

Archaeology and History of Nalanda Mahavihara

Nalanda, located in present-day Bihar near Rajgir, was one of the greatest centers of learning in the ancient world. Flourishing from the 5th century CE to the 12th century CE, Nalanda Mahavihara was not only a Buddhist monastic university but also an international hub of intellectual exchange. Its archaeological remains and historical records together provide a vivid picture of its rise, glory, and eventual decline.

Historical Background

Although the formal establishment of Nalanda as a great university took place during the Gupta period, the site itself had earlier associations with Buddhism. According to Buddhist tradition, Gautama Buddha frequently visited this region and delivered sermons here.

It is also believed that Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, spent time in Nalanda. Nalanda rose to prominence under the patronage of the Gupta emperor Kumaragupta I (c. 415–455 CE), who is generally credited with founding the great monastic institution.

The Guptas were known for their support of art, culture, and religion, and Nalanda became a symbol of this cultural renaissance. Later rulers such as Harshavardhana (7th century CE) and the Pala kings of Bengal and Bihar further expanded and supported the university. Under the Pala dynasty (8th–12th centuries), Nalanda reached the height of its fame and influence.

Nalanda as a Centre of Learning

Nalanda was the world's first fully residential university, with accommodation for thousands of monks and students. Historical accounts, especially those of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan Tsang), provide detailed information about the institution. Xuanzang studied at Nalanda for several years in the 7th century CE under the famous scholar Shilabhadra. In his writings, Xuanzang described Nalanda as having more than 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers.

The curriculum at Nalanda was vast and diverse. While Buddhist philosophy—particularly Mahayana Buddhism—was the core subject, students also studied grammar, logic, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, metaphysics, and Vedic literature. The university had strict admission procedures; students had to pass rigorous oral examinations conducted by learned scholars at the gates.

Nalanda attracted students from across Asia, including China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. It thus became a major center for the spread of Buddhism beyond India. The translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese and Tibetan was greatly influenced by scholars trained at Nalanda.

Architectural and Archaeological Remains

The archaeological remains of Nalanda cover a vast area. Systematic excavations began in the 19th century under the Archaeological Survey of India, particularly led by Sir Alexander Cunningham and later archaeologists.

The excavated site reveals a well-planned complex consisting of monasteries (viharas), temples (chaityas), stupas, lecture halls, and libraries. The structures are mainly built of red bricks, characteristic of Gupta and Pala architecture.

The layout of Nalanda shows a row of monasteries on the east and temples on the west, separated by a central pathway. Each monastery was built around a central courtyard, with small cells for monks, a well, and a shrine room. The temples and stupas were often decorated with beautiful carvings and sculptures of the Buddha in various postures.

One of the most remarkable structures was the great library known as “Dharmaganja,” which is said to have had three main buildings: Ratnasagara, Ratnadadhi, and Ratnaranjaka. Though the actual library buildings have not survived intact, archaeological evidence suggests the presence of multi-storied structures.

Numerous sculptures made of stone and bronze have been discovered at the site. These include images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas like Avalokiteshvara, and various deities of the Buddhist and Hindu pantheons. Terracotta seals and inscriptions bearing the name “Nalanda Mahavihara” have also been found, confirming the identity of the site.

Accounts of Foreign Travelers

The accounts of Chinese pilgrims are invaluable sources for the history of Nalanda. Xuanzang’s detailed descriptions provide insight into the daily life, curriculum, and administration of the university. Another Chinese pilgrim, Yijing (I-Tsing), visited Nalanda in the late 7th century CE. He recorded the strict monastic discipline, the high standard of education, and the international character of the institution.

Yijing mentioned that students were required to master Sanskrit and follow rigorous study schedules. His writings confirm that Nalanda was not merely a religious center but a comprehensive institution of higher learning.

Decline and Destruction

The decline of Nalanda began after the 12th century. Political instability and the weakening of royal patronage under the later Pala rulers contributed to its gradual deterioration. The final blow came around 1193 CE when the Turkish general Bakhtiyar Khalji invaded Bihar.

According to historical accounts, Bakhtiyar Khalji’s forces attacked and destroyed Nalanda, burning its vast library and killing many monks. It is said that the library burned for several months due to the enormous collection of manuscripts. This tragic event marked the end of

Nalanda as a major center of learning and symbolized the decline of Buddhism in northern India.

Rediscovery and Modern Significance

For centuries, Nalanda lay buried under mounds of earth and ruins. In the 19th century, British archaeologists identified the site based on the accounts of Xuanzang and Yijing. Excavations revealed the magnificent remains of the ancient university.

In recognition of its outstanding universal value, the ruins of Nalanda Mahavihara were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016. Today, the site attracts scholars, tourists, and pilgrims from around the world.

In recent years, efforts have been made to revive the spirit of Nalanda through the establishment of Nalanda University near the ancient site. This modern institution aims to promote international cooperation and academic excellence, inspired by the legacy of the ancient university.

Conclusion

The history and archaeology of Nalanda present a remarkable chapter in India's intellectual and cultural heritage. Founded during the Gupta period and flourishing under the patronage of Harsha and the Pala kings, Nalanda became a beacon of knowledge for centuries. Its well-planned architecture, vast curriculum, and international character made it unique in the ancient world.

The archaeological excavations have confirmed the grandeur described by Chinese travelers, while inscriptions and sculptures testify to its religious and artistic achievements. Although destroyed in the 12th century, Nalanda's legacy continues to inspire scholars and institutions across the globe. It stands as a symbol of India's ancient tradition of learning, tolerance, and cultural exchange.