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India Perspectives







RAJGIR

CONFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM & JAINISM

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*One of those dexterous
superlatives that light up a
whole spectrum of ancient
history and stimulates the
imagination...*

It is exciting and thrilling to stand at a place where thousands of years ago other people lived and whose spiritual insights informed the tradition of which we are now a part. One such spot is Rajagriha or modern day Rajgir. Imagine Lord Buddha on his first alms begging mission while staying in a cave on the Rajagriha hills. Bypass your imagination to the hill of vultures - *Gridhrakuta*, the site where Lord Buddha returned after his enlightenment to deliver his sermons and converted the powerful Magadhan King, Bimbisara, into the Buddhist order.

Empathize with Fahein, the Chinese scholar who ventured to this site 900 years later and wept bitterly that he had not been fortunate enough to listen to the sermons of Lord Buddha delivered here. Conjure an intoxicated elephant let loose by Devadutta to kill Lord Buddha, the next sequence on these hills of Rajgir may be the big boulder rolled down from the cliff to crush him. The elephant, no doubt, was subdued and the boulder broke into splinters. And finally it was from Rajgir that Lord Buddha set out on his last journey. Let your imagination attend the first

Ruins of Jivaka's mango grove.



Above: Ajatsatru Stupa.
Facing page: Maniyar Math.

Buddhist Council held in the *Saptaparni* cave, the oldest in Rajgir, wherein the teachings of Buddha hitherto unwritten were penned down after his death.

The story of Rajgir is not just Buddha's love for Rajgir and the events of his life that took place here; the place is equally revered by the Jains. Out of the 32 years of his missionary life, Mahavira spent 14 rain retreats in these surroundings. It was here on the Vipulachala hill that Mahavira delivered his first sermon. The 72-foot high Samvasran temple commemorates this sacred event. Of the eleven *ganadharas* or chief disciples of Mahavira, everyone is said to have died on the top of one or the other of the Rajagriha hills. Asoka (474-37 B.C.) too is believed

to have died on one of these hills and his stupa can be seen here. A still earlier stupa has been identified as that of Ajatasatru (497-459 B.C.)

A good deal of history finds shelter in the lush green forests and hills of Rajagriha - the capital of the mighty Magadhan empire in the fourth century B.C. (also construed as the first recorded capital in Indian history). Prior to the advent of Buddhism, Rajagriha was known as Girivaraja and *Kusagarapura* which implies an abundance of tall scented grass. *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* frequently refer to this place and depict it as full of wealth and water. It has been depicted as a beautiful capital with trees standing everywhere on the hill and peaks which make it impregnable.



The cheerful inhabitants are given to perennial festivities.

The pride, power and prowess of pre-historic kings of Magadha like Brahadratha, Dirga, Jarasandha, Meghasandhi, etc was an established fact. In those days issues were settled by the wrestling duels between kings and warriors. Meghasandhi is believed to have attacked Arjuna while a duel on the advice of Krishna was fought between Bhim and Jarasandha. Krishna is believed to have left for Dwarka when Mathura was repeatedly raided by Jarasandha. In the words of Harivamsa, "The highly powerful, effulgent and persevering Lord Paramount Jarasandha came to Mathura encircled by four-fold ocean like forces, consisting of war chariots,

containing beautiful seats and drawn by powerful steeds, whose course is never obstructed anywhere, cloud like elephants embellished with bells and golden seats, ridden by car warriors well read in the science of war and driven by clever charioteers, horses going by leaps and bounds, driven by horsemen and resembling clouds and numberless foot soldiers armed with swords and coats of mail, who could bound up in the sky like serpents."

The reigns of Bimbisara and his son Ajatsatru saw Rajagriha attain the zenith of its prosperity. The main interest of this period lies in the close association of both kings with the lives of Gautam Buddha and Vardhamana Mahavira. Within the ruins of the cyclopean walls of

Rajagriha there are visible landmarks of tumultuous times, when empires flourished and disappeared. Until the discovery of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, this wall was deemed to be the oldest architectural remains of India. The 12 feet high and 18 feet thick wall consists of undressed stones that are so well piled up that they still hold together at various places.

