Unveiling Kampil's Historical and Cultural Legacy: Exploring its Unique Representation in Indian Literature and the Ancient Civilization of the Panchal Region

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to analyse the significance of Panchal as an essential cultural region in the ancient Indian sub-continent, with reference to Western Uttar Pradesh. After establishing their domain in Punjab (Panch et al.), the Aryans expanded their territory by establishing settlements in Hastinapur, Ahicchatra and Kampilya and Mathura until these locations became significant cultural junctions for politics, religion, philosophy, art and literature. Research derived from various ancient texts depicting multiple social traditions uses these findings to analyze Panchal as a fundamental historical site in India. The reconstruction of Panchal history uses Vedic and Brahmanical and other classical Sanskrit texts to evaluate its role within the wider cultural context of India.

Keywords: Panchal Region, Cultural Legacy, Vedic Literature, Religious Traditions

Introduction

The territory of Panchal along with the towns in and around Bareilly developed into one of the territories that shaped early Indian civilization approximately 2000 years ago. Settled Aryans travelled from Punjab into central India to develop important cities at Hastinapur, Ahicchatra and Kampilya along with Mathura. The development of these cities established Panchal as vital for Indian historical and cultural evolution because they served political and religious and

philosophical and artistic purposes. The ancient Indian political system along with its basic democratic institutions started to develop in these urban centres which established assemblies and councils to maintain organized social order. The name 'Panchal' and its various etymological interpretations, some deeply rooted in the existing socio-political structure, add a layer of historical intrigue. According to some legends, King Bhrmyashva divided the kingdom among his five sons, hence the name 'Panchal'.

Other scholars argue that Panchal's name derived from the five communities inhabited this fertile land—Krivi, Turvashu, Keshin, Shrinjay, and Somaka (Mishra 52). With references in Vedic literature and subsequent texts, including the Mahabharata and Manusmriti, the name "Panchal" became firmly established in Indian historical records (Saraswati 36).

Panchal's significant contributions to religion are worth noting. It was a hub for the Vedic yajna (rituals) that played a crucial role in shaping early worship practices, laying the foundation for what would later become Hinduism. References to Panchal are scattered throughout several texts, such as the Shatapatha Brahmana and other Brahmanic literature, suggesting that it was a critical region for theological debate in an earlier era. The Upanishadic philosophy, which later evolved within the context of ascetic and contemplative practices, also found fertile ground here, influencing Indian metaphysical thought for centuries.

Other archaeological discoveries in Panchal also show signs of fortifications, pottery, and terracotta, which are evidence that were likely used for trade by an advanced civilisation with skills. The results support the region's cultural and economic wealth, with evidence of ties to nearby civilisations that fueled trade, bringing regality and prosperity to Panchal and leaving a trademark (Bhattacharya 112).

Geographical and Political Context

Panchal included north and south of the Ganga, so it was divided into 'North Panchal'(capital Ahicchatra) and 'South Panchal' (capital Kampilya). The careful division of this territory indicates a mature political organism and speaks for its significance in the ancient geography, politics and defence of India (Bhattacharya 68). One distinctive feature is the advanced civic planning in the Panchal region, which is allowed by the various urban centres and complex socio-political institutions. Discoveries in archaeology reveal that the region previously

contained improved cities, strong defences, and advanced irrigation systems necessary for a massive population and farming (Jain 142).

The Kuru district bordered to the west, covering portions of modern-day Delhi and Meerut, but still preserved its uniqueness. It is often mentioned along with Kuru in early Vedic and epic literature as a large and powerful kingdom, which shows this region's importance in politics during the ancient period in northern India. Panchal continues to be referred to in early treaties and alliances, especially in the Mahajanapada period, indicating its involvement in the greater geopolitics of ancient India (Mishra 85).

Literary Evidence of Panchal's Cultural Influence

The ancient Indian texts, especially the Rigveda, do not mention the word "Panchal" as a separate and distinct district or administrative unit. Instead, they refer to the 'Agri' community — a term thought to denote this area's agrarian base — crucial to its economic and social fabric (Saraswati 98). This allusion highlights that although an area corresponding to present-day Panchal certainly existed, it had not inherited a civilised status of becoming a definite entity or kingdom in the early Vedic period. Scholars see the lack of precise designation during this period as a sign of varying sociopolitical organisation in the Vedic age, where regions were defined not so much by demarcation or administration but by economic function and social structure.

