



ARCHAEOLOGY OF VIHĀRAS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EASTERN INDIA

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In the present work we have exclusively examined the archaeology of viharas to portray the monastic establishments of early medieval eastern India. We all know eastern India as the hub of Buddhism and all kinds of monastic activities. Here, Buddhism initially originated (6th - 5th BCE) and later (i.e. between 5th-12th CE) institutionally effloresced as various categories of viharas (laghu, majjhim and maha viharas). Majority (almost 70%) of the Indian Buddhist monuments, are located in this region and reflect precisely the same trend. In the history of Buddhist architecture, during this period the *stupa* (small oval shaped architecture) seems to gradually give way to *Chaitya* Halls and *viharas* or monasteries. At the level of patronage, community patronage was superseded by aristocratic and royal patronage, which unlike the early historic donations by merchants, traders and artisans, was quite substantial. This shift helped the construction and maintenance of large monasteries, some of which owing to their dimensions came to be known as *maha viharas* (prefix *maha* means great). There is good evidence for such developments in eastern India, roughly covering the present day states of West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar in India and Bangladesh. Nalanda monastery for example was supported by the grant of two hundred villages and other monasteries, like Vikramashila and Paharpur were equally well endowed.

A major source of information for our work is the various excavated sites depicting ruins of early medieval *vihāras*. Although, most of them are in highly dilapidated conditions, these sites throw ample light on our area of research. The discussion of these archaeological data will automatically better our understanding of early medieval *vihāras* in eastern India. As there are innumerable sites corresponding to our period, it is difficult to quantify their exact numbers. However, to have some idea about them we have worked out a list of some of the major as well as minor sites (with state wise configuration) as follows:

Bengal—1. Somapura *mahāvihāra* (identified with Paharpur in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh). 2. Jagaddala *vihāra* (Barind region of Bangladesh). 3. Raktamrittika *vihāra* (in Murshidabad district of West Bengal). 4. Pattikera *vihāra* (identified with Mainamati-Lalmai Ridge in the Tippera district of Bangladesh) 5. Bhasur *vihāra* (near Mahasthan, Bogra district in Bangladesh) 6. Tamralipti *vihāra* (identified with Tamruk in Midnapur district of West Bengal)



7.Sitakot *vihāra* 8.Jhewari (in Chittagong district of Bangladesh). 10.The minor sites include Halud *vihāra* (near Paharpur), Pandita *vihāra* (in Chittagong district, Bangladesh), etc.

In Orissa—1.Ratnagiri *mahāvihāra* (on a small stream called Keluaa in Cuttack district). 2.Puspagiri *vihāra* (identified with the contiguous hills of Lalitagiri and Udayagiri in Cuttack district) 3.Achutrajpur (in Puri district) 4.Khiching (in Mayurbhanj district). 4.The minor sites are situated at Vajragiri (in Cuttack district), Bhorasila *vihāra* (Puri district), etc.

In Bihar, we have—1. Nālandā *mahāvihāra* (in Biharsharif district) 2.Vikramashila *mahāvihāra* (in Bhagalpur district) 3. Kurkihar (in Gaya district) 4.And minor sites at Tārādih (Gaya district), Ghosrawan (Biharsharif district), etc.

In Assam, not a single *vihāra* has been excavated as yet, so we have only minor sites at Deo-Parvat, Dahparvatiya, Tezpur (all in Golaghat subdivision), etc.

Now, for the sake of convenience, we will try to concentrate on all the major sites and some of the minor ones, in order to highlight the basic settlements and its pattern, along with the miscellaneous artefacts excavated in those regions. Before starting our discussion on the archaeology of *vihāras*, it will be apt to differentiate between the *vihāras* and the *mahāvihāras*. According to Gadgin Nagao¹, Nālandā, Ratnagiri or Paharpur complexes are called “*mahāvihāras* ” because they had two basic components—a. *vihāras* and b. shrines. The *vihāras* were meant for the residence of the members of the Buddhist community comprising monks, laymen, etc., while the shrines were constructed solely for religious purpose .For example, *stūpas*, *caityas*, etc., were erected as a mark of devotion to the Buddha.

Discussion

On the basis of archaeological or art historical evidence we may assume that the period from 600 to 1200 A.D. is the vital phase witnessing the emergence of *mahāvihāras* as hub of social and economic activities in eastern India.

