

The Cradle of Ancient Learning and Knowledge

Rachna Shivaram

ABSTRACT

The university of Nalanda was known to be one of the ancient abodes of research and learning in India. Currently located in the state of Bihar, Nalanda has made unique contributions to the evolution and enhancement of Indian culture. The university has first been acknowledged to be a Buddhist center of learning, which later imparted knowledge in various subjects. This learning center was also known for its architectural marvel which included the humongous library, lecture halls and residential halls it possessed. The system of admission to the prestigious university was unique in its own way.

This paper aims to analyze the objectives of the university and shed light on how it was something more than just a mere institute of learning with special reference being made in the field of education and the varied curriculum that existed in the ancient university of Nalanda.

Keywords: Nalanda University, Ancient learning, Education, Curriculum, Architecture.

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been rich and varied in India since primeval times. The system of education during the ancient period comprised of both formal and informal modes of learning. Formal mode meant imparting education in a systematic manner which involves fulfilling a particular aim and objective of the study which is undertaken; whereas informal mode involves learning that occurs outside a structured curriculum in which an individual gathers knowledge through several life experiences and explorations. ¹ Similar modes of learning were being followed in the viharas ² .

In the due course of time , one such vihara which is situated in Nalanda evolved by emerging as one of the greatest centers of ancient higher learning and was widely known as ‘The Great Nalanda University’. ‘University’ in general terms refers to a place that invites students for education and to carry out research from different parts of the globe. ³ The great Nalanda university was a result of a Mahavihara which was constructed in that region. Viharas were usually constructed for the Buddhist monks to retreat during monsoon season, the main aim of these monks was to renounce the world and propagate the religion of Buddhism. These monks usually moved from one place to another to carry out their objectives ⁴ . It was soon noticed that while commuting the monks unintentionally walked through tiny herbs and creatures which endangered them. Thus, in order to prevent this action from re-occurring the viharas were built; throughout their stay in the viharas the monks utilized their time by resting, studying religious discourse and meditation ⁵ .

¹ Gupt Bharat, ‘Reviving Indian Heritage in Education’. World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues, 18(4), 112–125. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505125>

² Vihara- A Buddhist Monastery.

³ Hasmukh D. Sankalia, ‘The University of Nalanda’, B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 5

⁴ Dipak Kumar Barua, ‘Viharas in Ancient India’ A Survey of Buddhist Monastery’, 1969, pp 5-8

⁵ Hasmukh D. Sankalia, ‘The University of Nalanda’, B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 24 - 25

HISTORICAL ASPECT - FOUNDATION OF THE UNIVERSITY

University in today's time are an apex institution of higher education and research which awards degrees in various academic disciplines. They have their own administrative structure and management. These institutions are not merely centers for academic pursuits but are dynamic hubs that nurture critical thinking, innovation, and the all-round development of individuals. One such University which gained immense recognition and was a popular hub of knowledge in ancient India was the great 'University of Nalanda'. Nalanda was a result of a vihara which was constructed. Emperor Sakraditya 6 is credited for laying the foundation of the Sangharama 7 . The historical story around the construction of Sangharama at Nalanda states that while the founding stone by being laid Naga (cobra- a species of snake) was wounded, the emperor was worried at this sight and consulted a sage, because according to old traditions, any harm to Naga would bear bad omen. The sage reflected on this and claimed that the site of Nalanda would prosper, attract flock of students but at the same time he also gave an intimation stating that the site will witness spilling of blood because of the wound inflicted towards the Naga. 8 Eventually work began and the first monastery was built around 427 A.D. The words of the sage did come true because the notable University witnessed attacks which eventually resulted in bloodshed 9 . In the due course, there were transitions in these viharas. Earlier they were considered to be a mere place for resting and meditation but it soon started to become an abode of learned men, who came to viharas for the purpose of their study. 10

PREREQUISITE OF KNOWLEDGE

Universities in the present context are centers of research and higher learning and in order to match the elevated level, entrance exams are usually prescribed by the Universities. A pupil who wishes to get themselves enrolled have to go through this entrance examination and only if they ace it ,they will be admitted to the institute. Apart from this a student is expected to behold analytical skills and possess an advanced level of understanding of varied concepts which will help them exhibit a distinctive character.

