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## "NALANDA MAHAVIHARAYA ARYA BHIKSHUSYA"

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many educational institutions were established in ancient times by adopting the ancient vedic process such as Taxila, Nalanda and Vikranshila which are counted among the oldest universities of India. Nalanda was the most important and famous center of education of Mahayana Buddhism, students of Hinayana Buddhism as well as other religious and from many countries studied. The paramount aim of this paper is to analyse the Nalanda Mahavihara of Nalanda as an institution of learning.

**Key words : Nalanda Education System, Mahavihara, Buddhist Pedagogy, Mahayana Buddhism, Hinayana Buddhism.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the later part of the ancient times, Nalanda University had attained unprecedented fame, where apart from the education of Buddhism and Philosophy, other subjects were also taught.<sup>1</sup> The Buddhist higher Study Center has acquired an international prestige with attracting students from Asia and Europe by successfully achieving its objectives specially educated graduates of Nalanda used to go out and preach Buddhism. This university enjoyed international fame from the ninth century to the twelfth century.

## Meaning of Nalanda

According to Sanskrit,

"Nalam Dadati iti Nalanda. Nalanda is derived from the Sanskrit word Nalam + da.<sup>2</sup> Nalam means "Lotus" in Sanskrit, here Lotus means light or knowledge or symbol of wisdom. 'Da' means to give. Therefore, where there is no end of giving knowledge, it is called Nalanda.

## Location

Nalanda as a small town of ancient Magadha<sup>3</sup> and Nalanda was situated between the two capitals of the Magadhan Empire- Rajgriha and Patliputra and was famous as "Bauriya". The Brahmajala Sut (Digha Nikaya) describes the Buddha's stay at Nalanda. It is mentioned in the Bhagwati Sutra that Mahavir Swami met Gosak at Nalanda and lived for 14 years.<sup>4</sup>

## Origin, Development and Decline of Nalanda University

The establishment, growth and decline of Nalanda were deeply rooted in the Buddhist religion and philosophy and were stimulated by the contemporary social, political and religious conditions.

In Sanskrit, a monastery is called a sangharama and sometimes vihara. Literary it meant, 'the resting place' where the samgha stayed. In the sixth century BC, there were many wandering religious saints or Parivrajakas, who were called samghas.<sup>5</sup> Even before the monastic establishment came into existence, the samghas functioned like a roaming educational institution. In such a system some had to specialize, by designation given to certain monks as specialist of the discipline viz. Dhammadhara and Vinayadhara.<sup>6</sup> Among them Buddhist bhikkhus were known as Sakyaputtiya Samanas. Generally these Buddhist monks had renounced the world; they were nomadic mendicants; their sole purpose in life was to practice and to propagate the religion of Buddha.

The residences or monasteries for Buddhist monks were called viharas.<sup>7</sup> These viharas were the different types from the homestays. Viharas had small chambers devoid of the means of luxury. In ancient times, viharas were built in the form of small cells around the Chaitagrihas. But in the course of time, vihar of huge size, in which thousands of monks to live together, were built.<sup>8</sup>

According to Tibet traveller Taranath, Maurya Ashok laid the founder of Nalanda Vihar for the first time.<sup>9</sup> As the center of education, the first Buddhist Vihara was established here in 450 AD by Kumargupta I,<sup>10</sup> which Hiuen Tsang calls 'Shakraditya',<sup>11</sup> thus it is considered to be the founder of the Nalanda University. After this Budhgupta, Tadhagupta, Narsimhagupta, Baladitya and Vajra got the viharas built here.<sup>12</sup>

Harshvardhan had helped Nalanda University a lot with his generous donation. According to Hiuen Tsang 'Shiladitya' (Harsha)<sup>13</sup> used to give a permanent donation of the income of 100 villages<sup>14</sup> to Nalanda Vihara. Two hundred householders of these villages daily provided several hundred pickles of rice, several hundred Katti of ghee and butter to the monk of Nalanda. Harsha had great respect for the monks of Nalandas<sup>15</sup> and called himself their slave.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the student here did not have to beg for daily living.

It is known from the Munger Copper inscription of the Pal dynasty Devpal that he donated five grams<sup>17</sup> to Nalanda on the request of Balagupta Dev the ruler of Suvarndweep. He appointed a monk named 'Viradeva'<sup>18</sup> to look after the Nalanda University. During the time of Mahipa-I, a copy of 'Ashtasahasrika-Prajnaparamita'<sup>19</sup> was prepared in Nalanda. In the Pal inscriptions, it has been called 'Mahavihara' i.e. Nalanda Mahaviharaya Arya Bhikshusya<sup>20</sup>. According to an article, some of the vihara of Nalanda were destroyed in a fire<sup>21</sup>, Mahipala I got them rebuilt. In 1203 AD, Bakhtiyar Khilji<sup>22</sup> attacked this university and completely destroyed it.