When sites like Nālandā, Somapura or Ratnagiri were excavated the emphasis had been on individual buildings or groups of sculptures and we had only vague idea about the social and economic dynamics operating behind the emergence of *mahāvihāras* as socio-economic units. As a result of our piecemeal approach we failed to study Nālandā, Somapura, Ratnagiri etc. as great centres of all kinds of activities.

Archaeologist earlier focussed all their attention on the Buddhist *stūpas* as they yielded fine example of architecture and sculptural art. The fact that they formed part of a larger social and economic fabric was completely lost sight of². Therefore, we will try to adopt a wider

¹ Gadgini Nagao, *The Archaeological Tradition in Buddhist Monasticism*, in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, by A.K.Narain, p.197.

² ‘Emergence of Urban Centres In Early Historical Andhradesa’, H. Sarkar, in B.D.Chattopadhyaya and B.M.Pandey (ed.) *Archaeology and History-Essays in memory of Sri A. Ghosh*, pp.631-641.



perspective to study the *mahāvihāras* for the proper understanding of the ecological factors and their role in the early medieval history of eastern India.

As mentioned earlier, hundreds of Buddhist monastic establishments have been located or exposed in eastern India. Moreover, each one of these sites, with few exceptions, is taken as a settlement divorced from its social, economic and political milieu. These establishments must have supported a sizeable population who needed food and other amenities. It is therefore not proper to assume that a Buddhist establishment would flourish far away from a village or township in as much as food and money that a group of monks needed must be available within easy reach³. Evidently these monastic sites have to be viewed against the wider socio-economic background, and such a study makes it imperative to establish its relationship with the urban or rural centres nearby. Buddhist centres are often thought, and perhaps rightly, to be on the trade routes and on the banks of rivers⁴. In the earlier chapter on geography, we have tried to illustrate that most of the *vihāras* sites were located near the banks of the rivers. The *vihāras* such as Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri in Orissa are situated in the river valleys known for their agricultural wealth, particularly paddy cultivation. Similarly, in Bihar and Bengal *vihāras* were located in the heart of agricultural zones, which ensured the fulfilment of immediate requirements and the necessary patronage.

Now, we can take few sites as our examples to find out the nature of the settlements. At Tamluk in Midnapur district of west Bengal (the site of Tamralipti *vihāra*), we have evidences of maritime trading activities taking place. But we have no evidence to show their links with the *vihāras*. However these evidences certainly indicate that the *stūpa*-site was close to a township having in its population several trading communities conducting their own business. Especially in South-east Bengal, we have ample numismatic evidences indicating the presence of a metallic currency and contact of the region with the Arab trade. The Gupta gold coin discovered along with the imitation type of coins at the phase III level of excavation clearly point to the adequate political and commercial importance of the Mainamati-Lalamai region urban centres up to the eighth century. Even the epigraphic evidences from the region corroborate the numismatic ones. In the inscriptions ranging from the sixth to thirteenth century, several coins are mentioned which would suggest the presence of metallic currency⁵. These include *aripindika*, *churnika*, *panapa*, *purana*, *nishka*, *rupaya*, *sobhana*, *rupya*, *ruaka*, *tanka*, etc. However, excavation of all the sites in eastern India, have not led to the discovery of such varieties of coins. If we concentrate on the find-spots of the available coins, we get the name of two sites only a. Char Patra Mura and b. Salbana *vihāra*, which were just part of the larger Salbana *vihāra*-complex⁶. The legend inscribed on these coins bears '*Bangala Mriganka*' deer stamp of Bangala, a title that is also inscribed on the seals of the copperplates of the Deva kings discovered from the same site. So, one can safely assume that these coins were issued by the contemporary rulers and not

³ For example see-D.D.Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, pp.185-86.

⁴ H.Sarkar, *Op.Cit.*, pp632.

⁵ K.S.Behera., Behera, K.S. 'Trade and patterns of commerce...' in M.N.Das,(ed.) "*Kalinga and Sinhala: A Study in Ancient Relations*", p.11.

⁶ 'Excavatin on Mainamati Hills Near Comilla', I.A.Khan, *ASI*, New Imperial Series,pp.1-20



by the *vihāras*, as such. However, the find-spots of all these coins and the Buddhist affiliation of the contemporary rulers (i.e. the issuer of these coins) gives strength to the idea of indirect involvement of the *vihāras* in trading activities in the region of South-east Bengal till eleventh century.

