Nalanda: The Glorious Centre of Higher Learning

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Abstract

Our nation is prominently acknowledged and regarded for its civilizational values, cultural heritage, linguistic wealth and the way of imparting quality higher education since time immemorial. Our world renowned scholars such as Āryabhatta, Charaka, Vishnu Sharma, Kautilya, Bānbhatta, Jeewak and others have contributed a lot to the universe in various disciplines like Economics, Science, Mathematics, Administration, Medicine and other disciplines. India is also known for establishing world class higher education institutions at an early age. One of such universities is Nalanda, the ancient seat of higher education.

Keywords:- *Civilizational Values, Cultural Heritage, Nalanda University.*

Introduction :-

Nālandā always remained the head institution for higher studies and research for a period of nearly one thousand years in different branches of knowledge but it emphasised mainly on Buddhist philosophy and religion especially Mahāyāna. Different beliefs, traditions and dogmas of Jain, Buddhist and Brāhmanic religions met withe one another in a common stream at Nālandā and took new shapes and dimensions. Here, in this paper we shall specifically discuss a monastic establishment that developed and evolved into an unmatchable institution of learning, earning the reputation of being ‘university of universities'.

Education in ancient India reflected an age of creativity and intellect. The curiosity to comprehend the natural and worldly things made the learning system to reach its zenith, which reflects in its organized centres. There were two stages in the development of the early Indian education system viz. the gurukulas or the Vedic schools and the mahāvihāras or the monasteries. The emergence and development of these systems were deeply associated with the changes in the contemporary culture and society. The gurukula was mainly an unorganized centre for primary education that later evolved into a college such as Taxila. The guru-śiṣya paramparā was the base of early education system. But the mahāvihāras were centres for institutionalized education, which mainly focused on the higher education. The main mahāvihāras of ancient India were Nālandā, Vikramashilā, Odantapurī and Vallabhī etc. Amongst these mahāvihāras, Nālandā was the centre of coordination for all mahāvihāras education. Nālandā always remained the head institution for higher studies and research for a period of nearly one thousand years in different branches of knowledge but it emphasised mainly on Buddhist philosophy and religion especially Mahāyāna. Different beliefs, traditions and dogmas of Jain, Buddhist and Brāhmanic religions met withe one another in a common stream at Nālandā and took new shapes and dimensions. Here, in this paper we shall specifically discuss a monastic establishment that developed and evolved into an unmatchable institution of learning, earning the reputation of being ‘university of universities'.

Nālandā: One of the First Centres of Higher Learning in the World

Nālandā University is one of the universities of India, knowing the history of which we will be proud to be an Indian. In the ancient times, many educational institutions were established by adopting the Vedic process, three of them were such which were counted among the oldest universities of India as well as of the world; Taxila, Nālandā, and Vikramashilā. Nālandā University of these three higher education centres in ancient India, is the most important and well-known centre ; the largest university of the time in Asia.

According to historical evidence, the Nālandā University was founded by the mighty Emperor Kumāragupta of the Gupta dynasty in about 450 AD at Nālandā about 40 miles south of Patna, was a famous Buddhist place since early times, as it was the place of the birth and death of Sāriputta, the right hand discipline of the Buddha. Many travellers, including the Chinese traveller Hiuen-tsang, have called the emperor Kumāragupta the founder of this university. Hiuen-tsang, the famous pilgrim from China came here and studied and taught for five years in the 7th century AD. Nālandā University at that time had over 10,000 students and 3000 teachers. At this time, the chancellor of the University was Shīlabhadra who was a learned scholar of various disciplines.

Nālandā: The Treasure Within

The University had received 200 rich villages as endowment and so could offer free boarding and clothing to its students. The curriculum at Nālandā was very comprehensive and catholic. The establishment belonged to the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism, but the works of the rival school, the Hīnayāna, were also taught. Works of a famous Mahāyāna scholars like Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Asanga and Dharmakīrti must have been specially studied. It was devoted to Buddhist studies but it also trained students in fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics and the art of war.

There was a great rush for admission to the Nālandā University. The students from across the world, seeking admission into the prestigious centre of learning have to indulge into the questionnaire sessions with the guard (Dwārapāla) at the entrance itself and it was only after they could satisfy him, were supposed to proceed further. It reveals how learned the guards of the university were. In the process of questioning and answering, hardly one or two out of ten students could be successful and rest were sent back home.

