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India

PERSPECTIVES



Vaishali

THE BYGONE GLORY

Text: SHAHID AKHTER MAKHFI
Photographs: SHAHEEN PERVEEN



1st century BC Terracotta from Vaishali.

A touch of history, the spark of spirituality and a streak of glamour combined together to write off a place thousands of years ago. Precisely, this place is credited with being the world's first republic to have a duly elected assembly of representatives. It is the birth place of Lord Mahavira and equally cherished by Lord Buddha as his favourite monsoon resort. It was here that Buddha preached his last sermon and announced his approaching Nirvana. Another clue to this historical town is the raving beauty of Ambapali.



Vaishali, in north Bihar, ranks among few of the rare places in history that have left behind a trail of events that reflect the pride of ancient India. Long before the advent of Buddha, Vaishali was a flourishing republic (in fact the earliest examples in India of oligarchical republics like those of Greece). In all probability the Vaishali republic was not the outcome of any revolution leading to the overthrow of monarchy. It appears to be the result of a gradual growth effected by transformation that was brought about by the younger sons of the kings sharing authority with the elder ones.

Vaishali (spacious) was the ancient capital of the Lichchhavis - one of the most powerful clans of the confederacy that ruled Northern Bihar. Historians differ about their origin. Lord Buddha compared them to the gods in Indra's heaven. In Chinese accounts they are referred to as free, wild and handsome lot who dressed well in bright colours, drove fast carriages but were wanton, insolent and

utterly irreligious. "For sure, these dashing young fellows with their brilliant equipages and saucy manners must have presented in Vaishali a marked contrast to Buddha and his sombre clothed disciples", remarks Yuan Chwang in his travel accounts of India.

Some historians believe the Lichchhavis (skin thin) to be of Tibetan descent as is evident from traits appearing in the statues and other identical cultural aspects and administrative elements. Like the Tibetans, the Lichchhavis too exposed their dead to the nature and their criminal justice was equally similar. The unique feature of this judicial administration was that a criminal could only be punished if he had been found guilty by the seven successive tribunals unanimously though he could be acquitted by any one of them. Thus, the liberty of individual was safeguarded in a way that was unique in the world's history.

The **Vishnu Puran** gives a genealogical list of 34 kings, beginning with Nabhaga and

Above : Excavated ruins of the Lachhavi Republic.

Right : The Stupa that houses the corporal remains of Lord Buddha.

Sumati, the last mentioned king is represented as the tenth in descent from Visala and if the evidence of **Ramayana** is taken into consideration, he was contemporary of Raja Dasrath, the king of Ayodhya. Much later, Lord Ram is believed to have enjoyed the hospitality of Vaishali on his way back from Mithila.

The kings in whom Lichchhavi rule was vested according to the Jataka, called themselves Rajunam (kings) and they were so called because they all descended from an ancient royal family. The Jataka mentions about the tank in Vaishali where the families of the kings got water for the ceremonial sprinkling. Vaishali's elected representatives were anointed here before their swearing in. The water of this tank was scrupulously guarded against its being polluted by persons not belonging to the ruling families and we are told how the commander in chief of Kosala was hotly pursued



by the Lichchhavi kings for having bathed his wife in it.

Lord Buddha greatly admired the Lichchhavi constitution and it is evident that he borrowed a good deal from it to run his own religious order, like the rules on moving resolutions, voting by ballot, decision by majority of votes, the reference of complicated questions to committees, rules about quorum, votes of absentees and so on. Buddha was firm in his expression that so long as the Lichchhavis remained united and true to their democratic constitution, enemies would not be able to overcome them.

The aggressive imperialism of neighbouring Magadhan power under Ajatasatru compelled him to wage a war on the Lichchhavis. The pretext, according to Jain sources, was extradition of two Magadhan princes who had fled to Vaishali together with a prized elephant decked with a huge necklace with 18 strings of jewels. The elephant and the jewels had been gifted to them by their father, Bimbisara, but when Ajatasatru

