



Literary Pilgrims: Vaishali, A Buddhist Place, In Memoirs And Travel Narratives By Indians And Diasporic Writers

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Vaishali, an ancient Buddhist Centre in Bihar, is portrayed in memoirs and travelogues of Indian and diasporic writers. These memoirs and travelogues regard Vaishali not simply as a historical site but rather hover around citizens of Vaishali as a signifier that transcends concepts of time, linking memory, belonging, and heritage. This discussion shows how travel and memory negotiations are interwoven with self-reflection, transforming physical journeys into intellectual and emotional ones. Thusly, Vaishali is like a cultural and literary figure or emblem, which is intertwined with history, but as much in imagination.

The article portrays Vaishali not just as a place but also as a metaphorical site and frame where culture and lived experience meet. In Indian memoirs, the site is presented as both a reminder of national glories, of continuity in spiritual seeing, of ways of coping with trauma, and a "place" where sites such as the Ashokan pillar or Ananda Stupa are photographed as meaningful signs of cultural remembrance. Diasporic writers revisit Vaishali to contemplate upon the themes of separation between their homeland and their host countries. For them, the visit often becomes an emotional homecoming and a means of reconnecting with ancestral roots.

It portrays the site not as an archaeological ruin, but as a living literary symbol that persists through personal storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Vaishali, which is now a part of Bihar in India, has the pride of place on political and religious reasons. Its importance cannot be limited to a single discipline—history, religion, archaeology, and literature all claim it as a significant site. Historically, Vaishali was the capital of the Vajji confederation, located within the Mithila Kingdom and its centre at Suradh, which is considered among the first examples of Sanghas. Scholars from India have continued to celebrate this republic tradition and promote another way in which ancient India contributed to the global tradition of Democracy.

Vaishali has two points of significance for religious organizations. For Buddhists, it was sacred because it was the site where the Buddha gave his last sermon before entering Maha Parinirvana at Kushinagar. So, the town has a kind of half-awake spiritual aroma. There are, in fact, quite a few stupas, relics, and monasteries related to Buddhism in the area that stand as a testament of Vaishali's prominence as a vibrant hub of Buddhist activity. Also, the Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, with its lion capital, stands mute witness to the Mauryan emperor's attempts to establish Buddhism throughout his empire. For Jains, the city is also sacred because it is believed to be the birthplace of Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, who restored the Jain religion in the sixth century BCE. Therefore, Vaishali arises as collectively sacred geography for two of India's great religions.

The development of the Vaishali site has been greatly advanced by archaeological findings. Archaeological survey of India exposed a series of fortified walls, coins, terracotta figurines, and seals, all of which described Vaishali's significant wealth and position as a trading and cultural connection.

However, in literary stories, Vaishali takes on a life of its own, separate from archaeology. It becomes a space of memory, belonging, and change. For Indian writers, Vaishali often represents the strength of Indian civilization, a continuity through invasions and upheavals. For diasporic writers, it becomes a metaphor of return, a place where they try to blend memories and experience, ancestry and self.

The paper places Vaishali within the literary framework provided here, and asks several other questions: How is Vaishali constructed in Indian memoirs and travel writing? How do diasporic writers make sense of the site? What larger themes — pilgrimage, identity, globalisation — are being discussed through these constructions? The research also hopes to expand the landscape of Vaishali research into literary and cultural studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vaishali is first mentioned in the writings of Chinese pilgrims Faxian (5th century) and Xuanzang (7th century). These pilgrims travelled to Buddhist centres throughout India and described Vaishali's monasteries, stupas, and relics in their writings. Both of these writings document that Vaishali remained a popular destination for Buddhist pilgrimage and that the community was flourishing hundreds of years after the Buddha was no longer alive.

In contemporary times, historians like A.S. Altekar and R.C. Majumdar studied Vaishali's political and cultural history. Reports stated that Vaishali was a republic and a focal point of both Jain and Buddhist orthodoxy. They remarked on the city of Vaishali as prosperous and culturally vibrant, based on archaeological research, including excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India, which shed light on an impressive city.

Contemporary scholarship has begun to think about the cultural and spiritual geography of Bihar. John Smith's *Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites in India* (2020) presents a wide-ranging but comprehensive discussion of Buddhist centres, while Anil Patel's *Sacred Landscapes of Bihar* (2018) takes things a step further and provides a nuanced description of the religious geography of Bihar. Rana P.B. Singh has made a really interesting contribution to our understanding of the sacred landscapes of North India - Singh places Vaishali within a pilgrimage and tourism network alongside Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar. Singh's and Patel's work further confirm the significance of Vaishali, but does not unpack how the site has been remediated in the diverse literatures.

