

Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the '*Committee on Publication Ethics*'

Online ISSN:2584-184X



Research Article


Tiladhak (Telhara) University: A Comprehensive Study

Prof. Aisha Fatmi

Department of AIH & Archaeology, Nari Shiksha Niketan PG College, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: * Prof. Aisha Fatmi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20846076>

Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>Tiladhak (Telhara) University stands as one of the forgotten yet significant centres of higher learning in ancient India. It is located in the modern-day Nalanda district of Bihar. It is mentioned in the travel records of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) and has ample records through extensive excavations of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Tiladhak University flourished during the Gupta, Pala, and later medieval periods. This paper tries to find the origin, development, academic culture, architectural remains, and decline of the institution, while comparing it with contemporary educational centres such as Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri, and Vallabhi.</p> <p>The paper focuses on the material culture excavated from Telhara, including sculptures, terracotta plaques, seals, inscriptions, and pottery, which furnishes thoughtful insights into the intellectual and social life of that time. Furthermore, this paper examines the continuity of India's university tradition by putting Tiladhak within a historical context, leading up to today's modern universities. To reestablish Telhara's significance in the academic and cultural map of ancient India is the main aim of the paper.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2584-184X ▪ Received: 12-04-2026 ▪ Accepted: 20-06-2026 ▪ Published: 25-06-2026 ▪ IJCRM:4(6); 2026: 233-237 ▪ ©2026, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes <p style="text-align: center;">How to Cite this Article</p> <p>Fatmi A. Tiladhak (Telhara) University: A Comprehensive Study. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(6):233-237.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Access this Article Online</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>www.mrrjournal.in</p> </div>

KEYWORDS: Tiladhak (Telhara) University, Ancient Indian Education, Archaeological Excavations (ASI), Buddhist Monastic Learning, Nalanda–Vikramashila Comparison.

1. INTRODUCTION

The tradition of universities in India precedes the European concept of medieval universities by centuries. While Nalanda and Vikramashila continue to be the most celebrated institutions, Tiladhak (Telhara) University also played a crucial role in the intellectual history of ancient India. Situated around 30 kilometres from Nalanda, Tiladhak, [Telhara] came out to be a prominent Buddhist monastic-cum-academic centre, alluring scholars and students from across Asia. Telhara was discovered in 1872 by A.M. Broadley, the then magistrate of Nalanda,

which was commented on with some details by Alexander between 1875 and 1878. This site was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India in recent decades, disclosing ample traces including stupas, monasteries (vihāras), lecture halls and hostels, confirming its position as structured remains of higher learning. References in Xuanzang's travel records (7th century CE) and inscriptions indicate that the university was well-established during the Gupta and Pala periods. A recently discovered inscription stone confirms that the Pithipatis of Magadha donated land to the monastic community

of Telhara. It has also been mentioned in the Ain-i-Akbari as Tiladah, and is shown as one of the 46 mahals (administrative units) of the Bihar sarkar. Telhara was shown as a pargana in the maps prepared by the East India Company administration during 1842–45. Historical Background and Sources

The earliest reference to Tiladhak University appears in Xuanzang's account, who visited India during the reign of King Harshavardhana (7th century CE). Xuanzang described Telhara as "Tiladhaka," a flourishing Buddhist establishment with a vivid impression of Mahayana Buddhism. The site, located near Bihar Sharif, provides bricks, terracotta plaques, votive stupas, seals, and inscriptions that confirm its long academic tradition. The ASI excavations between 2009 and 2017 unearthed a unique four-storey monastic complex.

Major Archaeological Findings from Telhara

According to ASI Report 2017, Multi-storey monasteries (four levels), with brick and stone architecture, were found in the

debris. Votive stupas and Buddhist shrines confirm the religious-academic nature of the site. Potteries of Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) and red ware suggest occupation as early as the Mauryan era. Terracotta Plaque with Depictions of Bodhisattvas, floral motifs, and narrative scenes are found. There are University seals and inscriptions with Brahmi and later scripts, proving academic affiliations with other centres. Evidence of systematic educational space planning is confirmed through the excavations of Hostels and Lecture Halls.

So, the excavations revealed some unique features of Telhara University, such as its four-storeyed structure with monk cells, central courtyard, an advanced drainage system, prayer halls and furnished lecture rooms. The excavated area seems to be more than 30,000sq.m. The unique feature of the Telhara excavation is that, to date, Telhara is the only known ancient Indian university where evidence of a four-storeyed monastery has been discovered.



Telhara excavation site showing monastery remains.