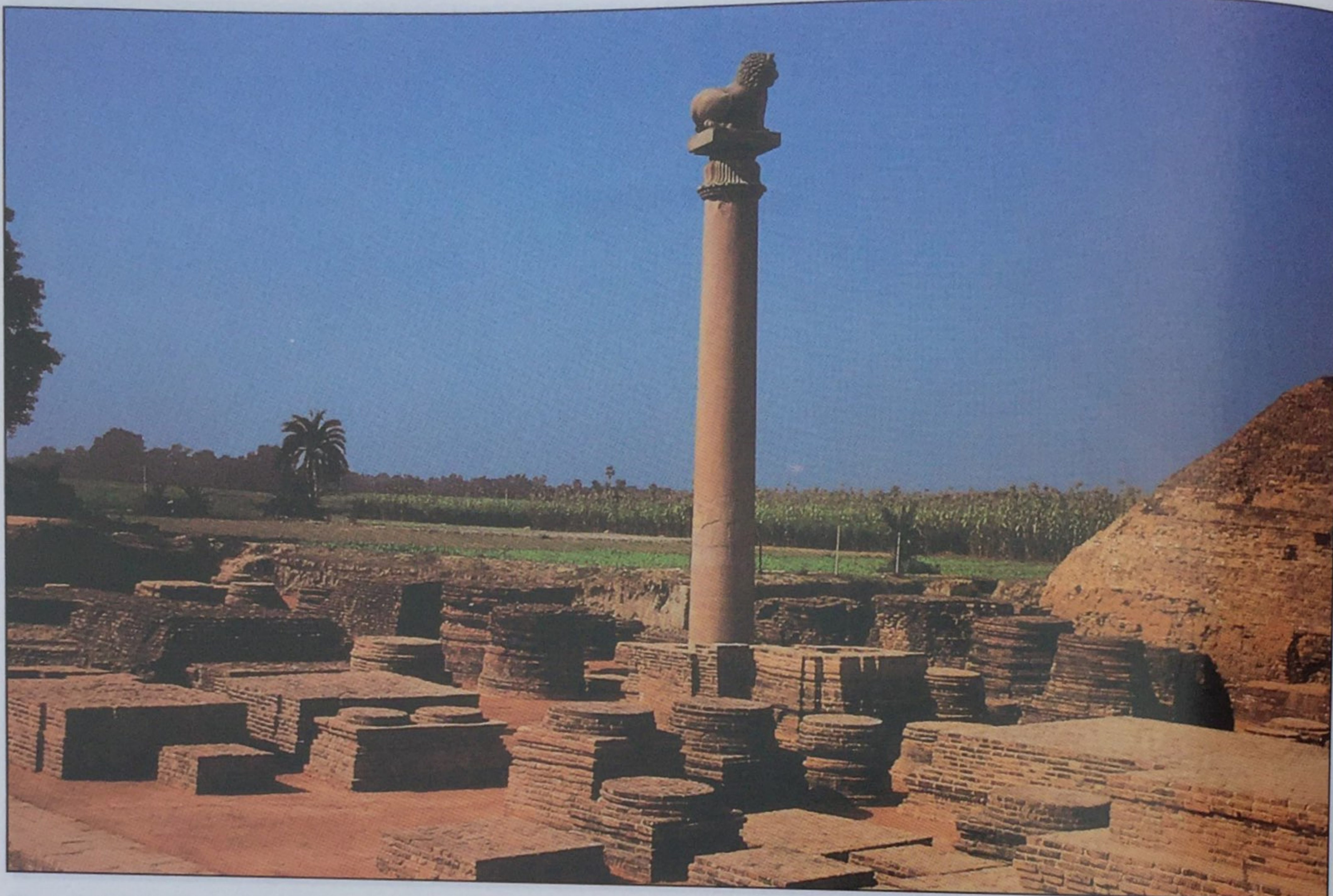
usurped his father's throne he demanded the return of gifts from his brothers who fled to Vaishali as their mother was a Lichchhavi princess. The confrontation culminated in a war that was successfully planned by undermining the unity of Lichchhavi kings.

The war established the hegemony of Magadha but the Lichchhavi pride never waned and even centuries later, when Chandragupta married a Lichchhavi princess, his successors issued coins with proud proclamations that they were 'the sons and daughters of the Lichchhavis.'

Lord Buddha is believed to have visited Vaishali three times. Legend has it that on one of his visits, several monkeys dug up a tank for his comfortable stay and offered him a bowl of honey. This is regarded as one of the great incidents in the legends of Buddha who announced his approaching *Nirvana* and preached his last sermon here. On his last visit to Vaishali, the Lichchhavis came a long way to bid him farewell and

finally they were stopped by a river created by Lord Buddha. As a pity for their distress, Buddha gave them his alms bowl which remained in Vaishali for a long time and then it was carried away to Gandhara. A hundred years after the demise of Buddha, a council of 700 monks met here to decide on the ten points of *Vanaya* (rule of conduct) which were under dispute.

