

BUDDHIST MONASTERIES IN ANCIENT INDIA: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CULTIVATION OF THE BUDDHIST SELF THROUGH THE AURA OF RELIGIOUS COMPLEX

Dr.Pintu Kumar

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, Motilal Nehru College (Eve)
Delhi University, New Delhi, India*

Abstract

The facets of architecture have special significance in the arena of religious education happening within a religious building affecting the nature of the self through sensory perception, training, and control. Ancient India saw the growth of the major Buddhist monasteries like Nālandā, Vikramaśīlā, Odantapurī, Valabhī and more affiliated to different sects of Buddhism. Interestingly, all monasteries acted as an educational institution in itself simultaneously with a religious center showing a profound relationship between religion and education. Buddhist monasteries were engaged in the organized transmission of spiritual knowledge, which is evident from the available beautiful balance of study and veneration reflected from the campus architecture. The archaeological excavations have brought out a good example of highly developed, arranged, durable and comfortable architecture of monasteries sharing with each other, for instance, see the graph of the plan of Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra below. The aim of the monastic learning and training was to produce devout Buddhists through the cultivation of Buddhist self, where the architecture of the religious complex played a significant role comparatively not less than teachers. These religious complexes were consciously planned in such a way that students feel the sacred aura every time and at every place within the campus from their living quarter to walking pathways. The habitation areas were either surrounded by stūpas or temples or situated in particular places within the school with images on the four quarters, sides of the entrance and facing the door to create the transformative power of architecture. The created religious atmosphere provided space and reminded residents to perform worship, rituals, and prayers, deeply embedded in the learning process. This paper will share and learn the necessary more than half role of the peculiar monastic architecture played in the generation of the ideal Buddhist self or individual through implanting Buddhist way of morality and life. This historical study will explore the educational role of the invisible aura of religious compound experienced and perceived by the participants and how it helped in transforming non-believers into upāsakas.

Keywords: aura, mahāvihāra, stūpas, spiritual knowledge, training, education, Buddhist self, worship, prayer, rituals

Ancient India witnessed a prosperous and sustainable educational culture in South Asia amidst natural and spiritual surroundings. This vibrant culture includes both Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist education system working concurrently. The physical and architectural settings of both learning centers were taught friendly, resulted in their unique and favoured position in the contemporary age. The background is so necessary that we can also assess the growth of ancient Indian education in two stages based on the architectural development of learning organisations, i.e., unorganised education in a temporary structure and organised school in a permanent structure. Gurukulas functioned in huts of *gurus* in the *jungle*, where nature played a vital role than the architecture in the instruction process. Later the large Buddhist monasteries organized and expanded bases, pedagogy, and curriculum of *gurukulas* within the permanent structure. Here, the plan and settings outside and within the religious building becomes essential for all residents. The facets of architecture had significance in the arena of education happening within a sacred structure affecting the nature of the self through sensory perception, training, and control. This paper will share the necessary more than half role of the peculiar monastic architecture played in the generation

of the ideal Buddhist self or individual through implanting Buddhist way of morality and life. This historical study will explore the educational role of the invisible spiritual aura of religious compound experienced and perceived by the participants and how it helped in transforming non-believers into *upāsakas*.

Most of the *mahāvihāras* constructed from the fifth to the twelfth centuries including Nālandā, Vikramaśīlā, Valabhī, Jagaddala, and Odantapurī, which were also the prestigious learning institutions in ancient India. These monasteries present the higher development of religious architecture in the form of a full-fledged building. In northern India, most of the monasteries were of bricks, while in western India they were caves, probably due to the abundance of caves on the hilltops. These monasteries fall in the third class of Ferguson's identification of the growth of *vihāras* in Indian subcontinent where the cell expanded into a hall, generally with pillars in the center, around these pillars, the cells of the monks arranged, the abbot or prior generally occupying cells at either end of the verandah. Among these large and famous monasteries, Nālandā was the first and the most extensive monastery in ancient India and became a symbol of Buddhist education by coordinating all monasteries. The architecture of later

monasteries like Odantapurī, Vikramaśīlā, and Somapura emerged on the model of Nālandā. These monasteries not only exchanged architectural patterns but also teachers and curriculum with Śrī Nālandā, which more or less flourished during the Pāla period. We can better understand the process of the development of Buddhist self by considering the architecture and the activities of Nālandā.

