

RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND INTEGRATED CULTURAL TRADITIONS IN VAISHALI: ASPECTS OF BUDDHISM, JAINISM AND GUPTA-ERA SHAIVISM

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Abstract: Syncretism has been one of the most fundamental features of Indian civilization. India's cultural heritage has not only assimilated various religious, philosophical, and social streams but also given them a shared cultural platform. This is the very feature that has secured for the Indian culture a place among the most ancient and most dynamic civilizations of the globe. This syncretic cultural activity has had an important center in Vaishali in Bihar. Here, many archaeological artifacts relating to Buddhist philosophy, Jain philosophy, and Brahmanical traditions have been uncovered, which indicates the diversified and co-existential past of the region. Vaishali was one of the ancient republics of India. It was the capital of the Licchavi Republic and a land rich in terms of politics, culture, and religion. This is the area where Lord Buddha visited several times and gave one of his last sermons. Here too was born Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism. Moreover, the Shaiva, the Vaishnava, and other Brahmanical religious orders flourished here during Gupta times. The statues of Lord Shiva of the Gupta period found in the Vaishali region are a sign that a legacy of religious tolerance and cultural harmony was carried on, evolving in this region. In this way, Vaishali is not only a religious center but also a living example of the composite culture of India. During this period, the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions developed in parallel and influenced each other. This chapter addresses the concept of this composite civilization based on the Buddhist, Jain, and Gupta period Shaiva legacy found in the Vaishali area. Therefore, a qualitative and descriptive technique has been employed, taking into account both primary and secondary sources, as well as different periodicals and journals, so that the research paper is created with the best quality and academic rigor.

Cultural and Historical Backgrounds

Vaishali is a very ancient and wonderful place. Vaishali is known as a flourishing city in Buddhist and Jaina literature. It is regarded as a prime example of republicanism in ancient India, being the capital of the Licchavis. Here, the social and political organization was already partially developed. Buddhist texts describe Vaishali as a wealthy city, graced with gorgeous gardens and magnificent *viharas* (monasteries). The geographical setting of Vaishali was also highly crucial for its development. It was relatively close to the Ganges and developed into a major center of trade and travel. This area of North Bihar was also an important route connecting Nepal with the Gangetic plains. There was, therefore, a constant movement of intake and outflow of different cultures, merchants, visitors, and religious lecturers into the area. It is for this reason that Vaishali became a big center of cultural exchange. The archeological evidence unearthed at Vaishali clearly shows the presence of many religious traditions in the area. The Ashoka Pillar, Buddhist stupas, *viharas*, Jain temples, and Hindu sculptures of the Gupta period all provide testimony to the rich cultural past of this region.

Introduction of Vaishali District (Bihar)

Population (2011)	Population – 34,95,249 Male 18,47,049 Female 1648191	Rural Population (2011)	Population 3,262,715 (93.35%) Male- 1723220, Female- 1539488
Urban Population (2011)	Population - 232,534 (6.65%) Male- 123829, Female - 108703	Geographical Area (km ²)	2036
Literacy (%)	68.6	Sub-Division	03 (Hajipur, Mahnar, Mahua)
Female Literacy (%)	59.1	Block (According to census of year 2011)	16 (Vaishali is also a Block) Total Population 1,46,364
Male Literacy (%)	77	Town	03

Village Panchayat	290	Total no. of Village	1414
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Source - <https://vaishali.nic.in>, Bihar Govt.