However, as time passed, the Yajurveda and later Vedic texts like Aranyakas and Brahmanas more frequently mention Panchal by name. This change in the reference from Nameless to a well-defined geographical entity indicates a raising of Panchala as one that can be called an independent socio-political body within its definite purview and identity within the Vedic civilisation. Panchal is not only a geographical territory, as the later Vedic texts indicate for Panchal (not!), but a social institution with its civilisations, administration, and growing prominence in the Vedic civilisation. Panchal's Identity in the Works The identity of Panchal formalised in these works is increasingly elevated, as it is a prominent socio-political force identified through cultural and economic contributions to ancient India.

Apart from these Vedic sources, Panchal's historical and cultural prominence is also recognised in Jain and Buddhist scriptures. Panchal was mentioned in Jain texts and works like the Pali Nikayas (which tell of the time of Gotama in India) as a prominent, wealthy cultural and

intellectual centre (Jain 102). Here, Panchal becomes more transcendent than a place for Foucaultian religious or philosophical discourse; it signifies knowledge and spirituality. These references indicate that in addition to Vedic traditions, Panchal was also recognised in Jain and Buddhist traditions, emphasising its significance for inter-religious interaction and cultural synthesis.

Further, these references to Jain and Buddhist schools also point out the possibility of Panchal being a learning hub for scholars, sages, or spiritual practitioners across traditions. This amalgamation of Vedic, Jain and Buddhist influences highlights the multi-faceted character of Panchal in the early Indian context—Panchal was not only a prosperous agricultural region but also a centre of religious thought, intellectual exchange and artistic activity. The wideranging resonance of these sources depicts Panchal as an active region that thrived with socioreligious dynamics in ancient India and possibly laid a base for its prominence in Indian civilisational history.

Division of Panchal and the Rise of Urban Centers

With the region's expansion, administrative necessities led to the division of Panchal into North and South, each with its capital. This division underscores the complexity and sophistication of governance in ancient Indian states. Ahicchatra, known for its religious significance, became a prominent centre for spiritual learning, while Kampilya emerged as a hub for trade and political administration. The growth of these cities contributed to the development of Indian cultural and political life, shaping the historical narrative of the subcontinent (Raychaudhuri 213). Continuing our exploration of the Panchal region, Ahicchatra emerges as a significant historical and cultural city. Vedic literature refers to it as "Parichakra," potentially due to its circular or spherical shape at the time. Over the centuries, "Parichakra" became known as Ahicchatra, a name associated with the city's cultural legacy (Sharma 145). Ahicchatra, along with Panchal, served as the capital of the region, and today, the remnants of this ancient city lie scattered near Ramnagar in Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh.

To reach Ahicchatra's ruins, one must travel from Bareilly to Aonla, with Ahicchatra situated approximately 10 miles north along a rural path. The ruins, which include expansive fortifications, cover several miles. North of Ramnagar, the remains of an old fort—popularly

known as Adikot—hold local legends that link them to a King Adi, reputed to be of Ahir descent. According to lore, as Adi lay in repose, a snake cast its shadow over him, leading to a prophecy by Dronacharya, the legendary teacher of the Pandavas, who foretold Adi's rise as a ruler. This prophecy, as per tradition, indeed came to pass. The fort's perimeter, stretching around 3 miles, was once surrounded by a water-filled ditch, remnants of which are still visible. Numerous ancient mounds around Ramnagar indicate the past presence of stupas, temples, and other edifices, attesting to the city's historical significance (Mishra 74).

Literary Mentions and Epigraphical Evidence

The ancient site of Ahicchatra, located in present-day Uttar Pradesh, is referenced by multiple names across various historical texts and inscriptions, highlighting its significance over centuries. In the epic Mahabharata, Ahicchatra is identified by names like "Chhatrapati" and "Ahikshetra." At the same time, Jain texts such as the Harivamsa Purana and the classical linguistic treatise Ashtadhyayi by Panini refer to it as "Ahikshetra" and "Ahichhatra." The variations in nomenclature reflect its prominence in both Vedic and post-Vedic periods.

Similarly, one inscription indicates its historical signification by keeping the name "Adhichhatra" near Ramnagar and carving within a cave, especially in Pabhosa of Allahabad district. The message affirms through historical authenticity and context that Ahicchatra has endured as a political and cultural area, its' earliest record coming from this dating the Shunga era (c. second century BCE) period (Bhattacharya 172).

Excavations at Ahicchatra have unearthed some interesting finds and speak volumes about its significance as an administrative, religious and cultural centre during several dynasties. Some notable findings, including a clay seal from the Gupta period reading `Shri Ahicchatra Bhuktau Kumaratyadhikaranasya, were also found. That means Ahicchatra was the main administrative centre in the Gupta Empire, possibly also at a regional level — and this was done from the seal. Furthermore, in 1951, a Yaksha statue of Ahichhatra was found near Ramnagar with an inscription dated to the 2nd century BCE. This statue, preserved in the State Museum of Lucknow, is a record of the artistic and religious tradition of Ahicchatra within Ancient India (Jain 156).

