



Origin of Nālandā Mahāvihāra: Structure as Evidence and Seal as Symbol

RESEARCH PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Following the discovery of ruins of Nālandā Mahāvihāra, multiple questions were raised, a plethora of speculations were made, and stifling conjectures were advanced about the origin, evolution, and decline of the greatest academic institution of the world. Multiple excavations through the years have yielded a lot of information about the structures and functions of the Mahāvihāra, which are well corroborated by the literary evidences. Though the bulk of the monastic sites is still not excavated due to habitation over the mounds and other factors. Still, scattered surveys and excavations have provided information revealing enough to facilitate a re-examination of the hypothesis developed on Nālandā. The knowledge furthered by the excavations and supplemented by the epigraphic and literary sources has raised many questions about some of the established myths related to the foundation/founder of the Mahāvihāra, the nomenclature of Nālandā, and origin of the structural form of Nālandā seals. Could Śākṛāditya be the founder? Was Nālandā the first Mahāvihāra? This paper examines these questions with the support of new archaeological sources and literary arguments.

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The origin of Nālandā Mahāvihāra has remained an enigmatic question in Buddhist researches. Many investigative possibilities have been engaged to propose a widely acceptable account but it is still open to debates and discussions. Perhaps, the fallacious veiling and the numerous probabilities to discover the real cause of origin led the curiosity of scholars to explore the several investigative possibilities. With the rediscovery of Buddhism in the nineteenth century, substantial numbers of Buddhist monuments, seals, coins, images, travelogues, etc., have been discovered, rearranged, edited, translated, and cataloged. The attention of many scholars was also drawn to Nālandā, the oldest and the most glorious center of Buddhist scholasticism in east India. It was a magnificent area for exploration which can supplement a further understanding of modes of organization of the monks of Mahāvihāra, carved by time through its place of expansion.

Nālandā scholasticism inherited the monasticism practiced in early Buddhism. It successfully established a linkage between two opposite poles of monasticism and scholasticism. The monks in Nālandā Mahāvihāra were more than ecclesiastical identities, they were representatives and symbols of Buddhist metaphysical assumptions, revealing how teachers of Nālandā understood themselves as torch-bearers of a mission and as an erudite representative of Buddhist scholasticism. The scholars inspired by their metaphysical thirst manifested the *samsāric* detachment which ascribed the symbiotic relationship in loneliness and contemplation. Their approaches of symbiotic relationship with the *jhāna*, *śūnyata*, and various *Abhidhamma* traditions contributed to the formation of Nālandā Mahāvihāra as the beholder of the great depository of Buddhist knowledge. Nālandā Mahāvihāra became an organization responsible for conveying the knowledge flow originated from the Buddhist ideals. It became a place par-excellence of knowledge developed with no predilection of religious identities. Their teachers taught how to earn true knowledge through gallant determination which was not exclusive to the *bhikkhus* living in a monastic complex but also to a person with a real appetite for knowledge. Here, the life of a monk was not to alter the course of religion described by many but to exalt with metaphysical and epistemological explanations. The state of the purity of knowledge was a reflection and was an optimized way of scholasticism explained by them.

The importance of Nālandā grew because of its economic importance as it was situated at the outskirts of Rājagriha. Unlike the hills of Rājagriha, Nālandā was located on a flat plain with vast agrarian tracts supported by multiple structures of natural pools and lakes. Rājagriha had vast royal paraphernalia and it had a complete dependency on Nālandā for daily necessities like milk, fruits, and other domestic supplies. Because of high fertility and abundance of water facilities, Nālandā was able to serve and sustain the wide density of the population residing in the earliest capital of Magadha. This fact can be corroborated by references to Nālandā which was identified as *bahirika* (outskirt) of Rājagriha. The Jain sources indicate a strong presence of Jain followers in Nālandā and the *Sutrakṛtāṅga* mentions Nālandā as *bahirika* of Rājagriha in 6th century BCE where Mahāvīra spent fourteen *chatumāssa* or rainy season (*Sutrakṛtāṅga Sūtra* II: 360). The term '*bahirika*' suggests that the region from Rājgir hill to Nālandā was intentionally linked due to its economic significance. When the capital was protected by a hill from five sides, plain lands were required to serve the immediate concerns of the capital. Nālandā was developed in the same situation and treated as a satellite urban center of Rājagriha. The wanderers and ascetics were also infatuated with this place because it falls in the core economic and spiritual zone which could easily serve the monks.

