

## **Acceptance and Rejection in Buddhist Monasticism; Spatial Organization in Nalanda Monasteries in Bihar**

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### **Abstract**

When we reconstruct the history of relationships and hierarchies among people and groups the study of spatial organization provides much information. The „space“ is a production that narrates the nature of relationships, hierarchies, organizational structures, rejection and acceptance of certain people and groups who live or interact with that particular space. Perhaps the story narrated by the spatial studies differs considerably from the story narrated by the literature.

Such relationships, hierarchies and organizational structures that maintained in monasteries are reconstructed mainly considering the literary sources which have their own limitations and biases. Therefore, there is a vacuum in studies of the spatial organization of Buddhist monasteries. In this paper the spatial organization of Nalanda monasteries of Bihar (4<sup>th</sup> century to 13<sup>th</sup> century) is analyzed.

Objectives of this paper are to explore and reconstruct the above mentioned different relationships, hierarchies and organizational structures that have been maintained among inmates and between lay and clergy of Nalanda, a Buddhist monastery that represents a mature level of the development of the idea of “monastery”. In exploring this, archaeological and architectural remains of ritual and residential spaces will be analyzed in detail horizontally and vertically. The way of the ritual and residential spaces are organized, their orientations, centrality and different levels of restrictive methods adopted through spatial organization will be analyzed here.

Several levels of hierarchies among monks and between lay and clergy are seen. While attempting to keep lay people away from the spaces of the monks the effort is seen to welcome them with certain restrictions and limitations.

*Key words: Buddhist monasticism, Nalanda, Built environment, Spatial organization*

### **Acceptance and Rejection in Buddhist Monasticism; Spatial Organization in Nalanda Monasteries in Bihar.**

The word ‘Space’ gives a geometric meaning of an empty area. However, when human activities take place in such a geometric space it changes from a ‘mere space’ to a space where ‘different meanings’ are produced (Lefebvre 1974).

These different meanings of the space are produced through changing the landscape and introducing new features to the said geometric space. These changes that is introduced by the human activities to a geometric space narrate the nature of relationships, hierarchies, organizational structures, rejection and acceptance of certain people and groups who live in or interact with that particular space (Rapoport 1982). In this paper an effort is taken to explore and reconstruct the above mentioned different relationships, hierarchies and organizational structures that have been maintained among inmates and between lay and clergy of Nālandā monasteries (c.4<sup>th</sup> century- c.13<sup>th</sup> century)

The archaeological remains of the Nālandā monastery spread in a rectangular area of about 600 meters by 460 meters. The residential buildings spread from north to south in the eastern side of the said rectangular space and east to west in the southern corner of the monastic site. The worshipping buildings such as image houses are located in a line in the western side of the said rectangular space from north to south parallel to the north south bound residential monastic buildings. Apart from these main buildings there are remains of two image houses east to the north-south bound residential buildings. (See the figure 1)



Figure 1: North-south bound residential buildings

There are eleven residential monastic buildings named as Monastery no. 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 from south to north and 1B and 1A from east to west in Nālandā monasteries. The image houses are named as temples and they are numbered as Temple number 3, 12, 13 and 14 from south to north and the two

temple buildings which are away from the main buildings are named as Temple number 2 and the *Sarai* mound. (See figure 1)

The said north-south bound residential monastic buildings open their entrance doors to westward and the two east-west bound monastic residential buildings open their entrance doors to northward. The significant feature of these residential buildings is that they have been constructed following almost a similar plan. They are square in shape and the size of monastery numbers 1 to 11 are approximately 62 meters by 53 meters while the monastery number 1A is 20 meters by 24 meters and monastery number 1B is 40 by 42 meters.

These monasteries consist of a central courtyard of about 39 meters by 29 meters in size, a corridor which runs around it of 2.5 meter in width and row of cells opening their doors into the said corridor. The size of a cell varies from 2.5 meter by 2.5 to 3.30 meter by 2.80 meters. Approximately, there are 35 cells in one building. There are archaeological and literary evidences to suggest that these buildings had been two or more storied (ARASI 1990a, p. 104; Hwui Li 2001, p.109). Based on these evidences we can surmise that there had been over 100 monks living in one residential building if there had been two to three monks living in each cell.

