

ANCIENT HERITAGE OF VAIŚĀLĪ: AN ASSESSMENT

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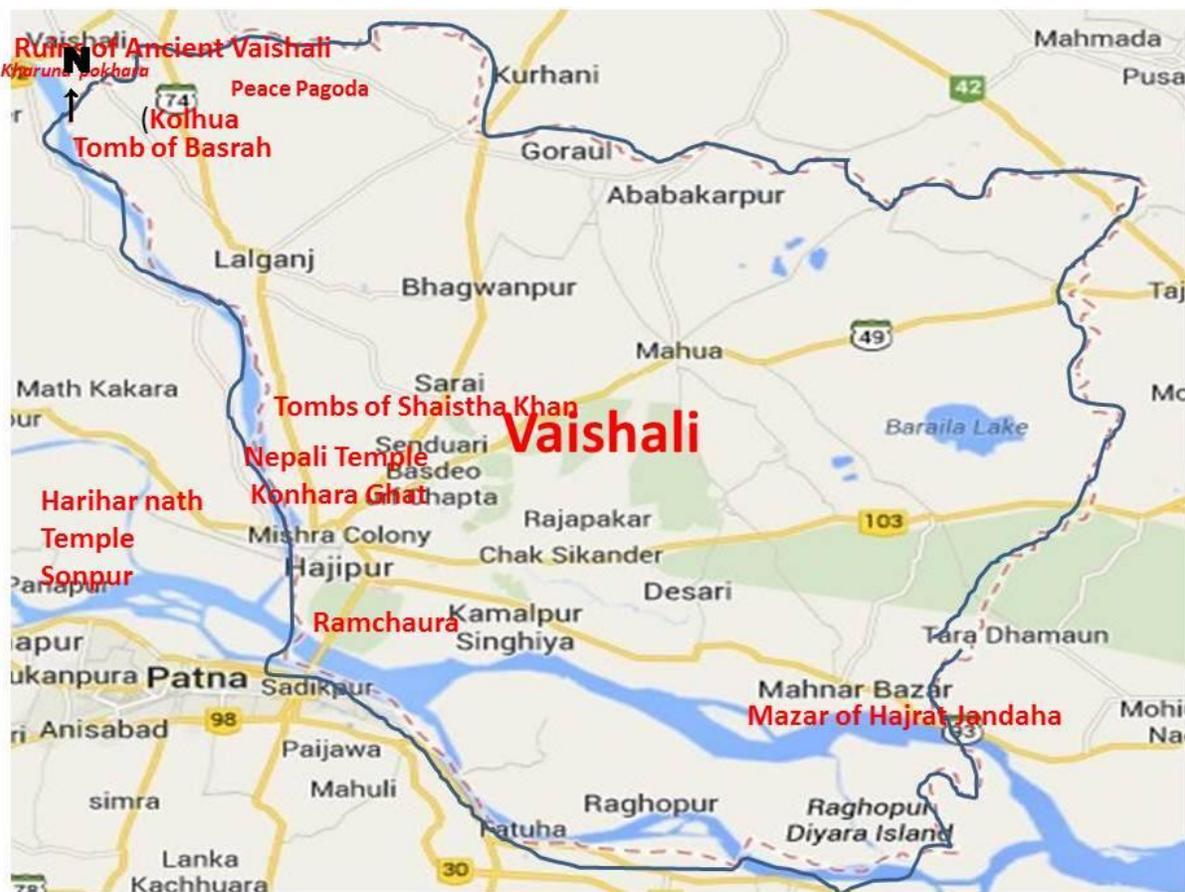
ABSTRACT

Since 6th century BCE upto the colonial period, Vaiśālī in Bihar has witnessed the evolution and growth of its material culture in myriad of forms. During the course of its history, Vaiśālī saw the emergence of various religious cults along with their representative material cultures which we call its tangible heritage in the form of beautiful *stupas*, *chaityas*, *vihāras*, temples, etc. Collectively, we call these religious edifices as the architectural splendors of that area. The present paper intends to explore and assess these architectural splendors of Vaiśālī. The objective of the assessment is to bring to light these architectural splendors in their historical contexts. It will help both While doing the assessment, both the primary and the secondary sources on the subject would be taken into account.