The name Rajagriha (royal city) stems from the town where king Bimbisara banished himself as punishment for the outbreak of fire in the palace. In order to prevent the occurrences of fire in the city the king had passed a law to punish the guilty person. Unfortunately the king himself was the first victim, so he left the kingdom under the care of his son.



Walls that protected the Rajgir city.

Finding the king alone, the neighbouring enemies thought of vanquishing him. However, people surrounded the king and gradually the city of Rajagriha sprang up which was possibly a burial ground earlier for the people of the old town. The new city sprang up with all houses resembling the royal

palace and it prospered until the last days of Buddha when the capital was shifted to Patliputra.

A visitor to Rajgir first encounters the long stretch of dry *stone wall* that criss-crosses the road at various points. Originally the 40 km stretch of the cyclopean wall encircling



Rajgir had 32 large gates and 64 posterns. However, only one such gateway in the North has survived the ravages of time. At regular intervals, the defensive wall was strengthened with bastions and watch towers while rivers and canals took care of the entire surroundings. Once the city gates

were closed in the evening, no one, not even the king could gain entry into the city. High stone walled area in the west was possibly the king's palace while the dwelling of common people centered in the eastern fringe, as is evident from the mud walls.

The Jain and Buddhist literature describe Rajgir as a populous and prosperous city which was abundantly beautiful. Ananda, a disciple of Buddha, considers this place good enough for his master to attain *mahaparinirvana* here. These literatures are replete with references to numerous sites associated with the lives of these two great men. The concept of monastic institutions was laid at Rajgir which later developed into magnificent academic and religious centres, producing learned and well disciplined monks.

Amongst the various spots around Rajagriha, the most sacred are the *Venuvana* and the *Gridhrakuta* as devout Buddhists can be seen prostrating at these places in particular. *Venuvana* or the forest of bamboos was the royal park gifted to Buddha in order to make it easier for his devotees to visit him. It started with king Bimbisara, who was first attracted by the dignified and high born demeanor of Buddha, much before his enlightenment when he was wandering through Rajgir in search of an ideal teacher. The king lured the wandering prince with wealth and territory but when the future Buddha refused, he was requested to visit the king after his enlightenment. Bimbisara was impressed by the Buddhist doctrine and accepted the Buddhist faith. He was equally enlightened by the Jain school and it is not surprising to hear about Mahavira's claim about

the conversion of Bimbisara to Jainism. Mahavira is further believed to have brought 23 sons and 13 queens of Bimbisara into the Jaina fold. Today the new *Venuvana Vihar* is identified by the site of a stupa built by Ajatsatru to enshrine the relics of Buddha.

A little further up the Vaibhara hill is the *Pipali cave*, well known in the Pali literature. It is named because of the sacred pipal tree at the entrance of the cave that was occasionally used by Buddha for meditation after his midday meal. If one manages to climb the hill, one is rewarded with a view of multicolour crops and variegated patches of cornfield. Buddha never missed passing through such scenic beauties without comments, and is believed to have called his companion Ananda to enjoy this particular panorama from the Vaibhara hill top, an area now crowded with Jain temples.

Following the foot track on this hill one reaches the *Jarasandha ki Baithak*. Historians consider it to be a military outpost with cells that served as living quarters for the picket. Another interesting spot associated with Jarasandha is the *Ranbhum* or *Jarasandha ka Akhada*. It marks the legendary wrestling arena that witnessed the month-long duel between Jarasandha and Bhima, who had entered Rajgir along with Lord Krishna and Arjun in disguise. The soil of the Ranbhum was once soft and white. It has now exhausted as wrestling enthusiasts carry away a good quantity of it. Two parallel cuts on the rock stretching for about 30 feet are believed to be the prints left behind by the chariot of Krishna.

Other points of interest include the *Maniyar Math*, a cylindrical brick shrine dedicated to the worship of



Above: Swetambra Jain Temple at Rajgir.
Right: Tonga – the popular local transport.