Buddhist Philosophy and Its Cultural Role in Vaishali

Buddhist Philosophy and Place in Culture in Vaishali. Historically, Vaishali has been an important center of Buddhism. Lord Buddha visited Vaishali many times during his lifetime. Buddhist literature states that the Buddha delivered many important talks here at Vaishali. Here, he also proclaimed his Mahaparinirvana, which refers to his final passing. The Second Buddhist Council was also held in Vaishali. This event is of great importance in the history of Buddhism. The Buddhist remnants found in Vaishali include stupas, viharas, and the Ashoka Pillar. The Ashoka Pillar is an outstanding example of Mauryan-era art. The lion capital is said to be a symbol of the spread of Buddhism and of the religious policies of Emperor Ashoka. The stupas here were built with the purpose of protecting the relics and recollections of the Buddha. Vaishali's social and cultural fabric was deeply affected by Buddhist doctrine. The local society was given a humanistic viewpoint by principles such as nonviolence (ahimsa), compassion, the Middle Path, and equality. Buddhism denied the segregation of castes and ritualistic customs and stressed the value of an ethical life. The Buddhist viharas of Vaishali were the centers of learning and cultural activities. Monks and students from anywhere would come here to study. Vaishali thus became the center of knowledge and intellectual legacy.



Archaeological Excavation Buddhist Sites of Vaishali

Buddhism aimed to incorporate local cultures and traditions, not throw them out. This is why Vaishali has a lovely blend of Buddhist art and local folk practices. Its sculpture and architecture give a clear glimpse of Indian cultural values.

The Jain Philosophical Tradition at Vaishali

Vaishali is regarded as a very sacred place of Jainism. Lord Mahavira was born at Kundalpur near Vaishali. Mahavira spent a significant portion of his life in this region. Vaishali is described in Jain literature as a city of immense religious and cultural importance. Jainism became immensely popular in the Vaishali region due to the teachings of Mahavira. The concepts of *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Aparigraha* (non-possession), *Satya* (truth), and self-restraint provided the moral compass for the society. Jainism guided people on the path of self-purification and penance. The remnants of the Jains at Vaishali show that the Jain community here was prosperous and active. The area is home to a religious diversity, which is reflected in its Jain temples, idols, and pilgrimage destinations. Jainism exerted a huge effect on the commercial society and the urban life. Vaishali was a city of very great commercial importance, and hence Jainism spread rapidly in the region. The non-violent and ethical way of life of Jainism promoted social harmony.



The Vaishali region associated with Lord Mahavira

The Concord of Buddhist and Jain Traditions

Vaishali has been an important site in the Indian religious and cultural history where both Buddhist and Jain traditions prospered side by side. Lord Gautama Buddha had visited Vaishali many a time to impart his teachings and to preach the messages of compassion, non-violence, and the Middle Path. Lord Mahavira was born in Kundagram, in the Vaishali region, which is also important to Jainism. Both religions stressed ethical life, self-restraint, and truth, not Vedic rites. The same doctrinal underpinning led to a spirit of harmony and co-existence among the followers of Buddhism and Jainism at Vaishali. Here, despite the multiplicity of faiths, there is a heritage of mutual respect and dialogue. The culture of Vaishali was such that the Buddhist and the Jain faiths were able to grow as complementary influences. Both religions emphasized the basic tenets of non-violence, asceticism, compassion, and human welfare, thus promoting ethical norms in society. Religious teachings and sermons had a great role in motivating people to be tolerant and live peacefully. The republican spirit of the area also favored religious tolerance and intellectual freedom. Thus, Vaishali was not just a religious center but also a symbol of cultural fusion and social peace. This peaceful co-existence of the Buddhist and Jain faiths is a real example of the open and inclusive spirit of the Indian civilization.

The Shaiva Tradition and the Shiva Idols of the Gupta Period

Historians view the Gupta period as the golden age of Indian history. During this period, art, literature, religion, and architecture flourished to a degree never before seen. The presence of the Gupta period Shiva images in the Vaishali region is indicative of the effect of Shaivism in this region. The sculpture of the Gupta period is a representative of the apex of Indian art. These Shiva statues are full of spirituality, emotion, and harmony. The recovered Shiva idols from Vaishali are a monument to the superb craftsmanship of the artists of the Gupta dynasty. The sculptures are of Shiva in a holy, serene, and serious mood. The idols are quite expressive of the special characteristics of Gupta art in their decorations, hairstyles, and attitudes. The Gupta period was a resurgence of the Brahmanical religion, but it did not mean that other religions were banned. In fact, the Gupta period was a time when Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism developed together. The Vaishali region is a very good example of this phenomenon. The Shaiva tradition arose in contact with indigenous religious concepts and with Buddhist and Jain thought. The sacred art of the Gupta period is a positive indication of the spiritual and moral nature of the syncretic culture of India.