The Pali texts refer to Vaishali as the land of Ambapali. She was graceful, beautiful, pleasant, gifted with the highest beauty of complexion, well versed in singing, dancing and flute playing. It is said that Ambapali was the daughter of unknown parents and found at Vaishali in the king's gardens, at the foot of a mango tree. The gardener found her and brought her to the city. She was known as the mango guardian' girl. And such was her beauty, grace and charm that many young princes vied with each other to possess her. Finally, she was appointed as courtesan or *ganika* in the town of Vaishali. Her raving beauty prompted the rival



The Ashoka Pillar in Vaishali.

Magadhan neighbour to appoint a parallel courtesan for their capital city Rajagriha.

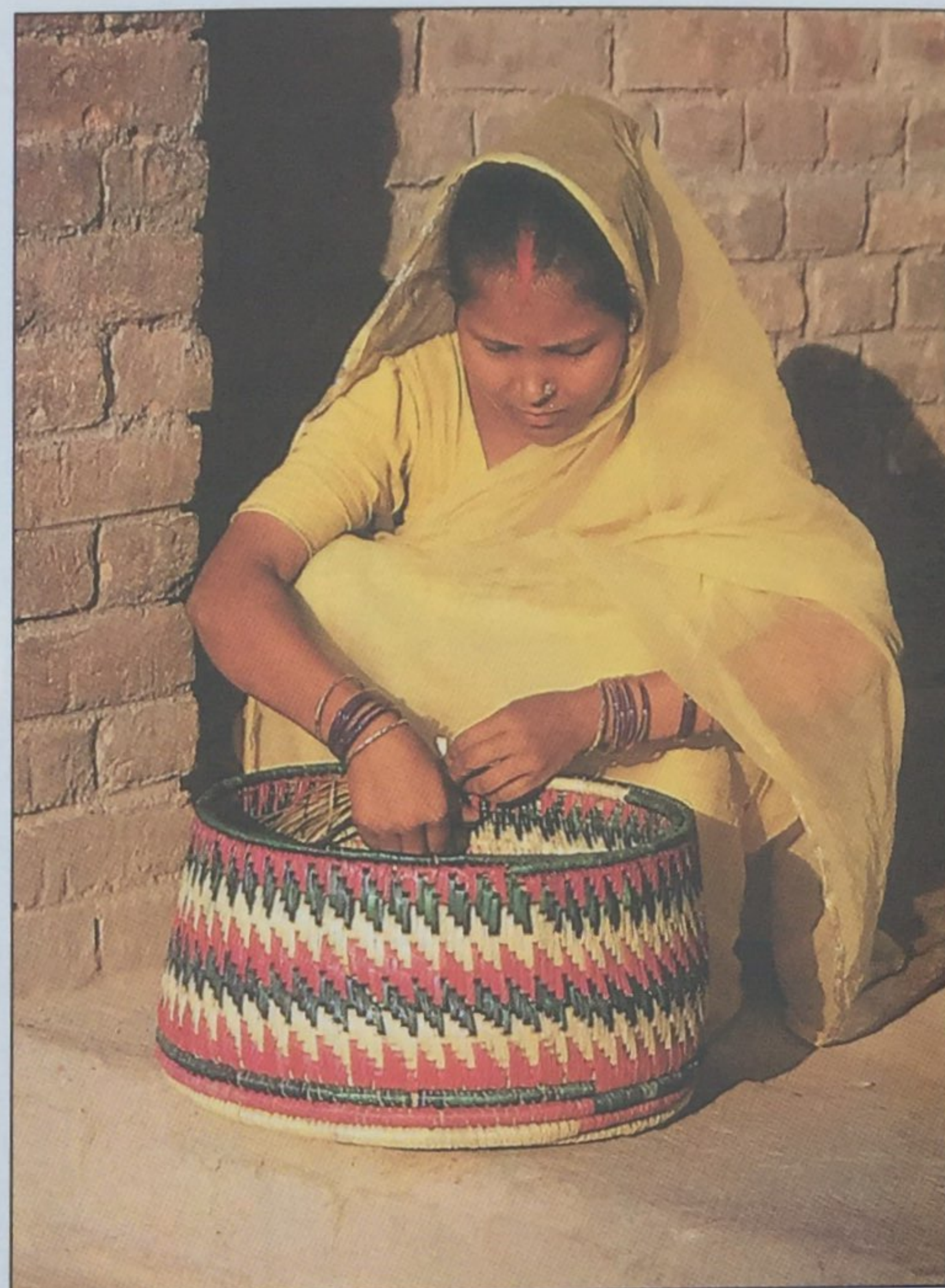
Buddha and his followers were not averse to courtesans. He readily accepted Ambapali's invitation and went to her residence with his Bikku Sangha to take their meals. When Buddha had finished his meals she dedicated her mango grove to the Bikku Sangha. The way in which Ambapali went to receive Buddha with her retinue and vehicles shows that her paraphernalia was almost royal. Ambapali soon accepted the Buddhist faith and remained famous as one of the most loyal and generous supporters of the Buddhist order. Around this time a Nunnery was founded here and a famous Buddhist nun Bhadra resided. Close by was the river Su where the nuns and the monks are said to have once bathed with gay abandon.

