

Revival of Buddhist Modernism at Vaiśālī

Abstract

The identity of Vaiśālī is changing through the constructions of Buddhist Shanti Stupas, temples and monasteries of Eastern and South- East Asian countries. These modern developments raise several questions about their history, local and international identity, reclaim and conflicts. I would like to discuss Vaiśālī in relation to their archaeological past and historical importance in the Buddhist world, and how they became important in the modern world. This paper proposes to examine the revival of Buddhist Modernism¹ through art & architectures of Buddhist temples and monasteries of Eastern and South- East Asian countries in Vaiśālī.²

Introduction

Image of Vaiśālī in various ancient literature and History

Vaishali is believed to be the ancient capital of the *Vajjian* Republic where Buddha received an offering of honey from a monkey. Vaishali is also the place where Buddha announced his *Mahaparinirvana*. The Ancient name of Vaiśālī was Videha, Mithila and Tirabhukti during different phases. Videha defined through literature in four senses. In the first definition, this place was inhabited by tribe at the east of the Gandak region called Videha tribes. Secondly,

¹ The German Buddhologist heinz Bechert coined the term ‘ Buddhist Modernism’ and defined it as follows: “Buddhist modernism is characterized by the emphasis laid on rationalist elements in Buddhist teachings, by the belief that the teachings of Buddhism and those of modern science are not only in conformity but identical, by the tacit elimination of the traditional cosmology, and by a reinterpretation of the objective of the Buddhist religion in terms of social reform and the building of a better world.” Bechert noted that Buddhist modernism is also characterized in part by the creation of lay religious organizations that did not previously exist. For him, the primary ethos animating this modern interpretation of Buddhism is the attempt to bridge the traditional gap between otherworldly and this-worldly practices and aims, transforming a religion of world-renunciation into one stressing societal reform and human development. (David L. McMahan, *Buddhism in the Modern World*. Routledge, 2012.)

² Vaiśālī has more than ten temples and monasteries built by Buddhist countries such as China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka.

it was known as Videhan state with its capital at Mithila that is usually identified with Janakpur in the Nepal. It is situated at the Indo-Nepal border at a distance of 14 miles from the Jaynagar Railway Station in the district Madhubani (plate no.1). Next, Videha is defined as a geographical term which included the Vaiśālī state along with the Videhan state, within its borders. In addition, in the literary sources, Ajatasatru, son of Bimbisara by a princess of Vaisali was called “Vaidehiputto”³.

The Two states, Vaiśālī and Videha, flourished in North Bihar during the Ancient period. These states came under the Magadha kingdom, under Ajatasatru and Mahapadma Nanda in the beginning of the fifth (circa 484 BCE) and the Middle of the fourth centuries BCE (circa 347 BCE) respectively.⁴ The terrain lying between Gandaka and Kosi rivers is known as Vaiśālī. It is also bounded by the river Ganga in the south and the Himalayan Terai in the north. This region comprises of the present districts of Champarana, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Saharsa and Begusarai.⁵

These information's are adequate to lead us to another set of questions, what happened to these sites, how and in which condition they were found or discovered by 18th and 19th century scholars? What had they written in earlier reports about these sites? In order to explain those questions, it is important to go into detail studies and critical analysis of Alexander Cunningham⁶ reports of 1861-62, which deals with the Vaiśālī.

³ F. Max. Müller, *The Sacred Books of the East* (SBE XI.), Oxford: Clarendon, 1879. *Mahaparinibbanasutta*, pp. 4-5.

⁴ Yogendra Mishra, *An Early History of Vaiśālī, from the Earliest times to the Fall of the Vajjian Republic, circa 484 B.C.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962. Introduction Section I, The Land, p. 1

⁵ Upendra Thakur, *History of Mithilā*. Darbhanga: Mithilā Inst., 1988. p.4.

⁶ Alexander Cunningham was a British army engineer, who had interest in the history and archaeology of India and one of the founder members of Archaeological survey of India.

Alexander Cunningham reports and archaeological discovery of Besarh or Vaiśālī

A village named Besarh or Besadh, situated at 27 miles to the east north from Patna, and 20 miles from Hajipur on the bank of the Ganges. On the basis of Ain-e-Akbari and distance measurement, Cunningham identified Besarh as the ancient Vaiśālī. Then he found King's Palace as described by Xuanzang. This is in Vaisali, at 120 li or 20 miles to the east of north from the northern bank of the Ganges opposite *Pāṭaliputra*. He observed similarity between, Xuanzang description of the palace 4 to 5 li (from 3,500 to 4,400 feet) in circuit and the ruins of *Raja Bisal Ka garh*, which is 1,580 feet long and 750 feet broad inside, or 4,660 feet in circuit round the crest of the mound.

