

Nalanda Buddhism: From Nalanda to Himalayas and Beyond, Tracing the Roots of Indian Buddhist Civilisations

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Abstract: *Today, Nalanda is honoured as the cultural inheritance that belongs to all of Asia and is regarded as one of the priceless treasures of Indian civilisations. Nalanda Buddhist University continued to produce major Acharyas like Shantarakshita and Nagarjuna, who were essential contributors to Buddhist philosophy and theology throughout the 5th and 6th centuries CE. These academics were among the most renowned of their time and served as the university's faculty over those centuries. They were also essential in propagating the teachings of Buddha and the numerous schools that developed from his teachings from Nalanda to areas across the Himalayan path and even further to the east, to the nations that make up modern-day Southeast Asia. A number of the world's largest empires during the height of their times, such as the Indian Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE) and the Pala Empire (750–1174 CE), as well as China's Sui Empire (589–618 CE), Tang Empire (618–907 CE), and Yuan Empire (1271–1368 CE), adopted Buddhism as their official state religion. Throughout the course of history, Buddhism came to be the state religion of many different countries. Buddhism has always been propagated peacefully throughout its long and glorious history. In a very peaceful way, it has expanded its influence to every corner of the world. Peace, tolerance, nonviolence, and loving-kindness are eternal principles in Buddhism that continue to have relevance in contemporary society and appeal to people worldwide. The present study attempts to review how Acharyas from Nalanda propagated what has been rightly recognised as 'Nalanda Buddhism' to Tibet and other parts of the world.*

Keywords: Buddhism, Nalanda, Himalaya, India

1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the first residential university in the world was Nalanda, and the most prestigious educational institution in the ancient world. It is also known as Nalanda Mahavihara and was an essential contributor to the development of Buddhist philosophy. However, its most significant contribution was to Buddhist philosophy also other sciences, including grammar, medicine, logic, and mathematics, were also taught then. Nalanda University was founded during the time of the Gupta Empire and had the support of both Buddhists and non-Buddhists throughout its time of operation. "The original Nalanda Mahavihara, or 'Great Nalanda Monastery,' was an extensive monastic-cum-educational complex that flourished from the fifth to the twelfth century before it was destroyed at the end of the twelfth century" (Gohain, 2023, p. 67). During the fifth and sixth centuries, Nalanda was at the height of its glory and influence. During that historical period, the country's most distinguished intellectuals promoted various patronage arts and academics. "It was an honour to study with the 2,000 faculty at Nalanda, and students came from across the east-China, Malaysia, India and beyond" (Chambers & Greenville, 2017, p. 201), and travelled to Nalanda University to learn from its remarkable contributions. Nalanda University was situated near Rajgir and about 90 kilometres southeast of Patna, presently connected via NH 31, 20 and 120 to India's Highway Network¹. Another important pilgrim place related to Buddhism was Bodhgaya, which is 80 kilometres away from Nalanda.

An early Buddhist source claims that when the Buddha travelled to Nalanda, he stopped at a place not far from Rajagriha. He also taught near a mango grove known as Pavarika, and one of his two most important pupils, Shariputra, was born in the region and eventually gained nirvana there (Scharfe, 2002). Nalanda is important in history because it was a significant part of Buddha and Mahavira's lives. Stupas, viharas, shrines, and beautiful artworks made of stucco, stone, and metal can be found at this site, which dates back to somewhere about the 3rd century BCE to the 13th century BCE². In addition to this, it is claimed that the Jain Thirthankara Mahavira resided in Nalanda for a total of 14 rainy seasons. The Buddha visited the town of Nalanda, known for its essential role in developing Jainism and early Buddhism. At the beginning of the fifth century, a Chinese Buddhist monk named Fa-Hien travelled to Nalanda. At that time, he founded a historic stupa but did not mention educational institutions (Giles, 1923).