An interesting fact is that such a layout for admission was practiced centuries ago in the 'University of Nalanda' . Nalanda was always known as a center of advanced learning, therefore in order to get admission into the university, a student was expected to have knowledge in certain areas of learning. An essential factor was that they were anticipated to possess an understanding of Sanskrit. 11

In order to get admission into Nalanda a student was expected at the primary level, to learn the 'siddha composition'. This subject deals with Sanskrit grammar, it was considered to be essential because it was assumed that knowledge of this composition would serve as a motivating factor

6 It is to be noted that most of the information regarding Nalanda University has been obtained through the records of Chinese traveler Huien Tsang and while addressing the kings he refers to their title they bear than their names. Skraditya is none other than Kumara Gupta I of the Imperial Gupta Dynasty.

7 Sangharama – Refers to Monastery in Sanskrit.

8 Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 'The University of Nalanda', B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, Madras, 1934, pp 42

9 Ibid pp 45,

10 Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 'The University of Nalanda', B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 31

11 Chandra Shailesh, ' Ancient India upto 200 A.D', Alfa Publication, New Delhi, 2009, pp 252- 253

for the students to persuade further studies. ¹² In terms of secondary level, they were expected to learn the Vritta Sutra, and after its completion, the student began to study various compositions in form of verses and proses. ¹³ . Along with it the students also exhibited their knowledge about Vedas, Vedangas, Nyaya and works of Buddhism viz Mahayana and Hinayana ¹⁴ .

The University of Nalanda had gained recognition at a global level, thus intellectuals from different nations - Tibet, China, Korea, Mongolia wanted to visit Nalanda either for pursuing higher studies, to obtain manuscripts or get a stamp of approval for their doctrines from the scholars residing in the University. ¹⁵ Admission to the University of Nalanda for outsiders posed a challenge, which they had to overcome. The scholars who wished to enter the institute but belonged from other nations had to appear for an entrance examination. It comprised of having a deep conversation on varied subjects with the gate keepers of the institute who were distinguished scholars themselves. ¹⁶

Hiuen Tsang points out that only about 20 percent of the candidates were successful, others had to retreat back disappointed. ¹⁷ It is to be noted that such an entrance exam was applicable to only those who came from different nations, and that the internal students who were already a part of Nalanda's Secondary Department of Education need not face this particular examination. ¹⁸

In the current context , Universities at a global level offer a plethora of disciplines to the pupils, extending from humanities subjects like history and sociology up to medicines, rocket science and more.

In Nalanda, there were certain branches of learning which was made compulsory, since the institute was primarily established for religious resolution, 'Theology' as subject was made obligatory. 'Theology' refers to the study of religion. ¹⁹

The wide range of knowledge being imparted in the University were known to be drawn from both Brahmanical and Buddhist arena, it included sacred as well as secular ideology. ²⁰ Since Nalanda was primarily a Buddhist learning center, the Buddhist philosophy also gained prominent place in the academic pathway. ²¹ Hiuen Tsang himself have claimed that he has studied the works on Mahayana Buddhism from Nalanda. ²²

¹² Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 'The University of Nalanda', B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 142

¹³ Radha Kumud Mookerji, 'Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism', Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951, pp 564 – 565.

¹⁴ Mahayana refers to the followers who believe in the divinity of Buddha and encourage idol worship; Hinayana refers to the followers who seeks individual salvation through self-discipline, meditation and they condemn idol worship.

¹⁵ D.G Apte, 'Universities in Ancient India', Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, pp 27

¹⁶ Dr. B.R Mani, Dr. R. S Fonia, et al. 'Excavated remains of Nalanda Mahavihara' Archaeological Survey of India, pp 80

¹⁷ D.G Apte, 'Universities in Ancient India', Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, pp 27

¹⁸ Radha Kumud Mookerji, 'Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism', Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951, pp 565.

