



THE KNOWLEDGE OF BUDDHA  
WAS WRITTEN IN RAJGIR AND IT  
ALSO SERVED AS THE PLACE FOR  
THE FIRST BUDDHIST COUNCIL

PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA



# Rajgir, the original seat of Empire

Decades of research around Rajgir in Bihar has unearthed fascinating details about the journey of Gautama Buddha and the spread of Buddhism. It is sad that the place has today been reduced to just another tourist spot, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

From the beginning of 19th century, a group of dedicated European scholars interested in Oriental history started searching every possible fragment of Gautama Buddha's life and work. By that time it was an established fact that Buddha, who for many centuries was promoted as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu by Hindus, was actually a real historical character. The Buddhist literature and sacred texts found in Tibet, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Siyam helped significantly in this process. Two travelogues written by two Chinese travelers — named Fa-Xian and Xuanzang — in two different centuries also proved to be quite useful.

In 500 century BC, human civilisation was limited to small geography. At that time, India was standing at the threshold of a new dawn. It was the time when a prince from the Shakya clan of Tarai had left his earthly pleasures and comforts and chosen the life of a monk instead. He was searching for an ultimate salvation of mankind. He was neither an ordinary man nor an ordinary monk. He was Buddha, the first enlightened soul of the world. His 'new religion' — Buddhism — was blooming in some pockets of India, mainly in the kingdom of Magadha from where the most powerful king of this land was ruling this country.

The various texts found in other countries helped them draw a sketch of Buddha's life and the details from the Chinese travelogues helped them identify places associated with his life. They found out that six places were most important in the life of Buddha. They are: Lumbini, where he was born; Bodh Gaya, where he attained enlightenment; Vaishali, where he allowed nuns to follow his religion; Kushinagar, where he died while on his way back to Kapilavastu; Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon; and Rajgriha, the royal abode per excellence where he stayed for the maximum number of years as a royal guest to king of Magadha and where he set up the first Vihara along with a residential camp of his followers.

In every ancient Buddhist text, Rajgriha is shown with paramount importance. It was here that he came in search for a master. It is here where he came from Sarnath and accepted the royal hospitality offered by the king and his court doctor. Here, his cousin Devdutta tried to kill him several times. Here, Buddha delivered most of his inspirational sermons including the famous lotus sutra. Thus, Rajgir was a point of interest to all Buddhists across the globe from the beginning.

The archaeological excavation of Rajgir was first undertaken by none other than the legendary Alexander Cunningham. His effort was followed by another legend, Sir Jhon Marshal, from 1905 to 1906 and then again from 1913 to 1914 by VH Jackson. In

1840s, Captain Kittoe, an employee of East India Company, found many important Buddhist sites in Rajgir with the help of Fa-xian's description.

In the excavation of 1905, a granary made of earthen rings, two clay tablets with legends that depicted character of 1st or 2nd century BC, six copper cast coins, a square copper punched coin, some fragments of Buddhist sculptures and few terracotta seals with symbols, were found. They gave enough testimonial support that this was indeed the old capital of Magadha. Soon, study revealed that human inhabitation started here in 5th century BC and continued till 1st century AD.

In early 19th century, Dr Francis Buchanan — a noted scholar — scaled the south part of Bihar on the basis of Xuanzang's travelogue and arrived at Rajgir where he found a massive, stone-wall boundary that took him 45 minutes to cross over. His observation correctly found that this place is well protected by five hills from various sides and almost an entire town is full of rubbles and dry rock wall that clearly indicates the remains of a lost city.

History helped him find out that more than 800 years BC ago, this place was known as Vasumati. It was named after son of Brahma. It was also known as Girivraja as it is believed that this place was well protected by several hills — Bipul, Baivar, Udaigiri, Sonagiri, Ratnagiri, and many more. The most popular name that ancient texts and travelogues of Chinese traveler Xuanzang both mentioned, was Kusagarpura. As per Xuanzang himself, it means 'superior quality grass'. Like many places in India, this was also mingled with the legend of Mahabharata.

It was believed that Rajgir was the capital of King Jarasandha, who was killed by Bhima after a tough battle. Till today, there is a place in Rajgir named Jarasandha *ki ran bhumi*, which is marked as the place where the deadly battle took place. There are archaeological ruins known as Jarasandha *ka akhra*. Both places have the ASI signboards which certify them as historical sites.