The *Chullavagga* indicates that the Buddha allowed *vihāra* as one of the abode for its followers. Then we see the construction of many small *vihāras* and several large *mahāvihāras* through the donations of kings, wealthy men, and devotees. Some of the *vihāras* became *mahāvihāras* within time with the continuous constructions on the site by contributions. In this way, ancient India saw the growth of the significant Buddhist monasteries like Nālandā, Vikramaśīlā, Odantapurī, and Valabhī affiliated to different sects of Buddhism. In the beginning, the monasteries like other abodes allowed for resting in the rainy season, but in due time it became a permanent station for some monks who loved to do meditation, thinking, reasoning, and study. With a beginning as resorts during the rains, the Buddhist monasteries at the next stage turned into a massive residential place for hundreds of monks and then into centers of learning. Interestingly, all monasteries acted as an educational institution, simultaneously with a religious center showing a profound relationship between religion and education. The process of transformation was slow but steady, and we can put it between the fifth and the seventh century. The Buddha also provided theoretical and practical approval for the beginning and continuation of teaching and learning process. The monastic learning and training aimed to produce devout Buddhists through the cultivation of Buddhist self, where the architecture of the religious complex played a significant role comparatively not less than teachers. These religious compounds were consciously planned in such a way that students feel the sacred aura every time and at every place on the campus from their living quarter to walking pathways. The created religious atmosphere provided space and reminded residents to perform worship, rituals, and prayers, deeply embedded in the learning process. Buddhist monasteries were engaged in the organized transmission of spiritual knowledge, which is evident from the available beautiful balance of study and veneration reflected from the campus architecture. The whole *mahāvihāra* functioned as a unitary establishment with several monasteries and temples together. The entire structure was a campus with a surrounded high wall. The archaeological excavations

have brought out an excellent example of highly developed, arranged, durable and comfortable architecture of monasteries sharing with each other, for instance, see the graph of the plan of Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra below.

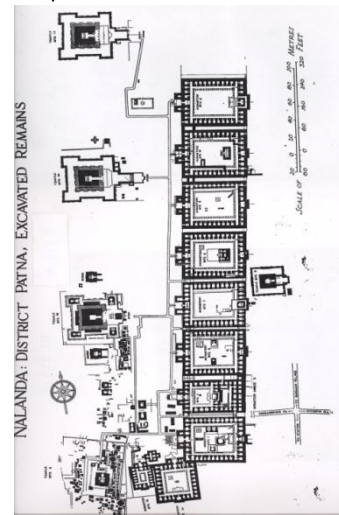


Plate 1: Graph of the Excavated Site of Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra

Source: Ghosh, A. *Nālandā* (New Delhi: Archeological Survey of India, 1957).

The above graph reflects that the architecture of Buddhist monasteries expresses the nature and the structure of its scholastic learning. It was constructed in a way to encourage religious learning and teaching within the campus. Like other monasteries, there were mainly two types of buildings at Nālandā Mahāvihāra, the one towered and highly ornate for images and second relatively simple for monks, which were facing each other. The high buildings of Nālandā's temples were sometimes up to six levels high, highly decorated and painted outside and inside. The monasteries of monks are also larger and higher as Hiuen Tsang resided in the dwellings of Buddhahadra at Nālandā, having four floors. The Mahāvihāra of Nālandā was divided into the two parts through a passage of more than 100 feet width between the sidewalls of Monastery No. 1 on the left and Monastery No. 4 and five on the right having a row of temples one side and the row of monasteries on the other side. The passage was not left entirely vacant, as is shown by few brick structures here and there. The situation of Temple No. 2 and the recently discovered large temple at Sarai Mound in the back of the row of monasteries, virtually project a picture of the temple surrounding private places. Le announces that Śrī Nālandā evolved into its highly structured plan in the Gandhara plan as its architectural model, which was also, in turn, a learning center.