Students from all parts of India and also from distant foreign countries were anxious to get admitted for education. Fa-Hsien, Hiuen-tsang and I-tsing were not the only Chinese scholars that were attracted to Nālandā by its fame as a centre of learning. During this short interval of thirty years between the visits of Hiuen tsang and I-tsing, Thon-mi, Hiurn Chiu, Taou-hi, Hwui-nieh, Āryavarmana, Buddhadharma, Taou-sing, Tang and Hwui Li, hailing from distant countries like China, Korea, Tibet and Tokhara had visited Nālandā and spent considerable time there in studying the manuscripts.

The Nālandā authorities had realised that a monastery without a library was like a castle without an armoury. The University maintained a splendid library to meet the needs of the hundreds of teachers and thousands of learners that were engaged in the study of various disciplines. One of the reasons why Chinese scholars used to spend years together at Nālandā

was to get the genuine and authentic manuscripts of the sacred texts and other works of Buddhism. I-tsing got copied at Nālandā 400 Sanskrit works amounting to 5,00,000 verses. Significantly, the library quarter was known as Dharma-gañja 'Mart of Religion'. It was located in three splendid buildings appropriately called Ratna-sāgara, Ratnodadhi and Ratnarañjaka. A great fire wiped out the library of over 9 million manuscripts and at the beginning of the 12th century, the Muslim invader Bakhtiyāra Khilji burnt the University down. The priceless library of the University was also set to flames. Thus, this famous University was perished at the hands of fanatic invader who did not know its value. After Independence, in 1951, The first President Dr. Rajendra Prasad suggested to establish Nava Nālandā Mahāvihāra. In 2006, it became a 'deemed university' and on November 25, 2010 it was conferred by the government of India as "The Institution of National Importance" through an act of parliament.

Nālandā : The Role Model for Other Renowned Centres of Higher Learning

The four Vihāras namely that emerged into the centres of higher education and learning were modelled upon Nālandā.

Jagadalla Mahāvihāra was a Buddhist monastery and a centre of learning, founded by the later kings of the Pāla dynasty, probably Rāmapāla (c. 1077-1120), most likely at a site near the present village of Jagdalla in Dhamoirhat Upazila in the north-west Bangladesh on the border with India, near Pahārapura. Jagaddala specialized in Vajrayāna Buddhism. A large number of texts that would later appear in the *Kangyura* and *Tengyura* were known to have been composed here.

Odantapurī (also called **Odantapura** or **Uddandapura**) a prominent Buddhist Mahāvihārais believed to have been established by the Pāla ruler Gopāla I in the 8th century. It is considered the second oldest of India's Mahāvihāras after Nālandā and was situated in Magadha. Odantapurī served as a model and inspiration for Tibetan Buddhists. Tibetan sources indicate that in 749 the Sam-Ye (Bsam-Yas) monastery was modelled upon it and that several distinguished Tibetan scholars studied there.

Somapura established by Dharmapāla of Pāla dynasty during the late 8th century in Bengal and flourished for 400 years till the 12th century. The University spread over 27 acres of land of which the main complex was 21 acres was one of the largest of its kind. It was a major centre of learning for Bauddha Dharma (Buddhism), Jaina Dharma (Jainism) and Sanātana Dharma (Hinduism). Even today one can find ornamental terracotta on its outer walls depicted the influence of these three traditions. It is one of the largest and best known Buddhist monasteries in the Indian subcontinent.

Vikramashila, the major centre of Tāntrika Buddhism was one of the largest Buddhist monasteries founded by Pāla king Dharamapāla with more than one hundred teachers and about one thousand students. It produced eminent scholars who were often invited by foreign countries to spread Buddhist learning, culture and religion. The most distinguished and eminent among all was Atisha, Dīpankara, a founder of the Sarma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Subjects like philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, Indian logic etc. were taught here, but the most important branch of learning was Buddhist tantra.

Nālandā was not only a centre of excellence in terms of imparting education and cultivation of values but also a seat of culture and civilisation. The extreme popularity of the institution attracted students from several Asian countries and beyond such as China, Tibet, Korea, Mangolia, Bhutan, Indonesia, Central Asia. The fame of the university also proves that how developed and advanced our ancient system of imparting education was. It was highly institionalized and enriched. For centuries, the university developed skills and cultivated values in the learners until a fanatic Turk destroyed it completely.

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