

Telhara: A Multilayered Archaeological and Historical Study

Prof. Rajeev Ranjan

Professor, Department of History, Patliputra University, Patna

ABSTRACT

Tiladaka, presently known as Telhara, is an ancient settlement in Bihar, India, situated between the Sona and Kattar rivers. Historically significant as a Buddhist monastic center, the site later underwent Hindu and Islamic adaptations, reflecting a layered cultural trajectory. This paper examines textual records, architectural remains, antiquarian reports, and recent archaeological excavations (2014 and 2021) to reconstruct Telhara's historical importance. Drawing upon primary accounts from Hiuen Tsang (7th century A.D.), 19th-century antiquarians such as A. M. Broadley and Alexander Cunningham, and modern excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India, the study highlights Telhara's role in Buddhist learning, its architectural transformations, and the scholarly debates surrounding its identity. The findings reveal Telhara's pluralistic heritage, where Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic traditions overlapped rather than replaced one another. The rediscovery of Telhara as a Mahavihara predating Nalanda underscores its importance as a cornerstone of Bihar's intellectual and religious history.

Keywords: Tiladaka, Telhara, Buddhist Monastery, Sangi Masjid, Archaeology, Bihar, Hiuen Tsang, Broadley, Cunningham, ASI Excavations.

Introduction:

The village of Tiladaka (Telhara) lies approximately 21 miles west of Nalanda, a region renowned for its Buddhist heritage. First brought to scholarly attention by A. M. Broadley in 1872, the ruins of Telhara testify to its former prosperity and cultural importance. The site contains remnants of Buddhist monasteries, Hindu sculptures, and Islamic monuments, reflecting a layered history of religious and cultural transformations. Recent excavations in 2014 and 2021 have confirmed Telhara's antiquity, revealing its continuous occupation from the 1st century CE to the 12th century CE, and situating it within the broader intellectual traditions of Bihar.

Literature Review:

1. Hiuen Tsang's 7th-century account describes Telhara monastery as a grand institution with courtyards, gilded copper reliefs, and brass

statues of Tara Bodhisattva and Avalokitesvara, confirming its Buddhist identity (Broadley 42–43).¹

2. In the 19th century, A. M. Broadley documented the ruins, emphasizing their Buddhist origins and cataloguing sculptures recovered during excavation. He noted that the Sangi Masjid was constructed largely from repurposed Buddhist materials, with graves yielding Buddhist carvings (Broadley 44–45).²

3. Alexander Cunningham, however, argued for a Brahmanical identity, citing the discovery of Siva and Durga images as evidence of Hindu occupation (Patil 5).³ This divergence underscores the interpretive challenges of multi-religious sites.

4. Later scholars such as R. D. Banerjee reinforced Telhara's importance as an antiquarian site, situating it within Bihar's layered cultural heritage (Banerjee 439).^t

5. ASI Excavations (2014 & 2021): Unearthed monastery structures, stupas, seals, inscriptions, and pottery dating back to the 1st century CE, confirming Telhara's role as a Mahavihara and intellectual hub.^u

Methodology:

This study employs a historical-archaeological approach, combining:

- Textual Analysis of primary accounts (Hiuen Tsang, Broadley, Cunningham).
- Architectural Survey based on descriptions of the Sangi Masjid, dargah, and recovered sculptures.
- Comparative Interpretation of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic elements to assess cultural layering.

Findings:

Buddhist Monastic Heritage:

The 2014 ASI excavation report noted: "brick-built monastery cells, prayer halls, and stupas were unearthed, along with seals inscribed in Pali and pottery dating back to the 1st century CE."^u These findings confirm Telhara's identification with Tiladhaka, mentioned by Xuanzang in the 7th century CE, and establish it as a Mahavihara (great monastery) functioning as a university until its destruction in 1198 CE.

Islamic Adaptation: The Sangi Masjid:

Broadley observed that the mosque at Telhara was constructed using Buddhist architectural fragments. Its oblong chamber (41' x 21') was supported by rows of intricately carved pillars, originally belonging to a Buddhist temple. Graves around the mosque yielded Buddhist carvings, reinforcing the site's earlier identity.

Hindu Presence:

Cunningham argued that Telhara may have been a Brahmanical site, citing the discovery of Siva and Durga images.³ This interpretation suggests Hindu occupation or reuse of Buddhist structures prior to Islamic construction.