ONOMASTIC ANALYSIS

The name 'Nālandā' was forgotten after its most unfortunate devastation and burning. The scrutiny began of a name and institution which was embedded in wider religious and academic thinking of the south, southeast, and east Asia. Nālandā needs to be thought of and navigated as a proud mission, one in which there were countless scholarly practices and actions connected at varying scales from monastic governance to state patronages. It was a sacred space and a organized system in which whatever exists is a manifestation of ideas developed on the convergence of multiple thoughts and backgrounds. The place got a new identity as Bargaon in the 16th century CE. During the time of excavation, Hirananda Sastri proposed the renaming

of Bargaon railway station as Nālandā, and the old tradition was rejuvenated (Sastri 1999: 4). Many hypotheses and contentions have been observed to know how the name 'Nālandā' was derived. Hirananda Sastri says that Nālandā comes from the word 'Na' which signifies ironwood tree and the name of the Nālandā might correspond to jungles of ironwood trees. He also proposes that the name might be derived from the word 'nālā' means lotus-stalks, found abundantly in Nālandā and adjoining regions. (Sastri 1999: 3–4) Faxian says it, 'Nā-lo' because it was situated around the Nāga tank. He identifies the place for birth and *mahāparinibbāna* of Sariputta (Beal 2005: 111).

Xuanzang informs that etymologically the term 'Nālandā' is derived from 'Na- alam - da' signifying abundance and perpetuity of gifts. He says that this sacred complex is known as Nālandā because the Buddha as a bodhisattva was king with his capital at Nālandā. The king was honoured with the title 'Nālandā' i.e., benevolent and kind. Because of his kindness, this place became popular as Nālandā. He also informs that Nālandā was developed on a Āmavana purchased and donated by 500 merchants to Buddhist *saṅgha* for ten *kotis* of gold coins (Watters, 2004, II: 164). However, such kind of appellation emerged when the monastic system became fully developed and Nālandā became a favorite seat of learning. Xuanzang's information was based on the *Mahāsudassana Jātaka* which says that the Buddha was born as a bodhisattva and a benevolent king of Nālandā. The *Jātaka* informs that the Buddha told Ānanda about *parinibbāna* of his two chief disciples Sāriputta and Mahāmoggalāna at Nālandā. It also informs that Sāriputta was born at Nālā-grāma and took *parinibbāna* on a full moon day in the month of Kartika at village Nālā (Jātaka 95). Dey says that Bargaon may be a corrupt form of Vihāragrāma and may be identified as Nālandā (Dey 2005: 136). T. Bloch emphasizes that Nālandā can be identified with the word Bargāv, not the village Bargaon. The name has been its appellation because of the sacred *vata* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree still standing inside the monastic settlement and its worshipping is prevalent in the vicinity of Nālandā (Bloch 1909: 440). It is difficult to perceive that the name is named after the *vata* tree. The Vata-Savitri worshipping was started very late in the early medieval period but Nālandā has antiquity since the age of Mahāvīra and the Buddha or even before.

From sources provided by the Chinese travellers, the two important arguments could be advanced in support of the name Nālandā. Faxian's reference of 'Nā-lo' suggests that Nālandā might have been named after the word 'Nālā' or 'Nālī'. In early India, the word 'Nālī' is used as a unit of measurement for agrarian land. In Magadha and Bengal region, agricultural fields were measured by Nālā or Nālī. In hill regions, this unit of measurement is still prevalent and land is measured in terms of Nālā/Nālī. References to it have been found in many inscriptions of the Sena dynasty (Mazumdar 1960: 101). The term 'Nālā' (Nālaka) may indicate it like a stalk of local variety of long grass/wild sugarcane known as *kāsā* (*Saccharum spontaneum*) and its long stalk is known as nālāka. The plant has considerable rhizomes and it is capable of reaching a height up to 8 metres (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1 Wild sugarcane (*Saccharum spontaneum*) at Nālandā University.