Cunningham had excavated the sites, found the ruined fort, and ruined bricks of *stūpa*. Fort was covered with mound, 1,580 feet long from north to south, and 750 feet broad from west to east, measured from edge to edge. He noted that the fort had cylindrical towers at the four corners, and surrounded by a ditch. It was full of water at the time, when Cunningham visited Vaiśālī. He measured these four towers, some are 6 to 8 feet above the country, and the north-west is 12 feet above the fields. He found bastion at north-west. He noted a modern small brick temple within the fort.

Cunningham noted a ruined mound of solid brick-work about 1000 feet distance from the south-west angle of the fort. This ruined mound was 23 feet 8 inches in height above the fields. The top of the whole ruined mound, he saw full with Muslims tombs, the tomb ascribed to Mir Abdal, is said to be 500 years old. In charge of the Muslims tombs became an important informer of Cunningham. On the site, a widely-spread Baniyan tree, supported on numerous trunks, on the south edge of the mound was shading the whole of the tombs. Cunningham claim this brick mound is the ruin of one of the *stūpas*, or solid towers of Vaiśālī, and relate with the description of Xuanzang. He quoted Xuanzang as "the sacred

monuments are so many that it would be difficult to enumerate them”.⁷Cunningham noted, “which were situated to the south of the town, one of which, I have no doubt, is the soild brick mound that now bears the tomb of the Muslim Saint, Mir Abdal”. This record has open up the issue of claim and changing definition of the space and authority. During the course of time and shifting of power from one hand to another political power, religious sites were also get new identity and claim according to the respective power.

Then Cunnigham writes about different *stūpas*, which were situated in different parts of Vaiśālī, with the help of Xuanzang travel account. He discussed a *stūpa*, erected on the spot, where Buddha had announced his approaching *Nirvāṇa*. That *stūpa* contains the relics of the Ānanda. He was unable to excavate any of these *stūpas* because of the presence of the Muslims tombs on the top of this ancient *stūpa*. He recorded an annual fair at the Besarh/ Vaiśālī *stūpa*, occurs in the month of *chaitra*, when many thousands of people assemble at shrine of *Mīr Abdāl*. He found that “occurrence of this fair is regulated by the solar reckoning of the Hindus, and not by the lunar year of the Muslims”⁸. On the basis of this, he concludes that the festival was established long before the time of the Muslims Saint. The place where this fair occurs, he related this fair with the festival of celebration in honour of the Buddha, or of one of his disciples. This shows how certain early practices continued in the name and form of the new god. Nevertheless it raises questions about when and how do these changes occur? Is it influence through the political power or it is a natural change?

On the western ward of the fort, Cunningham found a large body of water with an island, on which a small temple dedicated to Mahādeva is located. The temple has a collection of sculptures found in the ruins of Vaiśālī. The sculpture of Mahādeva seated on his bull *Nandi*

⁷Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862-63-64-65*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2000. Re-print. Op. cit. Julien’s Hwen Thsang, II, 395.

⁸Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862-63-64-65*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2000. Re-print.p.58.

and caressing *Gauri*. The Mahādeva and Gauri are shown with a lion image. There was also a sculpture of the Viṣṇu. The figure of the four-armed Viṣṇu has a halo around his head. He holds a club, a ball, a quoits and a conch shell. He found another sculpture of *Aṣṭa Śakti* or eight female energies seated on their *vāhans* or vehicles at the same place. He mentioned Buddhist sculptures, one is of Buddha, two of the Dhyani Buddhas, Amitabha, and the fourth, identify as Bodhisatwa Avalokiteśvara. At present, the temple remains in the same condition but Buddhist sculptures are moved in different temple nearby. A new temple for Buddhist sculpture is created recently, just adjacent to the old temple. Buddhist Sculpture is recognized by the locals as one of the Jain Tīrthāṅkara rather than the Buddha. It renders as to how gradually different religious identity and practices gaining its place in the Vaiśālī.

Cunningham observed several small water bodies of fifty two water tanks in Vaiśālī, locals call them *Bāwan Pokhar* (in Hindi), and two of them still exist in the neighbourhood of Bakhra. Remains of the Bakhra are all situated on a low mound, which is two miles away from the Fort of Vaiśālī. Cunningham recorded that larger part of this mound was cultivated and the whole surface was covered with small pieces of bricks. This place has ancient remains — a stone pillar surmounted by a lion, a ruined *stūpa* of solid brick, a water tank, four small eminences which mark the sites of ancient building, and a very fine life-size statue of Buddha, which was discovered only eight year ago.