We can say now that the overall environment of ancient Indian Buddhist monasteries was made entirely religious and pious with carefully constructed architecture plan concerning front facing temples and monasteries. Also, it was planned in a way to keep monks in the center of the complex with places of worship around. The exact position of *stūpas* with images in front of the residence of all monks constantly reminded their religious duty. Monks used to see temples and images in each movement in the campus. They used to perform rites, prayers, and *parikrama* whenever and wherever they want. The temples are visible from the hostel's rooms, so they can also pray day and night from the room. The spiritual orientation became apparent by the availability of the small *stūpas* and sacred bricks on the passage. The assembly of whole monastery promoted meditation and veneration with the study as a compulsory part of training. The act of worship was deeply embedded in the learning process and the act of studying was rooted in the process of adoration. Both were intermingled together as it was difficult to recognize the two distinctly. The religious settings of the campus probably could have helped in the visualization of what they were studying and writing and about whom they are reading, i.e., the Buddha. It seems the practice becomes more important in the training process to develop a devotee or inclined a person towards the interested faith. A resident of Buddhist monastery not only studied the philosophy of Buddhism but also tried to experience, and live with it. The practice of curriculum and suitable architecture helped a lot in the development of Buddhist self.

The cultivation of Buddhist self would not have been that much success without the selection of a perfect location for Buddhist abbeys. The Buddha said, "monasteries should be erected at places which were neither very near nor very far from any village or town; to facilitate not only the monks' daily round of begging but also their daily requirements." For example, I-Tsiang locates Nālandā seven yojanas northeast of Bodhi Gaya with more than ten grand pools near Nālandā monastery and every morning the priests take a bath in there. Buddhists used to decide a place, which can fulfill all requirements of the monastery and the monks. The Buddhist monasteries ideally located in comparatively more greenery lashed land and peaceful area. Most of the ancient Indian monasteries were constructed not far from town and near to villages. The place seems away from the noise of crowd but easily accessible to all. The close relationship between the monastery and the

neighbourhood worked in the complementary nature. The surrounding villages provided resource materials, and entrants both and the monastery provided religion, religious services, and salvation in reverse. The locality and outside of the main campus of Buddhist monastery became more popular and attractive by the erection of convent. The peaceful surroundings, with pools, arable land, and greenery needed for the daily rites and practices of the believers. It was necessary for the cultivation of Buddhist self. These natural settings helped in the exercise of external religious duties among ordinary men and non-believers. The growth of Buddhist-self became more efficient by these external practices, as the followers can discriminate himself from non-believers. In this way, the whole area became more sacred in the imagination, especially for Buddhist.

The monks resided in a separate building called *vihāra*, or monastery. The excavated monasteries are very similar in layout and general appearance with a simple design. The *vihāras* of Nālandā formed a rectangle bounded by an outer range of cells with an open verandah sometimes colonnaded and sometimes an open terrace running around their inner face and enclosing a spacious quadrangular court, usually containing a well. The habitation areas were either surrounded by *stūpas* or temples or situated places within the school with images on the four quarters, sides of the entrance and facing the door to create the transformative power of architecture. Chavannes says about Nālandā Mahāvihāra, "there are nine on each side. Each cell has a surface area of about 10 square feet. Although the doors are high, they are made as a single swinging door so that monks can all see each other." There used to be a central, special, sacred, and secret perfume chamber on one side of the entrance and sometimes to both sides containing a shrine, accessed by a very narrow and low opening in the wall of the cell in front of it. Schopen proves through archaeological, epigraphical, and literary sources that *gandhakuṭi* was supposed to the central cavity in a Buddhist monastery and reserved as the permanent residence for the Buddha himself and the Buddha was thought to have been a current resident and an abiding presence in the establishment.

From the excavation, it is clear beyond doubt that each monastery was a self-contained unit with all essential requirements of monastic and student life as was understood in those days. It also shows the free necessary facilities, which were provided by the *mahāvihāra* academic institution to its students and teachers for a

peaceful and sound mind to focus on the personal growth. The monastery had a transparent and spiritual environment suitable for non-believers to become *upāsakas*. Each resident can see and watch others by swinging doors and learn and imitate from their daily activities. The situation of images and shrines in all corners and at the entrance of monastery reflected the aura of the Buddha for all. Adding to this, the imagination of formal, and a continued presence of the Buddha in the *gandhakui* of monasteries made the complex more sacred. The presence of the Buddha served as a source of inspiration for learning, training, and teaching activities of monks. The naughty monks could have got moral compulsions by the presence of the Buddha. The novices and monks had to live a life of strict self-control. Life was highly disciplined, on and moral, following the rules and philosophy of the different sects of Buddhism.

