

THE ANCIENT UNIVERSITY OF NALANDA(PART-1)

PG HISTORY, SEM-2, PAPER CC:7

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INTRODUCTION

Historical records suggest that Nalanda was a Buddhist monastery of considerable repute with immense physical dimensions, which remained in existence from the 4th-5th century until at least the end of the 12th Century.

The Chinese travellers of ancient India mentioned a number of educational institutions. The most famous among them were the *Hinayana University of Valabhi* and the *Mahayana University of Nalanda*. Hiuen Tsang gives a valuable account of the Nalanda University. The term *Nalanda means “ giver of knowledge”*. It was *founded by Kumargupta 1* during the Gupta period. It was patronized by his successors

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and later by Harsha. The professors of the University were called *Pandiatas*. Some of its renowned professors were *Dingnaga*, *Dharmapala*, *Sthiramati* and *Silabhadra*. Dharmapala was a native of Kanchipuram and he became the head of the Nalanda University.

As a Buddhist centre of learning, Nalanda had a reputation that extended beyond the Indian subcontinent. It is unknown exactly when this centre came into existence, and we do not have a continuous record for its activities. It must have gained a reputation for importance by the 7th Century A.D., attracting scholarly monks such as *Hiuen Tsang* and *Itsing* from China. By the 12th Century A.D. However,

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there were other well-established Buddhist institutions in the region, such as *Vikramasila* (Bagalpur district, Bihar), *Somapura* (Paharpur, Bangladesh), and *Odantapuri*, competing for royal patronage. Their growing importance may have affected Nalanda's prominence in the region. The Tibetan monk *Dharmasvamin's account* of his visit to Nalanda in 1234–36 A.D. does record some lingering activity in the monastery with a handful of monks, but he later reported witnessing the last of the monks abandoning Nalanda due to regional disturbances. There is no record of what happened at Nalanda subsequently, and it is not conclusively known why Buddhist activities in the region ended sometime after the twelfth century.

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Sparse historical documentations over the subsequent Centuries resulted in Nalanda's erasure from living memory and local lore. Were it not for the accounts of travellers (mainly Chinese) who visited Nalanda in its prime, its very existence might have remained unknown. Those accounts include not only descriptions of travel, stay, and the state of affairs of the region, but some of them also mention distances and directions of places relative to other prominent and sacred landmarks in the vicinity. The accounts of the Chinese travelers *Fa Hien* (337–422 A.D.) and *Hiuen Tsang* (596–664 A.D.) were translated into English for the first time in the 19th century, providing added impetus to the already growing interest in the discovery of Indian antiquity among British explorers.

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Francis Buchanan was the earliest European investigator to visit the area. He indicated that he visited the ruins of, *Kundulpur* near the village of Baragaon on January 8, 1812, and evocatively recorded the expanse of ruins and details of antiquities he observed. *Captain Markham Kittoe* was an archaeologist who visited the site in 1847–48. Aided by the translation of Fa Hien's accounts, Kittoe identified Baragaon as “*Na Lo*” of Fa Hien; later *Alexander Cunningham* identified these remains as the ruins of the famous Nalanda that Huen Tsang visited. Huen Tsang, who resided at Nalanda between 635 A.D. and 641 A.D., made by far the most detailed record of the spatial layout of various structures within the complex.

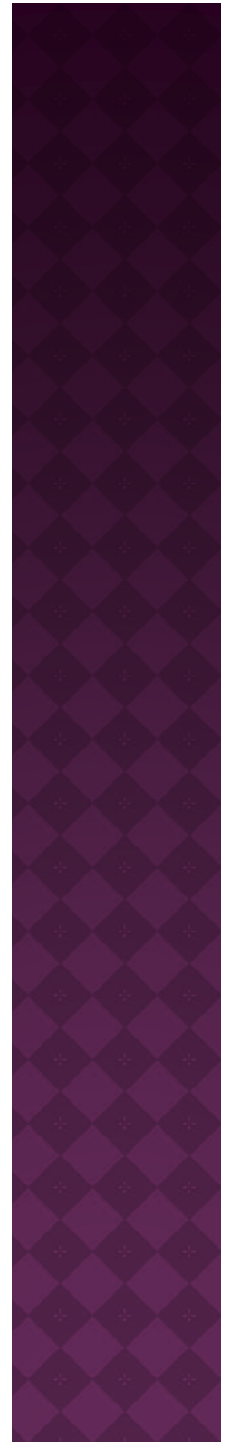
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He described structures such as monasteries, temples, images, Stupas, a gate, walls, and tanks. These descriptions heavily influenced 19th and 20th Century investigators in identifying structures revealed through archaeological explorations and excavations. However, the layout of structures excavated at the site does not exactly match the layout described by Hiuen Tsang.

Context and Chronology of Explorations and Excavations Investigations by Cunningham and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) :-Alexander Cunningham first visited Nalanda in 1861 as Archaeological Surveyor for the Government of India. He undertook field surveys for four seasons between 1862 and 1865, making detailed observations and measurements.