Cunningham gave details about a lion pillar and its surrounding. The lion pillar is situated in the middle of a small courtyard with small rooms on three sides —the residence of a *sanyasi*. Who recently settled at this place. According to Cunningham, the *sanyasi* was about 30 years old. He gave assistance and information about place to Cunningham. He found plenty of food stored in his house, and a well on the east side of the court-yard. Cunningham made an excavation all around the Lion Pillar until the water level. He measured the height of Lion

pillar above the water level was 32 feet. He was informed by an old man that a Bengali Saheb had also excavated round the pillar, and that just at the water level he found a square pedestal in three steps. Cunningham measured the upper and lower diameter of pillar is 38.7 inches and 49.8 inches respectively. The diameter being 44.2 inches, as the slope of the shaft is quite straight. The height of the capital is 3 feet 10 inches, where a 2 feet 10 inches in height bell-shaped capital, with an oblong abacus of 12 inches. Above this pedestal, a life-size lion is seated facing the north with his hind legs under him, with his mouth open as if snarling, and his tongue slightly protruded. He also discussed the aesthetic appearance of the lion in detail as “The attitude of lion is rather stiff, and the fore legs of the animal seem to be both too short and too thick; but the hair of the mane is boldly and cleverly treated, and the general appearance of the statue is certainly striking”⁹. This visual analysis of lion sculpture gives a sense of boldness.

In his account, Cunningham writes about the present condition of the pillar. He did not find any ancient inscription on the pillar, also the surface of the pillar has suffered considerably, and 2 ½ feet above the present ground level, the polished surface has peeled off all round. He also talks about how numerous names of visitors have been cut on the pillar. Most of these are Christians, Hindus and few of Muslims name are chisel out on the pillar. He came to know that the visitor wrote their names in charcoal, after a black-smith traced them roughly with a chisel. He mentioned a chiseled name and year “Reuben Burrow, 1792.” Some of them are 200 or 300 years old. The pillar is still today, known by the local people as *bhim-sen-ka-lat* or *Bhim-sen-ka-danda*. There are a number of local myths around this pillar, this is also as *Bhim-sen-ka-lat*, and how *Bhim* had forgot to take his *lat* (*lat* is locally means a stick).¹⁰

⁹ Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862-63-64-65*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2000. Re-print. p. 60.

¹⁰ Local peoples relate this pillar with epic of *Mahābhārata* and character of *Bhīm*. They call pillar as *Bhīm-Sen-Kā-lāt* or stick of *Bhīm-Sen-Kā-danda*. This is also mentioned by Cunningham. Alexander Cunningham, *Four*

After paying a visit to Vaiśālī, towards the South of the pillar, he noted a water tank of 200 x 150 feet. Locally people called this water body *kund* or *pokhar*. North of the pillar, there is a ruined *stūpa* of solid brick surmounted by an old *pīpal* tree. Height of the *stūpa* was 25 feet 10 inches from ground level. He came to know that an excavation was made, right into the centre of the mound by some sahib more than 50 years ago. This excavation was made by a Doctor, who was resident at Muzaffarpur, about 1805 C.E.

This shows as to how nearby educated person-doing excavation on this place and raise question why a doctor was excavating a *stūpa*. How they were just excavating just in the middle of the *stūpa*, where they got this idea? It gives a sense that before Cunningham, many others have knowledge about the richness of the place. Or it could be that they found ancient coins or valuable objects near by the *stūpa*. Even today, many stories are heard about how locals found vessels of coins during ploughing their land.

Cunningham noted a Buddhist temple some 500 feet away from the north of the ruined *stūpa* in Vaiśālī. The temple has a life size image of Buddha, which was found only eight years before the visit of Cunningham, in digging up some brick walls immediately to the east of the temple. This sculpture contains two Buddhistava images on both side of the Buddha and two lions on the pedestal. Pedestal also has a long inscription. On the basis of characters, he dated this image to 8th or 9th century C.E. According to his view, there were ancient Buddhist *vihāras*, where this image was enshrined. He observed similarity between bricks of Vaiśālī with the Great temple at Bodh Gayā, and of the *stūpa* at Giryek of Nālanda district.