Image of a Shiva statue

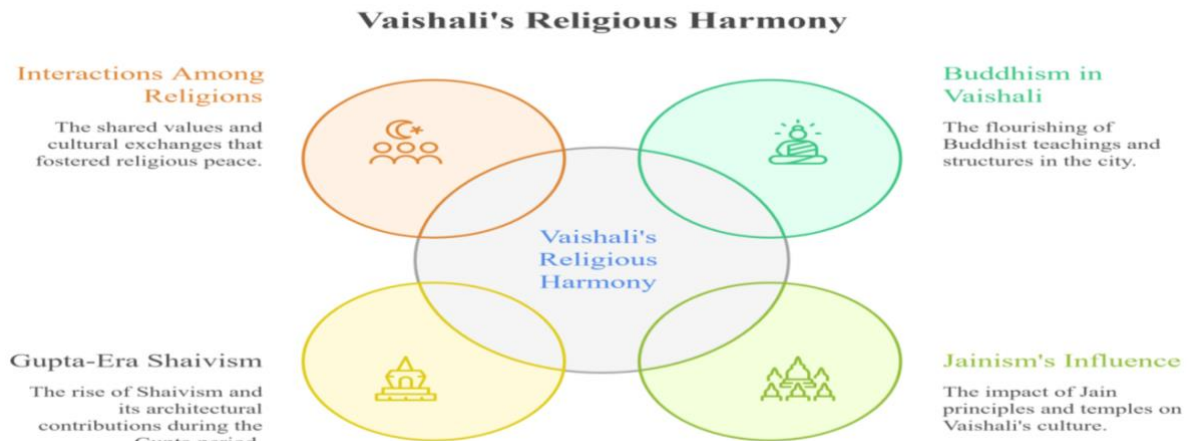
The concept of an integrated culture in Vaishali

Historically, Vaishali has been one of the main cultural sites of ancient India, where a wonderful confluence of numerous religious and philosophical traditions exists. Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism grew up side by side here, each influencing the beliefs and cultural values of the other. The doctrine of Lord Buddha fostered an attitude of compassion, non-violence, and equality. Lord Mahavira's Jain philosophy had stressed self-restraint, non-possession, and ethical behavior. The Shaivite tradition also became important in the Gupta period, and its influence increased the Hindu religious consciousness in the region. All these traditions co-existed, forming Vaishali, a center of religious tolerance and cultural variety. Followers of different faiths performed their religious ceremonies without any dispute and developed a sense of societal peace and harmony. Thus, Vaishali became a living testimony to the entwined culture of India. This integrated culture is also very much evident in the art, architecture, and social fabric of Vaishali. The Buddhist stupas, Ashokan pillars, Jain sculptures, and Gupta-period images of Lord Shiva all evolved from a shared cultural background and are markers of religious harmony and cultural co-existence here. There is also spirituality, harmony, and ethics in the sculpture and architecture in the area. Hindu traditions maintained religious and cultural continuity while Buddhism and Jainism preached peace and social equality. All these qualities combined gave Vaishali social amity and cultural togetherness. The region is known for the rich tapestry of cultural diversity in folk traditions, festivals, and holy places, which are reflective of the liberal and syncretic traditions of Indian civilization.