The findings mentioned above, and their continuous mention in different early literary and epigraphical references show that Ahicchatra is an essential cultural, administrative, and

religious centre. They give us historical layers, from the epic accounts of ancient Indian kingdoms to the administrative settlements developed by the Guptas.

Jain and Buddhist References

Ahicchatra, a site of immense historical and religious value, is prominently mentioned in Jain scriptures, where it is often referred to as "Ahichhatra." The revered Jain text Vividthirthkalp identifies its ancient name as "Sankhyavati," marking it as the capital of the Kurujangal region, a significant territory in ancient northern India. According to this scripture, Ahicchatra was the setting for a profound event in the life of Lord Parshvanath, the 23rd Tirthankara of Jainism. While Parshvanath was deep in meditation at Sankhyavati, the demon Kamath attempted to disturb his spiritual practice. It is said that Dharnidhar, the king of serpents, unfurled his hoods to shield the meditating Tirthankara from harm, inspiring the city's name, "Ahichhatra," which means "shelter of the snake" (Raychaudhuri 215). This protective gesture of Dharnidhar symbolised the victory of peace over adversity and linked Ahicchatra to themes of divine protection and spiritual endurance.

A parallel to this narrative exists in other Indian traditions, enriching Ahicchatra's historical depth. Specific Buddhist texts recount a similar tale, associating Ahicchatra with a "snake shadow" within a fort believed to be linked to King Adi. This overlapping symbolism across Jain and Buddhist accounts underscores the city's religious significance and suggests a shared cultural heritage within the broader Indian spiritual landscape. The historian Cunningham supports this interpretation, arguing that these consistent references provide a substantial basis for recognising "Ahichhatra" as the authentic historical name of the city (Saraswati 182). Ahicchatra's influence extends beyond legend and religious lore; it also holds a prominent place in archaeological records. The city's remains indicate it was once a flourishing spiritual and political power centre. Excavations have uncovered ancient fortifications, temples, and relics that reflect its strategic importance and the architectural prowess of the period. Situated strategically, Ahicchatra had been an important trade and pilgrimage spot of ancient India, being part of the kingdom of Panchala.

Its legends, mentions in ancient scriptures, and archaeological discoveries all highlight its significance. It was not just a colony but a symbol of perseverance, faith, and power that represented the dawn phase of ancient Indian civilisation. A diverse tapestry of narrative and

evidence within these pages has made Ahicchatra a lasting part of the historical stories of the Panchala region. This subject continues to inspire veneration and academic interest alike.

Historical Analysis of Panchal: Political, Cultural, and Religious Development in Ancient India

A historical overview of Panchal demonstrates that it functioned as a living political cultural religious center much like other Indian regions during ancient times. After the Aryans left the abundant terrain of Panch Nad Desh (Punjab) they migrated to western Uttar Pradesh (using this geographic term though including adjoining areas from other states) where ancient Indian civilizations formed their initial settlements. Ashtasankhya developed into an active political center through Aryan immigration while spreading throughout Panchal changing its political dynamics in ancient India.

Panchal's cities Hastinapur plus Ahicchatra together with Kampilya and Mathura developed into significant political hubs that exhibited the multifaceted political awareness and religious and philosophical activities of the region. The individuals living east of the river created the religious and cultural foundation of Hastinapur that became the Kuru capital and developed early political framework and philosophical thinking (Mahabharata) yet Ahicchatra and Kampilya alongside Hastinapur maintained their prominence as religious intellectual hubs while advancing cultural arts like music and dance and literature too.

The Panchal has also greatly impacted the world of religion and philosophy. The cities of this region attracted scholars, philosophers, and sages who contributed to the philosophical systems that would later become the basis of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Kampilya is an ancient city known for being the birthplace of Bhagwan Vimalnath, the 13th Tirthankar of Jainism.

The ancient cities became hubs of progress in art and letters as sculptors and artists carved bay scenes from everyday life, mythology, and religious imagery. Literary fashions also played a significant role; early epics and scriptures, transmitted orally and in writing, were taught and elaborated on in the courts and ashrams of Panchal. Panchal's contributions helped shape Indian civilization, as physical artefacts, manuscripts, and architectural remnants that purport to preserve the legacy of these artistic and intellectual advancements can still be traced. So,

Panchal had a rich historical and cultural evolution which not only constructed the identity of this area but also contributed to a permanent place in the big picture of Indian history and culture.