Though the glory of Buddha and Buddhism was best expanded during the time of Ashoka and Harshavardhana, both of them were born centuries after him. None of them was the direct disciple of Buddha. In his life time, Buddha was highly regarded and supported by two kingdoms. One was Magadha, ruled by Bimbisara and other was Kosala, ruled by



Prasenjit. History records that Rajgriha or Rajgir was the 1st capital of Magadha and it is from this place of Bihar that a huge population of India living over a large landmass was once ruled till the time capital was shifted to Pataliputra.

So, it is easy to connect Buddha and Rajgir where he spent years of his life and where in his presence a son filled his hands with the blood of his father. Ajatshatru, the rebel son of Bimbisara, threw his father into the prison and gradually killed him in a brutal way. The jail where poor Bimbisara was thrown was later excavated and is now a protected archaeological site by ASI. The 2mt-thick stone wall with each arm measuring 600 mt with a circular bastion clearly indicates a very strong structure. During excavation, an iron manacle was found in one of the cells. It very clearly established the fact that it was a jail.

Though the relics contain nothing more than a low-running stone wall, it's location creates curiosity. Legend has it that the king himself selected this place as his prison as it offers a panoramic view to the hill named Griddhakuta where in that time Buddha was staying and delivering his holy sermon. Even now, the place offers a breathtaking view of the hill where indeed Buddha stayed. A stone-paved road leading to the hill is known as the Bimbisara road as it is believed that it was built by him when he came to meet Buddha here.

From there to the east, a place identified as a 'mango grove' was donated to Lord Buddha by the famous physician of that time Jivaka. In 1954-55, DR Patil of the ASI excavated this place and exposed two large elliptical halls. Thus, it is believed that this was the location for Jivaka's monastery. A bamboo garden named Venuvana was also gifted to Buddha by the king.

The palace of Ajatshatru, the man who shifted his capital from here in 5th century BC, is also found in Rajgir. Once a massive structure, this was decorated with 32 gates. Today, it is not even a pale shadow of its own past. Only few standing pillars with minimum ornamentation on its rock surface and a small area encircled with a raw stone wall is what is left to see.

Near the palace

there is a stupa where once, a nail of Buddha was preserved. It is believed to have been broken by Ashoka to recover Buddha relics during his time.

Six months after the death of Buddha, Ajatshatru organised the first ever Buddhist council with 500 top scholar joining. It is believed that the mega conference was held in Saptaparni hill 12 km south of today's Rajgir city. In late 1960, a Japanese Buddhist scholar named Nichidastu Fujii built this stupa to celebrate 2,500 years of Lord Buddha. He did it on behalf of Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist Sec. This one is the biggest peace pagoda of the world. Built in white stone, the stupa contains a golden-coloured Buddha statue.

The cyclopean wall is now nothing but a debris that encircles the entire old part of Rajgir. This continuous and bastioned dry stone fortification wall with a circuit of 40 km runs over the top of the hills with periodic partition is a signature of an ancient capital with very modern security provision. Apart from this there is an inner fortification made of earth and rubble. Three well marked gaps in the wall clearly talks about massive gates. Outside this one another fortification wall now largely missing covers a circuit of nearly 5 km.

One of the most remarkable archaeological sites of Rajgir is at Udaigiri hills where on a stone bed, marks of chariot wheels are found. Two parallel furrows cut so deep into the rock bed that in rain it is filled with water. Though there is no definite evidence about its age, archaeologists believe that this is as old as the time of Mahabharata.

In the same place, shell inscriptions are also found. It is believed to be a 4th century AD work. This particular site of Rajgir is enough to prove the historical importance of this place. If Buddha spent only 12 years in Rajgir Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara spent 14 years here. The holy book of Jainism — *Tripitak* — was written in Rajgir. Today, more than 24 ancient Jain temples and many cave carvings are found here in Rajgir.

However, all these matter very little to common people who visit Rajgir. Neither Buddha nor the glory of a kingdom named Magadha magnets people visiting Rajgir. They come here to take a bath in a hot spring that is believed to be holy and cures many diseases. Rajgir of Bihar is a sorry example of underestimated heritage.