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Cunningham has been criticized for using unsystematic methods for identifying places, lacking careful procedures for conducting explorations, making crude and unscientific speculations, and being obsessed with finding places mentioned in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims. Despite these shortcomings, Singh notes that Cunningham's obsession yielded a number of major breakthroughs and correlations in the historical geography of ancient India. Furthermore, his "approach to historical geography involved contextualizing historical sites in relation to their physical landscape and ancient routes."



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Cunningham maintained meticulous records of the spatial and topographical details of the sites he explored. indeed, his documentation of archaeological sites—including mapping buildings, mounds, water bodies, and settlements almost to scale in relation to the surrounding topography—is unmatched for its time. *Chakrabarti* has remarked, “One cannot help feeling that [Cunningham’s] work did for Indian archaeology what the great Trigonometrical Survey achieved for the Indian landmass.” Cunningham’s initial investigations were published in 1871, along with a diagram entitled “Sketch of the ruins of Nalanda Mahavihara” showing the spatial distribution of villages, tanks, and such archaeological features as mounds, Stupa, walls, statues, and monasteries.

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ASI has conducted excavations in several phases, the earliest in 1863 and the most recent in 1983.

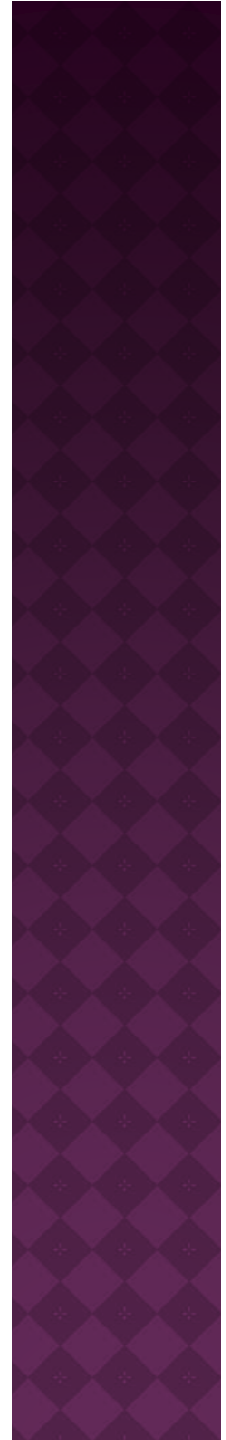
These excavations exposed a total of sixteen large structures; a row of four temples or Chaityas on the west (numbered 3, 12, 13, 14); a row of eight west facing monasteries or Viharas (1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) parallel to the temples; two smaller, north-facing monasteries (numbered 1A and 1B); an east-facing temple (2), situated behind monasteries 7 and 8; and, farther east, Sarai temple. Another monastery (12) existed north of monastery 11, but only the floor plan was discovered during excavations.

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The excavation of the site began in 1863 with the mound containing ruins of what later was called temple 12 (“F” in Cunningham’s sketch). This first location was selected by Cunningham on the strength of measurements and observations that convinced him the mound with “a great hollow in the centre” contained ruins of a temple. *Buchanan*, too, had earlier singled out this mound from several “heaps” and “conical heaps,” noting that it “has been opened for materials, and seems to have contained only a very small square cavity.” Buchanan’s accompanying sketch described this mound as “heap opened,” which might have influenced Cunningham’s initial choice.

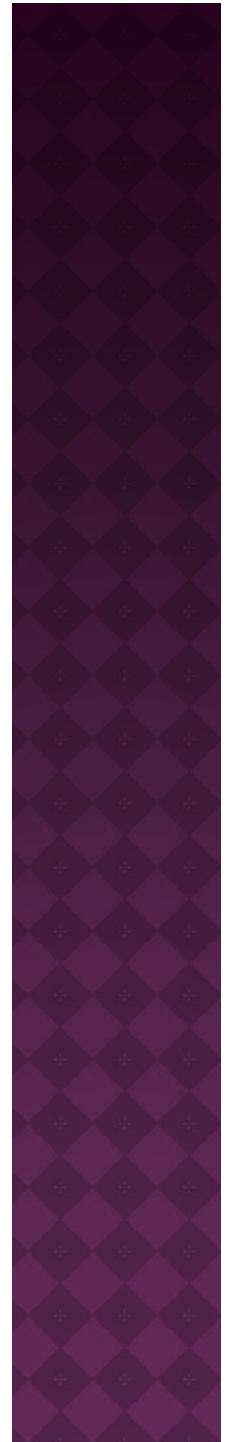
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The actual excavation of temple 12 was conducted by Captain Marshall, and was followed in 1871 by the excavation of temple 2. Nalanda became a protected site under the Indian Monument Act VII of 1904, and explorations and excavations resumed in 1915 after a four-decade hiatus. The period from 1915 to 1938 witnessed excavations that uncovered the largest spatial expanse of Nalanda's hidden treasures: temple 3, monasteries 1, 4, 1A, 1B. Subsequently there were long pauses in activity, and only two additional structures, temple 14 and Sarai temple, were excavated before large-scale excavations ceased, in 1983.



