

Nalanda University: A University for the 21st Century

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The name Nalanda is an icon for cross-cultural interactions and intra-regional connectivity around the globe. Located in Bihar, India, near the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment, the centre of learning at Nalanda was a major hub for educational and intellectual exchange and the creation and dissemination of knowledge among Asian societies from the fifth to the twelfth centuries CE. It received students from across Asia, stimulated intellectual, scientific, and religious dialogues, and dispatched missionaries and scholars to the leading Buddhist centres of Asia. Later generations have called this centre of learning “Nalanda University” and described it as the world’s first educational institution of higher learning.

When after an eight hundred year existence it was destroyed by an act of war, Nalanda lived on for another eight hundred years only in the shared cultural memory of India and Asian countries. It stood as a living symbol of a time of an inter connected Asia, of an Asia that did not **then** define itself against the paradigms of the emergent and monolithic model of higher education that holds sway today. Uncomfortable though this fact may be, what we have to accept today is faultlines created by the overwhelming force of multiple colonialisms—across Asian countries—that have altered the way we establish universities and has given to us today, what can only be described unflatteringly, as an imitative Asian model of the university. One, moreover, which is embedded in the socio-intellectual-cultural mores of Western pedagogy and Western modes of critical enquiry. Nalanda was Asian in thought, in belief, and in practice. It was Asian renaissance centuries before the term was coined to mark the shift in power balances when Asia shrugged off its colonial yoke.

However, while Nalanda remained alive as an idea, as a physical entity it was lost and forgotten: this ancient seat of learning lay buried and forgotten under indistinguishable mounds of mud and stone. In an ironic twist, it took a colonial archaeologist to excavate what is, arguably, one of the most emotive and evocative sites: the ruins of the ancient *Nalanda Mahavihara*. It was under the leadership of Alexander Cunningham and the newly formed Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), that an official survey in 1861–1862 was made in Bihar, even though systematic excavation of the ruins by the ASI did not begin until 1915 and ended in 1937. A second round of excavation and restoration took place between 1974 and 1982.

Thus, Nalanda entered into the lexicon of India and Asia again as a monument to times past and welcomed tourists, seekers of knowledge related to Buddhist philosophy and teaching, and the world at large. But its tryst with destiny--to quote Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India in 1947 in another context--had to wait for almost another hundred years (from its first discovery) to be realized. It was in 2007 that the idea to revive ancient Nalanda as a modern university--albeit true to its legacy and spirit--was mooted at the East Asia Summit in Cebu, Philippines by India and welcomed by all the

Member States. What brought around this extraordinary consensus was the nature of old Nalanda and its avowed spirit of accommodation and inclusion.

This was, and remains, a truly historic pledge where countries across Asia—and now also beyond—are wishful of being part of a revival of a university that is certainly the oldest in the world. For Nalanda university predates the modern Western universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, while Harvard and all the American Ivy League universities come much much after its fading away. It is hard to even envisage in today's post colonial, western centric world, how knowledge ebbed and flowed in the worlds of Asia, East Asia, South and South East Asia, and Central Asia. But this is exactly what is been attempted through the resurrection of Nalanda university today.

New Nalanda was officially born by an Act of the Indian Parliament in November, 2010. It is, by charter, an international and secular institution of national importance and global significance. The unique character of Nalanda is that its revival was welcomed by not just Indians who had grown up on the memory of the old Nalanda (destroyed somewhere about 1193 CE), but by the aforementioned Members States of East Asia at the EAS Summit when the idea was first mooted in 2007. For Nalanda was truly a seat of learning that symbolized the idea of a University without borders, and drew scholars from diverse and far flung Asian and Central Asian countries. In fact, the Parliamentary Act, in its opening sentences, enshrines the foundational values of the revival plan: "...to build a community of learning where students, scholars, researchers and academicians can work together symbolizing the spirituality that unites all mankind."

It is an idea underscored by the former Foreign Minister of Singapore, George Yeo, founder member of the erstwhile Nalanda Mentor Group (now the Nalanda University Governing Board): "Nalanda is an icon of the Asian renaissance in the 21st century...it should be the center of civilizational dialogue and inter-faith understanding, as it once was. It should again make available for common betterment of all beings knowledge already existing in the world." It is a vision that resonates across the range of founders of the new Nalanda University hailing from Japan, China, Singapore, Thailand, United Kingdom, and India.