Regarding intellectual, cultural, and social development, Nalanda Mahavihara and Buddhism had a significant influence not only on Indian society but also on Asian society. "Asoka's patronage of the Buddha dharma and his far-flung ambassadors of peace and culture had spread the teachings beyond the subcontinent; associating the modern state with the Mauryan era helped create a pan-Indo-Asian image of the nation as a centre of cultural power and influence" (Geary & Mukherjee, 2016, p. 14). There are several ways Nalanda has contributed to the enrichment of Asian society, like, Spread of Buddhism, as Nalanda and other Buddhist institutions propagated. Nalanda Mahavihara was a significant centre for transmitting knowledge and ideas. Therefore, the government

¹ History | District Nalanda, Government of Bihar | India

² Ancient Ariyakara Viharaya in the Rajagala Archaeological Reserve - UNESCO World Heritage Centre

of India, where the importance of old Indian traditions, customs, knowledge, and learning is not simply idealised but actively promoted through the objectives of various institutional organisations. For example, the National Education Policy (NEP) approved by the Indian parliament on 29 July 2020 acknowledges the “rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought” as the ‘guiding light for the policy’, and states that ‘the ancient Indian universities Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi, and Vikramshila, which had thousands of students from India and the world studying in vibrant multidisciplinary teaching and research and hosted scholars and students from across backgrounds and countries” (National Education Policy, 2020, p. 4). The propagation of Buddhist scriptures, philosophical treatises, and other subjects from Nalanda and other ancient Indian universities contributed to the intellectual development of Asian societies.

The method of teaching and learning that was developed at Nalanda had an impact on the formation of educational systems in several Asian nations. The emphasis that Nalanda placed on hard study, discussion, and critical thinking—all which were essential components of the school’s curriculum served as the cornerstone for educational institutions across Asia. The development of logical and analytical methodologies at Nalanda had a long-lasting influence on the intellectual discourse of Asia. Nalanda was a cultural merging ground, attracting students and scholars from various regions. “The university had around 10,000 resident students and teachers on its roll at one time, including Chinese, Korean, Sri Lankan and other international scholars” (Amareswaran, 2010, p. 107). This facilitated the exchange of ideas, languages, arts, and customs, leading to a rich cultural synthesis. Nalanda Mahavihara’s library, with its vast collection of scriptures and manuscripts, played a crucial role in preserving and safeguarding knowledge. The meticulous preservation of Buddhist texts helped transmit ancient wisdom and learning to future generations, ensuring the continuity of intellectual heritage.

Buddhism and Indian dynasties with specific reference to Nalanda Mahavihara

Nalanda Mahavihara, sometimes referred to as Nalanda University, was a historic educational institution. It was widely considered among ancient India’s most prestigious Buddhist educational establishments. Therefore, one must study the history of the Nalanda Mahavihara institution to fully understand the connection between Buddhism and the kingdoms that ruled India at the time. In the fifth century CE, during the Gupta dynasty, which was a crucial time in Indian history notable for its accomplishments in art, science, and culture, the Nalanda Mahavihara monastic complex was established. “While the Gupta period can be counted as the golden age of Buddhism in India, Buddhism flourished during this period at its highest peak. Mahayana Buddhism flourished during the Gupta dynasty. Important Buddhist learning centres like Nalanda and others at Kushinagar were the important contributions of the Gupta dynastic towards Buddhism after the end of the Gupta Empire” (Sharma & Shashikant, 2021, p. 11). The principal founder of the Nalanda Mahavihara, “the Gupta kings, were known by variant names, and following this, Sakraditya has been identified as Kumara Gupta I, who reigned in C. 415-55”

(Dutt, 1962, p. 329), and his successors, were known to be patrons of Buddhism and supported the growth of Nalanda.