Keywords: Architectural Splendors, Vaisali, Material Culture

Vaiśālī is situated in the name of the same district in the Indian state of Bihar. There are references to Vaiśālī in Rig Veda, Ramayana, Buddhist and Jaina literature and Puranas also. During Ṛgvedic period, ancient Magadh and its surrounding areas were known as a Kīkat Van (RV-III.53.14) and ancient Vaiśālī was an integral part of Kīkat Van. Rāmāyaṇa mentions about the king Ikṣāvāku's queen Ālambusā who had a pious son named Viśāla who founded the city named Viśāla Purī. (*Bālakāṇḍa*, 47.11-12). Buddhist literature describes about a large forest to the north of Vaiśālī as stretching up to Himālayas in 500 BCE (Sumaṅgala Vilāsini, 1971: 309). Ālāra Kālām, the teacher of Budhha, was also a native of Vaiśālī. (*Mahāvāstu* ii: 118). The Buddha is said to have delivered his last sermon at Vaisali. The disciple of Buddha, Ānaṇḍa resided here for 20 years and his ashes were also enshrined here at a place called Rāmchaurā. The Second Buddhist Council took place at Vaiśālī in 383 BCE. Mahavir was also born there. The above references show that the site is very famous for its association with the Buddha and Mahavira. Because of the association of Vaiśālī with all the important religious preachers at that time, it became a popular center of spiritualism and asceticism. Therefore, Vaiśālī is one of the holiest cultural regions on the bank of river Gaṇḍak (*Buḍhi Gaṇḍak / Nārāyaṇi river*) with concentration of Buddhist and Jain architectural remains. Chinese travelers Fā-Hien and Yuan

Chwang also visited Vaiśālī. Fā-Hien visited Vaiśālī in the beginning of the 5th Century CE. In his account, he vividly mentioned about the jungles, *stūpas* and *sangharāmas* or monasteries of Vaiśālī (Legge: 75). Yuan Chwang, who visited India during CE 7th century, also mentions Vaiśālī in his famous book *Si Yu Ki*. According to him, “the foundation of the old city of Vaiśālī was 60 or 70 *li* in circuit and the palace city (the walled part of the city) was 4 or 5 *li* in circuit” (Watters, 1904: 63). Some of the major sites in and around Vaiśālī are – Rājā Viśāl kā Garh, Tomb of Basrāh, Aśokan pillar at Bakhirā, ancient *stūpas*, brick temples and ponds of Koluhā, Kunharā Ghāt and Rāmchaurā at Hājipur.



Map of Vaiśālī

(Courtesy Google Map)

Democracy in Ancient Vaiśālī

Vaiśālī was one of the earliest republics in ancient India. In 6th century BCE, it was considered as the ‘Father of Democracy’ due to its democratic administrative set up. The role of Vaiśālī in

establishing the seven virtue of the Buddha Sangha was immense. It has been elaborated in *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* (Bhagwat, 1936:60-62). The democratic set up at Vaiśālī was executed through the representative bodies like *Sabhā*, *Samiti* and *Mahāsamiti* (Bhagwat: 1936: 60-62).