Academic and Intellectual Life of the University-

It seems that Tiladhak functioned as a residential university, where monks and students studied under the able guidance of learned teachers. Tiladhak attracted students from India and abroad. Patronage under the Gupta and Pala kings ensured a

thriving intellectual environment with a curriculum mainly including Buddhist Philosophy (Mahayana and Vajrayana), Logic (Hetuvidya), Grammar (Vyakarana), Medicine (Ayurveda), Arts and Mathematics, etc

Comparison with Contemporary Universities

Feature	Nalanda	Vikramashila	Odantapuri	Tiladhak (Telhara)	Vallabhi
Established	5th c. CE	8th c. CE	8th c. CE	5th–6th c. CE? {debatable}	6th c. CE
Location	Bihar	Bihar	Bihar	Bihar	Gujarat
Patronage	Gupta, Pala	Pala	Pala	Gupta, Pala	Maitraka
Curriculum	Buddhist texts, logic, and medicine	Tantric Buddhism	Buddhist studies	Buddhist + secular	Brahmanical & secular
Excavated remains	Extensive	Partial	Limited	Four-storey monastery, seals	Sparse

Some archaeological evidence suggests Telhara may have earlier occupational levels than Nalanda, although the exact date of establishment remains debated.

Decline of Tiladhak University

Tiladhak faced decline during the 12th–13th centuries CE, with the invasions of Bakhtiyar Khilji. Archaeological layers confirm

destruction followed by reoccupation under Muslim rule.

Tiladhak in the Context of Modern Universities

Tiladhak represents a stage in the evolution of India's higher education system. Comparing its features with those of modern universities

Parameter	Tiladhak	Modern University
Residential	Yes	Yes
International Students	Yes	Yes
Library	Yes	Yes
Faculty System	Yes	Yes
Degrees	Informal	Formal
Funding	Royal patronage	Government/Private

Sculptural findings in the excavations-

A Terracotta Seal of the Mahāvihāra is found, bearing a Dharmachakra flanked by two deer. Below Inscription is written-

श्री प्रथमशिवपुर महाविहारिये भिक्षुसंघस्य
"Of the Community of Monks of the Great Monastery of Prathamashivapura."

The significance of this seal is that it confirms institutional organization, Demonstrates Buddhist monastic administration. It also indicates official university seal usage.



Terracotta seal with Dharmachakra motif.

A Gupta-period (5th–6th Century CE) Buddha Image of red sandstone is found with features like Bhumisparsha Mudra, which bears a special Gupta artistic style and refined drapery.

This Buddha image shows continuity of Buddhist learning during the Gupta period. Pala-period Black basalt Buddha image is also found dated 8th–11th Century CE, with special features like an elaborate halo which bears Vajrayana influence. It also bears a decorative pedestal. Avalokiteshvara stone Sculpture of the Pala period shows evidence of Mahayana Buddhism at Tiladhak.



Pala

Period https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telhara_monastery#/media/File:Bodhisattva_Lokeshvara_Museum_Rietberg,zurich
Tara Image found at the site demonstrates female Buddhist divinity worship and Vajrayana influence.

Yamantaka Image (God of Death) with several heads bears strong evidence of Tantric Buddhism.



<https://www.mysteryofindia.com/2014/12/ruins-telhara-university-older-nalanda.html>



<https://nalanda-insatiablenoffering.blogspot.com/2012/04/ongoing-excavations-at-telhada-telhara>.

Baladitya Inscription

Mentions Baladitya of Teladhaka, which provides evidence for Scholarly connections with Nalanda, Pala patronage and Monastic restoration activity.

Warning Inscription-

"He who destroys this monastery is like a donkey and a bull."

- Demonstrates concern for preservation.
- Rare monastic warning inscription.

Xuanzang (7th Century CE) Reported:

- Seven monasteries
- Approximately 1,000 monks
- Multi-storeyed buildings
- Hanging copper bells

His description closely matches the excavated remains.

Tiladhak (Telhara) University was a crucial link in India's ancient educational heritage. Its discovery enriches our understanding of academic traditions that flourished beyond the more famous Nalanda. The comparative study confirms that Indian education was holistic, residential, and globally influential, predating modern European institutions. Reviving and preserving such heritage sites are essential to inspire the future generation.

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Reports

- Archaeological Survey of India, *Indian Archaeology: A Review*
- Bihar Heritage Development Society Reports
- Nalanda Excavation Reports

Link

- <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/tiladhak-university-existed-in-kushan-age-say-e>
- <https://www.facebook.com/myIndiamyGlory/posts/ancient-telhara-university-was-xperts/>
- <https://tamilandvedas.com/2014/02/24/new-discovery-in-bihar-a-university-under-a-mound/>
- (PDF) Telhara (Bihar, India) -- a node in Bharatam Janam's Meluhha Knowledge Network, ca. 5th century BCE

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About the Author

Prof. Aisha Fatmi is a Professor in the Department of AIH & Archaeology at Nari Shiksha Niketan PG College, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. Her academic interests include Ancient Indian History, archaeology, cultural heritage, historical research, and interdisciplinary studies. She is actively engaged in teaching, research, and promoting historical and archaeological scholarship.