



CHETANA

International Journal of Education

Impact Factor
SJIF 2021 - 6.169

Peer Reviewed/
Refereed Journal

ISSN-Print-2231-3613
Online-2455-8729



Prof. A.P. Sharma
Founder Editor, CIJE
(25.12.1932 - 09.01.2019)

Received on 18th July 2021, Revised on 25th July 2021, Accepted 21st August 2021

Article

Nalanda University:- India's ancient university returns to life

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Key Words: *Nalanda University, International Institution, world-class etc.*

Abstract

It was an eminent centre of learning long before Oxford, Cambridge and Europe's oldest university Bologna were founded.

Introduction

Nalanda University (also known as Nalanda International University) is an international and research-intensive university located in the historical city of Rajgir in Bihar, India. It was established by an Act of Parliament to emulate the famous ancient university of Nalanda, which functioned between the 5th and 13th centuries. The idea to resurrect Nalanda University was endorsed in 2007 at the East Asia Summit, represented mostly by Asian countries including China, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam, apart from Australia and New Zealand, and as such, the university is seen as one of the flagship projects of the Government of India. It has been designated as an "International Institution of National Importance" by the Parliament, and began its first academic session on 1 September 2014. Initially set up with temporary facilities in Rajgir, a modern campus spanning over 160

hectares (400 acres) is expected to be finished by the end of 2021. This campus, upon completion, will be the largest of its kind in India, and one of the largest in Asia.

The first chancellor of the university was Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, followed by former Singapore Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo. Nalanda is exclusively a graduate school, currently offering master's courses, and doctor of philosophy programmes.

Nalanda University in northern India attracted scholars from all over Asia, who lived for hundreds of years before being destroyed by invaders in 1193.

The idea of Nalanda as an international learning center has been revived by a group of politicians and scholars led by Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen.

The group wants to establish a new world-class residential university with top students and researchers from around the world, on a site close to ruins of the ancient Buddhist institution in the Indian state of Bihar.

The new Nalanda International University will focus on the humanities, economics and management, Asian integration, sustainable development and oriental languages.

Old premises

But building a top university from scratch, let alone one in a poor under-developed part of India, is a tall order. Some doubted that an international university could flourish in such a less developed area. "Are top students and faculty going to be attracted to rural Bihar?" Philip Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College in the United States, said that The university's chancellor Amartya Sen is fearless.

"Our job is to get to know the new Nalanda University and establish teaching. This is just the beginning - it took 200 years for the old Nalanda to come into a prosperous state. We may not take 200 years but it will take a few decades."

"This continued for some time after the destruction of Nalanda in the 1190s - from time to time some people noticed that there was some teaching going on for the next few hundred years, but there was nothing like a university. Now absolutely nothing No. We have to start from the beginning."

In 2006, India, China, Singapore, Japan and Thailand announced plans to revive the university based on the old Nalanda's vision of splendor. And it was supported by the East

Asia Summit which also includes Southeast Asian countries, Australia, New Zealand, Russia and the US.

International staff

The new university has been established at Rajgir, 10 km from the ancient site, with buildings being built based on old Buddhist principles. And the university has already published invitations to research scholars and scholars from around the world. The first two faculties were History and Ecology and Environment from which the first semester of the students began. According to Prof. Sen, with Yale's School of Forestry Studies, the History Department of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Seoul University in South Korea and Peking University in China, we have been able to move forward.

This international approach is fueling India's higher education sector, which is seen as inward and less internationalized than other countries in Asia, including China.

New Nalanda "Asian in inspiration, but it is not Asian in terms of its knowledge or extent or expertise or individual involvement. If knowledge works in Asia, it must also work in Africa or Latin America," said Prof. Sen. Said. If all goes well, it will glorify the ancient reputation of Nalanda even after 800 years.

Flying in the clouds

Founded around the 5th century, Nalanda once had over 10,000 students, mostly Buddhist monks, many from China, Japan, Korea, and countries in Southeast,

Central and Western Asia. The Chinese monk Xuanzang, who studied there in the 7th Century, left behind an eye-popping account of the thriving, wealthy university, describing a nine-storey library "soaring into the clouds."

Shanghai-based author Mishi Saran followed Xuanzang's route across Asia in her book Chasing the Monk's Shadow. "Xuanzang was looking to study with the people who knew the (Buddhist) texts best. Nalanda was already reaching the heights of its power and prestige. It was known in Korea and Japan - its reputation had spread through the Asian trade routes," she said.

"When Xuanzang was at Nalanda, it was a vibrant place, packed with scholars, with seminars, teaching and debate. It was a kind of Buddhist League institution - all the deepest ideas about Buddhism were explored and dissected at Nalanda," said Ms Saran.

The influence of those scholars continues to this day. At the Jaipur Literary Festival in Pink City, Rajasthan, the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama said, "The source of all [Buddhist] knowledge we have come from Nalanda." The new Nalanda hopes to match the intellectual rigor, but will not be a religious institution.

"Nalanda was not only interested in Buddhism. Even at that time it took from universal principles. It had secular studies, public health, it was interested in logic, astrology and mathematics and languages," said George Yeo, a former Singaporean Foreign Minister and head of the Nalanda international advisory panel. Nonetheless, the "spirit of Nalanda" is part of the attraction. Nearby, the Buddha achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya.

'Severe doubts' But Prof Altbach, an expert on world-class universities, has "severe doubts" about the location.

"The site of an academic institution is important," he said. Nalanda "may attract a certain number of big thinkers, but academics like to be where the infrastructure is. They want culture and amenities and coffee shops, and a wider community of intellectuals than that on campus". Yet Bihar has emerged as the fastest growing state of India with economic growth over the years. "The countryside looked dry and poor. Today there are green fields. The shops are full, the saris are bright," said Mr. Yeo. According to Nand Kishore Singh, Member of Parliament from Bihar and member of the governing body of Nalanda, the university itself is striving to develop the region by working with 60 nearby villages to improve livelihoods in agriculture and tourism. The next two faculties included Information Technology, and Management and Economics which would help develop job opportunities "to enable Bihar to catch up with the rest of India". With a large amount of infrastructure already planned for Bihar, the Bihar state government is fully committed to the university project, including roads and an international airport at Gaya. But "building a top-class university is extraordinarily expensive, especially in a rural and undeveloped location, even with assistance of foreign donors and the central government", said Prof Altbach.

Soft power, hard cash

While the land has been provided by the state of Bihar, the Nalanda's supporters estimate around \$1bn (£650m) will be needed. Even that is seen as a modest sum compared to some of the world's major universities.

Australia is funding a dean-level chair of ecology and environment. Singapore will design, build and donate library costing up to \$7m (£4.5m). Thailand will contribute \$100,000 (£65,000), and China has announced \$1m (£650,000) in aid for construction. "I don't see any dearth of money in the region but they are nowhere near the \$1bn endowment, so far not many countries have come forward with their huge purses," said Sukh Deo Muni, a former Indian envoy to Laos and visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

Professor Sen blamed India's infamous red tape for staking money. But Nalanda is being built up gradually, faculty by faculty, instead of having everything at once.

Even its ardent critics believe that the new Nalanda idea is viable. Prof Muni said, "A country like India should pay special attention to this. It can show that India is present in Asia not only economically and militarily but also intellectually."

Others share the larger vision that will see Asia establish itself on the world stage by presenting soft power. "I'm hoping this project can bring China and India closer together, two great countries, representing two great civilisations of East Asia and South Asia," said Mr Yeo. But even he admits resurrecting Nalanda "will be a challenge and there is no guarantee that we will succeed. The conception is grand but the implementation will be arduous".

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