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Library and education system in ancient Nalanda University

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Abstract

Nalanda University is an ancient center of higher learning situated in Bihar from 427 A.D. to 1197 A.D. Nalanda survived until 1197. It was mainly devoted to the Buddhist studies. This article contains a brief account of the Nalanda the famous University of ancient India. There were numerals of important features in this University. The following brief account of these universities library will enable the reader to have some idea of education imparted in these Universities during the long period. An inspection of this article will enable readers to compare our current institutions with those of ancient India and realize that the centers of higher learning in ancient India were very unique in their organization and scholarship during those distant times when elsewhere in the world very few had thought of organized, world class education at the institute level. This article portray about the various courses of study in Nalanda, Administration and Management, Teaching Faculty and Students, Famous Teachers of Nalanda, fabulous Library of Nalanda, amazing Library Building etc.

Keywords: Nalanda University, Ancient Library, Education in Nalanda, Nalanda Library

Introductions

History of Ancient Indian Education stretches out north of a few centuries, and contains various kinds of instructive associations in various ages, Corporate instructive organizations were first developed in Quite a while, regarding the Buddhist Monasteries, which formed into large foundations from the period of Asoka onwards, steadily changed over into focuses of schooling. Hindu instructive association was a later turn of events. The center had eight separate compounds, 10 temples, meditation halls, classrooms, lakes and parks. It had a nine-story library where monks meticulously copied books and documents so that individual scholars could have their own collections. It had dormitories for students, perhaps a first for an educational institution, housing 10,000 students in the university's heyday and providing accommodations for 2,000 professors. Nalanda University attracted pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey. The Nalanda had 08 separate compounds, 10 temples, reflection lobbies, homerooms, lakes and parks. It had a nine-story library where priests fastidiously replicated books and records so individual researchers could have their own assortments. It had residences for understudies, maybe a first for an instructive establishment, lodging 10,000 students in the University prime and giving amenities to 2,000 teachers. Nalanda University pulled in students and researchers from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey ^[1]. This article discuss about the establishment, key features and activities of the ancient Nalanda University.

Admittance in Nalanda

Nalanda, like other universities of its type was an institution which imparted only higher education and accordingly admission was restricted to those who had the necessary background to follow post graduate studies. In particular the institution was known as a place where learned men from all parts of the country as well as from neighboring nations gathered for getting their doubts solved and for gaining mastery in the art of disputation. Such scholars came in large numbers from China, Mongolia, Korea, Tokhara and Tibet. Although some of the scholars came for securing manuscripts on Buddhism, there were many who came to get a stamp of approval for their doctrines from the authorities in the University. Hiuen-Tsang has pointed out that only twenty per cent of those who came seeking for admission came out successful at the examination and the remaining had to go back in disappointment.

Those who examined the candidate seeking admission were experts in religious controversies and were always ready with difficult problems to try the competence of aspirants for admission.

Courses of study

The curriculum of the university was very exhaustive and embraced all subjects, Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist, Mahayana as well as Hinayana. Only a few of these many subjects were treated as compulsory. Study of Mahayana and acquaintance with all the eighteen schools of Buddhism were prescribed as compulsory subjects. The Mahayanist propounded the doctrines of Sunyabada and Vijnanabada. Tantra was a very popular subject at this university subjects studied in this University were the Vedas and their six auxiliaries. Medicine, Grammar, Sankhya, Philology, Law, Philosophy and other miscellaneous subjects. The subjects were drawn from different fields of learning, Brahmanical and Buddhist, sacred and secular, philosophical and practical, sciences and arts [2].