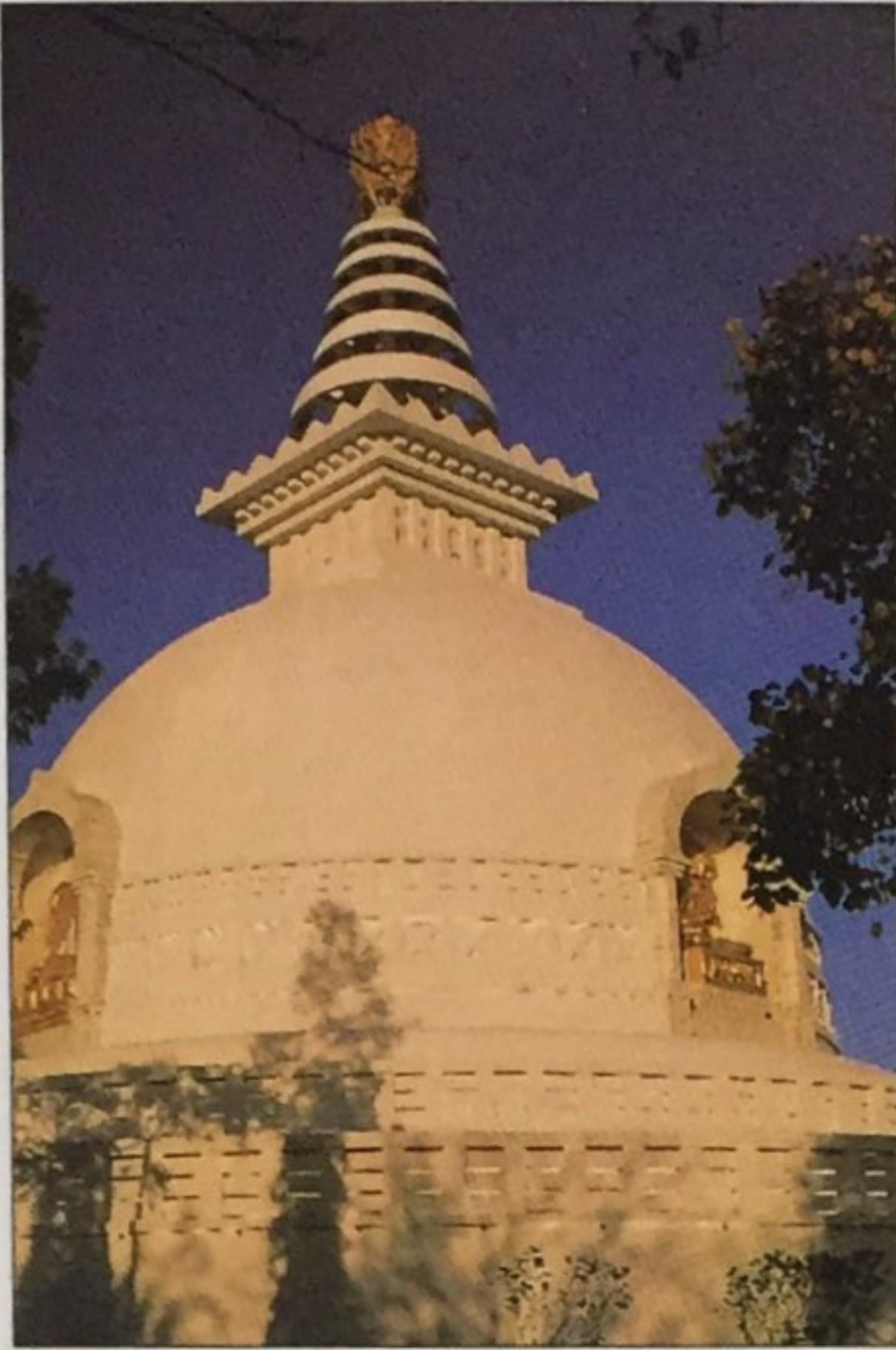


the presiding deity of Rajagriha - *Mani Naga*. *Naga* (snake) worship was a distinctive feature of non-Vedic religion and Rajgir was a great centre of pilgrimage. People of Magadha regarded *Nagas* as generous deities who, they believed, could bring rains if properly appeased by worship. Excavations have brought to light large groups of multi spouted jars, the spouts of which having the form of serpent hood. Possibly these were used for offering milk to the snakes.

