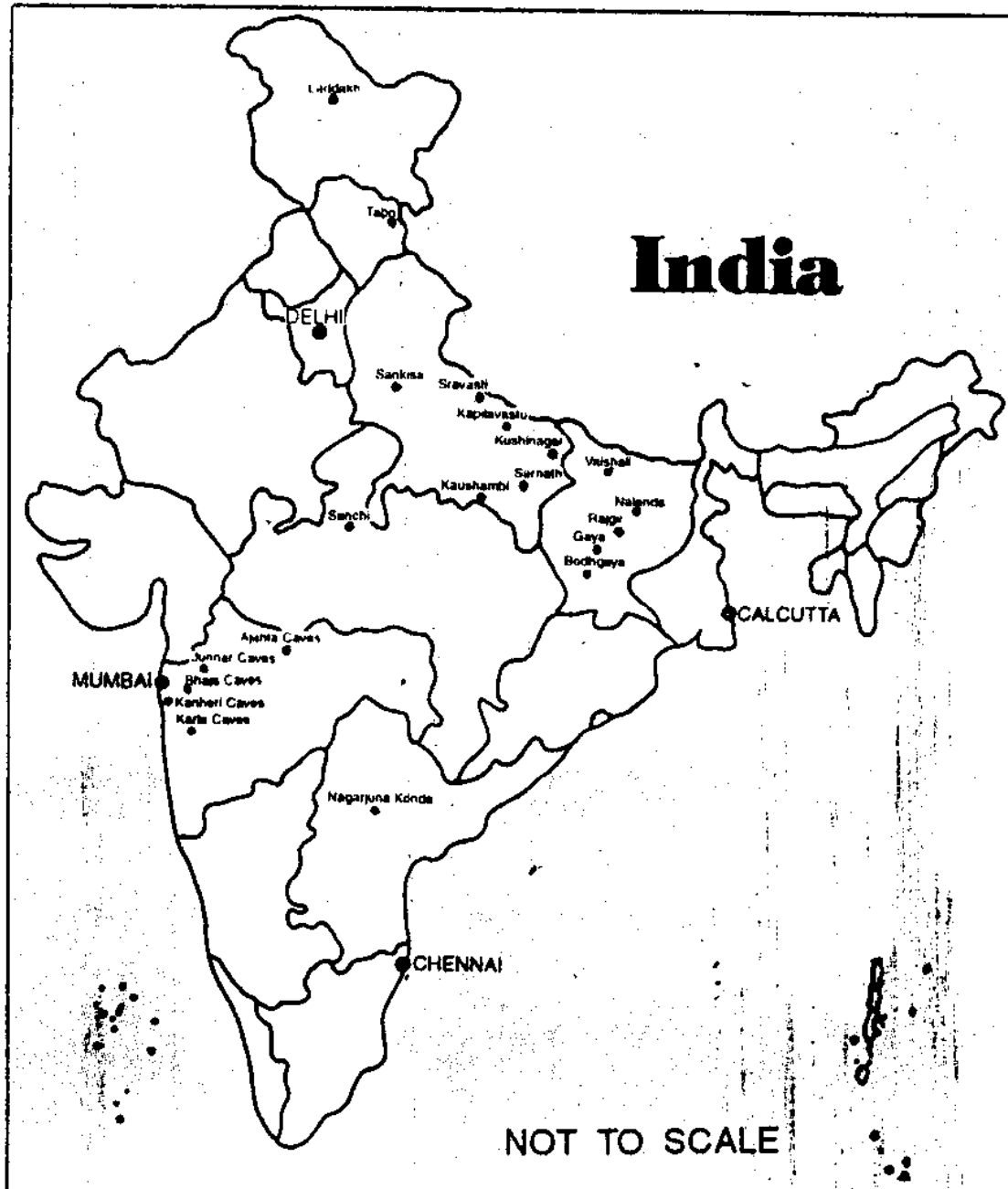
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