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Tracing an Ancient Trade Route between Vaishali and Rampurva in Bihar: An Archaeological Perspective

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Abstract
Flourishing during the Mauryan and Gupta periods, an ancient route traversed the north Gangetic plains of Bihar, connecting the imperial capital of Pataliputra (modern Patna) with the southern foothills of Nepal. This corridor occupied a crucial position within early Buddhist religious geography, facilitating trade, pilgrimage, monastic movement, and cultural exchange across the region. The route encompassed key archaeological sites such as the Buddha Relic Stupa at Vaishali, the Ashokan pillar at Kolhua, the monumental Kesaria Buddha Stupa, the Ashokan pillars at Areraj and Nandangarh, and the historic landscapes of the Rampurva capitals. Collectively, these sites illustrate the intersection of religious patronage, and long-distance mobility of people, goods, and ideas within the Gangetic plains.
This paper is based on fieldwork conducted[1] along the route, involving on-site visual surveys, interactions with local communities and Archaeological Survey of India officials, and a critical examination of excavation reports and published archaeological data. By integrating archaeological evidence with local memory and historical narratives, the study reconstructs patterns of trade, pilgrimage, and religious mobility that shaped this corridor. Particular attention is given to riverine systems, especially the Ganga, which functioned as vital arteries supporting commerce, monastic networks, and the dissemination of Buddhist ideas. The paper argues that this route functioned not merely as a commercial pathway but as a cultural corridor that fostered sustained religious exchange and regional integration during the early historic period.
Keywords*: Trade routes; Buddhism; Vaishali–Rampurva; Gangetic plains; pilgrimage networks*

Introduction

The exploration of ancient trade routes in the northern Gangetic plains has consistently provided fertile ground for historians seeking to understand the economic and cultural dynamics of early South Asian societies. Northern Bihar in particular formed an important connective zone linking the imperial centres of the middle Ganga valley with the Himalayan foothills. This study examines the corridor extending from Pataliputra through Vaishali and the Champaran region to Rampurva as an integrated landscape shaped by the interaction of trade, pilgrimage, and political authority. Earlier scholarship on the northern routes of ancient India has emphasized the significance of the *Uttarapatha* as a major trans-regional artery connecting north-western India with the Gangetic plains.[2] Archaeological studies conducted in Bihar during the twentieth century further revealed the density of early historic settlements and monuments across the region.[3] However, these sites are often studied individually rather than as components of a continuous mobility network. The present study attempts to reconstruct the Vaishali–Rampurva corridor as a connected chain of nodes that collectively sustained economic circulation and religious movement.

The study is based on a combination of field observations, archaeological data, and historical sources. Visual surveys of monuments and surrounding landscapes were undertaken to assess spatial relationships between major sites. Excavation reports published by the Archaeological Survey of India and the K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute was consulted to analyze material assemblages and stratigraphic sequences. Artefacts such as Northern Black Polished Ware, terracotta sealings, punch-marked coins, and beads serve as important indicators of trade activity and settlement continuity. These data were supplemented by textual references

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from Buddhist literature and accounts of Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian and Xuanzang, whose travel narratives from the fifth and seventh centuries CE provide valuable insights into the religious and commercial landscapes of the Gangetic region.[3]



Figure 1. Map of Bihar Indicating the *Vaishali–Rampurva* Corridor (© Map drawn by Mr S P Yadav, staff member at the *Kesaria Buddha Stupa*, who has documented the monument and has been associated with the site since 1988)

The strategic significance of Bihar during the early historic period was closely tied to its geographical setting within the fertile plains of the middle Ganga valley. The region benefited from the alluvial deposits of major rivers such as the Ganga, Gandak, and Sone, which supported dense agricultural settlements and surplus production. By the sixth century BCE this environment had become the centre of profound socio-political transformations associated with the emergence of the sixteen Mahajanapadas. Among these states, Magadha and the Vajji confederacy gained prominence through their control of fertile land and trade routes. The rise of urban centres such as Pataliputra and Vaishali reflects this wider pattern of economic consolidation and political centralisation.

Trade across the Gangetic plains during this period was closely associated with the *Uttarapatha* or Northern Route, which connected the north-western regions of the subcontinent with the eastern Gangetic basin. Scholars have identified this route as a major corridor through which commodities such as horses, textiles, spices, metals, and luxury goods circulated across long distances.[4] Bihar occupied a strategic position within this network, functioning as a zone of redistribution between the inland agrarian economy and the maritime trade routes of eastern India. Urban centres such as Vaishali and Pataliputra served as important nodes where goods could be transported further east towards the port of Tamralipti or northwards towards the Himalayan passes.