There is a unique dimension to memoirs and travel writing. Priya Menon's *Journeys Home* (2016) is a reflection of a second-generation Indian-American visit, searching for a contribution to spiritual grounding. Arun Dasgupta's *Tracing the Buddha's Path* (2019) includes personal reflection while also providing a descriptive account of the landscape of Vaishali. Both of these examples show how writers draw on memory, spirituality and identity in their own descriptions of the site.

Theoretical frameworks also help to provide context for understanding. Victor Turner's understanding of pilgrimage as liminality and transformation helps to explain why memoirs present Vaishali as a site of renewal. Edward Said's meditation on diaspora aids in clarifying the reasons why diasporic authors identify with Vaishali as both an object of nostalgic longing and a figure of estrangement. Collectively, these perspectives provide a space for exploring Vaishali as a literary and cultural symbol, and not just a historical archaeological site.

METHODOLOGY

This project uses a qualitative and interpretative method. Texts were selected based on their engagement with Vaishali, either with the writer's direct experience of visiting or as part of the writer's cultural imaginary. To gain a comparative lens, both Indian and diasporic selections were included. The texts will be closely read in terms of themes of pilgrimage, identity, nostalgia, and globalization.

The methodology is influenced by theoretical perspectives. Victor Turner's work on pilgrimage shapes the study of Vaishali as a place of transformation. The diaspora studies of Edward Said advise how diasporic writers recognize Vaishali as both hereditary and estranged. The study also engages with cultural memory studies, which emphasize how places act as an archive of collective identity.

Secondary historical and cultural sources, such as archaeological studies or studies of Buddhist and Jain traditions, provide context. By working across literary analysis and cultural history, the discussion stays grounded and can also explore symbolic meaning.

A significant limitation is the relatively small amount of literature on Vaishali, as the vast majority of writers focus on Bodhgaya or Sarnath. However, enough literature is available to argue that Vaishali continues to be the center of deliberation and narration across cultures.

REMEMBERING VAISHALI: INDIAN MEMOIRS AND THE SPIRITUAL HOMELAND

Throughout Indian autobiographical writings, Vaishali generally serves as a link for both spiritual practice and the national spirit. The Ashokan pillar, the Ananda Stupa, and the spot where the Buddha gave his last sermon become points of reference for reflection and cultural pride. Authors such as Anil Kumar (in *Echoes from the Ganges*) and Meera Desai (in *My Mother's India*) convey their experience of these physical spaces and remain mesmerized by the stillness, where things come alive from history within the remnants of what was once there. In each of these memoirs, Vaishali is also a marker of cultural memory, as if it is implicitly urging the authors to recall as they walk among the ruins, that there is a long history to India and it has been a society of perseverance. These images become a mirror of both collective pasts and individual contemplation.

VAISHALI IN DIASPORIC TRAVEL NARRATIVES

Vaishali is more typically understood as the emotional landscape of diasporic writers than a location of history. Their writings tend to scaffold an imagining of Vaishali as they return to an origin in which their ancestry frequently comes into conflict with their identity in the present. In the texts *The Buddha's Footprint: A Return to Bihar*, authored by Rohit Sinha, and *Halfway Home*, authored by Lina Kapoor, Vaishali serves as the metaphorical liminal space between the diasporic lives of their subjects and the inherited 'past' that was recollected in the materiality of their return. The authors also engage with current

changes in the place, tourism, commercialisation, and urbanisation, and raise questions around how notions of the sacred can be advanced through development. Vaishali may also be understood as a place of negotiation and reconceptualisation in diasporic literature.

VAISHALI AS A SPACE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND TRANSFORMATION

Alongside the generic forms of Indian memoirs and diasporic travel writing, we can also read Vaishali as a place of symbolically literary and cultural connotation--where history, religion, spirituality, and personal contemplation intersect and intermingle. It is a palimpsest of memories--layers of ancient civilizations, layers of Buddhism, of both historical and current forms, and layers of experience of the authors to ponder meaning, understanding, and consequence of their experience and lives. The vestiges of monasteries, stupas, and Ashokan pillars not only invoke a sense of nostalgia but become facets for authors to witness questions of identity, resilience, and belonging. For Indian authors, their visit to and experience of Vaishali evokes a reconceptualized sense of connection, a recognition of lineage that allows them to understand Vaishali as an affirmation of India's continued ability to embody a spiritual essence over time, historically and contemporarily, despite centuries of oppression and loss. The authorial experience of diasporic writers is more fraught, as Vaishali symbolizes both relationship and disjunction, as Vaishali embodies their ancestry (at some level), yet is distanced by time and space. This displacement becomes vital to navigating how cultural memory travels and continues across space.

