

TELHARA (NALANDA) EXCAVATION

A Brief Report

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BACKGROUND OF THE REGION

Telhara is a small village in the Hilsa subdivision of the Nalanda Dist. in Bihar. It is about 29 K.m. west of Nalanda, the Dist. headquarter. This place was visited by the Chinese traveller, Heun Tsang in the 7th Century AD., and it was mentioned as Teleadaka in his account.

In course of excavation at the site a good number of Pala sculpture have been discovered including both Buddhist & Hindu deities. The site, under Turkish ruler became an important settlement of Muslims during medieval period. This place is also mentioned in the Ain-i-Akbari as Tiladah and is shown as one of the 46 mahals of Sarkar Bihar.

In the survey map prepared by the company administration in 1842-45 the Telahara had been mentioned as Pargana. Buchanan mentioned this village as an important estate of Bihar.

There is a mosque towards the eastern side of the mound, It is said that the mosque was built with the materials carried from the ruins of the Buddhist monastery. It is mentioned that Bakhtiyar Khilji during his conquest of Odantapuri moved south from Maner towards Tiladah. i.e. Telahara (The account in Minhaj's Tabqat-i-Nasiri). It is very possible that Bakhtiyar camped at Telhara before conquering Odantapuri. Adjacent to the mosque (Sangi Masjid) there is a huge mound measuring about 200m x 100m which might be a monastery site.

About 10 K.m. south of Telahara is a village called Ongar, in which there is a splendid tank called the Suraj Pokhar. To the north of this tank, there is a temple containing an images of Surya and Buddhist figure.

About 4 k.m. of Ongari, there remains of large village called Biswak & Biswa. Like Telhara, this place is also mentioned as a pargana, which according to the Ain-i-Akbar, once contained 35,318 bighas, which stretches away as far as east bank of the Panchana. There are two enormous tanks to the east of the village, and two mud forts of considerable size and antiquity. Remains of Buddhist vihara is remarkable.

Islampur is another important site south-west of Telahara, from here also remains of another vihara has been reported. Another site Icchos about 25 kms./South-West of Islampur was an important Buddhist sites.

A huge mound marking the site of temple or vihara is reported at Mubarakpur South-West of Icchos. Near this ruins, is a village known as Afzalpur Sarunda covered with mud fortification and also a large tank from where several Buddhist figures were found.

TELHARA & ITS IMPORTANCE

Telhara or Teladhaka was one of the monastic establishments most extensively describe by Heun-Tsang, who visited India in the the 7th Century A.D. A large number of stone sculptures were noticed by Broadley from Telahara. The famous Maitreya and twelve armed Avalokiteswar image are at present displayed in the Indian Museum Kolkata. Perhaps the best known Pala sculpture from Telhara is now in Rietbarg Muzeum. Zurich. Even today, many Buddhist as well as Hindu sculptures are found in the village Telhara.

Telhara monastic site was first mentioned in 1872 by A M Broadley, the then Magistrate of Nalanda and letter on 1875-78 by Alexander Cunningham.

EXCAVATION

The excavation work on nearly 35' high Bulandi mound at Telhara by a team of archaeologists of state Govt. unearthed the evidence of three-storeyed structural remains, as mentioned by Huen-Tsang in his travel account. Evidence of prayer hall and residential cells for monks in the Monastery, have been found in course of the recent diggings.

The recent excavation work at the site was started in December 2009. Evidence of ancient monastic structure has been discovered at the site within a short period of excavation. The excavation has yielded a good number of antiquities besides heavy structural remains as stated above.

A fairly good number of pottery and images belonging to Gupta age to later Pal period have been found. Digging have also revealed a 34 meter long floor lined by a number of cells. The large floor is dotted with a number of platforms with images of Buddha installed on them. A -4' high blue basalt image of Buddha in *Abhay Mudra* another in *Dharma Chakra Mudra* and miniature images like Hariti, Manjushri etc. have also been found on the floor. It appears to be a prayer hall, mentioned by the Chinese traveller.

A stone plaque with 8 lines inscriptions in *Proto-Nagari* and a black colour terracotta seal have also have been found on this floor.

Another brick paved floor with a wall almost 12' in height has been discovered below this prayer hall in eastern side. Above this floor a well was found in which some broken images of Buddha have been discovered.

On the northern side of the mound two brick cells have been unearthed with paved floor. After cutting the floor, a 4.25 mt. sand deposit was noticed after that an exciting discovery was made by findings of N.B.P. Black & Red ware. Another striking feature of the site is that lot of inscriptions in *Proto-nagri* script were also found on potteries.

A small images of Buddha in red sand stone reveals that this monastery was in existence during Gupta period.

In course of further excavation at the site we have come across with Gupta Age monastery. Nearly 60 mt. long brick wall of the monastry structure has been found at the depth of 8 mt. Below this wall another structure remains running in north-south direction has been encountered.

IMPORTANT FINDINGS

A large number of antiquities, including the basalt image of Yamantak, with seven faces and a stone figurine of Marichi have been found. A unique piece of Terracotta seals with inscription having the symbol of Chakra flanked by deer have been found indicative of monastic seals, besides this more seals with inscriptions, on top of which are the symbol of bull & lions are found. After decipherment of the seals, the date regarding monastery remains can be determined with exact chronology of the site.

However, during the course of current excavation some copper coins have also been encountered.

Tentative Chronology of the site:

1. N.B.P. - (3rd Century B.C.)
2. Kushan (1st Century A.D.)
3. Gupta Pd. (5th to 7 Century A.D)
4. Pala Pd. (7th Century to 11th Century A.D)

This site is going to be popular & famous like Vikram Shila & Nalanda University after the completion of the excavation.