**I** - Among the remains of the monastic residential buildings there is a row of cells with inbuilt brick beds in monastery number 1. There are 13 such cells with two brick-beds attached to the side walls in each cell. One notable feature here is that one of the two beds in all the rooms is bigger than the other. The width of bigger bed is 110 cm while the width of the small bed is 68cm only. This is a clear indication that one who is given the bigger bed was regarded as superior than the other. He might have been a senior member of the order or a person who claimed higher reputation for his academic career and the one who was given the inferior bed was someone who was a student or a lesser important monk. Based on this feature of the monastic building we can get an idea how the hierarchy is maintained through the other semi-fixed features such as types of furniture, curtains and other items of the cell. The descriptions of Yijing (A.D. 671-695) that ‘reputed monks of Nālandā monasteries were given good rooms, good servants and provided with sedan chairs when they traveled out of the monastery’ go very well with the above finding (I-Tsing 1966, p. 64).

**II** - In central courtyards there are elevated stages, located closer to the eastward corridor in 5 of the 13 monastic buildings. Further, there is a well and evidences of store rooms and a fire place in several of the courtyards. In every residential building there is a separate and comparatively bigger room in the centre of the row of cells direct opposite side of the entrance door. This is a shrine room where an image is kept.

All these remains suggest that each residential monastic building is almost an independent and self sufficient entity. They had their own worshipping space within the monastic building, a store room where food rations were stored, cooking spaces and a well for water supply of their daily needs. Since the doors of each cell in each monastery open to the open corridor in the monastic building it is argued here that the corridor is the meeting place for the inmates of the each monastery. Hence, it is argued here that the space organization within each monastic building highly encourages the interactions of the resident monks within the said monastery and work as one group. Based on all these facts one can conclude that the each monastic building is an independent unit where inmates had very close relations with each other.

If these monastic buildings were few storied then the number of residents in each monastery exceeded 140. However, each of these residential building has only a single entry/exit door. Absence of any extra exit door in any of these monastic buildings where over a hundred monks lived is a clear evidence that the interactions of the resident monks with the outside of their own monasteries have been considerably restricted, controlled or discouraged.

The orientation of these entry/exit doors also does not encourage interactions among the residents of different monastic buildings. All the doors of the monastery number 1 to 11 are oriented to the westward and of the monastery number 1A and 1B are oriented to the northward. No entrance doors are oriented face to face with each other where inmates of different monastic buildings can meet and interact easily.

The above deduction based on the spatial organization is further supported by the other sources too. Many of the seals found in Nālandā monasteries contain ‘*Sri Nālandā Mahāvihāra Catudisi ārya Bhikṣu Saṅghaṣya*’ or a similar inscription which can be translated as (The seal) of the noble *Bhikṣus Saṅgha* of the four quarters at the Nālandā Mahāvihāra. Since this seal belonged to whole community of monks of the monastery, we can conclude that this seal signifies the authority of the major assembly of monks (Karunatilake 1980). However, there are evidences for separate assemblies also from the same site. One such seal reads as:

“[...andā]yām Sri śakrāditya Kārīta [vi]hāre cāturddisīy ārya mā (ma)hā bhikṣusaṅghasya (Sastri 1999, p.38).

which can be translated as (the Seal ) of the *Saṅgha* of the four quarters in the monastery caused to be built by Sri Sakrāditya at Nālandā. Sakrāditya was the first king who constructed a monastery in Nālandā according to Xuanzang (Hwui Li 2001, pp.110-111). This seal is a clear evidence that there had been a

separate assembly of monks at the monastery caused to be built by the above king at Nalanda monastery.

All the 650 seals found in Nālandā monasteries including the one mentioned above provide evidence that they have been used as endorsements by attaching them to some letters or documents or perhaps agreements. On the backside of all the sealing, there is a mark of a strip of cloth which had been used to tie them to something (Figure 2). Since most of the seals have been discovered from one particular cell of the monastery number nine (Sastri 1999, p.32) we can conclude that it was the record room where all the agreements, deeds and official documents and correspondence were deposited. There are certain seals found in the same room belong to certain organizations or bodies called *Janapada* of certain villages which can be interpreted as certain bodies came to agreements with the assemblies of Nālanā monasteries. Based on the above evidence, we can conclude that the assemblies of monks engaged in economic transactions and agreements on behalf of the Nālandā monasteries. Further we can conclude the assembly of monks of the monastery caused to be built by the king Sakraditya also had the authority to engage in certain economic activities, come to agreements with other bodies and sign deeds as separate autonomous entity.



Figure 2. Seals of Nālandā monasteries.