Administration and Management

The head of the university was a Bhikkhu possessing character, scholarship and seniority, who was elected by the various Sanghas comprising the federation. This Bhikkhu controlled and directed the work of administering the affairs of the university, academic and otherwise through two councils appointed for the purpose. The former looked to affairs like admitting students to the university, regulating the courses in various subjects, distribution of work among teachers, holding of examinations at proper intervals, looking after the securing and maintenance of manuscripts and the arrangement for copying manuscripts which were greatly in demand in those days. The other council attended to the financial aspect, construction and repairs of buildings, securing and supply of food to the inmates, arrangements of clothes and medicines, allocation of rooms to students and teachers according to their standing and the distribution among the residents of the menial work connected with the working of the university. Leasing out the land to farmers, collecting and storing of corn received from tenants and the distribution among various messes was an important duty of the council. The independence and efficiency of each constituent school was maintained and relations between the constituent groups were adjusted by means of rules provided for the purpose. Rules for both the teachers and the taught were framed by the federation for maintaining harmony of relations, for preventing controversies among professors and for maintaining academic etiquette. Finance Buddhism was strictly speaking an order of ascetics and mendicants and no Bhikkhu was allowed to receive gold or silver or any gift in cash. The violation of this interdict was regarded as a serious offence. Things offered in kind could be accepted. This rule was observed very rigorously. But the Buddha, during his life-time allowed the Sanghas to grow rich by permitting them to receive benefactions from lay well-wishers which kept continuously flowing to the monasteries even under Buddha's direct encouragement. Among the gifts accepted for the Sangha were parks, pavilions, ponds, buildings and Viharas with all appurtenances for healthful life, materials for buildings and property by bequests for the dead. Right from 425 A.D. endowments for the university

were pouring in. The list of such donors contains the names of kings Kumaragupta I, Buddhagupta, Tathagatagupta, Baladitya, Vajra and Harsha Vardhana. Like the Guptas and Vardhanas, Varmans, also showed interest in the university. It is stated that Purnavarman and Yasovarmadeva donated money equal to the price of the whole Nalanda institution [2].

Teaching Faculty and Students

It is stated that at one time there were 10,000 monks staying at Nalanda. Of these, 1,510 were teachers and the remaining 8,500 were students belonging to various levels of attainments and studying various subjects. It has been pointed out that there were on an average a hundred lecturer discussions every day. On an average the number of students per teacher was seven or eight and it must have been very convenient to give individual attention to students.

Famous Teachers of Nalanda

The names of Famous teachers who lived at or were associated with Nalanda University are Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Dinnaga, Padmasaibhava, Shantarakshita, Aryadeva, Rahulabhadra, Asanga, Jayadeva, Chandrakirti, Dharmapala, Gunamati, Sthiramati, Prabhramitra and Jinamitra are traditionally associated with this famous university [2].

Library of Nalanda

The most fully developed, well organized, and most widely used was the library of the Nalanda Monastery [3] which was regarded as an ancient seat and academy of higher learning, or to put in modern terms as an institution of university grade [4] About 50 miles south-east of Patna, Nalanda arose steadily as a famous Buddhist centre of learning which was the place of birth and death of Shariputta, one of the dearest disciples of the lord Buddha. There was also a rush of scholars from abroad, e.g. Fa-Hien, Yuan-Chwanga, I-ting and other Chinese scholars to make use of this library. They came mostly to get true copies of the sacred texts, and other Works on Buddhism.

Establishment of Library

Glorious library of this monastic University probably flourished during about 400 A.D. [5] Ashoka, the greatest Mouryan emperor had erected a temple there in the third century B.C. As Fa-Hien did not record its educational eminence in his travelogue in circa 410 A.D. its rise as a centre of learning has to be placed at about 450 A.D. [6]. It was under the lively hold up of liberal support and patronage of the Gupta emperors who were little traditional that Nalanda gradually rose into prominence. Sakraditya of 414- 455 A.D. laid the foundation of the magnitude of Nalanda by establishing and endowing a monastery there. Although the "Nalanda authorities could feel that a monastery without a - library was like a castle without an armory" [7]. Consequently a complicated scheme was adopted for a well planned and fabulous library of extensive importance within the university area to meet the varied demands of numerous teachers, scholars and thousands of pupils, who had devoted themselves to the study of different branches of knowledge.