The cornerstone of this pioneering spirit, one that drives the founding of the twenty first century Nalanda University, is best exemplified in the words of the Chancellor of the university, Nobel Laureate and Harvard Professor, Amartya Sen: "The modern world has much to offer from which people in the past would have been thrilled to learn. But the past too has some great examples of intellectual breakthrough that can both inspire and inform us today, and contribute to our academic and social regeneration." In a more recent public lecture organized by the university in October 2014, in New Delhi, chaired by India's Vice President, M. Hamid Ansari, Chancellor Amartya Sen spoke about "the relevance of Nalanda in the contemporary world." His distinguished lecture examined why there was the need to revive Nalanda university, despite the world of higher learning having undergone a seismic shift, with a plethora of universities and institutions of global excellence. It is in this context that he makes a very moot point about the nature of Nalanda: "The tradition of Nalanda was not only that of quality education—itself a matter of great importance in India today—but also one of global cooperation and a

systematic attempt to learn across the barriers of regions and countries. What the Singaporeans call ‘the Nalanda trail’ was a flow of ideas and contacts that brought people from different countries and different cultural backgrounds together. It was easy to see how profoundly that commitment was inspired by Gautam Buddha’s focus on enlightenment without borders.”

So, while Nalanda is not, and never quite was a Buddhist seminary, it was a university whose sustaining principle was respect for all humanity and the sanctity of all life. It also advocated the core Buddhist value of a holistic system of knowledge where man was in harmony with man, with nature and with the environment as a whole. Indeed, this is what we define at the university as the Nalanda Way: one that is predicated on creating a community that is in harmony with its multiple environments.

Hence, what Nalanda seeks to create anew is a model of a university that is transcendent, consensual, free of divisiveness and fundamentally creative. A Nalanda that meets the needs of the dystopian twenty first century, plagued by, and inheritor to, the excesses of past generations. Moreover, generations who have seen each other only through the prism of a fractured history, vanishing resources, religious fundamentalism, and often a militant nationalism. In this world of others and othering, of us and them, of black and white and yellow and brown, the grand vision of Nalanda anchored in accommodation and egalitarianism is even more precious. In such times, it is modern Nalanda which dares to dream the Utopian dream of being, once again, the place for mobilizing the visionary aspect of educational practice, a space from where a new economy of ideas and actions will emerge. A utopia, however, that is not isolated, but merges seamlessly with the world at large.

It is this revisionist and revolutionary aspect of the university that underlay the choice of the first two Schools with which the university began its academic life on 1st September, 2014 in Rajgir, Bihar, close to the site of the ancient Nalanda from which it draws both hope and inspiration. A tightly knit group composed of, among others of Vice Chancellor Gopa Sabharwal, I, Anjana Sharma as the founding Dean of Academic Planning, Nalanda founding faculty and excited and enthusiastic Nalanda pioneer students have all begun a historic journey together. Unsurprisingly, given its international nature and its historic significance, the university already has representations at both the faculty and student levels from diverse countries such as Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Germany, the United States of America, Bhutan, and, of course, India.

The two Schools with which university commenced its academic life are as follows: Historical Studies and the School of Ecology and Environment Studies. Given the university’s location—bucolic, agrarian and in a historically dense area of the ancient Magadha—the two chosen Schools best serve to seamlessly merge the local, the regional, the national and the transnational. Only ten kilometers from the ancient ruins of Nalanda, the new university is happily located in an area that is historically and archaeologically rich, one that provides both students and faculty with an opportunity to engage with history as a lived experience and create new ways of writing/reading/transmitting history.

The carefully selected programmes of Historical Studies that link up with the legacy of the ancient Nalanda are: Asian interconnections, archaeology, art history, economic history and global history. Students and faculty have already begun working on exciting projects in the region. History at

Nalanda is not taught just in class but is part of the lived experience with field visits, documentation, and actual participation in fresh sites of archaeological excavation in the nearby regions. One such site is at the village of Telhara, where the ASI is engaged in the discovery of another *mahavihara* which possibly had links with old Nalanda. An intrepid student from Japan is an early volunteer to the site, and is involved in both research and documentation. He exemplifies, as do the other students, the dictum that we at Nalanda constantly caution students with: if you think that learning is only imparted in class, Nalanda University is not for you!