Basrah

Situated 30 km north-west of Hājīpur (25° 59'N and 85° 8'E), Bāsrāh is famous for its archaeological and antiquarian remains. Sir Alexander Cunningham explored the site in 1861-64 and again in 1881 (1883:6). His explorations largely concentrated near the ruined fort called Raja Viśāla kā garh and the Aśokan pillar. After examining the site he identified it as ancient Vaiśālī (1883:6). Presently, the site is located on a high mound, on the top of which there is a huge brick *stūpa*. The diameter of the *stūpa* is approximately 42 m and its height is 7.2 m. It is approached by a steep staircase. The *stūpa* is said to be built in the memory of Āmrapālī (www.vaishalimuseum.org) who was a famous courtesan of Vaiśālī and a disciple of Lord Buddha. The fort was excavated by T. Bloch in 1903-04. His major findings were brick building and rooms of different dimensions —23x12, 12x8, 10x8 feet, etc. (ASI, Annual Report 1903-4, 1906: 81). He also unearthed a four feet wide platform of brick masonry the outer surface of which is paved by solid course of bricks masonry. The excavation also yielded more than 720 seals impressed on 1100 earthen surfaces, terracotta figurines, toys, balls, whorls, ivory lamps, conch, bangles, etc. (ASI, Annual Report 1903-4, 1906: 81). D.B. Spooner excavated the site again in 1913-14 concentrating on Raja Viśāl kā garh area which unearthed copper coins, bangles, seals, etc. (ASI, Annual Report 1913-14, 1917: 98-122). Krishna Deva also undertook limited excavations at that site in the same area in 1950 (Krishna Deva, 1950:68). The excavation revealed many structures that include two defense walls — one mud wall and another brick wall. It has yielded antiquarian objects ranging from NBPW (Northern Black Polished Ware) culture to Śuṅga, Kushāṇ, Gupta and Post-Gupta periods. All the antiquities of the site have presently been housed in the site museum at Vaiśālī (www.vaihalimuseum.org). A. S. Altekar excavated Kharauna Pokhar area of the site between 1958 and 1962. His excavations revealed 3 feet 4 inch wide brick wall on the all four sides of the slope of Kharauna Pokhar. At Raja Viśāla kā garh, he unearthed a military barrack along with the rampart and also Kushāṇ coins, arrow-heads spears-heads and other iron implements (A.S.Altekar 1959:3-4).

Bakhirā

The site of Bakhirā is located at a distance from 3.5 km to the northwest of Basrāh near Kolhua village. The site contains major archaeological assemblages from Maurya to post-Gupta periods. The archaeological remains of the site include an Aśokan pillar, a *stūpa*, temple, number of votive *stūpas*, tanks, *kuṭāgarśālā*, *swāstika*-shaped monastery, etc.

Relic *Stūpa*

It is located to the north of Kharonā Pokhar. The site was excavated by K.P Jaiswal Research Institute in 1957-58 (www.vaishalimuseum.org). The site has unearthed the earliest phase of the *stūpa* which was raised of mud with a diameter of 8.07m. It is called a relic *stūpa* because a soap stone casket was found in its core containing ash and earth. The site also yielded a small conch, two glass beads, a small piece of gold-leaf and a copper punch marked coin. The excavation also revealed that the *stūpa* was gradually enlarged in Maurya, Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa periods. The present diameter of the *stūpa* is 17.1m. Now, only the ruins of *stūpa* remain exposing its lay-out.



Ananda Stupa, Bakhira

Votive *Stupas*

In between the pillar and the *stūpa* a lot of votive *stūpas* were perhaps constructed by the lay Buddhists before or after fulfilling their cherished wish and also to acquire their personal well-being and virtue. Around three hundred and thirty *stūpas* were exposed in different shapes, sizes and designs. Their geometrical pattern includes square, circular, rectangular, *damaru* style, cylindrical, etc. Decorated bricks were finished with lime plaster and the floor has been finished with lime punning. There are different groups of votive *stūpas* found in two, four and five numbers in a single unit. At a niche of one of the votive *stūpas* has a beautiful *stucco* head of Buddha with an inscription of Buddhist creed.