Copper plate of Devapāladeva (810-850 CE) further validates this assumption as according to it, five villages have been granted to a particular monastery of the Nālandā monasteries caused to be built by the king Bālaputrdeva, the king of Sumātrā. The income from those five villages was to be used for the offerings, oblations, shelter, garments, alms, beds, the requisites of the sick like medicine, for writing *Dharmaratnas* or Buddhist texts and for the up keep and repair of the monastery when damaged (Sastri 1999, p.92). This again suggests that each monastery within Nālandā establishment has functioned as independent institutions while keeping its larger identity as ‘Nālandā monasteries’.

What comes from the study of spatial organization go very well with the above findings. Further we can argue that since Nālandā had been a well know seat of learning in the early medieval world where a considerably high number of students studied at a time, these separate monastic buildings may have functioned as separate schools or faculties of studies where certain texts or subjects were specialized.

**III** - According to the location and the orientation of the image houses they can be categorize in to two groups, namely, temple number 3, 12, 13 and 14 as one group which has been constructed in one line parallel to the above said nine monastic buildings running south north directions. The other set is two temple buildings located outside of the monastic residential buildings oriented their entrance doors away from the main site.

Out of the first group of temples, temple number 12, 13 and 14 follow the same plan. Their size is approximately 48 meters by 48 meters. There are stairs to enter these temples and when one reached the last step he/she sees the Buddha statue in the shrine chamber which is in the centre of the temple. In each of the three temples there is a circumambulatory path of 7 meters wide around the central shrine.

The entrance doors of the residential buildings of monastery no. 1 to 11 opens towards westward and the doors of the parallel image houses opens their entrance doors towards the east. The distance between two lines of parallel buildings is about 60 meters. (See figure 1). This orientation of the ritual spaces, their distance from the residential buildings and the way of each residential monastery is oriented towards these temples suggest that monks of two or three monasteries shared each of these temple space exclusively for their ritual purposes. It is very likely to assume that monks of closer monasteries shared the nearest temple building for their daily group-worships. The size of the temple, the width of the circumambulatory paths and the size of the open area before the temple buildings suggest that few hundreds of people can be accommodated at a time in these spaces.

**IV** - In the spatial organization in religious places it is a common feature to have a central ritual space. In Buddhist establishments it is the 'Stūpa' the central ritual space in most of the cases. However, it is a significant feature the absence of such central Stūpa in Nālandā monasteries. Except the several votive Stūpas concentrated in three spaces in the site, namely, around the temple number 3, at a separate rectangular space south of temple number 12 and in front of the temple number 13 there is no any such central Stūpa among the remains. The overall plan of the monastery also does not provide direct evidence to make out what is the central ritual space according to their locations in the site.

However, among the temple buildings Temple number 3 has different appearance from all other temple buildings. Other temple buildings are rectangular buildings where there is evidence of an image or image room in the centre of them. But, Temple number 3 is a huge brick structure which has been constructed on a courtyard of about 80 meters by 65 meters and has been repeatedly enlarged for seven times.

Temple no. 3 is located in the southern end of the Nālandā site and westward to the Monastery number 1A. It is a complex of small Stūpas in various sizes clustering around the main brick structure. Apart from the small Stūpas, there are four corner towers around this brick structure of which three have been exposed (Ghosh 2006, p.18). These towers have been decorated with rows of niches containing stucco figures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas principally Avalokiteṣvara. All these provide evidence to suggest that this building structure has got major attention among other temple buildings. In addition to that the fact that the central brick structure at temple no. 3 has been repeatedly enlarged for seven times (*Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India* 1999b, pp.130-131) and none of the other ritual spaces in Nālandā monasteries provide evidence to suggest that they have been reconstructed or enlarged more than twice I suggest here that this had been the most important ritual space in Nālandā monasteries.

Clustering around many numbers of small size Stūpas around the central worshipping object is the practice in the subcontinent India as proved by many ancient Buddhist sites such as Buddhagaya and Saranat. The concentration of many such small stūpas built in various time periods and spread haphazardly around the brick structure at temple number 3 further validate the point that this space is the main ritual space in the Nālandā monasteries.

Another point that support this argument of central ritual space from all the other ritual spaces is that the huge open arena before the Temple number 3. From Temple number 3 there is hardly any building up till the temple number twelve (see figure 1 above). This open arena runs about 140 meters up till the temple number 12 and the width is about 80 meters. Then the total size of the open arena in front of the main shrine is about 11200 square meters. This can be named as the largest open arena in Nālandā monasteries.