The dried stalk of it could be used to measure the land. This grass is still used in local rituals. It can grow in moist climate and bear the devastation of seasonal floods. Its stalk contains glucose and fiber. The shoots of this plant is edible and its peeled rhizomes have a sweet flavour.

The stalks are chewed just like sugar cane (Pandey *et. al.*2015). In the ancient past, burnt parts of plants was used as a salt substitute. In the topography of Nālandā, this grass is abundantly available. Because of its abundance, it helped the people in many ways. This was maneuvered by the local population to supplement their food, make huts of its reed. People also cleaned the marshy jungles of nālā for agrarian purposes and Nālandā was developed as an agrarian settlement that could directly support the earliest capital of Magadha. The early importance of stalk of kāsā (*Saccharum spontaneum*) might be the reason to identify this place as Nālandā.

I-Ching says that the name was derived from a serpent king, Nāga Nanda¹ (Takakusu 1998: 86). It is difficult to say that Nālandā was named after the serpent king Nanda but the association of the land of Magadha with the serpent cult is very old. The śramanic religions wasted no time understanding the popularity of the serpent cult and both Jainism and Buddhism accommodated it into their fold. The Jains associated this cult to the *tīrthāṅkara* Parśvanātha and the symbol of serpent became his cognizant. During his wandering, when the Buddha visited the Kassapas, they offered him a place in his hut full of nāgas. The Jatilas were fire worshipers and possessed a fire dragon. Kassapa, seeing the Buddha in his ascetic grandeur, asked him to stay overnight in the room where the sacred fire is kept and nāga used to live. On the Buddha's consent, Kassapa offered him the room where the sacred fire was kept. The dragon resided in the room confronted with the Buddha but could not harm him. The nāga died in fury and in the next morning the Buddha showed the dead body of nāga to the Kassapas and informed them that his venomous fire has been subjugated by his sacred power. (*Vinaya Pitaka* I: 33ff; *Samyutta Nikāya* IV: 19). Just after the *nibbāna* when the Buddha was still in contemplative disposition and rain started, he was saved by the nāga Muchalinda who winded his coils seven times circling the body of the Buddha and holding his hood over his head (*Vinaya Pitaka* I: 3). Buddhism made a serious attempt to associate humans and non-humans with the local pattern of weather trajectories, availability of water resources, and agriculture. The nāga is a folk deity that was holding the mysteries of nature, especially the rain, which was the most important component for the survival of agriculture. In Buddhism serpent deity, an epitome of folk power and God of rain often represented sculpturally in human form with expanded cobra hoods leaping from the vertebral position of the neck (Bloss 1973: 37). Nāga Nanda may be propitiated here to protect agriculture and rain. Later on, the place itself became identified on his name and known as Nālandā.

ORIGIN OF MAHĀVIHĀRA

Sukumar Dutt proposes that since the 4th–5th century, a new type of monastic organization called Mahāvihāra was developed under the patronage of the Gupta kings. It may be the single monastic organization as the Mahāvihāras founded by the Pāla rulers or the conglomeration of the monasteries headed by a supreme monastic patriarch. The traditional *vihāra* structure was developed in a cloistered pursuit to get expertise in *Tipitakas* for the growth of religion but on the scholastic tradition of Mahāvihāra, the canonical teachings were highly liberalized and widened in scope and character (Dutt 2000: 320–321). The first such structure was developed at Nālandā i.e., Nālandā Mahāvihāra.

The closer scrutiny of the structural development, authority, and leadership of Mahāvihāra show a pattern that indicates the development of Mahāvihāra was much earlier than the Gupta period. The important characteristics of Mahāvihāra can be summarized as:

1. Mahāvihāra had splendid monastic structure or the cloistering of many monasteries regulated by a central monastic authority, serving a range of purposes viz., monasteries, *uposthagāra*, *ārogyavihāra*, temples, libraries, etc.
2. Mahāvihāras was headed by a patriarch or a chief abbot.
3. All Mahāvihāras were state patronized either directly by the kings or by land grants.
4. Mahāvihāras were engaged in 'directed' ecclesiastical activities as well as monastic administration.