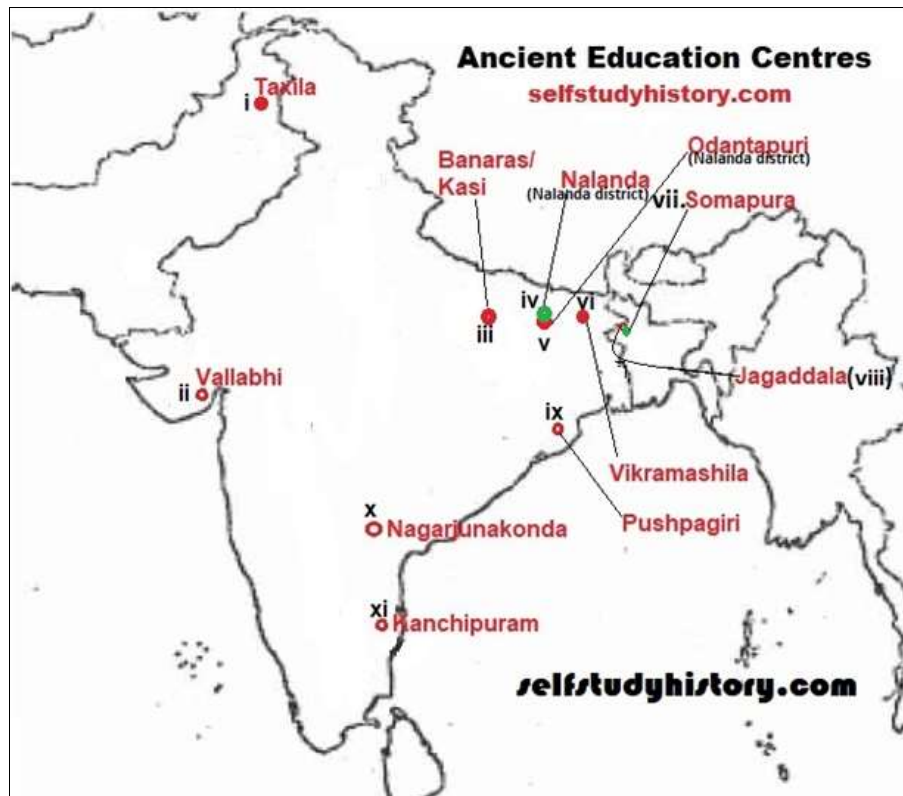


Fig 1: Source: <https://selfstudyhistory.com/wp-content/>

Library Collections

Hiuen-Tsang noticed that the works belonging to the eighteen sects and other books, viz. the Vedas, the Hetuvidya, Sabdavidya, the Chikitsavidya, the works on Atharvavidhya, the Sankhya and miscellaneous works were studied there. He further recorded that there were one thousand men at this monastery who could explain twenty collections of shstras and shastras; five hundred who could explain-thirty collections, and perhaps ten men, including the Master of the Law, who could explain fifty collections [8]. Silabhadra, the famous scholar alone had studied and understood the whole number, and who regarded as the chief-member of the community for his eminent virtue and old age. I-tsing, the Chinese scholar stayed for his studies at Nalanda for the long period of ten years got copied and collected there 400 Sanskrit texts amounting to 500000 of verses (shlokas). It is evident from this record that the Nalanda Monastery was well-equipped with a library of immense collection, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist works which were either distributed or sold away. No reliable data as to the strength of the collection is available, but it can be presumed without much polemic or controversy, that the library stocked every written material on Buddhist scriptures, and their commentaries, and they might be in hundreds of thousands, including copies [9]. According to his observation when a Buddhist monk expired at Nalanda, his collection comprising books and manuscripts was added to the Library and other properties including non-Buddhist works were disposed off. This information showed how gradually through peaceful acquisition of dead one's precious and careful collections, the Nalanda Monastic Library ultimately became a grand storehouse of invaluable manuscripts.

I-tsing mentioned in his narrative that he saw eight big reading halls at the Nalanda Monastery. After him two monks named Tche-hong and Hoi-e-ye from Korea, and

another Chinese monk named Ke-ye came to Nalanda Monastery to study by exploring and utilizing the superb collections of the Monastic library which was enriched with the Buddhist and non-Buddhist works. In the sixth year of Mahipala I, the Astasahasrika - Prajnaparamita was copied at Nalanda by one Kalyanamitra [10]. The same was again copied there in the fourth year of Ramapala's reign and in the fourth year of Govindapala. All these facts, clearly point out that the Pala, rulers also exercised control over the University of Nalanda, the more glorious than present Oxford, up to their last days and contributed much to the growth and development of the Nalanda Monastic Library.