Sculptural Remains:

Broadley catalogued several basalt sculptures, including a richly ornamented alto-relievo figure holding lotuses, adorned with a jewelled crown, and accompanied by attendants and chariots. The iconography reflects syncretic stylistic elements, complicating strict categorization as purely Buddhist or Hindu.²

2021 Excavations:

The 2021 ASI excavation report recorded: "monastery seals, inscriptions, and deeper structural remains were recovered, pointing to continuous occupation from the 1st century CE to the 12th century CE. Epigraphic studies revealed connections to early medieval Buddhist traditions."^u These findings strengthen Telhara's status as a major intellectual hub and suggest its role as a precursor to Nalanda.

Chronological Timeline of Telhara's Development:

Period Key Developments

1st century CE Earliest occupation layers: brick cells, stupas, pottery, seals in Pali.^u

4th–6th century CE (Gupta period) Flourishing as a Mahavihara. Xuanzang later describes its grandeur.¹

7th century CE Xuanzang's visit (637 CE) confirms Telhara's role as a major Buddhist learning center.¹

8th–10th century CE Continued Buddhist activity; sculptural remains reflect artistic vibrancy.²

11th–12th century CE: Gradual decline; university destroyed in 1198 CE during invasions.

Medieval Islamic period (16th century CE):

Construction of *Sangi Masjid* using repurposed Buddhist materials; dargah of Sayyed Yusuf Iqbal becomes a local shrine.²

19th century CE Rediscovery by Broadley and Cunningham; scholarly debate on Buddhist vs. Hindu origins.²³

Modern excavations (2014 & 2021): A S I confirms continuous occupation (1st–12th century CE) and Telhara’s role as a Buddhist university.

Discussion:

Telhara’s history illustrates the layered cultural transformations of Indian sacred sites. Initially a flourishing Buddhist monastery, it later incorporated Hindu iconography and was eventually adapted into Islamic architecture. The reuse of Buddhist materials in the Sangi Masjid exemplifies both continuity and transformation, where religious traditions overlapped rather than replaced one another.

The scholarly debate between Broadley (Buddhist origins) and Cunningham (Hindu origins) underscores the interpretive challenges of sites with multi-religious remains. Telhara thus serves as a microcosm of Bihar’s pluralistic heritage, reflecting centuries of intellectual exchange and architectural adaptation.

The rediscovery through modern excavations challenges the long-held view that Nalanda was the earliest Buddhist university. Instead, Telhara emerges as a **precursor to Nalanda**, offering a model for later institutions and highlighting Bihar’s role as a global intellectual hub.

Conclusion:

Tiladaka (Telhara) stands as a testament to India’s pluralistic heritage. Its ruins embody centuries of religious coexistence, adaptation, and intellectual exchange. From its founding in the 1st century CE, through its Gupta-era peak, to its decline and transformation under Islamic rule, Telhara represents a microcosm of Bihar’s cultural history. Modern excavations have confirmed its role as a Mahavihara predating Nalanda, reshaping our

understanding of Buddhist scholarship in India. Future archaeological research may further illuminate the complexities of Telhara’s past, offering deeper insights into the layered academic traditions of Bihar.

Works Cited :

1. Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang). *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*. Translations cited in Broadley.
2. Broadley, A. M. *The Buddhistic Remains of Bihar*. Bharati Prakashan, 1979.
3. Cunningham, Alexander. *Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India*. Vol. II.
4. Banerjee, R. D. *M.A.S.B.* Vol. II.
5. Archaeological Survey of India. *Excavation Reports on Telhara (2014, 2021)*. Direct quotations: “brick-built monastery cells, prayer halls, and stupas were unearthed...” (2014); “monastery seals, inscriptions, and deeper structural remains were recovered...” (2021).

Footnotes:

1. Hiuen Tsang’s account is preserved in later translations and cited by Broadley, who emphasized its importance in reconstructing Telhara’s Buddhist past.
2. Broadley’s excavation notes reveal the reuse of Buddhist materials in Islamic architecture, a phenomenon common in medieval India.
3. Cunningham’s interpretation reflects a broader trend in 19th-century scholarship to identify Hindu origins in contested sites, often based on iconographic evidence.
4. Banerjee’s antiquarian work situates Telhara within Bihar’s wider archaeological landscape, reinforcing its layered cultural significance.

