Evidence from Landscape Archaeology

The Search for Odantapuri

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Odantapuri, also known as Uddandapura, was an important seat of Buddhist learning during the Pala period. It was established by the first Pala Emperor Gopala in the 8th century, and was part of a network of five Mahaviharas in eastern India. The others were:

- Nalanda the oldest, believed to have been active from 4/5th to 13th century AD, has excavated ruins of six temples and eleven monastery structures, protected by Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) spanning across approx. 0.3 sq km.
- Vikramasila in Bihar, built by Dharmapala (780 to 820 AD) the second Pala king, which has a central cruciform monument surrounded by a quadrangle 320x330m with monastic cells. It has an outer wall with semi-circular bastions.
- Somapura in Bangladesh is similar to Vikramasila in architecture by slightly smaller quadrangle (280x280m) was also built by Dharmapala.
- Jagaddala in Bangladesh was built by Ramapala (1077-1124 AD); excavations have revealed Buddhist monastics structures.

Odantapuri seems to have played a role in introducing
Buddhism into Tibet and in influencing the architecture of Samye, Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya, 1990). Although no physical structures have been identified, historical records suggest that it was located close to Nalanda, but met with an abrupt end in the 12th century. Odantapuri is identified with Bihar Sharif based on the older name of the latter – Dand Bihar or Bihar Dandi. (J.D. Beglar, 1878) and A-dwand Bihar mentioned in the list of victories in Tabakāt-i-Nāṣiri. Many Buddhist images and carvings have been found in Bihar Sharif (Patil, 1963 and Kuraishi, 1931). Buchanan has recorded numerous brick and stone remains there (V.H. Jackson, 1922). A brass image of a goddess with 4 hands and a votive inscription mentioning the name Uddandapura was also found in this town (Hirananda Sastri, 1999). Very little excavation has been conducted in Bihar Sharif thus far, and no investigation has revealed a large structure comparable to a Pala Mahavihara, neither has any monastic seals surfaced.

Around the 11th century AD, while Nalanda was struggling for survival, Odantapuri “had a rival institution functioning under the royal patronage of Palas and, being a capital town, it must have inevitably snatched away the fortunes of Nalanda” (Patil, 1963). Taranatha wrote that during the time of the four Sena kings (12th century AD) the number of foreigners increased in the region and “To protect Odantapuri and Vikramasila, the king even converted these partially into fortress and stationed some soldiers there” (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya, 1990). This perhaps explains the semi-circular bastions on the outer wall of Vikramasila’s vihara quadrangle.

The medieval chronicle Tabakāt-i-Nāṣiri mention that in 1197 troops led by Ikhtiyar-ud-Din Muhammad (son of Bhaktiyar Kailji), destroyed a fort, killed all the inmates, and burnt a library, later realizing that the place was not a fort but a vihara (Raverty, 1881). It is believed that this vihara sacked by the invading army was Odantapuri (Patil, 1963).

The records of the Tibetan monk Dharmaswamin, who was at Nalanda (1234-36), indicate that Odantapuri was in close proximity to Nalanda, but the distances and directions he mentions are inconsistent (Roerich, 1959). An inscription found in Gaya mentions that Gaya was located in “Udandapura dese” (the region or district of Uddandapura), which suggests that the name Uddandapura referred to a larger area or a district (Kielhorn, 1891). Therefore the Vihara bearing that name could have been anywhere within
Recent studies in landscape archaeology using geospatial analysis has revealed that the extent of archaeological remain in the environs of Nalanda site is much larger (spreading across an area of approx. 7.5 sq km) than the property protected by the Archaeological Survey of India; there is evidence of additional temples and monasteries; and there are indications of a large archaeological structure under Begumpur that could have been either a part of the Nalanda complex or a separate entity (Rajani, 2016).

Digital Elevation Model (DEM) created through photogrammetric analysis of stereoscopic satellite imagery from Cartosat1 has revealed a large mound on which the settlement of Begumpur sits, and this mound contains a very interesting topographical relief feature of a large square (400x450m) and protruding ends on the northwest, northeast and southeast extremes forming three corners of a shape consistent with the buried foundations of a four-pointed structure. The protrusions could correspond to bastions of a fort, but their size is more consistent with small structures, perhaps stupas, one at each corner separated from the large central square (similar to architecture of Samye...
monastery). The debris of collapsed structures could have formed heaps, uniting the isolated structures in the corners with the main square in the middle. The shape and dimensions of the mound suggest that structure within was square-shaped, and large enough to comfortably accommodate the vihara structures of both Vikramasila and Somapura, which are tellingly oriented in a similar way.

The ruins of this structure were still visible when Buchanan visited in 1812. In his journal, Buchanan mentions Begumpur was on a “considerable space elevated with the fragments of brick” (Jackson, 1922). None of subsequent explorers or archaeologist have noticed or recorded this feature.

A field exploration was undertaken to seek evidence along the periphery of this feature. The residents of the village were forthcoming with information. As we probed them for information about any exposed old structures in the vicinity, one resident reported that a small trench had recently been dug on his land and offered to lead us there. As the team followed him, our GPS track traced and ended by the trench located almost precisely at the north-eastern corner of the mound. The brick structure – perhaps only the proverbial tip of the iceberg – has been discovered. The massive structure one suspects lies hidden beneath the northern mound is comparable in size and shape to the Vihara quadrangles of Vikramasila and Somapura.

The archaeological mound below Begumpur is worthy of further study. It could be hiding Odantapuri or another Pala period monastery. In order to take this study further it is necessary to conduct an extensive survey using GPR, Lidar and traditional ground survey and also dating bricks found at the northeast corner of Begumpur.