



## ARTICLE

## WHERE KNOWLEDGE MEETS THE SEEKER: Nalanda University

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Abstract:

Nalanda University has been established with a vision of being a foremost international institution in India. It begun its academic activities from 2014. The University is posed to be a unique meeting ground for various branches of knowledge from across the globe. The article is an attempt at highlighting some of the primary ideas keeping which in mind the University was conceived, and which the academic community in Nalanda University is committed to pursuing as part of its teaching-learning programme.

Keywords: Nalanda, Xuanzang, University, Historical Studies, Bihar

“The priests to the number of several thousands are men of the highest ability of talent. Their distinction is very great...whose fame has rapidly spread through distant regions. Their conduct is pure and unblamable. They follow in sincerity the precepts of moral law.”

Xuanzang, Si-Yu-Ki<sup>1</sup>

The prologue above by the famous Chinese traveler Xuanzang could fit, without raising any doubts, as a reference to an Indian religious establishment or royal court. When Xuanzang passed through north India in the early decades of the seventh century, sometime between 629 and 645, Harshavardhana ruled from Kanauj his celebrated capital city, in modern-day Uttar Pradesh. His empire stretched from northwestern Bengal in the east to the banks of the river Beas in the Punjab, the western limits of the Indian subcontinent. During Xuanzang’s visit King Harsha was

at the height of his power, and the resultant peace and prosperity led to the flourish of Hinduism and Buddhism in his domain. Set in the above context, therefore, the words of appreciation from the Chinese traveler would not read out of place, as referring to a religious establishment or the royal court of the ruler.

However the element of surprise strikes when it is revealed to the reader that Xuanzang was actually referring to Nalanda Sangharama (council of monks) – a reputed centre for higher learning, and not to any temple or court. Nalanda, when



Xuanzang visited it, had gained great fame as a seat of learning. Also known as Nalanda Mahavihara (great monastic centre of learning), the institution attracted scholars from various corners of the globe including, but not limited to, China, Sri Lanka, Tibet and South East Asia. It is located twelve kilometers north to the town of Rajagriha, also called Rajgir, in the current Indian state of Bihar. Translated as the 'royal city', Rajagriha was the capital of Ajatshatru the ruler of Magadha Empire, before it was abandoned in favour of Pataliputra closer to the current capital city of Patna.

As a centre for learning, Nalanda had an astonishing life-span of close to eight hundred years, from the fifth to the close of the twelfth century, with its apogee coinciding with the period Xuanzang passed through this region. Such was the quality of learning imparted at this institution that it seldom ran out of a continuous flow of scholars, which, at times of flourish, is believed to have over 2000 teachers and 10,000 students, figures capable of causing envy to some best-known modern day universities. Its appeal was international.

I became aware of the new Nalanda University project at a time when the Government of India decided to revive the glorious heritage of old Nalanda in the form

of a twenty-first century institution of global learning and research intended to attract the brightest minds, both teachers and students, from around the world to engage in pursuit of knowledge. This, since then, has remained the principle on which the new university has functioned. When the university came into existence through the Nalanda Act, passed by the Indian Parliament in 2010, I was yet to complete my Ph.D. programme in History.

The acceptance of Nalanda University by the international community is evident from the support it has received since its inception from various nations and international bodies. The support from the East Asia Summit member states has been significant in building up a partnership through collaborative efforts, successfully linking regions having historical connections. Drawing on traditions of Asian interconnections, which had been an important pull-factor for old Nalanda, has in a significant way, magnified the visibility of Nalanda University across Asia and beyond. This focus of new Nalanda was primarily responsible for drawing my interest towards this university when I placed my application for a faculty position.



Few years had passed by since the time Nalanda University came to existence on paper. This was precisely the period I had used to secure my Ph.D. degree and move towards postdoctoral research. The latter gave me opportunity to expand the horizon of my research, till then focused on South Asia and beyond stretching from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, beginning shortly after old Nalanda ceased to exist. My postdoctoral research helped me look deeper into different trends of trans-regional connections that existed within Asia, by taking up investigation along lines of travel and pilgrimage within the Muslim civilization. Such an exercise involved studying geopolitical concerns mapped through cultural, social and political interactions.

I consider myself fortunate for the opportunity to pursue my intellectual concerns within the academic community of the new Nalanda University, as one of its founding faculties in the School of Historical Studies. It has been an engagement which brings with it a sense of deep comfort and satisfaction, and the promise of being able to work within the environs of an extremely active centre of knowledge and learning. At the same time it is also rewarding to be part of a rich intellectual environment created with scholarship gathered from farthest corners of the

globe. In many senses it showcases the idea of gathering knowledge beyond barriers, which had been inextricably linked with the existence of old Nalanda.