However, under the following Pala dynasty, Nalanda Mahavihara attained its most incredible heights. R.C Majumdar, a renowned historian, in his book *The History of Bengal*, mentions the Pala dynasty, he wrote, “According to Tibetan tradition, Gopala founded a Vihara or Monastery at Nalanda and established many religious schools. Further, he states, “whether Gopala himself first adopted Buddhism, or whether he was born in a Buddhist family, it is not possible to determine. But certain it is that the successors of Gopala were all ardent followers of Buddhism” (Majumdar, 1943, p. 101). The Pala dynasty, which ruled over large parts of eastern and northern India from the 8th to the 12th century CE, actively supported Buddhism and the Nalanda institution. “The Palas, as the inscription on their coins show, were Buddhists, but the Buddhism professed by them was not what had prevailed in the Gupta age. The religion had entered on a phase in which the Mahayana philosophy, of which Nalanda had hitherto been the intellectual stronghold, had slanted off to an esoteric cult known as Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism)” (Dutt, 1962, p. 349). Kings who were devoted to Buddhism, such as Dharmapala and his successors, made substantial contributions to the institution’s expansion throughout its formative years. Under Pala’s support, Nalanda Mahavihara grew and became a centre for Buddhist learning.

Propagation of Buddhism under the various Nalanda’s Acharya

A significant number of Acharyas were essential in the spread of Buddha’s teaching across India and the rest of the world. There have been many influential Acharya, and their work has had a profound impact on the Asian continent. One of them was Nagarjuna, a Buddhist who was devoted to the Mahayana school. Joseph Walser, in his book *Nagarjuna in Context: Mahayana Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, wrote, “In Mahayana hagiographies, Nagarjuna is among the earliest of the great saints. Nagarjuna is prominently represented in the transmission lineages for both the Zen and the various Tantric traditions” (Walser, 2005, p. 1). Apart from that, “Nagarjuna, the founder of Madhyamaka” (ibid, p.60), also known as the Middle Way, is a philosophical school of thought within Mahayana Buddhism. The concept of avoiding extreme viewpoints in favour of adopting a more balanced perspective is referred to as the ‘Middle Way’, the literal translation of the word ‘Madhyamaka’. Nihilism, the view that there is no existence at all, and eternalism, the belief that there is an inherent existence, are the two extremes on each side of the road known as the Middle Way. The goal of Madhyamaka is to argue against extreme viewpoints and find a happy medium between them.

“It is in this context that the Madhyamaka is said to represent the essence of the Buddha’s teaching because it represents the fruition of the critical attitude which constitutes the real heart of Buddhism” (Santina, 1987, p. 173). The fundamental concept of Madhyamaka is ‘emptiness’ (shunyata). “This is a significant admission that the real heart of Buddha’s teaching is the doctrine of Shunyata, as the Madhyamikas claim... The Madhyamika standpoint is clearly stated in some celebrated passages. Buddha tells us that there are two main viewpoints, the existence and the non-existence views (bhavaditthi and

vibhavadiitthi)” (Murti, 2008, p. 51). Madhyamaka philosophy has significantly impacted numerous Buddhist traditions, notably Mahayana Buddhism. It is essential to note that Buddhist traditions and scholars may interpret and comprehend Madhyamaka philosophy differently. Various commentaries and performances have been created throughout the centuries, contributing more depth and nuance to the Madhyamaka teachings.

Another great Buddhist scholar among the Nalanda Acharya was Santarakshita, “the high priest of Nalanda Monastery in the first half of the eighth century A.D. Santarakshita was one of those prominent scholars of the Nalanda University who belonged to the svatantra Madhyamika school” (Singh, 1981, p. 110). Due to his high reputation, he was invited by Tibetan King Khri-Sron-Lde-bstan in the year 743 A.D. to establish Buddhism. “Immediately after coming to Tibet, he introduced the observance of the ‘ten-virtues’ and Dharma which teaches the real state of eighteen physical and corporal regions with the eight prohibitions such as killing, the taking of what is not given, the commission of foul actions, lying, drinking, dancing and singing, and sitting on lofty seats” (ibid, p.111). However, due to local gods and demigods’ active presence in Tibet, Santarakshita returned to India. Local deities once again express hostility towards Buddhist philosophy on his second visit. This time, Padmasambhava, who had exceptional spiritual abilities and mystical resources, was invited by Santarakshita. Padmasambhava journeyed to Tibet, using his mystical abilities to subjugate indigenous demons and gods. Following that, Buddhism became more widespread, and Santarakshita established the Sam-ye Monastery. He was this monastery’s first abbot and held the position for thirteen years.