He gave a reference to description of Xuanzang, where Xuanzang noticed one mile to the north-west of the Palace of Vaiśālī is a *stūpa* and column that was built by King Aśoka. To

Reports Made during the Years, 1862-63-64-65. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2000. Re-print. p.61.

the south of the pillar, there was a pond which was believed to be excavated by a flock of monkeys for the use of Buddha.¹¹ On the west of the tank, a *stūpa* was built on the spot where the monkeys offered the honey to Buddha, north-west angle of the tank, there was a statue of monkey. Cunningham matches this account of Xuanzang with what he had found in Vaiśālī. Even he did not find any remains of the capital of the Lichchhavi family, specially the “*kūṭāgāra*” which were mentioned by Xuanzang. Vaiśālī was celebrated as the place, where Buddha had announced his *nīrvāna* or *parīnīrvāna*. Then at the end of Cunningham’s report of Vaiśālī, he spoke about the name Bakhra, which could be derived from vak, “to speak,” from the fact that in the *kūṭāgāra* hall, Buddha had addressed his disciple for the last time. Buddha announced his *parīnīrvāna* at Vaiśālī.

Through above descriptions of the Vaiśālī, it becomes clear that this Buddhist site had an important place in the Buddhist religion throughout the centuries. When we see the sites are mentioned in the ancient text with reference of the life of Buddha. Important life events of Buddha places translated in the form of architecture and religious sites. Vaiśālī gets recorded in the foreigners’ travellers’ accounts with a descriptions of social and political life.

Later, these accounts become an important source of information to relocate the ancient Buddhist site and path for the modern excavations. Excavations and reports of Vaiśālī, not only gives the sense of the ancient remains but also preserve a social life of its surroundings. It marked the changes occur during the course of time, where people still practicing a certain form in new religious beliefs. It is important to see how these sites again marked as important places in the Buddhist practices.

¹¹ As Cunningham has given reference to the Julien’s Hwen Thsang, II. P.386-387. Alexander Cunningham, *Four Reports Made during the Years, 1862-63-64-65*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2000. Reprint. p. 62.

Excavation and reports have given a new way to claim Vaiśālī again by the different Buddhist communities of Eastern and South-East Asian countries. The process of reclaiming is itself a part of revival of Buddhism in these sites. In the subsequent analysis, revival of Buddhism will be discussed in relation with this Buddhist site along with their struggle to reclaim Vaiśālī as part of Buddhist circuit.

Reclaiming of Buddhist identity of Vaiśālī through art & architectures of Eastern and South- East Asian countries

World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*)

World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*) of Vaiśālī is next to the coronation tank, near to ancient Buddha relic site built by Japanese Nichiren Buddhist Sect Nipponzan-Myohoji and Rajgir Buddha Vihar Society (Plate no.2).¹² Peace pagoda is a Buddhist *Stūpa*, erected according to the teaching of the *saddharma pundarika sutra* (The Lotus Sutra) to spread love and peace and to make the pure land on the earth, a symbolic monument of peace. Since World War II, peace pagodas have been building all over the world. The construction of the *stūpas* all over the world was initiated by the founder of the Nipponzan-Myohoji, monk Nichidatsu Fuji, after seeing the tragedy of Atomic Bombs in Japan, at the end of the World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki cities of Japan where the atomic bombs killed millions of people during the World War II also have Peace Pagodas. Today's eighty peace pagodas are built around the world in Europe, Asia and the United States. Seven peace Pagodas built in different parts of India (Rajgir, Darjeeling, Delhi, Dhauli Giri-Bhubaneswar, Ladakh, Wardha, and Vaiśālī).

The construction of Vaiśālī peace pagoda was started on 20th October 1983 and the foundation stone is laid by Dr. A.R. Kidwai, the then Governor of Bihar. It has taken fourteen

¹² It is a Japanese Buddhist Sangha, which was founded in 1917, and work for peace in the world.

years to get completed and it is inaugurated by Dr. Shanker Dayal Sharma, President of India on 23rd October 1996. This *stūpa* is designed by Dr. M.Choka of Japan. Foundation work construction is done by Riling Engineer Ltd. of Patna; it is supervised by Mr.Suresh Prasad of Darjeeling with the help of local masons, labours and technicians of Vaiśālī. *Stūpa* consist four images of Buddha on four sides of the *stūpa*, which is made by Mr. Sudarshan Sahu (padma shree) of Puri, Orissa. Sculptures are made of fibre glass and polished with gold. He is also made Kota (top portion of the *stūpa*). Lions, lamps and Dharma chakras were sculpted by Mr. Lakshmi Pandit of Patna, Bihar and flooring is done by Mr. Jitendra N. Prasad of Vaiśālī. The height of the *sūtpa* is 38m (125 feet) with 36m (118 feet) diameter of base. The Diameter of Dome is 20m (65 feet).

