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Nalanda University: A Dream Asian University of the 21st century

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Abstract

Nālandā (Hindi/Sanskrit/Pali: नालंदा) is the name of an ancient center of higher learning in Bihar. The site of Nalanda is located, about 55 miles south-east of Patna, and was a Buddhist center of learning from 427 to 1193 BC. It has been called "one of the first great universities in recorded history. Some buildings were constructed by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka the Great (i.e. Raja Asoka: 273–232 BC) which is an indication of an early establishment of the Buddhist learning center Nalanda. The Gupta Empire also patronized some monasteries. According to historians, Nalanda flourished between the reign of the Gupta king Śānkrāditya (also known as Kumāragupta, reigned 415-455 BC) and 1193 BC, supported by patronage from Buddhist emperors like Harsha as well as later emperors from the Pala Empire. The complex was built with red bricks and its ruins occupy an area of 14 hectares. At its peak, the university attracted scholars and students from as far away as China, Japan, Greece, and Persia. Nalanda was ransacked by Turkic Muslim invaders under Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193 BC, a milestone in the decline of Buddhism in India. The great library of Nalanda University was so vast that it is reported to have burned for three months after the Afghan invaders set fire to it, sacked and destroyed the monasteries, and drove the monks from the site. In 2006, Singapore, India, Japan, China and other nations, announced a proposed plan to restore and revive the ancient site as Nalanda International University.

Key-words: *Nālandā, Buddhist emperor, Emotional Intelligence etc.*

Historical Background

The name Nalanda is an icon for cross-cultural interactions and intra-regional connectivity around the globe. Located in Bihar, India, near the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment, the centre of learning at Nalanda was a major hub for educational and intellectual exchange and the creation and dissemination of knowledge among Asian societies from the fifth to the twelfth centuries CE. It received students from across Asia, stimulated intellectual, scientific, and religious dialogues, and dispatched missionaries and scholars to the leading Buddhist centres of Asia. Later generations have called this centre of learning "Nalanda University" and described it as the world's first educational institution of higher learning.

When after an eight-hundred-year existence it was destroyed by an act of war, Nalanda lived on for another eight hundred years only in the shared cultural

memory of India and Asian countries. It stood as a living symbol of a time of an inter connected Asia, of an Asia that did not then define itself against the paradigms of the emergent and monolithic model of higher education that holds sway today. Uncomfortable though this fact may be, what we have to accept today is fault lines created by the overwhelming force of multiple colonialisms—across Asian countries—that have altered the way we establish universities and has given to us today, what can only be described unflatteringly, as an imitative Asian model of the university. One, moreover, which is embedded in the socio-intellectual-cultural mores of Western pedagogy and Western modes of critical enquiry. Nalanda was Asian in thought, in belief, and in practice. It was Asian renaissance centuries before the term was coined to mark the shift in power balances when Asia shrugged off its colonial yoke.

However, while Nalanda remained alive as an idea, as a physical entity it was lost and forgotten: this ancient seat of learning lay buried and forgotten under indistinguishable mounds of mud and stone. In an ironic twist, it took a colonial archaeologist to excavate what is, arguably, one of the most emotive and evocative sites: the ruins of the ancient Nalanda *Mahavihara*. It was under the leadership of Alexander Cunningham and the newly formed Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), that an official survey in 1861–1862 AD was made in Bihar, even though systematic excavation of the ruins by the ASI did not begin until 1915 and ended in 1937. A second round of excavation and restoration took place between 1974 and 1982. Thus, Nalanda entered into the lexicon of India and Asia again as a monument to times past and welcomed tourists, seekers of knowledge related to Buddhist philosophy and teaching, and the world at large. But its tryst with destiny—to quote Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India in 1947 in another context—had to wait for almost another hundred years (from its first discovery) to be realized. It was in 2007 that the idea to revive ancient Nalanda as a modern university—albeit true to its legacy and spirit—was mooted at the East Asia Summit in Cebu, Philippines by India and welcomed by all the Member States. What brought around this extraordinary consensus were the nature of old Nalanda and its avowed spirit of accommodation and inclusion.

New Nalanda was officially born by an Act of the Indian Parliament in November, 2010. It is, by charter, an international and secular institution of national importance and global significance. The unique character of Nalanda is that its revival was welcomed by not just Indians who had grown up on the memory of the old Nalanda (destroyed somewhere about 1193 CE), but by the aforementioned Members States of East Asia at the EAS Summit when the idea was first mooted in 2007. For Nalanda was truly a seat of learning that symbolized the idea of a University without borders, and drew scholars from diverse and far flung Asian and Central Asian countries. In fact, the Parliamentary Act, in its opening sentences, enshrines the foundational values of the revival plan: “to build a community of learning where students, scholars, researchers and academicians can work together symbolizing the spirituality that unites all mankind.”