1 Faxian also mentions that it was situated around the Nāga tank. Beal (2005: 111), *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun from China to India (400 AD & 518 AD)*.

On basis of these characteristics, it can be inferred that the first Mahāvihāra was Aśokārāma, founded by Aśoka. (Strong 2008: 86).

1. Aśokārāma was made probably on the ruins of Kukkuṭārāma Vihāra² and it was one of the largest monasteries during the period of Aśoka.
2. The Chinese sources inform that the great monastery of Aśokārāma was headed by the Mahāthera Yaśa but the Pāli sources inform that Moggaliputta Tissa was its chief patriarch.
3. It was directly patronized by emperor Aśoka.
4. At this monastery, the third Piṭaka, the *Abhidhamma* was compiled, here Moggaliputta refuted the doctrines of heretics and wrote the *Kathāvattthuprākaraṇa*. The decision to send the nine missions to different places was taken here. (*Mahāvamsa* XII: 1ff)

Similarly, the Mahāvihāra tradition was also developed in Śrī Lanka. After the arrival of Mahinda and his retinue in Śrī Lanka, King Tissya bestowed Mahāmeghvana to them which was later developed as Mahāvihāra. This monastery (Mahāvihāra) had all characteristics of Mahāvihāra as mentioned in the case of Aśokārāma. It was later evolved as the leading monastery of Śrī Lanka which contributed enormously to the development of Buddhism and its literature (Adikaram 2009: 52). The Mahāvihāra was developed as per guidelines prescribed in India for the monasteries. It was neither too far nor too near to the city as it would serve the purpose to be in touch with the laypersons without developing with them any kind of proximity. Mahinda declared it the headquarter of Buddhism in Śrī Lanka. It has also been mentioned that Mahinda was not only the architect of Mahāvihāra but also laid a plan for the city of Anurādhapura. He had seen and stayed in a large city like Pataliputra and Ujjain and had a wide experience of their layout. It helped him to make the plan for the great city of Anurādhapura. (Rahula 2014: 52–53). The *Mahāvamsa* informs that he saw how his father made the Kukkuṭārāma/Aśokārāma Vihāra that helped him to develop the Mahāvihāra. On many occasions Mahinda accompanied king Devānampiya Tissa for spot inspection and allotment of buildings for monastic dwellings, making tanks with facilities of warm water, a place for plantation of the bodhi tree, and *uposathāgāra*, etc., (*Mahāvamsa* XV: 27–172). It shows that the idea of great monasteries with central authority lying with Mahāthera was already developed in the period of Aśoka. Nālandā has only one difference i.e., the beginning of the scholastic tradition.

DEBATE ON ŚAKRĀDITYA AS FOUNDER OF NĀLANDĀ MAHĀVIHĀRA

Reference of Chinese traveller about Śakrāditya caused much upheaval to set the discourse about the historical narratives about Nālandā Mahāvihāra. Xuanzang mentions that ‘here soon after the decease of the Buddha, Śakrāditya a former king of this country entering to one vehicle and reverencing the three precious jewels, built a monastery’ (Watters 2004: II.164). Korean monk Prajñavarman visited Nālandā after four decades of Xuanzang’s visit and repeated the same narrative that Śakraditya founded a monastery at Nālandā (Dutt 2000: 312–313). Epigraphic records found from the monastic complex show that he indeed built a *vihāra*. A fragmented seal with the circular impression, dharmachakra symbol, altar, and two lines of inscriptions are also found at excavated Nālandā monastic complex. It reads:

- 1 [nda]yām śrī-śakrāditya-kānta-
- 2 hāre chādusddiśiy-ārya-mā(ma)hā-
- 3 bhikshusaighasya. (Sastri 1999: I,848, plate. II e)

In the context of Xuanzang’s reference, many scholars suggested that Nālandā Mahāvihāra was founded by Kumārgupta-1 or Śakrāditya³ (Dutt 2000: 329).