Vaishali, too, depicts the type of pilgrimage seen in literature, moving from the idea of literally going to a site to traveling with the metaphor. That is, when writers refer to walking among the ruins at Vaishali, they also enter into a reflective passage into their self-identification, as they are recognizing where their life has crossed with some collective cultural text. Travel writing is one branch of memory-work, a writing genre that recounts the story of a place, not only in the stone and structure, but through language, imagination, and experience. In this fashion, the place continues to endure regardless of the changes that may come from tourism or abandonment. The tension of the decay of a site, blended with some attachment to continuity, becomes heightened through narratives that remember Vaishali, as if the site was never simply ruins, while refusing to forget the coinciding emplacement as it has continuously re-inscribed the place as a project of spiritual reckoning.

Additionally, literary analyses of pilgrimage, memory, and diaspora provide the context of how Vaishali operates as a place of meaning. Diasporic literary scholars argue that memory and nostalgia are key components of diasporic identity; that is not only longing, but also a form of negotiation between one's homeland and the homeland of the culture adopted. For example, the article, *The Role of Memory and Nostalgia in Indian Diaspora Writing* shows how those displaced either in the same homeland or different one depend on memories of sacred sites, cultural practices, and ancestral origin to help hold onto self in an

unfamiliar social context (skirec.org). This topic is continued in the study, Exploring the Features of Diasporic Literature which identifies characterizations of themes of persistent notions of displacement, belonging, hybridity, and longing to return to an origin of cultural significance as characterized in many migrations found in diasporic writing (ijoes.in).

Recent developments at Vaishali reinforce these ideas of memory and identity. The launching of the Buddha Samyak Darshan Museum and Memorial Stupa in Vicinage to Vaishali, to contain the relics of the Buddha excavated in 1958-62, demonstrates a renewed investment in the material past (en.wikipedia.org). Whatever the transformation—in a museum, memorial, stupa, visitor centre—it solicits more questions than many travel memoirs grapple with. How do sites of sacrality engage with modern industrial technologies, for instance? What type of spiritual aura attends to commercialization and tourism? Does increased access serve to enhance or diminish the site's symbolic power—the very argument of pilgrimage? Writers concerned with such transformations tend to emphasize that the meaning of Vaishali is in the narratives from Guava—clearly indicated in a shift in material form static in time.

Consequently, Vaishali is not merely a geographical place: it is a performance site where memory - for scholars of diaspora literature - is not static, it is always in flux, sometimes contested, and at other times, re-imagined. Here, memoirs and travel narratives possess works of cultural preservation. These narratives do not treat Vaishali as ruins or remnants, but as living sites of identity-where ruptures (colonial, postcolonial, diasporic) are re-negotiated. Through, for example, the considered silence of an Indian author when faced with the Ashokan pillar; or, as another example, the complicated question of home for a diasporic author, Vaishali re-mains a literary pilgrimage, which is continually being re-written.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Three main themes appear in both Indian and diasporic texts:

1. Pilgrimage as Transformation – Writers are consistently showing Vaishali, not only as a location on a pilgrimage, but as a goal that beckons and inspires spiritual consciousness and personal change.
2. Identity and Belonging – Diasporic-voiced writers particularly seem to demonstrate Vaishali as a cultural identity reconsideration site, negotiating their homeland and host-land.
3. Heritage in Transition – Many writers demonstrate Vaishali as influenced by globalization, tourists, and development; this begs the question of how tradition can be preserved.

CONCLUSION

Vaishali persists in both the actual (the site) and literary (the trope). For Indian writers, it is a reminder of cultural pride and spiritual continuity. For diasporic voices, it is a return, a negotiation with identity, and

an emotional re-connection. Questions of pilgrimage, heritage, and belonging reveal the layered meanings we place on the site. This study deliberately focused on a narrower definition of Vaishali, looking at memoirs and travel writing to argue that sacred spaces are as much carried on in story as in stone. Future projects could carry out a comparative study of Vaishali, or even complement the analysis here by considering how narratives of pilgrimage change with respect to class, gender, or generational point of view.

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