Another important fact is that there had been a Buddha statue on top of the brick structure in a shrine room and it had been oriented facing to this huge open arena. Further, it is worthy to mention here at all the enlargements of the said brick structure an access plinth is made to climb up till this shrine room on top of the brick structure.

Based on all these it is concluded here that the temple number 3 had been the central ritual space in Nālandā monasteries and the huge open arena before this ritual space must have been used for occasional congregations of all the residents of the Nālandā monasteries.

V - The second set of image houses namely Temple number 2 and the *Sarai* mound are located away from the rectangular land space where all the residential buildings, central worshipping area and major temples are located. The temple number 2 is located immediately behind the residential monastery number 7 and 8 and the *Sarai* mound is located 154 meters east of Monastery number 7. The most significant feature of these two temples is their orientation to the opposite direction from the rest of the monastic site. There is no proper entrance door or access road from the residential buildings to this temple area. There is only a narrow passage of about 2 meter wide in between monastery number 7 and 8 which lead to the back side of the temple number 2. It is very unlikely that a ritual space is constructed turning its back to the residential area where its worshipers live. This is clear evidence that this space where two temples are located turning its back to the living area of the monks were not intended for the ritual purposes of the resident monks.

The *Sarai* Mound temple is 31.70 meter by 22.79 in size and there are remains of a gigantic Buddha image made on stucco in a standing posture on huge lotus pedestal oriented turning its back to the monastic residential area. Nath records that the remaining temple is very high and it may be the temple that Xuang Zang records as the temple that a king named Pūrnavarman built. He further claims that the remains of the lower portion of the standing Buddha image is the image that mentioned by Xuang Zang as 24.4 meters high statue (Nath 1983, p.xxi). The presently remaining lower portion of the statue reveals that the height of it goes closer with the height that Nath suggests. If this standing image is so high then the visibility of the image acquires a greater distance. The devotee has to stand in a greater distance to see the full profile of this image of the Buddha. For that the site should extend to another two hundred meters or so to the eastward.

This helps us to deduce few conclusions. They are: Nālandā site had spread to a wider area towards eastward than today's remains have spread and the eastward area from the monastic residential buildings has been exclusively separated for the lay people for their ritual purposes. Only selected monks may have access to this area to conduct rituals. The orientation of the monastic residential buildings and the way they have been built disregarding the area where the said image houses are located suggest that the ordinary monks were not supposed to interact with that particular area. The lay people who come to this area of image houses also have not been welcomed to the monks' residential area as the orientation of the buildings and lack of access roads suggests. Since the highest



Buddha image of the site is housed outside of the monastic residential area oriented away from them suggest the level of effort taken to maintain two separate spaces for lay and clergy.

**VI** - Apart from these major spaces there are three spaces within the monastic site where there are number of small stūpas are concentrated. They are around the temple no. 3, closer to the northern side of the entrance door of the temple number 13 and at a rectangular space southward to the entrance door of temple number 12. Among them the site at temple number 13 is insignificant because the numbers of small stūpas are very few. At the temple number 3 there are over seventy small size stūpas concentrated on the courtyard around the brick structure. They have been built with bricks and decorated with niches and stucco decorations. They vary in sizes and haphazardly spread in the courtyard which suggests that they have not been added to the said site at one point of time following a master plan. They may have added to the site during a considerably long period of time.

As has been already pointed out the excavations have revealed that temple number 3 has seven levels of constructions in different time periods namely four times before 6<sup>th</sup> century and two times after that. Most of the votive stūpas of this space belong to the fifth level (*Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India* 1990b, p.131) which has been dated to the sixth century based on the inscriptional evidence found on bricks of some of these votive stūpas (*Epigraphia Indica* 1984, p.20). This suggests that even though the temple number 3 has been built at least two centuries before the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the concentration of these small stūpas around it has started comparatively a later time period. In the successive construction levels of the monastery number 3 the votive stūpas too have been enlarged or repeatedly reconstructed one over the other (*Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India* 1990b, p.28). In some stūpas the well known verse of the chain of Causation is inscribed on bricks which translate as ‘Of all objects which proceed from a cause, the Tathāgatha has explained the cause, and he has explained their cessation also; this is the doctrine of the great *śramaṇa*.’