2 Buddhaghosha informs that Kukkuṭārāma vihāra was built by setthi Kukkuṭa. (*Pappañcasūdanī*, II,571); Xuanzang mentions that in the south-east of Pataliputra, Kukkuṭārāma vihāra was built by Aśoka. (II, 95); Malalasekera accepts that Aśokārāma was built on ruins of Kukkuṭārāma vihāra, G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, (2007: 615) Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas. reprint.

3 Alexander Cunningham puts the date of Nālandā Mahāvihāra after the visit of Faxian but before the arrival of Xuanzang i.e., between CE 425 to 625. Cunningham Alexander (2000: 30), *Four Reports Made During the Years 1862-63-64-65*, vol.1, Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India; Amalananda Ghoash on basis of palaeographic consideration accepts that beginning of the monastery 1 could be early sixth century. Amalananda Ghosh (2013: II.304–305) *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal;

The endorsement that Kumārgupta-1 was the founder of the Nālandā Mahāvihāra could be contested on many counts.

1. Xuanzang mentions that Śakrāditya founded a monastery (*vihāra*). Structurally and functionally, there is a subtle difference between *vihāra* and Mahāvihāra. Probably, he made a monastery in the wider complex of Nālandā Mahāvihāra. It is difficult to ascertain the exact location of the monastery as the chronological sequence is missing and historical periods are juxtaposed over a long period because of construction and reconstructions of the structures.
2. There is a vast gap between the *mahāparinibbāna* of the Buddha (483 BCE) and the ascendancy of Kumārgupta I (415 CE). Xuanzang mentions the Guptas as patron of Theravāda. Nālandā as a Mahāvihāra was a Mahāyāna conglomerate.
3. Much before the Śakrāditya, the early Guptas were well acquainted with Buddhism, and probably before Chandragupta II, they followed the faith of the Buddha. They were feudatories of the Kuśāṇas in the Magadha region who were zealous patrons of Buddhism. (Banerji 1933: 2–3) Under their influence, the Guptas also respected the religion of the Tathāgata.
4. The inscribed image of Hāriti found from Sārnāth suggests that Śri Gupta, the founder of the Gupta dynasty was a Buddhist. B.R. Mani discovered the headless image of Hāriti kept under the Pipal tree in the village Barapur, Sārnāth. The inscription is in Brāhmī script and Sanskrit language of 3rd century or early 4th century CE and reads [Rajna] Śri Gupta Svamina Pratisthitapita [established by Śri Gupta Svami] (Mani 2012–2013: 273). I-Ching also corroborates the fact on the reference of Hwui Lun that *Chi-li-ki-to* (Śri Gupta) built a temple at *Mili-kiya-si-ki-a-Pono*. (Beal 1881: 110–111). P.L Gupta accepts the Chinese translation of *Mili-kiya-si-ki-a-Pono* as Mrigaśikharavana i.e. Sārnāth. (Gupta 1970: 230). It suggests that even the founder of the Gupta dynasty made monasteries for Buddhist monks. Such *vihāras* may not only be at Sārnāth but also other places like Nālandā.
5. Though Ajātsatru subdued the power of the Lichchavis but their presence in the Vaiśālī-Nepāl region was never eliminated. After the downfall of the Śungas and Kuśāṇas, the Vajjian power was revived. They were ardent followers of Buddhism. The matrimonial alliance between the Lichchavis and the Guptas changed the political equations as well as the dynamics of Buddhism in the Magadha region, especially at Nālandā. The Lichchavis married their daughter Kumārdevī, a devout Buddhist to Chandragupta I (Maity 1975: pp.8–9). Vaiśālī, capital of Vajjis, was supposed to be the birthplace of Mahāsaṅghikas who were shifted to Nālandā after the third Buddhist council. Because of that, the Vajjians patronized Nālandā. Kumārdevī can be recognized as the real architect of Mahāyāna tradition at Nālandā Mahāvihāra.
6. Archaeological and literary pieces of evidences show that Kumārdevī groomed her son in Buddhism. The *Kavyālamkarasutravrtti* (III.2.2) of Vāmana mentions that Vasubandhu was a teacher of Samudragupta. (Goyal, 2005: 214–218) Vasubandhu was not only a teacher of Samudragupta but also Ācarya of Nālandā. (Agrawala 1963: 229).
7. Nālandā Copper plate inscription of Samudragupta gives evidence to his patronage of Mahāvihāra. Sastri interprets that the inscription was issued in the victorious camp at Nripura and it mentions the gift of two villages to a brāhmana Jayabhatta who was an expert in *traividya*. (Sastri, 1999: 77–78). Sastri argues that the terms like *Brāhmananam*, *Traividyasya*, *Chaturvidyasya*, inscribed on epigraphic records of Nālandā do not corroborate to individuals but the functionaries related to Mahāvihāra. These words are used for experts in various disciplines like *Traividyasya* means experts in three disciplines of the Vedas, *Brāhmananam* and *Chaturvidyasya* mean experts in various Brāhmanical knowledge, appointed in the *vihāras* to impart Vedic knowledge (Sastri 1999: 33–34). Nālandā Copper plate inscription could be considered as the first epigraphic records of the Early Guptas for Nālandā Mahāvihāra. It shows that the Mahāvihāra was already functional before Śakrāditya.
8. Nāgārjuna is considered as the first great exponent of Nālandā tradition who lived sometime between 150 and 250 CE. He is traditionally regarded as the founder of the *Mādhyaṃaka* (*śunyata*) which he expounded in his famous work the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. It is presumed that he served as abbot of Nālandā Mahāvihāra and was the teacher of Āryadeva. He defended the Mahāyāna *sūtras* as the true words of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*). His treatise were occasionally focused against logicians of