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The spatial arrangement of structures at Nalanda indicates that the sequence of locations chosen for excavation spread from one mound to the neighbouring one, starting from the first location chosen by Cunningham.

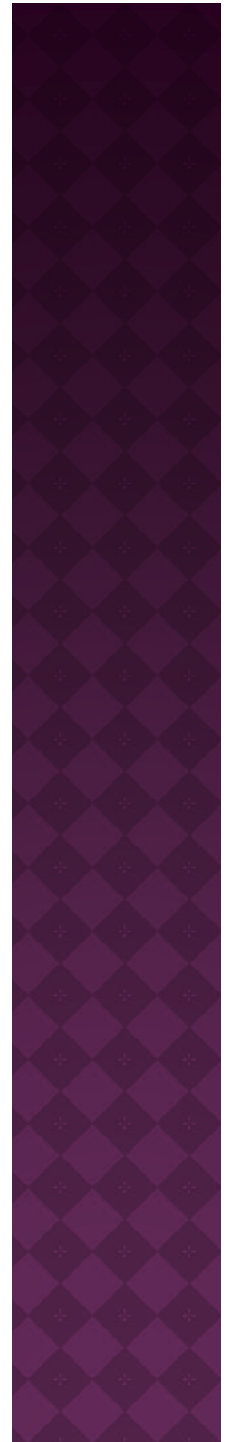


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In 1812 Buchanan approached Nalanda from the north and observed that the ruins commenced near Dighi Pokhar (the tank east of the village Begumpur). Even in 1907 there were visible ruins at Begumpur: “Bargaon [Baragaon] and the neighbouring village of Begumpur to the west of Dighi Pokhar contain masses of ruins which have never been properly explored, and there seems little doubt that a detailed and systematic exploration of the whole area would be rich in valuable results.” It is curious that Cunningham’s 1871 sketch did not record any ruins in Begumpur other than the fort built by the eighteenth-century military adventurer Kamgar Khan, but it did identify several other mounds that lie to the south and west of the current ASI boundry, so there was awareness in the 19th Century

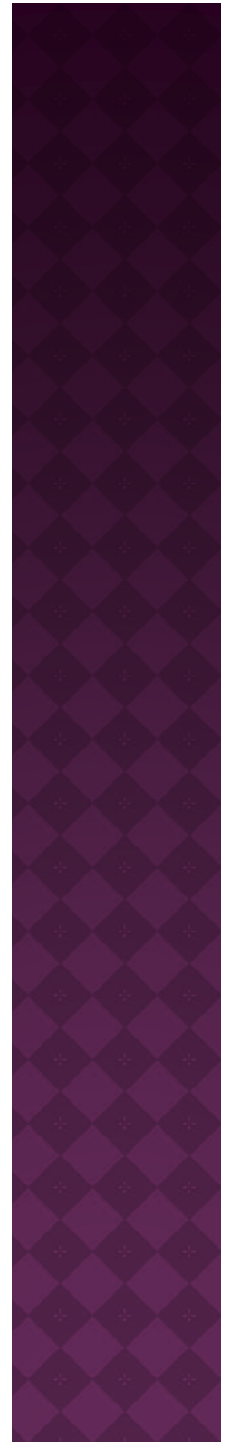
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that archaeological remains were spread over a large area. The excavation and subsequent conservation and preservation, however, are limited to land that ASI has been able to acquire. Given the painstaking nature it is perhaps unsurprising that only a small portion of the area with archaeological potential has been uncovered. The unprotected area outside the ASI boundary has been exposed to the growing demands of human habitation and agriculture, and the potential of Begumpur appears to have been forgotten. In addition to physical remains, historical eyewitness accounts also suggest that Nalanda's spread was greater than our present understanding .



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If Nalanda had sustained anywhere near the 10,000 residents mentioned by Hieun Tsang (or even the 3,000 residents recorded by Itsing, another Chinese traveler, who stayed at Nalanda between 671 A.D. and 693 A.D.) solely within the currently excavated extent, the monasteries would have had to have been multi storied—premodern skyscrapers— which is unlikely. Granting the possibility that the number of residents is somewhat exaggerated, it is nevertheless clear that even the seventh-century extent of the complex must have been substantially larger than the currently excavated area, not to mention any additions that could have been made during the nearly five centuries that



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Nalanda remained functional after these Chinese travellers visited.

The inability to corroborate the excavated remains with facts mentioned in accounts, and the vast quantity and spread of antiquity in the region, has led investigators to believe that the site was much larger than the currently exposed archaeological remains.

(To be continued)