Amravana or Jivaka's mango garden marks the site of the dispensary of the royal physician, Jivaka, who happened to dress the wounds of Buddha here when he was injured by his unfriendly cousin, Devdutta. Jivaka converted this site into a Vihara and gifted it to the Buddhist order. It was amidst this thicket of *Amravana* that Buddha dwelt for some time and King Ajatsatru came to him seeking spiritual guidance. *Swarna Bhandar* is an interesting cave where the guide will convince you that it still contains the wealth

hidden by Bimbisara. He points to the marks left behind by the British canons when they tried to explode the cave to retrieve the gold. The surrounding shell script can't be deciphered and hence the treasure remains inside. Only the recitation of the *mantra* can open the cave leading to the fabulous Magadhan treasury!

Topada in the epic *Mahabharata* refers to the hot water springs of Rajagriha. Legend ascribes it to the *tapah* (austerities) of Brahma. In Buddhist literature the main river of Rajagriha is called Tapoda, the waters of which were diverted to form a lake for the king. Today Rajgir is noted for its numerous hot water springs at the base of Vibhara Hill, attracting not only the pilgrims and tourists but the sick and the infirm as well. There are separate bathing cells for men and women. The hottest of the springs is the Brahmakundi where the water gushes at 45 degrees centigrade. Guru Nanak is believed to have bathed in one of these springs during his sojourn at this place.



The Shanti Stupa (above) and the image of Lord Buddha on its outer wall (right).

Buddha spent much of his life in the caves of his favourite *Gridhrakuta hill*. Here he gave audience to one and all. It was from this site that he delivered his message of peace to the world and expounded the famous *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, which refers to the ever presence of Buddha on the hills of Gridhrakuta. Buddhist pilgrims spend their days and nights in religious vigils burning lamps in these caves. The original road leading to the cave was built by King Bimbisara to facilitate the pilgrims' visit. Two small stupas once stood on the roadside which marked the spots wherefrom the king began to walk on foot and the other stupa demarcates the point where the king dismissed his retinue in order to be alone with the Lord. King Bimbisara was unfortunate to be imprisoned by his impatient son Ajatsatru but his request for a cell offering a view of Buddha on the Gridhrakuta hill was granted. Much later Mahendra (Asoka's brother) built his

hermitage on this hill. The remnants of this prison can be identified by the iron rings on the floor that were discovered during the initial excavation.

Adjacent to Gridhrakuta hill is the *Ratnagiri hill* humming with tourists plying on the aerial ropeway leading to the 160 feet high *Vishva Shanti Stupa* built by the Buddha Sangha of Japan. A 2200 feet aerial ropeway carries the tourists to the hill top where the stupa is all alive with the chantings of *na-mu-myo-h-nga-kyo* amidst the beating of big drums.

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The author is a noted travel writer.

Around Rajgir

Nalanda, 15 kms, should be the first choice for the visitor to see the ancient monastery.

Gaya, 68 kms, is the famous pilgrim centre for the Hindus where they offer oblations for the salvation of their dead ancestors. Twelve kms further south is Bodh Gaya, the rallying point for the Buddhists from all over the world.

Pawapuri, 38 kms is a sinless town, sacred to the Jains. Lord Mahavira attained nirvana here. The site is commemorated with a beautiful marble temple, Jalmandir, set amidst a lotus pond which was the outcome of the sacred ash and later the mud being carried away in great quantity by the pilgrims.

Bihar Sherif, 25 kms is venerated by the Muslims on account of the tombs of sufi saints. Prominent among them is Makhdum Shah Sharfuddin dating back to the 14th century. It was once the capital of the Muslim governors of Bihar between 13 -16 centuries when the city was an active cultural centre and seat of Muslim thought and learning. The earliest among the graves is that of Malik Ibrahim Bayu perched on the hill-top of Pir Pahar. He was the first local governor of the Delhi sultanate who died in 1353. The dome is curiously elongated and stands as one of the earliest examples of Muslim domes in this part of the country.