The images of four Buddhas represent important event of Buddha, i.e. Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon and *Parinirvāṇa* (Plate no. 3, 4, 5 & 6). These narrative panels are carved with low relief in the background where as principle image is carved in protruding high relief, such as the Birth and *parinirvāṇa* images. In the Birth event, Buddha is standing on a lotus with raising his one hand up with pointed finger towards sky and second hand pointed towards earth. This is a new iconography in the images of Buddha. Background is shown with seven lotus flowers. It shows the first seven steps taken by the Buddha after the birth. An image of Maya Devi holding a branch of tree is shown right besides the baby Buddha. Background images are much smaller and are in a low relief in comparison to voluminous sculpture of Buddha. The background of first sermon of Buddha has words that are written in Japanese calligraphically, (Plate no.4), which at once appear to be belong to the foreign land. The idea of building peace pagoda in all around the world came from Japanese Buddhist world. In the image of the Buddha, Japanese calligraphy is a distinct feature to show its affinity to its own cultural practices as well as to proclaim their affinity in a declarative sense.

A small Japanese Buddhist temple, named Nipponzan Myohoji is situated beside the gate of the peace pagoda at Vaiśālī (Plate no.7). The architecture of Japanese temple is simple and do not have any decoration from outside. A triangle shape roof and U shape gate leads to a small hall, which is full of small Buddha sculptures, with photographs of monks (Plate no.8). Walls have calligraphy, portraits of monks and a four steps platform. The top platform has small sculptures of Buddha and sculptures of *stūpa* then second and third have photographs of different monks and flowers pots. Temple also have place for prayers and meditation. A place where important monk's photographs and Buddha images are placed side by side, it introduces important monks to the viewers and their roles in the construction of *stūpa* and temple at Vaiśālī. Photographs, sculptures of Buddha, flower pots with plastic flowers, offered biscuits and cakes, calligraphy and paintings on walls, it creates an active Buddhist world. It is interesting to see ancient sites are activated through these visual vocabularies.

Conclusion

Vaiśālī always received an important attention in Buddhist and Jain literary sources and was considered a place for philosophical debates which brought Siddharth to Vaiśālī after renouncing the material world. This incident is mentioned in the *Lalitavistara*, *Mahāvastu*, *Therīgāthā* and *Majjhima-Nikāya*. After enlightenment, Buddha, again was invited to Vaiśālī, where he preached the *Ratana-Sutta*. These literary sources provide details about the site in relation with the Buddha's life and indicate how Buddhism was growing. These information leads to early archaeologist to excavated this site.

Alexander Cunningham, whose effort and interest influence the Governor-General of India Lord Canning, made a way for establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India. Cunningham was appointed as the first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of

India. Thus Cunningham recreated or reclaimed the ancient site of Vaiśālī and construing an identity for the Buddhist world.

Then the growth of modern Buddhist temples and monasteries at Vaiśālī are making this site an international centre for Buddhists religion. The *Viśvā Śānti Stūpa* of Vaiśālī is also working to spread the message of peace through Buddhism by building a huge *stūpa* and images of Buddha. These *stūpa*, temples and monasteries are becoming a tool to represent culture and identity of the respective countries and are not only place of pilgrimage but tourist attractions too.

Plates



Plate no. 1, Lion Pillar and Ananda Relic Stupa; Vaiśālī



Plate no. 2, World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*) of Vaiśālī, Bihar.



Plate no.3, Sculpture of Birth, World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*), Vaiśālī, Bihar.



Plate no.4, Sculpture of Enlightenment Buddha ,World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*) ,
Vaiśālī,



Plate no.5, First sermon at sarnath, World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*), Vaiśālī, Bihar.



Plate no.6, Sculpture of *Parinirvāṇa*, World peace pagoda (*Viśvā Śānti Stūpa*), Vaiśālī, Bihar.



Plate no.7, Japanese Buddhist temple, Nipponzan Myohoji, Vaiśālī.



Plate no. 8, Inside of the Japanese Temple, Nipponzan Myohoji, Vaiśālī, Bihar

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Ajit Kumar,

Research Scholar,

School of Arts & Aesthetics,

Jawaharlal Nehru University,

New Delhi - 110067

Contact No. 9968938304

Email id: jtkumar0@gmail.com