Vaishali, 55 kms from Patna, does not appear to have changed much, though the Buddhists and their monasteries are nowhere to be seen. Still the picturesque village

surrounded by banana and mango groves amidst paddy fields offers enough relics to recreate the past.

The best place to begin your tour is Kolhua where a life-sized lion pillar beside a brick stupa is all set to greet you. It commemorates the spot where Buddha preached his last sermon and announced his approaching Nirvana to his disciples. The sandstone pillar supporting an inverted lotus shaped capitol with a life-sized lion faces north – the direction Buddha took on his last voyage. History further unfolds here with the legend of monkey chief offering honey to Lord Buddha and digging up a tank for his comfortable stay. The stupa was originally built by Emperor Ashoka with lime plaster over it but subsequently enlarged by bricks during the Kushan period. In the surroundings there is a cluster of votive stupas with a small temple amidst it. Nearby are the remains of a monastery and a large tank where Buddha resided during his sojourn.

From Kolhua, drive back to the Vaishali museum, which houses



archaeological remains discovered at various sites in Vaishali. Close to the museum is circular tin shed to arouse your curiosity. One may dismiss it as a rain shelter amidst a small park but thanks to the board that speaks all about the remains of a stupa under the shed which once housed the Buddha's funeral ashes. These were found in a casket buried in the relic chamber along with a beautiful terracotta head of the Buddha (now preserved in the National Museum, Delhi).

History records that after the cremation of Lord Buddha by the Mallas of Kushinagra his ashes were divided among the six heads of state (Ajatasatru of Magadha, Shakyas of Kapilavastu, Bulis of Alikappa, Koliyas of Ramagrama, Brahmins of Vethadipa and Lichchhavis of Vaishali) and the two mallas of Kushinagra and Pawa. The Lichchhavis received one-eighth of his ashes and they buried it here under the mud stupa which was later enlarged by the Mauryas, Sungas and Kushans.

On the other front of the museum is the *Abhishekh Pushkarni* or the

Coronation Tank of the Lichchhavis. Adjoining the lake is the recently built Vishwa Shanti Stupa. A little distance away is the Raja Vishal ka Garh – an excavated site (a kilometer in circumference) that is believed to be the remains of the ancient parliament house where the federal assembly gathered to discuss and regulate the ancient republic. The original building can hardly be visualised but it is believed to have an eight feet high wall and 140 feet deep moat around it.

Four kms away at Kundupur is a commemorative plaque, marking the birthplace of Lord Mahavira. Also at Vaishali is the famous dargah of Miranji which houses the relics of a 15th century saint, Sheikh Md. Kazim.

Vaishali can easily be reached in few hours from Patna by car. The best place to stay is at Tourist Bungalow maintained by BSTPC. Another option is the PWD inspection bungalow. The best time to see Vaishali is between October and March. One may consider Vaishali together with

Another 1st century BC Terracotta from Vaishali (left above), and a contemporary Vaishali housewife making basket (above).

Sonepur Cattle Fair (which is almost halfway between Patna and Vaishali) during October/November. Mid April may be the second choice when Vaishali is geared for the Vaishali Maha Utsav celebrating the birth anniversary of Lord Mahavira.

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The author is a noted freelance writer.