Its cities became enduring symbols of India's ancient civilisation, contributing to the development of political institutions, philosophical thought, religious practices, and the arts (Sharma 24).

Ahicchatra in the Mahabharata and Early Vedic Texts

The town of Ahicchatra was central to North Panchal, and its importance is highlighted in the *Mahabharata*, where it is denoted as "Ahichhatra Vijayaya" and depicted as the "city of Nahichatra encircled by towns" (Adiparva 138, 76). Like other ancient Indian districts, such as Kashi and Mathura, Ahicchatra bestowed its name to its surrounding region. Throughout the Mahabharata, "Ahicchatra-Janapada" refers explicitly to North Panchal, with the Ganges River marking the boundary between North and South Panchal. Although the northern limits of Panchal are not precisely defined, they likely extended to the Himalayas, with the southern boundary reaching the Charmanvati (Chanval) River (Bhattacharya 58).

In addition, the Vajasaneyi Samhita references Panchal and the neighbouring Kuru kingdom. The Kathaka Samhita describes the Panchals as "residents of Keshin Dalbhya," while the Aitareya Brahmana mentions the Panchals alongside the Kurus, identifying them as inhabitants of "Madhyamadim." The Shatapatha and Taittiriya Brahmanas record victory marches conducted by the Kuru-Panchal alliance, suggesting a longstanding and stable political relationship between the two kingdoms (Mishra 92).

Cultural and Social Structure of the Panchal Kingdom

An exploration of the political, cultural, and religious development of ancient India, along with the evidence from archaeological records, traces a colourful history of the Panchal region that has played a significant role in shaping the Indian subcontinent as we see it today. The cradle of early Indian civilisation, after the expansion of Aryan settlements from the lush fields of Panch Nad Desh (the Punjab region), this area borders on what is now western Uttar Pradesh. The Panchal region gradually developed into a vibrant hub with the Aryan migration, which impacted ancient Indian culture and politics.

The erstwhile Panchal was home to numerous cities, some of which flourished into centres adorned with craft and culture — notably the cities of Hastinapur, Ahicchatra, Kampilya and Mathura that constituted the region's socio-political, religious and intellectual aspirations. Hastinapur, which boasts ancient Vedic glory and greatness and is mentioned in the great epic Mahabharata as the capital of the Kuru kingdom, was an important centre for the social development of nascent Indian political systems and philosophical thought. Two important cities of the Panchal, Ahicchatra and Kampilya, also developed into educational centres where religious discussions flourished along with learning of art like music, dance and literature. Panchal, the land of saints and artisans, also significantly shapes religion and philosophy. Great scholars, philosophers, and sages came to live in the region's cities, further developing the philosophical systems that eventually became Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Importantly, as the birthplace of Bhagwan Vimalnath, the 13th Tirthankara of Jainism Kampilya holds significance for the Jain community.

Art and literature thrived in these ancient metropolises, with sculptors, painters and artists crafting finely detailed carvings and illustrations – which depicted scenes from everyday life, myths, and religious iconography. Oral and written literary traditions were also highly formative: early epics, scriptures and commentaries were tested and built within the Panchal courts and ashrams. Artefacts, manuscripts, and architectural remnants in this region stand as evidence of its artistic and intellectual advancements, which form an invaluable legacy of human thought that also lies at the base of what is today Indian civilisation as it sprang from Panchal.

As such, Panchal's developmental history contributed to this region's identity and left a lasting legacy on the larger canvas of Indian history and culture. Its cities became enduring symbols of India's ancient civilisation, contributing to the development of political institutions, philosophical thought, religious practices, and the arts (Sharma 24).

The history of the Panchal region is a complex interplay of various political, social and cultural events. Ahicchatra and Kampilya, the two major centres of this region, occupied a prominent place not only in the sociopolitical structure of the Indian sub-continent but also played an essential role in the making of early Indian civilisation. The testimony of Vedic literature and the Mahabharata, followed by later historiological evidence, support Panchal's glory in creating a cultural heritage that lives on even today, reflected through its interactions with neighbouring regions such as the Kuru kingdom.

Panchal has a long history; it was a thriving cultural and political hub influencing places well beyond its geographic limits. Panchal, from the primary settlement of the Aryans until reference in a few Vedic writings, played a significant role in Indian civilisation. The extensive background, administration level, cultural prominence, and historical importance of this region reflect its significant role in the early history of India. The anthropological study remains a testament to India's cultural past, showcasing the legacy that Panchal has left behind.

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