The Value of Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological digs carried out at Vaishali have unearthed some items that are crucial evidence of the rich cultural and religious history of the region. The Ashoka Pillar here is another feature of the Mauryan era's art and promotion of Buddhism. The emperor Ashoka erected this pillar, demonstrating his profound respect for Buddhism and the sanctity of Vaishali. Moreover, the discoveries of stupas and viharas at Vaishali prove that this region was a significant focus of Buddhist learning, faith, and worship. These remains also point out that Vaishali was a big hub for the propagation of Buddhism around the world in ancient times. "The style of architecture and construction methods used here is a wonderful representation of the high art and craft traditions of the time. These archeological treasures still provide a clear view of the historical splendor and cultural wealth of Vaishali. The finding of Jain iconography, temple ruins, and Shiva sculptures of the Gupta period from Vaishali shows the syncretic culture and religious heterogeneity of the region. The vestiges of Jain culture indicate that Vaishali was one of the primary centers of Jainism, and the teachings of Lord Mahavira had a deep impact here. The Shiva sculptures of the Gupta period, on the other hand, indicate the development of Hinduism and, more notably, the Shaivite tradition. These sculptures are

indeed specimens of artistic brilliance, spirituality, and aesthetic beauty typical of the iconography of the Gupta period. The presence of Buddhist, Jain, and Shaivite artifacts in the same area proves that Vaishali was a major center of diverse religious traditions and cultural harmony. This archeological evidence is not only of historical interest but also of essential importance for an understanding of the tolerant and syncretic traditions of Indian culture.



Vaishali's Syncretic Culture in the Modern Context

The syncretic culture of ancient Vaishali is a wonderful source of inspiration in the modern world, where many countries are faced with problems like religious intolerance, cultural strife, and societal disintegration. Vaishali is the symbol of Indian culture, where we can see the co-existence of many religions, faiths, and cultural traditions. The city was a place where Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism co-existed peacefully. This has brought about an attitude of respect and tolerance for each other. That is why it is not only a city from the past but also a symbol of cultural concord and social unity. The historical heritage of Vaishali is proof that unity in variety has been the very kernel of Indian civilization. The city became a major spiritual and cultural center due to its strong association with Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira. The stupas, Ashoka Pillar, Jain temples, and other religious sites here attract devotees and tourists from all over the world even now. These cultural sites have to be preserved not only for their historical importance but also because they are still living symbols of India's cultural diversity and religious amity. The government and local institutions are active in many efforts for the preservation of the heritage of Vaishali and the promotion of tourism in the region. If these projects are implemented more effectively and the cultural character of Vaishali is projected on an international platform, it can become a world-class center of cultural and spiritual tourism. The syncretic culture of Vaishali thus sends a powerful message of tolerance, peace, and human association to modern society.

Closing thought

Vaishali is a positive example of Indian synthesis, religious tolerance, and multicultural traditions. Vaishali of old was not only a political and economic powerhouse but also a vital center for the harmonious coexistence of different religions and streams of culture. At this time, Buddhism propagated the message of compassion, the Middle Path, and social equality; Jainism propagated non-violence, asceticism, and self-control, while the Shaivite traditions of the Gupta period centered on spiritual consciousness, creative expression, and cultural continuity. The confluence of different cultures led to a synthesis of cultural awareness in Vaishali marked by the spirit of cohabitation, tolerance, and social peace. The Ashoka Pillar, the stupas, the monasteries, the ancient temples, and the Jain monuments are the living testimonials of this many-sided cultural heritage of the archeological treasures of Vaishali. These monuments serve as a testament to the fact that the fundamental ethos of Indian culture has always been unity in diversity and

tolerance of numerous faiths. In today's time, when society is struggling with the issues of religious and cultural divisions, the history of synthesis and harmony in Vaishali might be a tremendous source of inspiration for mankind.

Suggestions

The government, the Department of Archaeology, and the educational institutions should collaborate for the preservation and promotion of the rich cultural legacy of Vaishali. Special attention should be paid to the preservation of its historical sites, to their scientific excavation, and to digital fixation. In addition, the syncretic culture of Vaishali should be added to the school and university syllabi so that the younger generation may grasp the importance of religious tolerance and cultural peace. If this history of Vaishali is showcased properly on an international platform, it can be a significant hub of global peace, cultural dialogue, and spiritual tourism.

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