The School of Environment and Ecology is also premised upon the same principle. As mentioned earlier, the location of the University is in a farmland area which is purely rainfall dependent. The focus areas of this School have also been developed with the understanding to make knowledge benefit community and are the following: human ecology, hydrology/hydro ecology, disaster management, agriculture and food, climate change and energy studies. This choice knits together the environmental challenges and concerns that not only afflict the state of Bihar where Nalanda is located, but also mirror the problems faced by many Asian countries. In Rajgir itself, a large sections of the populace of the region principally relies on the economy that is either driven by the rural setting or, seasonally, by religious tourism. Rajgir, the small town in which Nalanda University is situated, is a critical site that interlinks the historical with the religio-spiritual and the agrarian. Indeed, Rajgir is the place where Buddhist and Jain religions coexist and, as a result, it has a constant global and pan Asian footprint. If one is in Rajgir during what may be loosely described as the spiritual season, one is lucky to hear multiple Asian tongues, observe multiple Asian apparels and forms of food and worship.

However, this global footfall has had a limited relationship with the community, and, it is the hope that the School of Ecology and Environment Studies will eventually drive the economic and human health of the region and contribute towards developing the principles of sustainability at both the individual and community levels. In a small way this has already begun with faculty undertaking (with students) environmental projects that are of immediate relevance to Rajgir itself, be it waste or water management as an example.

Staying true to the principle that ideas only matter when they are put into practice and the need to put the values of sustainable development into action, has led to the university embarking on an international competition to design and master plan the new university. The competition (which ran successfully in 2013), was based on an elaborate dossier that required companies and their architects to create a design that was both aesthetically pleasing and sustainably rich. The aim, to reiterate, is to build a totally green and sustainable campus that will integrate the principles of man and nature living in harmony. The idea, of course, is to not just teach “disciplinary” knowledge in the class alone, but to firmly ground knowledge into practice. Once completed, the university will be the largest net zero campus anywhere in the world: net zero waste, net zero water, and net zero emission. Nalanda will thus be, over time, the best exemplar of an integrated lived experience that melds classroom learning with the lived experience of the built campus.

But, exciting and innovative though this may be, it is not the heart of the revival plan. The soul of this is best exemplified in the words George Yeo, whom I mentioned earlier: “As Asia re-emerges on the world stage in this century, its civilizational origins will become a subject of intense study and debate. Asians are rediscovering their own past and deriving inspiration from it for the future. This inspiration covers all fields including governance, scientific inquiry, architecture, wellness and aesthetics.”

Hence, Nalanda’s revival represents the revival not only of an institution named “Nalanda”, but of lost habits of the heart predicated on shared values and common vision of Asian countries. A vision that celebrates the ceaseless currents of ideas, cultural practices, socio-religious mores that inter linked the Asian continent. It is these forgotten connections, these lost archives, these interrupted conversations that Nalanda is seeking to revive. The endeavour is to create a contemporary University inspired by the academic excellence and global vision of the historic Nalanda, and build a Nalanda that both shapes and impacts upon the model of higher education worldwide.

As a Graduate, research intensive, Liberal Arts, Social and Natural Science University, Nalanda is designed to encourage and promote an intellectual paradigm where experiential learning, innovative thought, and inter disciplinarity are all part of a common fabric of reading, of researching, of writing and, not the least, of cognition. The academic vision—one that encompasses all the seven schools—is drawn from the desire to build bridges across the historical rupture of colonialism and craft a teaching-learning-research paradigm that privileges the model of a humanistic education. Hence, the university is seeking to craft a new education model, one based on a mutuality of trust and a shared desire to establish the--under siege--principles of peace and human harmony.

The aforementioned Nalanda University Act concretizes this vision in following words: “...to contribute to the promotion of regional peace and vision by bringing together the future leaders of the East Asia, who by relating to their past history can enhance their understanding of each others’ perspectives and share that understanding globally.” Furthermore, the university will nurture and “foster in the students and scholars the spirit of accommodation, understanding and...train them to become exemplary citizens of democratic societies.”

In order to bring this spirit alive, Nalanda University will follow the example of the old Nalanda and liberate knowledge from the narrow confines of geography and religion. For more than ever the task that lies ahead of universities of the new millennia, is to rescue knowledge from the model of either a capitalist economy or of a political imperative. Rather, Nalanda’s iconic trajectory in the 21st century is that, through its teaching and research programmes rooted in a concern for all humanity, it will eventually advance global concerns and help find global solutions to them.

Thus, to close, I would like to just say that Nalanda is the *vihara* where creativity will once again flourish, where education will be about the creation of value, where teachers, students, and all others will work with the deep knowledge that they have a grand and sustaining mission.

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