Generally, the images found in abundance in the temples, where they worshipped (See Plate 2). Temples were also important part of the monastic architecture and an agent for the cultivation of self. Buddhist monasteries are covered with *stūpas* from within. The brick slabs inscribed with sacred texts or tablets containing the Buddhist creed found in the temple sites and miniature votive *stūpas*. The holy Buddhist doctrine says, "of those things which spring from a cause, has been told by Tathāgatha; and their suppression likewise, the great monk has revealed." The large *stūpas* at Nālandā with their row of niches with stucco and terracotta statues and their *maṇḍala* forms and multiple gates and terraces resembling the Borobudur in Java. These structures are ornamented with images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in different poses. Besides prominent temples in the Buddhist monasteries, we have come across many small votive *stūpas* perhaps for the worship by the residents (See Plate 3). The *caityas* was already part of the monastic community but adopted by it and integrated into coenobitic life as one of the most crucial element. The main temple of Nālandā is surrounded by small votive *stūpas*, which shows that many who had resided and studied at Nālandā died here over the time and got buried around the temple in the form of memorial *stūpas*. Stone *stūpas* are common, and most of them have square plinths and a dome above it with niches containing images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

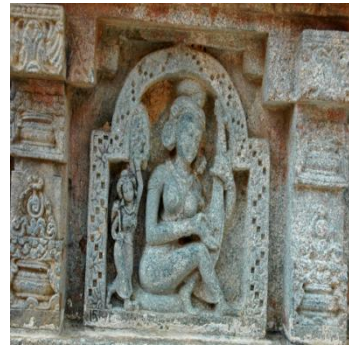


Plate 2: Small Images from Temple Nos. 2, and 7 at the Mahāvihāra of Nālandā

Source: A Personal visit to the site



Plate 3: Small Votive Stūpas from Nālandā Mahāvihāra

Source: A Personal visit to the site

The architectural functions of big temples and small votive *stūpas* were not only for worship but also for the practice of rituals. I-Tsiang says about worshiping a temple and image, "with *caityavanadana*, there are some who, sitting alone, facing the shrine, praise the Buddha in their heart; there are others who, going to the temple kneel side by side with their bodies upright and putting their hands on ground, touch it with their heads and thus perform the Threefold Salutation." Hiuen Tsang says that kneeling was not the only way to pay respect or do worship but so was saluting and reverence. A series of rituals was performed further according to the progress in the study and training for ascribing higher grades such as *uposatha*, *pabajjā*, and *upasampadā*, etc., which were a memorable moment for the student life. The teachings applied in these places. It

reminded the residents, the outsiders, and the visitors about the glory of Buddhism.

The monastic programmes were structured for the learning of appropriate forms because it was essential to the disciplined development of self. Buddhist literature of various genres has made a distinction between the devotion of practices like study, preaching, and meditation, and services and management, where sometimes the administrative responsibilities of monks were subordinated concerning inferior merit and *karmic* results. Under services as the part of training monks and novices performed physical labour like sweeping, gardening and cleaning, cleaning the toilets, moving bricks, cleaning the street outside the monastery, taking care of monastic animals, repair of the monastery and stupas to keep the convent tidy and maintained. The architecture is not successful until you grow an attachment to it. Monks treated the building as their house and always took proper care and maintenance. The menial works related to this supposed as sacred and part of the duty of every resident. In this way, they started feeling the architecture.

Conclusion

It is readily observable that the educational aspect of Buddhist monasteries was missing in the archaeology. The archaeologists looked for a Buddhist monastery and accordingly tried to illuminate the religious and the architectural element especially through temples, images, foundation bricks, gates, buildings, etc. They missed the connection between the architecture and the education imparted in it followed by historians. The design and the learning processes have intimate relationships especially in religious education in a religious complex. A spiritual convent trains and cultivates a self in similar faith through its architecture as done by ancient Indian Buddhist monasteries. The construction with external settings of Buddhist monasteries played more than half role in turning non-believers into *upāsakas*. The cultivation of Buddhist-self seems not possible without adequately designed monasteries, temples, images, and shrines diffusing a spiritual aura. The residents always felt that aura, which inspired them to be a Buddhist in faith. The present paper tried to present a brief account of connections between education and architecture submitted by ancient Indian large Buddhist monasteries like Nālandā, which much like an educational institution with a religious center. Still, there is a need for more detailed interpretation of monasteries and temples from an educational perspective. The design and construction of *stūpas*, images, *vihāras*, *caityas*, lecture halls, pulpits, rooms, labs with kitchen, and

bathrooms need a view from the architectural expert to address their educational functions, suitability, and comfortability.