Collection Development

A copper-plate discovered during the excavation of the ruins of this Monastery recorded the grant in the time of Devapala, the Pala ruler of Bengal, of some villages for the writing of the Dharmaratna or religious books besides other texts. It is curious to note that regular practice of copying the manuscripts was made by the copyists, who were employed in the Monastery for this purpose. The expenses were borne out by those who required the copies. Besides these professional copyists, there were other devout souls who engaged themselves in the work of copying of the sacred texts as a part of their duty. The students also must have made their own copies. The magnitude of the Nalanda Monastic library implies that there were many well-versed teachers in-charge of this library and their office must have involved considerable responsibility and tact. It is said that several thousands of monks lived in this Monastery, and they devoted themselves in the task of copying the religious texts which must have made numerous and frequent additions to the library. As the curriculum of the university was very comprehensive and catholic, Hindu subjects were also not neglected. The study of Medicine or "Chikitsasashtra" was also prosecuted at this place naturally,

texts. Relating to Grammar, Logic, Literature, Vedas Vedanta and Samkhya Philosophy, Dharmasastra, Puranas, Astronomy and Astrology were also available ^[11]. It is found that in several monks' cell, more spacious and better arranged at Nalanda than is usual in the monastic ruins, an adjacent cell too small to live in is occasionally provided. Perhaps it was intended for the safe keeping of manuscripts borrowed for private study ^[12] By a careful study of the clay sealings found during excavations at Nalanda, it was revealed that many of the secular sealings fixed to palm-leaf documents were tied together with strings or palm-leaf stripe used like tapes, of which impressions were left on their back. It is clear that the documents were impressed with seals on clay, which were sometimes partially exposed to fire, besides many of the monastic cells met their destruction by fire ^[13]. This explains why the collection at Nalanda included sealings well-burnt, over-burnt in many cases, half-burnt or un-burnt.

Library Building

It is curious to mention that the Chinese records did not mention the library buildings. Tibetan legends supplemented the Chinese accounts to some extent, and in which was found the mention of Nalanda's great library buildings. Detailed particulars relating to the magnificent library of the Monastery of Nalanda can be gleaned from the Tibetan sources. All these buildings " were majestic in their size and height with richly adorned towers, fairy-like turrets appearing like pointed hill-tops, and observatories lost in the mist of morning. The upper rooms towered above the clouds and from their windows one could see the winds and clouds producing ever new forms and from the soaring eaves the sunset splendors and the moonlit glories.

According to these accounts, the Nalanda Monastery was endowed with a well-maintained and grand library, which was situated in a special area known as the Dharmagahja (Mart of Religion or Piety Mart). It consisted of three monumental edifices ^[14] called Ratnasagara (ocean of Jewels), Ratanadadhi (Sea of Jewels) and Ratanaranjaka (Jewel-adorned) ^[15] Among them Ratanasagara was a nine-storied building, which was specialized for the collection of rare and sacred works like Prajhaparamitasutra and Tantrika books, such, as Samajaguhya and others.



Fig 2: Source: <https://www.bbc.com/>

Monetary Provision

There are epigraphically evidences which clearly show that adequate financial aid was provided for the preservation and maintenance of the magnificent collections of this Monastic library. The Nalanda copper-plate grant of Devapala recorded that the celebrated king of Suvarnavipa (Java and

Sumatra) named Balaputradeva had a monastery erected at Nalanda requested Devapala, a contemporary king of Bengal, to make a grant of five villages (four of which lay in the Rajagrha (Rajgir) and one in the Gaya District of Sri Hagar Bhukti (Patna Division) for the maintenance of this newly built monastery at Nalanda. Devapala, the illustrious Pala monarch accorded with the request of the ruler of Java and Sumatra, and granted five villages for the upkeep and maintenance of the monastery, and a portion of this endowment was made reserved for the purpose of copying of manuscripts for the Nalanda Library as is evident from the expression "Dharmaratnasya Lekhanartham" in the epigraph.