The indigenous coinage is of considerable importance, for it shows not only the existence of a currency to facilitate exchange at commercial levels, but also the continuous supply of gold and silver from abroad. As the Tippera-Chittagong region did not have deposits of gold-silver-bearing ore, we are to locate the sources of the precious metals in southern China, Burma (Myanmar), Pegu and South-east Asia⁷.

The precious metals could come to southeast Bengal if the region was in a position to export commodities needed by the neighbouring countries. In this connection we have to presuppose the continuity of commodity production and the existence of urban centres located along serviceable trade routes. Excavations at Lalmai hills have laid bare pottery pieces of considerable quality and even at present potters form a significant class of artisans in Mainamāti-Lalmai region⁸. Some scholars contend that southeast Bengal got gold and silver from southern China, Pegu and South-East Asia in exchange of textile goods and earthenwares⁹. And it is also believed that the ancestors of Patuas (painters) and Nathayogis (weavers), the two occupational classes of present day Bengal, produced ornamented potteries and textile goods, respectively for their export to South-east Asia¹⁰.

Firstly, the two occupational classes of Patua (painters) and Nathayogis (weavers), whose ancestors are believed to be the producer of ornamented potteries and textile goods, respectively, do not exhibit any Buddhist affiliation. If we study the artefacts discovered from the monastic complex in this region, we don't have any evidence of availability of any type of fabrics, dying vats, weaving machine or any other objects related to textile production. As discussed earlier, monks' demand for robes in the *vihāras*, was met by the supplies from outside. However, a few decorated potteries of fine quality have been discovered from the *vihāra*-complex¹¹. Out of these ornamented potteries, some of them portray human and animal figures, which appear to be of Brahmanical origin¹². Secondly, in another area of the same site, a group of partially complete pots consisting of water pitchers, open drinking bowls, cooking pots have been found¹³. Most likely they were prepared in the *vihāra* itself and quality-wise they were quite inferior as compared to the ornamented potteries, which do not appear to be indigenously prepared in the *vihāras*. Therefore, these evidences again support the idea that *vihāras* were not directly involved in the trading activities in southeast Bengal during the early medieval period. To some extent, we can perceive the *vihāras* as procurement centres for the contemporary trade or presence of these archaeological evidences in *vihāra*-complex can also be interpreted as being

⁷ Marco Polo's accounts shows that gold and silver were available in different parts of Yun-nan in Southern China and also perhaps in upper Burma(Myanmar), *The travels of Marco Polo*, tr. Ronald Latham, pp.153,158. Chau ju kua says that foreign merchants were collecting products of Malay in exchange of gold and silver,F.Hirth and W.W Rockhill, *Chau ju-kua:His work in the Chinese and Arab trade in the twelfth and fourteenth centuries*(1964), pp.68,69.

⁸ F.A.Khan,*Op.Cit.*, p.34ff.

⁹ M.R.Tarafdar,Trade and society in early medieval Bengal, in *IHR*,IV, p.278.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Excavations at Mainamāti, A.S.I.*, New Imperial Series, pp.1-25.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*



the result of the *vihāras*' great capacity for hoarding wealth. In this respect, these artefacts do suggest a wide interaction sphere for the *vihāras* and point towards their pattern of resource use.

However, the relative role of trade must have been considerably lesser compared to agricultural operations in eastern India. By giving this example of former Comilla region, we want to illustrate that the availability of archaeological data and their interpretation, helps us to fill a void in so far as the limitations of literature are concerned. The accounts of Hsuan Tsang and I-tsing, do mention about material life in the *vihāras* but they do so only incidentally, the focus of these works being primarily on the religious and organizational aspects of the Buddhist establishments. Even in religious matters one inscription indicates that in Ratnagiri *mahāvihāra* three generations of dancing girls had been employed for the performance of some rituals¹⁴.