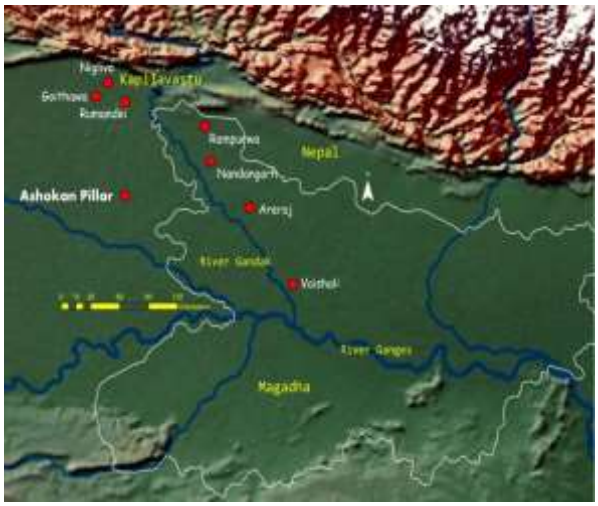


Figure 2. Ashokan Pillars along the river Gaṇḍak (©The Mahamaya)

Vaishali, identified with the archaeological site of Basarh in present-day Muzaffarpur district, represents one of the earliest urban centres in northern Bihar. As the capital of the Licchavi republic, it is frequently described in Buddhist and Jain texts as a prosperous city characterised by active commerce and political organisation. Archaeological excavations carried out between 1958 and 1962 under the direction of B P Sinha and Sita Ram Roy revealed extensive settlement remains and a complex sequence of structural phases at the Buddha Relic Stupa (Fig. 3).[5] The earliest phase of the monument consisted of a simple mud mound associated with early cultural deposits that yielded Northern Black Polished Ware and Black and Red Ware pottery. Subsequent phases demonstrate gradual enlargement through the use of kiln-burnt bricks and additional structural reinforcements. These changes reflect the growing ritual importance of the site as well as the increasing economic capacity of the surrounding community.

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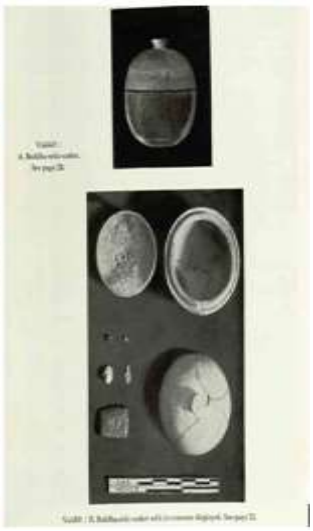


Figure 3. Buddha Relic Stupa, Vaishali
Figure 4. Buddha Relic Casket with the contents displayed (© ASI)

One of the most significant discoveries at the stupa was a relic casket containing ashes mixed with soil, along with artefacts such as a punch-marked coin, glass beads, a fragment of gold leaf, and a piece of conch shell (Ref. to fig. 4). The presence of a coin within a ritual deposit illustrates the interaction between religious practice and monetised exchange. It suggests that the circulation of currency had become integrated into devotional activities and pilgrimage networks during the Mauryan period.



Figure 5. A Panoramic view of Kolhua, Vaishali

The nearby site of Kolhua (Fig. 5) provides further evidence for the integration of sacred geography and imperial presence within this landscape. Kolhua is marked by a monolithic pillar erected during the reign of Ashoka, crowned by a seated lion capital.



Figure 6. Markata-Hrad or the Tank, Kolhua, Vaishali

The pillar is traditionally associated with the episode of the "Monkey's Offering," a narrative in which a monkey presents honey to the Buddha. Archaeological investigations have also revealed the remains of a large brick tank known as the Markata-Hrad (Fig. 6) , interpreted as part of a monastic complex associated with Buddhist activity. Material finds from Kolhua include numerous terracotta figurines, stone objects, and artefacts made of copper, iron, and glass. Such assemblages point to the presence of skilled artisans and active craft production within the settlement.





Figure 7. Kesariya Buddha Stupa, Champaran
Figure 8. Shrine cells housing stucco images of Buddha

Another important node within the corridor is the monumental stupa at Kesaria (Fig. 7) , located to the northwest of Vaishali. Rising to a height of approximately thirty metres, the structure is among the largest Buddhist stupas in India. Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest construction phase may date to the Sunga period,

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while subsequent expansions occurred during the Gupta era when the monument acquired its present terraced form. The architectural design consists of multiple circular terraces containing shrine cells that once housed images of the Buddha. Scholars have often noted similarities between the terraced form of the Kesaria Stupa and later Southeast Asian monuments such as Borobudur, suggesting the diffusion of architectural concepts along long-distance trade routes linking the Gangetic plains with maritime Southeast Asia.[6]





Figure 9. Lauriya Areraj, East Champaran
Figure 10. Monastery Remains, Lauriya Areraj, East Champaran

Further north in the Champaran region the archaeological landscape becomes dominated by the presence of Ashokan pillars. The pillar at Lauriya Areraj (Fig. 9) stands over twelve metres high and bears inscriptions of several Major Pillar Edicts. These edicts, engraved in Brahmi script, communicate moral directives related to the emperor's concept of Dhamma. Their placement along important travel routes suggests that they were intended to address travellers, merchants, and local communities who passed through these corridors. Excavations in the surrounding area have produced pottery fragments including grey ware, red slipped ware, and black slipped ware, indicating continuous habitation and economic activity.