Arrangement of Collection

The Hiuen-Tsang described more elaborately the nature of the contents of the Nalanda monastic library which was mainly confined to philosophical and religious writings. This Chinese account further mentioned that the manuscripts were arranged on the shelves dug out on the stone walls and the shelf-guides were inscribed on stones for the manuscripts.

Preservation and Conservation of Resources

The palm-leaf manuscripts were generally wrapped with cotton materials and preserved in between two light-weighted marble slabs of the uniform size of the manuscripts. Thus the manuscripts as contained in the stock of the library were preserved for a long time and protected from dust and fire. The teachers were chiefs of the different sections of this renowned library of Nalanda. Usually, the teacher who used to teach a particular subject was the head of that particular subject collection of the library and guided his students conveniently ^[16].

Ruin and Maintenance of the Library

It is sad to note that this magnificent Library which developed gradually but steadily through the ages could not survive long. According to the sources these libraries perished in flames kindled by an incendiary. But the date when the event occurred was unknown. The Tibetan text presented a vibrant account of the destruction of the library thus "After the Turaska raiders had made incursions in Nalanda, the temples and chaityas there were repaired by a sage named Muditabhadra. Soon after this, 'Kukutasiddha, Minister to the reigning king of Magadha, erected a temple at Nalanda, and while a religious sermon was being delivered there, two very indigent Tirthika mendicants appeared. Some naughty young novice-monks in disdain washing-water on them. This made them very angry. After propitiating the sun for twelve years, they performed a Yajna, fire-sacrifice, and threw living embers and ashes from the sacrificial pit into the Buddhist temples ^[17]. This produced a great conflagration which consumed Ratnadadhi. Thus ended "most insignificantly the most magnificent temple of learning in Jambudvipa" or the premier and pioneer National University of India. The evidence of the destruction of the buildings was also corroborated by Baladitya's inscription. Pandit Hirananda Sastri, who was in-charge of the Nalanda excavations for some time discovered a record inscribed on sides of a large copper-plate surmounted by a seal soldered to its top, bearing an emblem, the Dharmachakra, flanked by two gazelles which was the insignia of Nalanda. It had suffered in the fire which

destroyed the building. The seal bore the legend Sri-Devapaladevasya, i.e. of Devapaladeva who, as already noted, was the third sovereign of the Pala dynasty. This record informs us of a grant of a few villages in the Rajagrha and Gaya districts of the Srinagara, identified with Pataliputra division, for the proper maintenance of the Nalanda Monastery and the comfort of bhikkhus coming there from the four quarters, for medical aid and for copying the Dharmaratnas or religious scripts. It should be mentioned that the task of writing or copying the manuscripts was considered a part of the scholar's duty at Nalanda. Nalanda possessed in the course of its centuries old history, an enormous collection of manuscript literature - both original works and copies of Sutras and Shastras. Numerous manuscripts were written and copies of old manuscripts were made in the monasteries of Nalanda, during the sovereignty of Pala king. But only few have survived. Three copies made in the Pala period at Nalanda of the voluminous texts of the Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita are known. Other copies of the works, viz., Artaviniscaya Sutra and its commentary in the colophon of which Nalanda Mahavihara^[18] was mentioned as the place where the author, was living, had been discovered outside Indian borders.

The university and its library flourished down to the twelfth century A.D. Its destruction was brought about by the Muslim invaders under Mohammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, towards the end of the twelfth century. The university worked with great vigor upto 1100 A.D. when its greatness began to be eclipsed by Vikramashila which began to receive a greater share of royal patronage. The university received the final tragic blow at the hands of the Muslim invaders under Mohammad Bakhtiyar Khilji at the end of the 12th century and not one of the monks remained to narrate the sad tale of its destruction. The priceless library of the university was also wantonly set on fire and destroyed.

Conclusion

University of Nalanda which offered to us the first well-organised Library consisting of manuscripts of different curricula that were followed there. It not only helped the scholars, but also aided the ordinary people by answering simple reference questions. The visitors were struck dumb by its magnificent buildings and grand libraries of encyclopedic knowledge. It may be that in the subsequent periods numerous academic and institutional libraries grew up, but none could excel the Nalanda monastic library which being pre-eminent scattered its rays to all directions and made the cultural conquest of India easy and convenient.

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