Besides, archaeological sources throw light on some issues pertaining to the daily life of the monks whose reference elsewhere is rare. For instance, in Vikramashila *mahāvihāra*, we have a structure, which is 15' in breadth, contains thirteen sloping channel like vents, about 9' apart, and they merge with the level of the water of a small longitudinal reservoir constructed just at the foot of the wall. The reservoir and its surface are paved with flat bricks plastered with lime. On a close study of the plan of this structure, it appeared that the structure was a rectangular closed hall having five cells within it with the provision for some cooling device technique toward its north. The exact purpose of this has not yet been determined; but it is presumed that it may have been the manuscript section or the library of the *mahāvihāras*. The cooling device was meant to provide normal cooling effect to keep the manuscripts, which were on *Tālapatra* (palm-leaf) well preserved. In Pattikera *vihāra*, a pillared hall with two small chambers in southeast section seems to be the Community Dinning Establishment¹⁵. In its vicinity a large number of broken pots and pans, ashes and pieces of charcoal have been found. From Somapura *mahāvihāra*, we get an idea of the bathroom of the monks, which comprised an open platform 105'6'' by 27'. It stood about 10' above the adjoining ground level and was not accessible from any other side except the monastery. Along its entire southern face, there are a series of water chutes, each 1' in width occurring at intervals of 4' to 4'3''. Moreover, all *vihāras* were well equipped with vast drainage-networks for proper sanitation. In Nālandā *mahāvihāra* were found several outer cells with numerous earthen pots. The debris here, according to H.Sastri¹⁶, was very stinking and it led him to infer that the monks residing in the monastery used these cells as latrines. In the majority of *vihāras*, we find ventilated cells (probably meant for the residence of monks) as well as unventilated cells (most likely for meditation purpose or for the storage of goods), flanked by small guardrooms. Although, these are a matter of details, they definitely better our understanding of the material life of the monks in eastern Indian *vihāras* during the early medieval times.

¹⁴ E.I. , XXXIII, 1959-60, p. 267, 11.42-43

¹⁵ I.A.Khan, *Mainamāfi*, A.S.I., New Imperial Series, p.7

¹⁶ H.Sastri, *MASI*, vol.66, p.23



In the Raktamrittika *vihāra*¹⁷ site in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, copper-bronze furnaces are found. A double oven¹⁸ for metallurgical activity in bronze has been excavated from the site of Ratnagiri *vihāra* in Cuttack district of Orissa. From Taradih (Bihar) we have a unique copper mirror. A remarkable use of brass and bronze was made in the construction work of an unfinished *vihāra* made near Nalanda (Bihar)¹⁹. A remarkable copper statue of the Buddha discovered at Sultanganj (Bihar) and at present preserved in the Birmingham Museum (U.K.) is symbolic of the metallurgical skill of the craftsmen of the *vihāras*. The excavations at Nalanda have led to the unearthing of a damaged smelting furnace, a heap of slag, fragments of crucibles, clay moulds, etc. These evidences indicate the *vihāras*' active participation in metallurgical activities. Further, numerous metal artefacts discovered from various sites like Achutrajpur, Jhewari, Kurkihar, etc. testify to the fact that there existed proper workshops for the production of metal images within the monastic complexes. Therefore, all these archaeological evidences appear to have a bearing on economic and social life in eastern Indian *vihāras* during the early medieval times.

In administrative matters of the *vihāras* archaeology provides significant evidence. In fact, the evidence on the administrative structure of *vihāras* is largely limited to that of the Ratnagiri and Nālandā *mahāvihāras*. We have several categories of seals from Nālandā mahavihara viz. *janapada* seals (18), official seals (47), village seals (109), royal seals (13), etc. From Ratnagiri 1386 seals and sealings have been discovered so far, majority of which were issued by the *mahāvihāra* itself as the legends depicted on them indicate. One important thing we notice here is that a large number of seals discovered from cell 17 (the strong room or the record room as termed by D.Mitra) of the Ratnagiri *mahāvihāra* bear the names of certain individuals which help us to contend that these gentlemen might have had a considerable say in day to day affairs of the *mahāvihāra*. However, many of the legends on the sealings from Ratnagiri and Nālandā *mahāvihāras* indicate that a committee system based on the elected representation of the resident-monks seems to have been the main instrument in exercising the authority of the General Assembly of monks, which was the supreme administrative body. The legends depicted on the *janapada* seals of Nālandā *mahāvihāra* indicates that the *mahāvihāra* had conferred upon the village councils known as *janapadas*, some authority over the administration of the villages. At least in one instance, one of the *janapadas* was associated with the monastery of the village (*vihārattha-janapada*). As large number of villages were under the control of the *mahāvihāras*. It is quite likely that for the collection of revenue and for their maintenance *mahāvihāras* would have adopted a decentralized administrative network. These seals also indicate that Nālandā *mahāvihāra* had a number of regional monasteries under its control; and at least some of those monasteries, too, were administered through a committee system. It is probable that this closely-knit network of regional monasteries was effectively used in the management of the property of the *mahāvihāra*, situated in distant areas.

