

History of Bihar

Ancient Times

The land mass currently known as Bihar is very ancient. The name is derived from “Vihara” – a land of monasteries. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim, and Sikh shrines abound in this ancient land. Earliest myths and legends of Hinduism are associated with Bihar. Sita, the Consort of Lord Rama, daughter of King Janak was born in Sitamarhi. The ancient kingdom of Janak called Vidaha consisted of present day districts of Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Samastipur, Madhubany, and Darbhanga. The original author of the Hindu epic – The Ramayana – Maharishi Valmiki lived in Valmikinager, a small town in West Champaran.

It was here in Bodhgaya, under a banyan tree, the Bodh tree, that Prince Gautama attained supreme knowledge to become Buddha, the enlightened one. Most of the major events of his life, like enlightenment, last sermon, and nirvana (death) happened in Bihar. The great religion of Buddhism was born here, and Bodhgaya is one of the most important and sacred Buddhist pilgrimage centers in the world.

The Lord Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, was born at Vaishali and attained nirvana (death) at Pawapuri, near Rajgir. The tenth and the last guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobindt Singh was born in 1666 in Patna Sahib. A lovely and majestic Gurudwara – the Harmandir, built to commemorate his memory, is one of the holiest places of worship for Sikhs. The ancient kingdom of Magadh and of Licchavis, around 7-8 Century B.C. produced rulers who devised a system of administration that truly is progenitor of the modern art of state-craft and of the linkage of state-craft with economics. Magadh rose to glory during Guptas (4th and 5th centuries A.D.) and produced Kautilya, the author of Arthashastra, the first treaties of the modern science of Economics and Chanakya, the advisor to the Magadh king, Chandragupta Maurya. Chanakya produced the first Indian treaties on state-craft and politics. Patliputra (ancient name of Patna, the Mauryan capital) was established by King Ajatshatru around 5th century B.C. at the confluence of the rivers Sone and Ganga.

The Maurya Emperor Ashok (234-198 B.C) was the first to formulate firm tenets for the government of a people. These edicts inscribed on stone pillars were planted across his kingdom extending to almost all of the undivided India. Ashok was responsible also for the widespread proselytization of people in Buddhism.

Nalanda, the world's first seat of higher learning, a Monastic University was established during the Gupta period and flourished from the 5th to the 11th century. The University had 9 million books and 2000 teachers to impart knowledge to 10,000 students from all over the Buddhist world. Lord Buddha himself taught here and Hieun Tsang, the 7th century Chinese traveler, was a student. Ongoing excavations have uncovered temples, monasteries, lecture halls and charred library burned by Mughal invaders.

Medieval Times

The glorious history of Bihar lasted until around the 8th century Gupta Period. It was followed up by the Palas of Bengal, who ruled until 1197, when the Mughal period began. In Medieval Times, Bihar lost its prestige as the political and cultural center of India. The Mughal period, which lasted from the 12th to the 17th century, was a period of unremarkable provincial administration from Delhi. The only remarkable person of these times in Bihar was Sher Shah, an Afghan whose rule in the 16th century extended all the way to the Punjab. His mausoleum is located in Sasaram.

Modern Times

The British acquired Bihar in 1764 in the Battle of Buxar and ruled until India's independence in 1947. During most of British India, Bihar was a part of the Presidency of Bengal and was governed from Calcutta, dominated by people from Bengal. When separated by the Bengal Presidency in 1912, Bihar and Orissa comprised a single province. Later in 1935, the division of Orissa became a separate province. In 1956 the southeast district of Puralia was incorporated into West Bengal. The state was further bifurcated in 2001, and a new state "Jharkhand" came into existence.

It was from Bihar that Mahatma Gandhi launched in 1917, his civil disobedience movement, which ultimately led to India's independence in 1947. Many people from Bihar became leading participants in India's struggle for independence. Dr. Rajendra Prasad became the first President of the Republic of India. Jay Prakesh Narayan affectionately called JP, made substantial contributions to modern Indian history until his death in 1979. It was he, who steadfastly and staunchly opposed the autocratic rule of Indira Gandhi. The movement started by JP, however brought the emergency to an end; led to the massive defeat of Indira Gandhi at the poll and restored liberal democracy.

In the immediate post-independence period, Bihar saw an economic growth through establishment of new industry and power projects. However, the state has experienced an extreme and progressively escalating decline in the last decade or two, making it the worst administered and the poorest state at the dawn of the new millennium. The looters in the past were foreign invaders. But the tragedy of today's Bihar is that looters are only sons of the soil. A new progressive government came into power in 2006 and is struggling to reverse the economic and law and order decline of decades.

This landlocked state is surrounded by Nepal, Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and comprises three cultural regions – Bhojpur, Mithila, and Magadh. Rivers Kosi and Gandak from the north and Sone from the south join the Ganga. In the fertile plains, rice, sugar cane, oilseeds, maize, jute, barley and wheat are cultivated. The present Bihar is predominantly rural and agricultural.