¹⁹ Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 'The University of Nalanda', B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 67

²⁰ Radha Kumud Mookerji, 'Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism', Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951, pp 566

²¹ D.G Apte, 'Universities in Ancient India', Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, pp 30

²² Radha Kumud Mookerji, 'Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism', Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951, pp 567

Subjects taught in Nalanda were also varied which included 'Logic' it was called as 'Hetuvidya' in Sanskrit and it prevailed even before the rise of Nalanda University. 23 'Tantrism' was another popular subject which made its way in the prospects of learning of Nalanda. The subject encompassed recital of mantras, practice of meditation, worship of Buddha in different mudras and it had also encouraged worship of a host of gods and goddess. 24

Tantrism as a subject also gained recognition as it allowed liberty of action which was earlier not permissible in Buddhism. However, it is necessary to state that the major objective behind the study of Tantrism was majorly to gain spiritual power by concentration and meditation, but there were instances in which practitioners carried out the practice of Tantrism to explore the context which was away from the academic setting.

From the records of I Tsing it was known that there was an astronomical observatory at Nalanda which reflects that astronomy as a subject was included. 25 I Tsing also revealed that he had studied medicine as a subject, in the University 26, as the study of Ayurveda and other healing tactics was common in ancient India which kept the monks healthy. One way in which Nalanda University conveys its teaching was the recovery of 'Tattvasangraha', it was an encyclopedia which had references about several author and their ideology. 27

Nalanda, therefore came to be known as a hub of intellectual and academic pursuits. The curriculum at Nalanda comprehended subjects which covered various disciplines of knowledge. Through the above discussion, it can be stated that almost all branches of knowledge which were known during that era were being taught at Nalanda and thus the modern Universities today are known to have adopted the similar patterns of academic setting that prevailed centuries ago.

EDUCATIONAL & RESIDENTIAL JOURNEY

Today, there are nearly thousands of universities across the globe and many of them provide accommodations for their students in which they can reside and accomplish their course work. As the saying goes, "Where there is a stepping stone, there is a milestone". It was the University of Nalanda in ancient India that served as an earliest known abode for many students.

The residential abode bear witness to the architectural marvel and the archaeological evidences reveal that they were at least two stores in height and consisted of both single and double rooms. The residential arena was well designed and constructed with a stone cot, niches for lamp, ample place for studying and resting. 28

It was projected that there were around ten thousand residential monks and about 1000 of them served as tutors. The student's had to attend nearly 100 lectures per day, to which they catered diligently 29. This gives us an insight into the scenario which reveals the commitment of the students. The monks who tutored the pupils adopted various methods of schooling; - the monk teacher helped the students to understand the challenging aspect of the course, another

23 D.G Apte, 'Universities in Ancient India', Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, pp 30

24 D.G Apte, 'Universities in Ancient India', Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, pp 31

25 Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 'The University of Nalanda', B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 85

26 Pintu Kumar, 'The Ancient Nalanda Mahavihara: The Beginning of Institutional Education', Journal of the World Universities Forum, Volume 4, Issue 1, New Delhi, pp 71

27 Hasmukh D. Sankalia, 'The University of Nalanda', B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 82

28 Dr. A.S Altekar, 'Education in Ancient India', Nand Kishore & Bros; Educational Publishers, Benares, Second Edition, 1944, pp 116

29 Radha Kumud Mookerji, 'Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism', Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951, pp 564 - 565

technique was the discussion method in which students acquired knowledge by listening to discussions made during lecture hours, this enabled them to widen their horizon and clarify doubts. 30

Just like our current universities possess enormous classrooms for lectures; archaeological explorations in Nalanda reveal that the University complex consisted of big halls and three hundred smaller rooms which were utilized for daily lectures. Records on Nalanda University reflect that discipline was always on the forefront and time was managed efficiently. For instance; bells were rung every morning which indicated the monks to proceed towards bath area. Sunrise and Sunsets were demonstrated through drum beats. 31

An interesting fact is that the students admitted to Nalanda University gained education free of cost, the reason underlying is that the institute received huge endowment from great patrons like Skanda Gupta, Emperor. Similar practices can be seen in our current education system where deserving students are granted scholarship which caters as a financial aid.

KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORY – THE LIBRARY

Universities and their libraries in general are integral component of educational field which enables the students to ace their academics. These libraries serve as a storehouse of knowledge which provides a vast array of information. Therefore ‘Books’ are one of the gateways for receiving knowledge.

The prominent library of Nalanda was given a poetical name of ‘Dharma ganja’ which means ‘Reservoir of Knowledge’. This library was known to be the biggest library of its time. It comprised of remarkable collections of study materials which was essential for the teachers, monks and students who were engaged in various area of studies. 32 The library comprised of three huge buildings called Ratnasagar (Sea of Jewels), Ratnadadhi (Ocean of Jewels), Ratnaranjaka (Adorned with Jewels), out of the three, Ratnasagar was a nine storied building which consisted of special collection of rare books. 33

The books were originally handwritten and it also housed numerous manuscripts. The palm leaf manuscripts were well preserved to save them from dust and fire. These manuscripts were arranged on stone shelves dug out on the walls and the shelf guides for the manuscripts were inscribed on stones. 34 . However the library witnessed its first attack by the Huns under the leadership of Mihirkula in 455 – 467AD but it was restored by the successors of Skandgupta, the second attack took place during the early 7 th century by the Goudas of Bengal, however it was again restored by king Harshavardhan, the next attack was the most brutal and it was carried by Turkish invader Bakhtiyar Khilji. He is known to have massacred many Buddhist monks alive and the library was set on fire. Reports predict that the fire lasted for three months which perished the library. 35

30 Hasmukh D. Sankalia, ‘The University of Nalanda’, B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, 1934, pp 146

31 Radha Kumud Mookerji, ‘Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism’, Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951, pp 569 – 570.

32 Dr. A.S Altekar, ‘Education in Ancient India’, Nand Kishore & Bros; Educational Publishers, Benares, Second Edition, 1944, pp 119

33 Dipak Kumar Barua, ‘Viharas in Ancient India’ A Survey of Buddhist Monastery’, 1969, pp 145

34 Ibid pp 146

HOW EXTENSIVELY IS NALANDA RECOGNIZED AMONG MASSES?

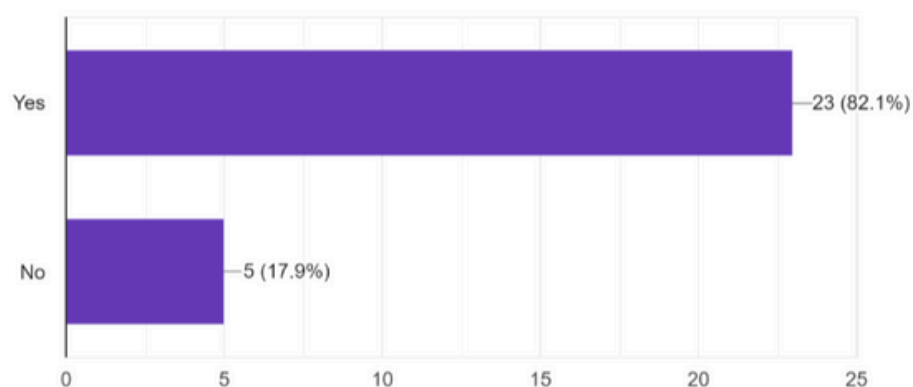
A questionnaire was handcrafted in order to find out how popular is the University of Nalanda among masses. The analysis reveal that many are aware about its existence, but very few are aware about its historical significance and the academic progression that prevailed in the University. From historical perspective it's disheartening to know that such a grandiose institute is hardly known to people.

However, it was observed that despite lack of widespread awareness about Nalanda University, there is a distinct eagerness among the participants to delve in to the history of the institute.