Figure 11. Lauriya Nandangarh (Ashokan Pillar & Lion Capital), Champaran

Lauriya Nandangarh (Fig. 11) represents another significant site within this northern zone. In addition to an Ashokan pillar, the area contains a large stupa mound surrounded by numerous smaller mounds that may represent ancient burial structures. Archaeological finds from the site include cast copper coins, punch-marked coins, terracotta objects, and bead fragments. These materials indicate the presence of active craft production and commercial exchange. The concentration of monetary artefacts suggests that the settlement may have functioned as a regional market centre catering to travellers and pilgrims moving along the route.



Figure 12. Rampurva Pillars, Champaran[7]

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Figure 13. An aerial view of Rampurva Pillar Site © Deepak Anand

At the northernmost edge of the corridor lies Rampurva (Fig. 12 & 13), located near the present border between India and Nepal. The site is unique in possessing two Ashokan pillars situated a short distance apart, one originally crowned by a lion capital and the other by a bull capital. The bull capital, now preserved in the collection of Rashtrapati Bhavan, is widely regarded as a masterpiece of Mauryan sculpture. Its polished sandstone surface and decorative motifs display stylistic influences associated with Achaemenid Persian art, illustrating the wide cultural contacts of the Mauryan empire.

Archaeological investigations at Rampurva have revealed traces of habitation layers and structural remains dating to the Mauryan period. These findings suggest that the site functioned as an important stopping point near the Himalayan foothills. Caravans travelling northwards would likely have reorganised their goods here before proceeding through mountain passes leading towards regions such as Lumbini and the Tibetan plateau.

The functioning of this corridor must also be understood in relation to the riverine systems of northern Bihar. The Gandak river in particular provided an efficient channel for the transportation of bulk goods such as timber, grain, and stone blocks used in construction. The placement of settlements and monuments along both riverbanks and overland routes indicates the existence of an integrated logistical network in which water transport complemented terrestrial movement. Even in the present day, large seasonal gatherings such as the Sonepur fair at the Gandak–Ganga confluence reflect the long historical tradition of trade and exchange in this region.

When viewed within the broader context of the *Uttarapatha*, the Vaishali–Rampurva corridor appears as one segment of a much larger trans-regional network. This route connected the Gangetic plains with regions extending from Central Asia to eastern India. Major nodes along this network included urban centres such as Taxila in the northwest and maritime ports such as Tamralipti in eastern India. The presence of diverse artefacts including imported beads, coins, and specialised craft products across Bihar indicates participation in these wider circuits of exchange.

The archaeological evidence also highlights the role of economic institutions such as merchant guilds or *shrenis* in sustaining long-distance trade. Sealings and inscriptions associated with craft communities have been discovered at several sites in the region, suggesting the existence of organised groups of artisans and traders. These guilds likely coordinated the production and distribution of commodities such as textiles, ivory objects, and perfumes, which circulated across regional and international markets.

The reconstruction of the Vaishali–Rampurva corridor therefore demonstrates that early historic northern Bihar was characterised by a dense network of interconnected settlements, religious monuments, and administrative markers. Rather than functioning as isolated sites, these locations formed part of a continuous landscape of movement shaped by trade, pilgrimage, and imperial governance. The placement of Ashokan pillars, the expansion of monumental stupas, and the distribution of material artefacts collectively illustrate how economic and religious processes reinforced one another within this environment.

In conclusion, the archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the Vaishali–Rampurva axis operated as a vital corridor linking the political centre of the Mauryan empire with the Himalayan frontier. The combination of terrestrial routes and riverine networks enabled the movement of goods, people, and ideas across considerable distances. Religious sites attracted pilgrims whose journeys stimulated local economies, while imperial monuments provided administrative oversight and symbolic authority.

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By examining these sites as components of a broader network rather than isolated monuments, it becomes possible to better understand the mechanisms that sustained regional integration in early historic northern India.

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1. I would like to thank the staff members at the various sites I visited for their assistance and for generously sharing their knowledge and experiences during the course of this research.
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