Adjacent to the south side of the entrance of the temple number 12 there is a rectangular space of 50.60 meters by 14.80 meters where concentration of about sixty stūpas in various sizes (See figure 2). Most of these stūpas are constructed with bricks on a raised square platform while the stūpa raise from the platform is round in shape. The height of the platforms in most of the stūpas is from 30 cm to 1.2meter and the diameter of the stūpas varies from 60 cm to 1.2 meter. There are remains of 12 stūpas comparatively large in size. The height of the platforms of these bigger stūpas is about 1 meter to 1.5 meter and the diameter of them varies from 1.80 to 3.5 meters. There are seven other stūpas made of black basalt stones. They are about 70 cm in height and the diameter is about

50 cm. Out of seven stone stūpas six are made of one single stone and the other one which is bigger in size is with several pieces. Out of the said six stūpas one has the cupola or the upper part of the stūpa and others contains with holes that connected the upper portion to the lower.



Figure 2, Votive stūpas at the temple number 12.

Yijing has given a description about this practice of making small stūpas at the time he visited the subcontinent. Accordingly ‘The priest and the laymen in India make Chaityas or images with earth, or impress the Buddha’s image on silk or paper, and worship it with offerings wherever they go. Some time they build Stūpas of the Buddha by making a pile and surrounding it with bricks. ...Any one may thus employ himself in making the objects for worship. Again, when the people make images and Chaityas which consist of gold, silver, copper, iron, earth, lacquer, and stone, or when they heap up the snowy sand they put in the image or Chaityas two kinds of Sutras. 1. The relics of Great Teacher. 2. The Gāthā of the Chain of Causation’ (I-Tsing 1966, pp.150-151). In most of the cases in Nālandā the latter verse has been found inscribed on a brick and enshrined in votive stūpas or has been inscribed on the pedestal of small images.

Debala Mitra also argues that these small stūpas named as ‘votive’ stūpas, have been constructed by pilgrims aiming to attain religious merits. According to her ‘...an offering is made which generally took the form of votive stūpas in the case of rich and clay tablets inscribed with the Buddhist creed in the case of poor’ (Mitra 1980, p.22). Gregory Schopen suggests that ‘...there had been a belief that the important places of the Buddha’s life such as birth place, place of enlightenment and the place of Parinibbāna were places a devout Buddhist must do *darshan* in his life time. And this *darshan* was regarded as a direct intimate contact with the living presence of the Buddha.’ Further, he argues that if

someone dies in such places his birth in *Tusita* heaven is promised according to the Sanskrit version of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (Schopen 1997, p.116-117). His argument is that these small stūpas contain the bones or ashes of the devotees who wanted their ashes to be deposited closer to a place where the Master's relics are deposited (Schopen 1997, p.120). According to him the relics of the Buddha was regarded as the living presence of the Buddha and the purpose of depositing the small stūpas containing ashes of a death person closer to the main stūpa is to keep him closer to the Buddha (Schopen 1997, p. 134-135). Debala Mitra records finding of several Votive Stūpas with bone remains at Ratnagiri, Orissa which support the Schopen's argument (Mitra 1983, p.31-32).

All these arguments support the idea that the belief behind the construction of these small stūpas in certain selected spaces in a Buddhist site was either to accumulate merits or associated with the belief of the afterlife. Further, the practice of constructing of 'votive' stūpas was part of a merit making endeavor by the people.

This suggests that while taking a keen effort to keep the lay people away from the space where predominantly monks live, monks of Nālandā have given limited access to the lay people to these particular demarcated spaces where votive stūpas concentrated as part of a merit making endeavor.

## Conclusion

This study of the spatial organization of Nālandā monasteries reveals the nature of the relationships among the inmates of the said monasteries and between the lay and clergy to some extent. It gives a vivid picture of the process of rejection and acceptance. Some monks were accepted and given the opportunity to live in a cell where a superior monk was living while giving him an inferior position. Further, lay people were accepted to the monastery, however, restricting them to a certain demarcated area in the monastic site. The spatial organization clearly restricts monks from frequenting in the area that is understood as the space demarcated for the lay people. Lay people were given limited access to the major area of the monastery during a certain time period of the year or for certain purposes only. That is when they make special offerings or engage in some meritorious act like offering votive stūpas. Their day today religious activities were channeled to the aforesaid different space.

The way the orientation of the entrance doors of the residential monastic buildings again restricts the interactions of the monks of different monastic buildings. However, through channeling their group ritual activities to certain common ritual spaces, their mingling is again administered. Providing a single

entrance/exit door to a monastic residential building where few hundreds of monks live is also a symbol of control and surveillance.

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