Rejuvenation of the Nalanda Mahavihara

In light of recent developments, a growing number of people in different parts of the globe are becoming interested in Buddhism. As is common knowledge, the holiest site in Buddhism can be found in India; now is the time for India’s efforts to strengthen this essential religion. Vajrayana version of Buddhism spread from India to Tibet and its Himalayan belt, and “It was the result of the hard work and influence of Indian monks, philosophers and travellers in the past, such as Nagarjuna, Santarakshita, Padmasambhava, Kamalsila, Atisha Dipankara, Tilopa, Naropa and others” (Gautam, 2008, p. 63). Followers of the Mahayana school of Buddhism believe that the ancient Nalanda University was a hub for the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism and that their lineage derives from the Nalanda legacy (Perspective on Pan-Asianism One Asia, Peaceful, Prosperous and Happy Asia, 2011). As a direct result of this, the Indian government established the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) in the year 2010, and it was officially launched the following year in December 2012³. Its principal objectives were to ensure India’s leadership in the Buddhist heritage of Indo-Asia and to counter China’s influence in selecting a Buddhist leader to succeed the Dalai Lama. The IBC participated in a global discussion on social issues and politics while promoting and preserving its inherited Buddhist history.

Since 2006, a pan-Asian project to rebuild old Nalanda as ‘Nalanda University’ in Bihar, India, has been supported at the highest possible levels of government and charity donations by an association of South, Southeast, and East Asian countries. “Nalanda, described as an ‘icon of Asian renaissance’, and the issues surrounding its revival raise important questions about how a new interest in ‘pan-Indo-Asianism’ and a newly imagined vision of ‘Asian’ education is seen as converging to promote Asian interests” (Pinkney, 2015, p. 111).

At the recent inaugural summit of IBC, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi stated, ‘From armed conflicts to the ecological crisis, there is no challenge faced by the modern world that cannot be solved if one draws from the centuries-old teachings of the Lord Buddha’ (Barman, 2023). The government of India’s primary objective of this plan is to restore India’s status as the spiritual epicentre of the Buddhist religion. Restoring Nalanda to its former glory as a seat of Buddhist scholarship and a hub of intellectual excellence is the primary objective of this project. The efforts contribute to the maintenance and presentation of the extensive history of Nalanda but also to the expansion of education, research, and cultural interaction in the surrounding area. Today, Nalanda Mahavihara stands as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and symbolises ancient India’s rich intellectual and cultural history. Nalanda’s legacy is protected by UNESCO World legacy status. It promotes awareness, tourism, and site preservation. The inscription also supports international cooperation to preserve Nalanda’s unique cultural and historical heritage.

2. Conclusion

The Nalanda Mahavihara remains an iconic emblem of ancient India’s intellectual capability and Buddhism’s effect on the region. The creation of this institution as the first residential university in the world and the subsequent cultivation of academics and intellectuals played an essential part in forming India’s and Asia’s respective cultural and intellectual landscapes. Moreover, the teachings and legacy of Nalanda continue to inspire and encourage the promotion of understanding and peace across various civilisations, highlighting the lasting power of education and knowledge. Therefore, we must consolidate the heritage site to serve as the hub of interfaith understanding and civilisational discussion once again, as it once did. It should once again make information already present in the entire world accessible for the benefit of everyone.

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