Aśokan Pillar

It is located at a distance of 1.6 km south-east of the Koluhā village. Locally, the pillar is known as Bakhirā Lat (Cunningham, 1883:12.) The monolithic pillar is 12 m high from existing surface level. It rests on a square stone slab fixed over a greenish sandy layer. Most part of the Chunar sandstone column is polished. The pillar has a square abacus and is surmounted with a seated

lion capital. The seated lion with open mouth is in gracious position. The column does not have an Aśokan edict. But there are some characters of *shankha lipi* of Gupta period. Later some English alphabet was engraved on it by the famous English astronomer, mathematician and the founder member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Reaben Burrow who visited the site in 1792.



Aśokan Pillar with Votive Stupas, Vaiśālī

Tank

Near the Aśokan pillar is a tank known as 'Markaṭ-Hrad', i.e., Monkey Lake. According to legends, it was excavated by the monkeys for Buddha. Now, locally it is called Rām Kuṇḍ (District Gazetteer of Muzaffarpur, 1907:142). This brick lined seven tiered tank measuring approximately 65 x 35 m in dimension has two bathing *ghāts* (terraces) on southern and western sides. This is the largest tank among any Buddhist monasteries in India (www.vashalimuseum.org).

Kuṭāgarśālā

According to the *Sumaṅgala Vilāsini*, a commentary on *Digha Nikāya* by Buddhaghosa, outside the town of Vaiśālī there was a large forest or *mahāvana* where a *saṅgharāma* or monastery was established (*Sumaṅgala Vilāsini*, 1971: 309). The text adds that a storied building was built on pillars and putting a pinnacle above, it was made into a *kuṭāgarśālā*, resembling a chariot of gods (*Sumaṅgala Vilāsini*, 1971: 309). This is the site where Buddha stayed in rainy seasons (*varṣā-*

vās) and addressed to his follower for the last time after the announcement of his approaching *nirvāṇa*. According to the “*Māndhātṛi sūtra*” of the *Divyavadāna*, the *kuṭāgarśālā* had an upper storied hall lying on the bank of *Markat-hrad* or Monkey Tank. The Chinese pilgrim Fā-Hien, who visited Vaiśālī in CE 5th also says that to the north of the city (of Vaiśālī) there existed a large forest (*mahāvana*) having in it the double galleried *vihāra* where the Buddha dwelt (Legge: 75). It seems that Fā-Hien described about the *kuṭāgarśālā* that existed in the forest of Vaiśālī at the time of his visit. Yuan Chwang who visited India in CE 7th century, mentioned that the double galleried *vihāra* was in ruins. Excavations in the site have exposed three phases of its construction. Earlier it was a small *caitya* hall built during Śuṅga-Kuśāṇa period from 3rd- 2nd century BCE. In later phases it was enlarged to a lofty temple. In post Gupta period, it was converted into a monastery by providing a number of supporting walls.

Monasteries with Swastika Plan

Near the *kuṭāgarśālā*, there are monasteries constructed on a *swastika* plan. Each side of the *swastika* has three rooms attached with one common *verandah* around a central open courtyard and entrance from eastern side. The total number of rooms are twelve. The toilet is in southern side. This was completed in Gupta period and constructed for Buddhist nuns (www.vaisalimuseum.org).

Site Museum

Vaiśālī Site Museum has a historical background. In pre-independence days, a villager collected some precious antiquities from the site and created a small museum. Subsequently, the collection was taken over by a museum controlled by the Vaiśālī Sangh (www.vaishalimuseum.org). The present Vaiśālī Site Museum was established by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1971 to house the antiquities and objects found *in-situ* and from successive archaeological explorations and excavations. The museum collections of the Vaiśālī Sangh were also donated to the ASI Site Museum soon after its establishment (www.vaihalimuseum.org). The museum has four galleries and about 2000 antiquities, but only 650 are presently on display. The antiquities range from 600 BCE to CE 1200 covering pre-Maurya, Maurya, Śuṅga, Kuśāṇa, Gupta and early medieval periods.

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