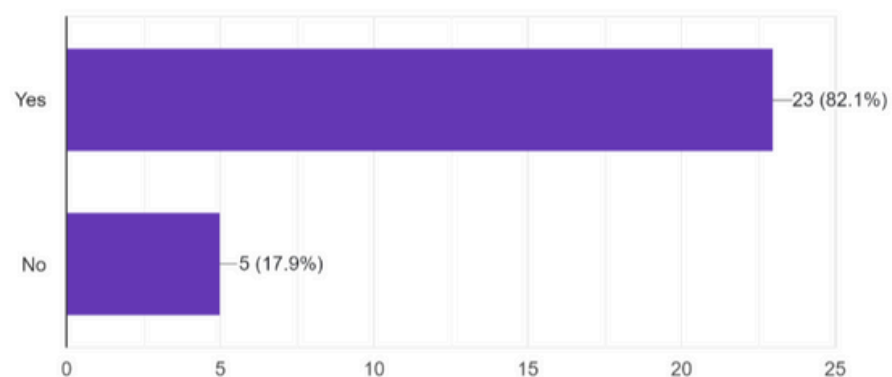
When asked which is the preferred platform through which they would like to learn about the university, many of them responded with 'Social Media'. This reflects how social media plays a prominent role in providing information to the masses quickly.

Thus, we can hope the ancient University of Nalanda is more widely known , so that people can embrace the cultural and historical significance it holds, as it was a repository of knowledge and a testament to the intellectual achievement of its time.

Have you heard of Nalanda University before taking this survey?
28 responses



Have you heard of Nalanda University before taking this survey?
28 responses



CONCLUSION

The University of Nalanda gained prominence at a global level as an ancient center of learning, it is also known to house varied subjects, which gave the students the liberty to choose as per their interest. The scholars who received their education from Nalanda gained huge respect in society. The unique system of admission proves that the pupil needed to be intellectually wise in order to enter Nalanda. The residential arena on being unearthed sheds light on the systematic planning which prevailed. The enormous library of Nalanda stood as a testimonial to the enduring power of learning which represented a rich tradition of intellectual quests.

REFERENCES

BOOKS:

Altekar A.S, "Education in Ancient India". Nand Kishore & Bros; Educational Publishers, Benares, Second Edition, 1944

Apte D.G, "Universities in Ancient India". Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda.
Barua Kumar Dipak, "Viharas in Ancient India: A Survey of Buddhist Monastery".
Calcutta Indian Publication, 1969.

Chandra Shailesh, "Ancient India (upto 1200 AD)", Alfa Publications, New Delhi 2009.
Mookerji Kumud Radha, "Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhism"
Second edition, Macmillan, London, 1951

Sankalia D. Hasmukh, "The University of Nalanda", B.G Paul & Co. Publishers, Madras, 1934.

ARTICLES:

GUPT, BHARAT. "Reviving Indian Heritage in Education." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2014, pp. 112–125. JSTOR

KEMPERS, A. J. BERNET. "THE BRONZES OF NĀLANDĀ AND HINDU-JAVANESE ART." *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, vol. 90, 1933, pp. 2 -4 JSTOR

Laha, Monalisa. "SOME SELECTED BUDDHIST MONASTRIES AS CENTRES OF LEARNING OF THE PALA PERIOD." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 76, 2015, pp. 145 JSTOR

Singh, Shyam Deo Prasad. "NALANDA PANDIT SANTARAKSHITA-HIS WRITINGS AND ENDEAVOUR TO PROPAGATE BUDDHISM IN TIBET AND NEPAL." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 42, 1981, pp. 110–111. JSTOR

REFERRED WEBSITES:

Dr. B.R Mani, Dr. R. S Fonia, et al. "EXCAVATED REMAINS OF NALANDA MAHAVIHARA" Archaeological Survey of India, Ministry of Culture, Government of India

Kumar Pintu, "THE ANCIENT NALANDA MAHAVIHARA: THE BEGINNING OF INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION". Journal of the World Universities Forum, Vol.4, Issue 1, New Delhi

About the Contributor:

Ms. Rachna Shivaraman is a member of the Department of History at ICLES Motilal Jhunjhunwala College of Arts, Commerce and Science, located at Vashi, Navi Mumbai .