Arriviste of New Era

The foundation of this pioneering spirit, one that drives the founding of the twenty first century Nalanda University, is best embellished in the words of the Chancellor of the university, Nobel Laureate and Harvard Professor, Amartya Sen: “*The modern world has much to offer from which people in the past would have been thrilled to learn. But the past too has some great examples of intellectual breakthrough that can both inspire and inform us today, and contribute to our academic and social regeneration.*” In a more recent public lecture organized by the university in October 2014, in New Delhi, chaired by India’s Vice President, M. Hamid Ansari, Chancellor Amartya Sen spoke about the relevance of Nalanda in the contemporary world. His distinguished lecture examined why there was the need to revive

Nalanda university, despite the world of higher learning having undergone a seismic shift, with a plethora of universities and institutions of global excellence. It is in this context that he makes a very moot point about the nature of Nalanda: “The tradition of Nalanda was not only that of quality education— itself a matter of great importance in India today— but also one of global cooperation and a systematic attempt to learn across the barriers of regions and countries. What the Singaporeans call ‘the Nalanda trail’ was a flow of ideas and contacts that brought people from different countries and different cultural backgrounds together. It was easy to see how profoundly that commitment was inspired by Gautam Buddha’s focused on enlightenment without borders.”

Description

Nalanda was one of the world’s first residential universities, i.e., it had dormitories for students. It is also one of the most famous universities. In its heyday it accommodated over 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers. The university was considered an architectural masterpiece, and was marked by a lofty wall and one gate. Nalanda had eight separate compounds and ten temples, along with many other meditation halls and classrooms. On the grounds were lakes and parks. The library was located in a nine storied building where meticulous copies of texts were produced. The subjects taught at Nalanda University covered every field of learning, and it attracted pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey. During the period of Harsha the monastery is reported to have owned 200 villages given as grants.

The Tang Dynasty Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang left detailed accounts of the university in the 7th century. Xuanzang described how the regularly laid-out towers, forest of pavilions, harmikas and temples seemed to “soar above the mists in the sky” so that from their cells the monks “might witness the birth of the winds and clouds. Xuanzang states: “An azure pool winds around the monasteries, adorned with the full-blown cups of the blue lotus; the dazzling red flowers of the lovely kanaka hang here and there, and outside groves of mango trees offer the inhabitants their dense and protective shade. The entrance of many of the viharas in Nalanda University ruins can be seen with a bow marked floor; bow was the royal sign of Guptas’.

Hence, Nalanda’s revival represents the revival not only of an institution named “Nalanda”, but of lost habits of the heart predicated on shared values and common vision of Asian countries. A vision that celebrates the ceaseless currents of ideas, cultural practices, socio-religious mores that inter linked the Asian continent. It is these forgotten connections, these lost archives, these interrupted conversations that Nalanda is seeking to revive. The endeavor is to create a contemporary University inspired by the academic excellence and global vision of the historic Nalanda, and build a Nalanda that both shapes and impacts upon the model of higher education worldwide.

Education System of Nalanda University – Curriculum and Pedagogy

Nalanda was a center of higher learning in various subjects. The education system of Nalanda University evolved over the period and focused on the holistic development of the individual by taking care of both the inner and the outer self. The system focused on the moral, physical, spiritual and intellectual aspects of life. It emphasized on values such as humility, truthfulness, discipline, self-reliance and respect for all creations. Teaching and learning followed the tenets of Vedas and Upanishads fulfilling duties towards self, family and society, thus encompassing all aspects of life.

Sources of Education

In Nalanda University the system of education was the education of the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads and Dharmasutras. The writings of Aryabhata, Panini, Katyayana and Patanjali and the medical treatises of Charaka and Sushruta were also some of the sources of learning. Sources of learning were drawn from various disciplines such as Itihas (history), Aanviksiki (logic), Mimamsa (interpretation) Shilpashastra (architecture), Arthashastra (polity), Varta (agriculture, trade, commerce, animal husbandry) and Dhanurvedya (archery). The literature and basic principles of Buddhism was also a part of curricula. Physical education too was an important curricular area and pupils participated in krida (games, recreational activities), vyayamaprakara (exercises), dhanurvedya (archery) for acquiring martial skills, and yogasadhana (training the mind and body) among others. The Gurus and their pupils worked conscientiously together to become proficient in all aspects of learning. In order to assess pupils' learning, shastrartha (learned debates) were organized. Pupils at an advanced stage of learning, guide younger pupils. There also existed the system of peer learning, like you have group/peerwork.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers had complete autonomy in all aspects from selection of students to designing their syllabi. When the teacher was satisfied with the performance of the students, the course concluded. He would admit as many students as he liked and taught what the students were keen to learn. Debate and discussions were the primary methods of teaching. Teachers were assisted by their advanced level students.

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