non-Buddhist as well as non-Mahāyāna Buddhist schools. Nāgārjuna is accredited with reconditioning the *sūtras* and paradoxical statements on emptiness into a metaphysical scheme. (Westerhoff 2021). If, Nālandā *vihāra* was not developed as a flourishing center of Mahāyāna, how an erudite scholar from south India could decide to come to Nālandā. In the early centuries of the common era under the liberal patronage of the Kuśāṇas and then the Guptas, Nālandā was fashioned as a Mahāvihāra and Nāgārjuna laid here the foundation of Buddhist scholasticism.

9. Tāranāth informs that the founder of the Nālandā Vihāra was Aśoka and the institution was evolved by 500 ācaryas. The scholastic tradition was further developed by Rahulbhadrā and its great exponent was Nāgārjuna (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1990: 101).
10. I-Ching mentions that king Śakrāditya built a *saṅghārama* for the bhikṣu Rājavamsa. Chavannes says that kings built the monasteries for masters of different sects and their followers (Chavannes 1894: 84). It shows that he was not the first to build a vihāra at Nālandā.

MAHĀVIHĀRA SEALS AS SYMBOL OF ANTIQUITY

It has also been argued that the monastic seals of Nālandā Mahāvihāra have been found since the Gupta period onwards. It indicates the evolution of Mahāvihāra tradition in the same period. But scrutiny of the origin of seals in Buddhism shows that Nālandā seals represented the tradition that was developed in the age of the Buddha. The 'wheel and deer' device was designated to represent the first sermon of the Buddha at Sārnāth. Later on, it was denoted to a broader term to represent the sermon of the Buddha and considered as an appropriate device to represent the place where the Buddha visited and preached. (Sastri 1930: 387). At Sārnāth, the first kind of monastic seal represents 'wheel and deer' device with legend '*śridharmachakre āryabhikṣu saghasya*' or '*saddharmachakre ārya bhikṣu saghasya*'. (Singh 2014: 52–53) Later on, various legends were proliferated. Numerous seals were discovered at Sārnāth with 'wheel and deer' device and legend of mūlgandhakutī.

1. *Śri Saddha[rmmacha]kkre*
2. *Śri-Mūlgandha*
3. *[Ku]tyam bhagvato*. (ASIAR 1914–15: 127).

The monastic seals of Nālandā Mahāvihāra were found in large numbers. The majority of these seals 690 out of 775 (except the fragments) were found from vihāra number 09. The upper portion of the seal has a 'wheel and deer' device and the lower portion has a legend reading '*Śri-Nālandā-Mahāvihāraye-ārya-bhikṣu-saṅghasya*' **Figure 2**.