Right at its inception, Nalanda University, as many would agree with me, has successfully lived up to the spirit of its glorious predecessor. Particularly in bringing together, not only from Asia, but also beyond its borders, an exciting and engaging group of scholars, young and old, to think, debate and deliberate on various branches of knowledge. The physical proximity of the two institutions, set apart by thirty minutes of driving distance, is reason enough to inspire.

On the footsteps of the intellectual traditions of old Nalanda, the new Nalanda University is committed to excellence in research and teaching, with students and faculty from all over the world. In the very first year of its existence the University has been able to live up to its above commitment. This has in turn created a suitable environment where I believe we can build on towards a model for intellectual excellence by allowing ourselves to work on new areas of critical enquiry and research. But where I think Nalanda University will remain special is in the constant effort to take these enquiries right into the classrooms, where students are



given an opportunity to read and learn on various aspects of their discipline, but through a critical eye. Here students also come to learn that new outcomes of critical enquiry are as much exciting and instructive as are the very means and methods by which such investigations are carried out. The journey is as rewarding as the findings!

Engaging with the idea of inter-Asian interactions, as a legacy of old Nalanda, occurs at multiple levels. One of them being the teaching-learning process, which in the Nalanda University does not limit itself only to the classroom. Rather it becomes an exercise where the idea of learning moves beyond the pages of the book, into the surroundings where the new university situates itself. It is visualized as an institution of academic excellence where the modes of acquiring knowledge will also take into consideration untrodden avenues. Students therefore are provided with opportunities to access knowledge systems that spill beyond classroom lectures. This could have been possible only by framing an academic curriculum that would not be subject to a set syllabus. Rather it would allow for broad thematic structures within which the teaching-learning exercise would take place.

In the School of Historical Studies, one of the two Schools with which Nalan-

da University began its journey in 2014, the other one being the School of Ecology and Environment Studies, this is pursued through five broad focus areas – global history, economic history, Asian connections, art history and archaeology. As a faculty focusing on any, or many, of these themes I get to offer courses on, but not limited to, Asian modernisms, maritime networks, histories of circulation, religions of Asia, material culture and politics of heritage. This also provides students with the precious opportunity to engage with multiple disciplinary approaches in course of their study. Such an approach brings in a rich variety of methodological interventions stretching across multiple disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, Archaeology, Religious Studies, Philosophy, Political Science, Philology and Art History.

This multidisciplinary approach towards the understanding of historical studies directly aids my content and method of teaching. Some of the primary issues that concern my research include multiple ideas of the past, how historical understanding of the past can help read the present, and the various ways in which the present is constituted or constructed by the past. These questions while leading to the formation of new knowledge, also help in interiorizing valuable insights on



our past – those which have remained untapped, yet carry much potential for creating and recreating new understandings of the past.

It needs to be remembered that ancient Nalanda as an institution, contrary to popular perception, did not limit itself only to the study of religion and philosophy. Rather it was a centre of higher learning where knowledge on arts, medicine and sciences were also imparted. This eclectic approach towards knowledge was chiefly responsible for making this institution one of the most sought after in its age. It is this inclusive vision which remains central to the new Nalanda University, as it begins its career and positions itself as a meeting ground for both Asian and the world scholarship. Like all new paths and uncharted terrains, this journey will not be easy. But the challenge is less to make it easy, but more to make it conducive to explore fresh and stimulating resources of knowledge.

It is this international appeal within a non-metropolitan location, in the pilgrimage town of Rajgir close to the old Nalanda ruins in the interior of Bihar, which makes it a unique experience. Going by the tradition of old Nalanda it is a place where the local, the national and the transnational converge. It was evident in the eclectic

scholarship the old institution had drawn from far and wide. Nalanda University too has already started attracting the global community in terms of its teachers and students – its two most important pillars. For new Nalanda University this has not only been a pan-Asian convergence but even beyond that. At one level it is a deep commitment to the idea of an international centre of knowledge. The aspiration to be associated with which has drawn many out of their seemingly comfort zones. Speaking for myself I take it as a priceless opportunity to engage with my discipline through the exercise of teaching and research. Nalanda University visualizes a sustained dialogue between erudite scholarship and lived experience, whereby I stand to gain by exploring new ways of approaching, reading and researching history within the ambits of this truly global inter-Asian university.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, translation of Hiuen Tsiang's *Si Yu Ki*, Volume II, Kegan Paul, London, 1906, pp. 170-71.

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