World Heritage Week – India's 45 UNESCO sites and Tamil Nadu

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Why in news: India observes World Heritage Week from 19 to 25 November. This year it comes after the Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath became India's 45th UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2026 – a good moment to revise the list, the convention behind it and Tamil Nadu's share.

Key points

- The convention: UNESCO's World Heritage Convention was adopted in Paris on 16 November 1972. India ratified it in 1977, and its first sites – Agra Fort, the Taj Mahal, and the Ajanta and Ellora caves – were inscribed in 1983.
- India's count: Sarnath (the Chaukhandi Stupa and the archaeological remains of Sarnath) was inscribed at the 48th session of the World Heritage Committee in Busan, South Korea, in July 2026. India now has 45 sites – 37 cultural, 7 natural and 1 mixed (Khangchendzonga National Park, 2016).
- Tamil Nadu's sites: the Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram (1984); the Great Living Chola Temples – the Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur (1987), extended in 2004 to Gangaikondacholapuram and the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram; the Nilgiri Mountain Railway (2005, part of the Mountain Railways of India).
- Shared and serial sites: the Western Ghats (2012) cover parts of Tamil Nadu; the Maratha Military Landscapes of India (2025) – 12 forts – include Gingee Fort in Villupuram district, the only component outside Maharashtra.
- Natural vs cultural vs mixed: a site is judged against ten criteria – six cultural and four natural; a mixed site meets at least one of each. Sarnath was inscribed under criteria (iii) and (vi).

In the exam: TNPSC – Tamil Nadu's World Heritage Sites with years (Mahabalipuram 1984, Thanjavur 1987/2004, Nilgiri railway 2005, Gingee in the Maratha landscapes 2025); UPSC Prelims – India's count and categories (45: 37 cultural, 7 natural, 1 mixed), the 1972 convention, the newest site (Sarnath, 2026).

Questions

1. Which site was inscribed in July 2026 as India's 45th UNESCO World Heritage Site?

A. Maratha Military Landscapes of India
B. Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath
C. Dholavira
D. Santiniketan

2. Which fort in Tamil Nadu is a component of the World Heritage Site 'Maratha Military Landscapes of India' (2025)?

A. Vellore Fort

B. Gingee Fort

C. Thirumayam Fort

D. Dindigul Fort

Answers with explanations

1. **B) Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath** – The Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath (Chaukhandi Stupa and the archaeological remains) was inscribed at the 48th session in Busan in July 2026. The Maratha Military Landscapes were inscribed in 2025, Dholavira in 2021 and Santiniketan in 2023.

2. **B) Gingee Fort** – Gingee Fort in Villupuram district is one of the 12 components and the only one outside Maharashtra. The site was inscribed at the 47th session of the World Heritage Committee in Paris in 2025.

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