Figure 2 Seal of Nālandā Mahāvihāra.

Buddhism has conceived extensive imagination of legends and cosmogonies associated with animals representing mystical and archetypal characteristics. Some of the symbols and motifs were evolved, developed, and used in the ancient past and are still used in continuous traditions. Some of these symbols single or combined are embraced and adopted by the new religions and sects. It might be the possibility that more than one religion chooses the same symbol. The legitimacy of the 'wheel and deer' device is age-old and lineage of it could be traced from the Indus Valley Civilization where two deer are represented like the famous yogi seal (420) and the wheel is often visible in the numerous Harappa seals. (Thaplyal 1989: 47)

The concept, imagining, and tradition may be borrowed from the Indus Valley Civilization. The famous Mohenjo-Daro seal represents a Mahāyogī who was surrounded by an elephant, buffalo, rhinoceros, and tiger, and two deers are sitting near his feet. (Possehl 2012: 59) **Figure**



Figure 3 Mahāyogī Seal No, 420, Mohenjo-Daro. (After Kenoyer 1998:112).

3.

All four animals surrounding the Mahāyogī show violent and defiant postures. The elephant in Indian tradition is considered a symbol of strength and wisdom and depicted with a frontal head and elevated trunk. But the seal is showing that the elephant is moving backward. He is defying the yogī showing hurdle to attain the supreme consciousness. The other animal tiger, buffalo, and rhinoceros are looking ferocious and attack the Mahāyogī. The elephant could be depicted as Māra and rest three ferocious animals are his three daughters Trana, Rati, and Rāga. The pictures showing above the yogī may be forces of evil spirits accompanying Māra. The yogī was sitting on the throne unperturbed. In Buddhist cosmology, the Buddha could be recognized as yogī and his gesture of sublimity and peace was well represented by two deer sitting beneath his throne. The deer has been represented with the symbol of piety, harmony, tranquility, peace, and longevity. His gesture of kindness is well represented in the *Jātaka*. The *Nigrodhmiga Jātaka* links the Buddha with a deer a king who saved the lives of his fellow by offering his body. The bodhisattva's kindness was duly acknowledged and the place was known as *migdāya* (*Jātaka*, 1) The deer that was directly connected to the Buddha was considered sacred. Its calm, agility, and sublimity are duly praised in Buddhism.

The impression found on seals of Nālandā was borrowed from the 'wheel and deer' device that was first conceived at Sārnāth. (Sastri 1999: 36). It was a standard pattern of the seal but different monasteries and establishments also issued their seal with 'wheel and deer' device with different legends showing affinity to particulate *saṅgha* like-*Śrī Nālandā Mūlanavakarmavārika bhikshūnām; Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra-[Guṇākara]baudha Bhikshūnām;*

śri Nālandā chaturbhagvatām sana-vārikbhikshūnā[m], etc (Sastri 1999: 37–38). Surprisingly, the majority of these seals found at Nālandā belong to the Gupta and post-Gupta characters. The reason may be that these seals, at the earlier stage used only as votive symbols and for a memento. When seals were attached in terms of grants, monasteries, these were preserved. Seals and sealings with Buddhist symbols of wheel and deer etc., found in the Gupta period at Nālandā and many other sites may not be taken as conclusive dating of the earliest use of these symbols on the seals and sealings. Although physical pieces of evidence for considering an earlier date are lacking at present but literary and circumstantial evidences strongly suggest that this symbolism had been already developed by the Buddha. In the aniconic phase of Buddhist art, these symbols appear in fairly evolved forms. Nālandā seal must have appeared in the period of Aśoka, if not earlier.

CONCLUSION

The nomenclature of any city or place is circumstantial and based on local factors. The present hypothesis suggests that Nālandā may be named after the stalk (*nālāka*) of local grass *kāsā* (*Saccharum spontaneum*) or the tradition of the Nāga cult. Many cities like Pataliputra and Kuśinagara were named after the plants like *Pātali* and *Kuśa* respectively.