¹⁷ S.R.Das, *Arcaeological Discovery from Murshidabad District*, 1971, Cal.

¹⁸ D.Mitra, *Ratnagiri*, ASI, N.Delhi, 1982.

¹⁹ H. Sastri in 'Nālandā and its epigraphic materia', *MAS*, vol.66, p.22



We have several excavated sites depicting the ruins of early medieval *vihāras* in eastern India. As there are innumerable sites corresponding to the period of our study, it is just not possible to include all of them. We have categorized archaeological sites according to their state-affiliations. One can differentiate between a *vihāras* and a *mahāvihāras* on account of the latter's massive dimensions. *Vihāras* were basically residential areas where monks used to take shelter, whereas *mahāvihāras* were huge complexes, which in addition to the *vihāras* i.e. the residential area, comprised shrine area, which was characterized by erected monuments like *Chaitya*, *Stūpa*, etc., meant for worshipping. Thus our major emphasis has been on the *mahāvihāras* of Somapura, Ratnagiri and Nālandā. We could not treat the site of Vikramashila on the same scale, as its authenticity is still debatable. Another remarkable site is that of Salbana *vihāra*, excavated near Tippera district of Bangladesh, where several hoards of metal coins have been unearthed. These numismatic evidences have added new dimension to our study of the economic condition of the *vihāras*. They have helped us to formulate some ideas about the trading activities taking place in the region during the early medieval times. We have also included some of the later excavated sites like that of Jagjivanpur, Tula Bhita, etc, in Bengal and an attempt has been made to discuss the basic data by highlighting the details of architectural remains, their dimensions, the artefacts found, etc., so that we have a general idea about the monastic settlement and its pattern, in eastern India during the early medieval times.

Concluding extrapolation :

Apart from the donatory inscriptions, we have used a large number of inscriptions on seals and sealings found at the site of great monastery of Nalanda. Though many religious institutions used seals for administrative purpose, only Nalanda has yielded a large number of seals and sealings containing valuable information. Most of the legends on the Nalanda seals and sealings have been deciphered and translated; yet some of them need more careful reading and interpretation. The value of the information, which can be gathered from the seals, depends largely upon the interpretation of terms used in legends. Their information can be used mainly for the study of the administrative organisation of the Nalanda monastery and also of its relation with regional monasteries and various outside bodies. The unique importance of the seals and sealings lies in the valuable light they throw on certain aspects of the internal administration of the institution and also the way in which it exercised its authority over the villages under its control, aspects which are not brought to light by other sources.

we find that the archaeology of *vihāras* (throughout the Indian sub continent viz. that of Nalanda mahavihara Jagaddala mahavihara Vikramashila vihara Pattikera or Mainamati viharas, etc.) portray hierarchy of various categories of viharas. Corroborating literary evidence like vinaya rules for the monks (Subhasitaratnakosha by Vidyakara of Jaggadala Vihara, edited by D.D, Kosambi and V.V.Gokhale. Oxford Univ. Press 1937) on the other hand prescribes transfer of monks from one viharas to another. Most intriguingly, there are several instances where a monk is rewarded by getting transferred from smaller to bigger monastery for his deeds and vice versa is also seen, where as a punitive measure a monk is demoted for his misdeed to a lower vihara. On the basis of these corroborating evidences one can speculate an integrated model of monasteries comprising of hierarchy of various categories of viharas (small medium



and large viharas,) under the aegis of Nalanda Mahavihara. An analogy : like the modern Indian Judicial System based on hierarchy of courts (High Court, District courts, session courts and lower courts) with an apex body Supreme Court. Here, in case of both, the former as well as the latter, all the respective constituents are inter related and inter twined.

The integrated viharas of various categories must have affected the taxation of peasants and traders. In short, earlier during the Gupta period fragmented feudal model led to over taxation of peasants and traders leading to decline of trade and urban centres. But the integrated model of viharas reversed this contradiction after endowments to individuals was substituted by grants to Buddhist institutions. We have many epigraphic evidences which indicate that traders were now required to pay tax in any one of the constituent viharas unlike earlier period of feudalism. Consequently, it created conducive condition for economic activities (esp. trade) which got manifested in Viharas involvement in trading activities to the South east Asian region.