## Premises

Nalanda University built in a very well planned manner and in a wide area, was a wonderful specimen of architecture from North to South, there was a row of monasteries. Some of Vihara were very large and grand whose skyscraper peaks were very attractive. <sup>23</sup>

यग्यापध्धगयत्नेहि शिखरश्रेणी विहारावली ।  
मालयोर्ध्वयिगजिनी विगचिता धात्रा मनोज्ञाभुवः ।  
नालन्दा हसतीय सर्वनगरीः शुभाभगौरस्पृष्ट  
र्च्यत्यांशु प्रकरोम्यदागपकला विख्यात विद्वज्जना ॥

The largest vihara was 203 feet long and 164 feet wide. The university building had seven large lecture halls and 300 small and large halls. Students lived in hostels and Kripas were built on each corner. <sup>24</sup>

## Admission

There were strict rules for the students seeking admission in this educational institution. The entrance examination was extremely difficult and only meritorious students could get admission because of it. They had to pass three difficult exam levels. Student first had to argue with the Dwarapundits<sup>25</sup> or gatekeepers, who were specialists in discussion and expert at religious controversialists, admitted the students at Nalanda University through an interview "of those aspirants who wished to enter the school of discussion, the majority beaten by the difficulties of problems, withdraw and those who were deeply versed in old and modern learning were admitted, only two or three out of ten succeeding. <sup>26</sup> This is the first such instance in the world. <sup>27</sup>

## Study-Teaching

The detailed history of Nalanda is actually the history of Mahayana Buddhism. Yuwanchwang (Hiuen Tsang) calls it the 'center of Buddhists'. In addition to the Buddhist scriptures (Hinayana and Mahayana), Education was also taught in the Vedas, love vocabulary, yoga, medicine, tantricism sankhya philosophy etc.<sup>28</sup> The study of medical science was essential.

## Teachers

There were three classes of the teachers in the university, who according to their qualifications come in the first, second and third class.<sup>29</sup> There were 1000 such Arharyas who could explain 20 sutra texts, 500 were such who could explain 30 collections, while there were 10 scholars who could explain 50 collections.<sup>30</sup> Shilbhadra<sup>31</sup> was the only Acharya who was the knower of all the collections. Hiuen Tsang called Shilbhadra the 'The Treasury of Truth and religion'.<sup>32</sup>

## Library

Nalanda had a huge nine-floor library named Dharmaganj (Dharma Youjna) **(Mart of Religion)**<sup>33</sup> with a unique collection especially handwritten manuscripts of more than three lakh books, for the study of thousands of students and masters. This library was operated in three grand buildings named Ratnasagar(ocean of jewels), Ratnodadhi(sea of jewels) and Ratnaranjak(jewels adorned)<sup>34</sup>. Hiuen Tsang took copies of 24 Mahayani texts and 5200 texts from here and took them with him to China.

## Students

In the time of Hiuen Tsang, the number of students where were 3000 but at the time of Hiuen Tsang, it increased to 10000.<sup>35</sup> There wee two types of students at Nalanda Mahavihara; antevasikas and Saddhivi harikes. The Ante vasikas were in training to be a monk under the Arharyas. The Saddhivi harikas were the full monks

involved to achieve salvation under the guidance of Upajjhaya. Initially the teacher-student ratio here was 1:10, which became 1:6 by the time of Hiuen Tsang.<sup>36</sup>

### **Relationship between Teachers and Students**

Guru is essential for attaining knowledge.<sup>37</sup> The disciple should be present in the service of the Acharya by being sympathetic.<sup>38</sup> The relation of Guru and disciple is considered very sacred. The relationship between antevasiakas and Acharyas could also be described as close knit as in the Brahmanic gurukula system; in fact, "the teacher ought to consider the pupil as a son; the student ought to consider the teacher as a father."<sup>39</sup>

### **Administration and Management**

The entire university was managed by the Vice Chancellor or the Chief Acharya who was elected by the monks. The Vice Chancellor made all the arrangements in consultation with two advisory committees.<sup>40</sup>

The first committee looked after the education and curricular works and the second committee looked after the financial system and administration of the whole university.

### **Conclusion**

Thus Nalanda was a very important center of ancient education, whose fame spread not only in India but also abroad. In fact, it was a Visva Bharti from where the culture spread throughout the country. As a result of the greatness, generosity and erudition of the scholars here, the name of Nalanda itself became synonymous with the highest and best qualities of learning in the then world.

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