The origin of Mahāvihāra could be undisputedly accepted in the period of Aśoka. The only difference between the Mahāvihāra of earlier origin and Nālandā Mahāvihāra was that the first was engineered with the mission to enrich the fundamental characteristics of Buddhism by compiling, invigorating, and propagating the words of the Buddha. It was monastic in character and conduct. But Nālandā Mahāvihāra was distinguished for being engaged with scholastic tradition developed by Mahāyāna.

The seals and sealings found at Nālandā and other places in eastern India belong to the Gupta and post-Gupta character but literary and circumstantial evidences show that these were first conceived and developed in the age of the Buddha and well proliferated since the period of Aśoka.

The epigraphic, as well as literary records, suggest that the early Guptas took a keen interest in Buddhism. It may be because of Kuśāṇa's influence or the influence of Kumārdevī. It might be possible that the village grant issued by Samudragupta; donations inscribed on image Hārīti and other benefactions issued by them were to support the functioning of *vihāras* existing at Nālandā. The reference of Śakrāditya is relevant in the sense that he built a new *vihāra* in the existing complex.

Chakrabarti says that the majority part of Nālandā Mahāvihāra is still unexplored and the hoariest part of Nālandā is still to be discovered (Chakrabarti et al 1995). The archaeological evidences found during excavations in the Nālandā Mahāvihāra monastic complex and the vicinity suggests the urbanization in the region started in the 6th century BCE in NBPW phase. B. R. Mani excavated three archaeological mounds near the Nālandā archaeological complex to its southwest in the vicinity of Jagdishpur village. The remains of Northern Black Polished Ware, Black, and Red Ware, are found from Jaffaradih. From here, remains of *stūpa*, a stone image of seated Buddha, and other fragments are also discovered. 500 meters from this place mound Garh or Garhpar of the early historical period was excavated. From Rukministhāna same kind of antiquities and remains of the broken votive, *stūpas* are found. On basis of these findings, he suggested the beginning of Mahāvihāra was in the third century BCE (Mani 2008: 21). It shows that *vihāras* of Nālandā were developed earlier than Śakrāditya.

The earliest stratification from Caitya no 3 belongs to 3rd century BCE. The excavation at Sarai Mound at Nālandā Mahāvihāra gives the idea of a huge temple complex, *prādaksināpath*, and small cells with big earthen jars having carbonated wheat, rice, and barley. Few pieces of NBPW and other potteries, toys like ram, bull, elephant, horse, and a sizable number of stone sculptures including an image of goddess Vageśvari have also been found. (*Indian Archaeology* 1981–82: 12). In continuation of work, further excavation yielded remains of votive *stūpa*, dishes, terracotta sealings, one of which have Garuda stamp, male and female figurines with elaborate headdress bangles, etc., have been discovered. The most important discovery of this excavation was ring well of one-meter circumference. The rings are ornamented with geometrical designs.

(*Indian Archaeology* 1982–83: 23). Xuanzang informs that king Purnavarma installed a copper image of the Buddha which is more than 200 feet high. (Watters 2004: II.171) The exposing temple complex with fragments of legs of stucco image of the Buddha has been found from Sarai Mound (*Indian Archaeology* 1975–76: 3). The discovery of such a large image shows the importance and antiquity of this place.

The existence of a sufficient number of archaeological evidence of NBP wares, fragments of *stūpas*, etc., show that settlement at this place began in the 6th century BCE or earlier. The frequent references of *bahirika* for Nālandā, its growing economic status, and donations by the setthis prove that the earliest stage of monastic structure developed in the age of the Buddha i.e., the NBPW phase. The place where the 'ring well' along with other Buddhist remains are found may be the Pāvārika Āmravana, which setthi Pāvārika donated to the Buddha his mango grove. Here it might be the first Buddhist Vihāra at Nālandā was developed. These inferred evidences emphasize that Nālandā as a monastic establishment was well developed in the period of Buddha. Aśoka and Kumārdēvi gave it an institutional shape.

This probe into archaeological materials intends to open new vistas of further researches into the great ancient past of this hallowed institution with a solemn expectation to have excavated many more glowing gems buried beneath the sacred sands of time.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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