References

1. Crystal Mirror, Light of the Liberation: A History of Buddhism in India, Vol. VII (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1992), 302-78.
2. HuuPhuoc Le, Buddhist Architecture (USA: Grafikol, 2010), 62.
3. James Fergusson, Illustration of the Rock-Cut Temples in India (London: John Weale, 1845), xv-xvi.
4. The Buddha allowed also pinnacle house, storied dwellings, attics and caves for resting in the rainy season as long as they were located outside of town; Stephen C. Berkwitz, South Asian Buddhism: A Survey (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 16.
5. Forthcoming, Pintu Kumar, Buddhist Learning in South Asia: Education, Religion, and Culture at The Ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra (USA: Lexington Books, 2018), Chapter 1.
6. Bhattacharya put this change after the fifth century onwards; Bela Bhattacharya, "Buddhist Learning and Literature at Nalanda," in Nalanda- Buddhism and the World, ed. R. Panth. (Nalanda: Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, 2001), 145. Fogelin traces this change within the monastery from the seventh through twelfth centuries as Buddhism became an increasingly academic endeavor as the samgha focused on the mastery of essential texts; Lars Fogelin, An Archaeological History of Buddhism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 205.
7. S. Beal, trans., Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of Western World, vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner Co. Ltd., 1906), 74.
8. J. Takakusu, trans., Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695) by Yijing (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896, p. 154.
9. S. Beal (trans.), The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang by Shaman Hwui Li, vol. 1. First Edition. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner Co. Ltd., 1911). Reprint second edition. (New Delhi: MunshiramManoharlal, 1973), 109.
10. Forthcoming, Pintu Kumar, Buddhist Learning in South Asia: Education, Religion, and Culture at The Ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra(USA: Lexington Books, 2018), Chapter II.
11. Forthcoming, Pintu Kumar, Buddhist Learning in South Asia: Education, Religion, and Culture at The

- Ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra(USA: Lexington Books, 2018), Chapter II.
12. The vihāras typically have a quadrangular plan like Gandhara monasteries; Le, *Architecture*, 58-62.
 13. Suresh Chandra Ghosh, *The History of education in Ancient India c. 3000 BC to AD 1192* (New Delhi: MunshiramManoharlal, 2001), 66-67.
 14. Takakusu, *Buddhist Religion*, 108.
 15. H.N. Sastri, *Nālandā and its Epigraphic Material*, *Memoires of Archaeological Survey of India*. No. 66. (Delhi: Manager of Publication, 1942), 21.
 16. Chavannes Edouard, trans., *Memoire Compose a l'epogee de la Grande Dynastie T'angsur les Religieux Eminents par I-tsing (kau-fa-kuo-sang-chuan)* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1894), 86 quoted in Mary L. Stewart, *Nālandā Mahāvihāra: A Study of an Indian Pāla Period Buddhist Site and British Historical Archaeology 1861-1938* (Oxford: Bar International Series 529, 1989), 219.
 17. Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1997, pp. 258-78.
 18. Beal, *Life*, vol. 1, 101.
 19. H. N. Sastri, *Archaeology and Ancient Indian History* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vernacular Research Series 31, 1944), 67.
 20. Robert E. Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 62.
 21. B. N. Misra, *Nālandā: Iconography and Architecture*. vol. 3. (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Crop., 1998), 252-60.
 22. Takakusu, *Record*, 123.
 23. Thomas Watters, *On Yuan-Chwang's Travel in India (AD 629-695)*. vol. 2. Second edition. (Delhi: MunshiramManoharlal, 1973), 173.
 24. Takakusu, *Record*, 96-100.
 25. TalalAsad, "On Ritual and Discipline in Medieval Christian Monasticism," *Economy and Society* 16 (1987), 159-204.
 26. Jonathan A. Silk, *Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 2.
 27. Thomas Borchert, "Monastic Labor: Thinking about the Work of Monks in Contemporary Theravāda Communities," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 79 (2011), 162-92.