

The world's oldest Republic



somen sengupta revisits Vaishali, an extraordinary archaeological site in India where the Buddha had announced his impending Mahanirvana

RAINDROPS were still rolling down the windowpanes of my car when I suddenly found a signboard installed by Bihar Tourism indicating the road that led to the relic *stupa* of Vaishali. Outside, it was clouded but I had sunshine on my face knowing that I was nearing Vaishali. The air was sultry and the sky dark and I was silently praying to the Buddha to stop the rain because returning from an extraordinary excavation site like Vaishali without good photographs would make no sense. Thanks to him, my prayers were shortly answered. The sky smiled with a pensive touch, quite similar to what people of this place experienced years ago when the Buddha, by then in his 80s, had announced his impending *Mahanirvana* right here at Vaishali.

I first visited Vaishali nearly six years ago not knowing much about the place. Like a casual tourist I took meaningless photographs and left. Later, realising its gargantuan historical significance, I repented helplessly on my ignorance. Thus, when I got a chance to revisit the place, which is one of the most important archaeological sites in India, I did not think twice and before leaving Patna for Vaishali I told friends that I was off to see the world's oldest Republic!

It is now a proven fact that the oldest republic of the world was once formed here under the rule of the Licchavis. Later, the place was gradually ruled by the Mauryas, then the Kushans and finally by the Guptas. Despite being very near Patna city, Vaishali as a tourist spot is sadly under explored. The Bihar we see today was once the political and religious hub of India for centuries. From its ancient capitals of Patliputra and Vaishali, the royals ruled India and changed history forever. Bihar developed simultaneously as a centre of learning and institutions like Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikrashila became part of Indian history. With the passage of time, largescale destruction by Muslim

invaders and neglect pushed many things into the dark but some ruins and relics still remain, reminding us of our glorious past and Vaishali is one of them.

History tells us that Vaishali got its name from King Vishal of the *Mahabharata* and the city had vivid mention in various travelogues of Chinese visitors like Fa-Hein (fifth century AD) and Hieun-Tsang (seventh century). These two references helped Alexander Cunningham, chief of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 to relocate this lost city in Basrah village of Bihar.

One of the most eminent exponents of Jainism, Mahavira was born here in 599 BC. The place reached its zenith of glory when, in 483 BC, Lord Buddha visited the place to deliver his last sermon, "Parinirvana", just three months before his death. The Buddha, a very frequent visitor to this city of Vaishali, allowed women to join the *sangha* and the first to accept this benefit was the mother of his disciple, Ananda.

One hundred years after this revolutionary inci-



World peace pagoda



dent, the second Buddhist Council was conducted here in 383 BC. It is here that Amarapali, the courtesan, is mentioned in various Buddhist literature, and she became a follower of the Buddha. On his way to Nepal, Ashoka the Great visited Vaishali and erected an Ashoka pillar in memory of the Buddha.

I had read somewhere that this place had been abandoned for long. Many priceless artifacts were stolen and destroyed till 1861 when Alexander Cunningham discovered this site with reference from various travelogues. He mentioned its huge potential as a place of archaeological excavation.

In 1903, Dr Bloch of the ASI undertook the project and was followed by Dr Spooner in 1912. What they recovered was just jaw-dropping and this excavation site reopened lost pages of Indian history.

By clearing the debris from a huge *stupa* with massive brick construction, underneath it they

found an Ashoka pillar in excellent polished condition. Innumerable artifacts like coins, pottery, statues, caskets, a double-walled square chamber, gold and semi-precious stones were discovered. Inside the *stupa* they found a statue of a headless, seated Buddha and a crowned head as well. The biggest discovery was perhaps a big Buddha statue with a crown on its head and wearing a necklace. It is a piece from the Pala period.

Before this site was undertaken by the ASI, the pillar was partially visible but most of it was under mud and soil. Local people used to call it "Bhimsen ki lathi". It was found to be one of the six lion pillars Ashoka had erected to inscribe his declaration and messages.

I felt immense pride while facing the mammoth pillar. This monolithic 12-metre high polished sandstone rests on a 2.2-metre slab. The pillar is crowned with a solitary seated lion with its mouth open. It is the only Ashoka pillar found so far that does not contain Ashoka edicts or inscriptions but contains some Bramhi and Shankha *lipi* used in the Gupta era. Reaban Burrow, a scholar from the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, explained some of the script after his visit to this place.

As I turned back, I found the main attraction of Vaishali. It is the grand *stupa* also known as Kutagarasala *stupa*. It is believed that the Buddha used to stay here during his visits to the city. A masterpiece of archaeological significance, this brick *stupa* was built by the Mauryas in the third century BC and then drastically renovated by the Kushans, who increased its height in the first century BC.

Finally I walked to the relic *stupa*, which is now a shadow of its past.

This is one of most sacred pilgrimages for any Buddhist. It attracts a huge number of pilgrims from Japan, Thailand, Korea and many other countries.

A vast water tank just next to the *stupa* inside the same complex always attracts attention. Known as "markat hrad", this tank has two bathing ghats on opposite sides. These are designed in such a way that one is not visible from the other. I came across another large tank nearby known as *Abhishek pushkarani* or coronation tank. It is believed that water from this tank was used in the coronation of the Licchavis. On its bank, the Japanese government has funded the Vishwa Shanti Stupa.

When I had finished my exploration, it was twilight. The calm and tranquil atmosphere had me feeling very close to what many followers of the Buddha must have experienced many, many years ago here in historical Vaishali.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS: Vaishali is just 63 km from Patna city and takes one and half hour's journey by road to reach. Start early from Patna to cover all sites in Vaishali. Vaishali Museum is a must-visit. Bihar Tourism guesthouses are available. From Patna one

can also cover the Unesco world heritage sites of Nalanda and Bodhgaya. For details: www.bihar-tourism.gov.in and www.tourism-bihar.in



YOUR EXPERIENCE

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