

NALANDA UNIVERSITY—A PHOENIX FROM THE ASHES



I was in Bologna, Italy about thirty years back for attending a conference in the historic University of Bologna. Historic because this was the oldest university in Europe. Some participants took pride in proclaiming that this was the oldest university in the world. The statement is true only if we paraphrase the statement by saying that this was the oldest ‘functioning’ university. I pointed out that Nalanda University in present India is probably the oldest university of the world which incidentally died (was destroyed) in the 1190s. The University taught students from all over India and abroad for more than 600 years (according to conservative estimate), within about hundred and fifty years of the establishment of the University of Bologna in 1038 AD and shortly after the foundation of Oxford University in 1167. Amartya Sen mentioned in his essay on Nalanda University that the University was built in the fifth century AD while according to UNESCO, Nalanda was built in the third century AD. UNESCO reports “Nalanda stands out as the most ancient university of the Indian subcontinent and engaged in the organized

transmission of knowledge over an uninterrupted period of 800 years”. UNESCO declared the ancient Nalanda Mahavihara University as a World Heritage Site in July this year.

Ancient Bihar was very prosperous in the third century BC and Pataliputra (now Patna) was not only the capital of the Indian subcontinent for more than thousand years but also served as the centre of Buddhist religion and culture. Nalanda was run by a Buddhist foundation and became an excellent centre of learning for Buddhist studies. Nalanda was a purely residential university and could boast of having students not only from India but also from other Asian countries with Buddhist connections like China, Japan, Korea. All the inmates were lodged, boarded, taught

and supplied with all essentials free of cost. At one time it accommodated more than ten thousand students and two thousand teachers.

Apart from Buddhist studies, Nalanda offered systematic studies on other subjects like grammar, phonetics, literature and languages, science, mathematics, anatomy, law, architecture, medicine and public health. Medicine

appears to have made great progress during the Buddhist age when hospitals were established all over the country.

There were other ancient academic institutions in ancient India such as Takshashila, Odantapuri and Vikramashila. Of all these, Takshashila (Taxila) was

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comparable, if not bigger than Nalanda, both in size and status. Takshashila is believed to have been in existence in the fifth century BC. It was situated within about 30 kilometres north-west of Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan), neighbouring Afghanistan. Some scholars prefer to call Takshashila as a center of higher learning or academic institute rather than calling it a university. That Takshashila was a 'religious school' engaged only in the priestly language and grammar is an understatement. It taught the Vedas and the Eighteen Arts such as archery, hunting etc. Along with that there were law school, medical school and school of military science which attracted students from all over the ancient world. That Takshashila was not confined to the narrow lines of religious teaching can be understood from the great teachers and students it produced. Panini, the famous grammarian was in Takshashila; Chanakya (Kautilya) wrote his famous *Arthashastra* here; and celebrated Ayurvedic healer Charak was a student of Takshashila.

Takshashila was destroyed by the barbarian Huns in 455 AD and according to Sir John Marshall who was Director General of Archaeology, "after the year 455 AD these Huns swept down into India in ever-increasing numbers, carrying swords and fires wherever they went".

Nalanda was founded by Aryadeva on a spot selected for its beauty on the banks of the sacred river Ganga by his Guru Nagarjuna and rose to its extraordinary status during the successive Magadha kings. Nalanda was adequately described by Fa-Hien who lived in India from 399 AD to 414 AD, by Hiouen Tsang living here from 629 AD to 645 AD and by I-Tsing who spent ten years in Nalanda out of his twenty years living in India. Hiouen Tsang described enthusiastically about the magnificent architecture and lakes of pure water covered with blue lotus. The library building had nine stories, and there were a hundred lecture rooms.

Nalanda and Takshashila, in fact all the universities at that time reached a standard so high that students from neighbouring countries were attracted and the general idea was that 'education will be complete' only if one studies

at one of these universities. One has to understand that earning such a reputation and maintaining its standard for centuries was not an easy task. It requires a team of qualified devoted teachers and quality students. Admission to these universities was very tough. It is said that "A high wall surrounded such an abode, sometimes with only a single door, and a learned pundit was the door-keeper, who put the would-be-student through an examination, ere he would open the door for his admission—a literal entrance examination, for the applicant could only enter when he had argued in satisfactory fashion with the doorkeeper". Admission to these universities, I imagine, was nothing easier than cracking JEE in modern times.

The status of Nalanda started deteriorating in the seventh century. By the next century, Nalanda's position was largely taken up by the Royal University of Vikramashila which flourished for four centuries and was destroyed with Nalanda and Odantapuri during the Muslim invasion of 1199. In connection with the destructive raids of Muslims, it is interesting to note that in spite of such a fierce aggression by Mahmud of Ghazni, he himself was a patron of learning in his own country. He had a fanatic horror of images, Muslims admit no images, and therefore he ruthlessly destroyed buildings which included them; learning institutions were no excuse for idolatry.

Nalanda has for sometime now been ushering signs of new hope and respect to the citizens: firstly through rejuvenation of the ancient university from its antiquity to a modern class university and secondly by attracting attention of UNESCO by declaring it a World Heritage in July this year. The decision to revive old Nalanda University was taken during the East Asia Summit held in 2007 at Cebu, Philippines. Although help and support came from a number of Asian countries, the leading role was played by Singapore and the most influential person behind this move was George Yeo, the then Foreign Minister of Singapore. Construction of building is in progress now. Considering the budgetary constraints, classes on limited subjects have started in rented premises at Rajgir in

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September 2014. Unlike the old Nalanda University, education here is not free and the cost for a two year M.Sc. course is not trivial. It is too early to make a judgement on the academic excellence and other achievements but we and all other Indians, feel proud if modern Nalanda University reaches the same stature that the old one enjoyed, if not surpasses the past glory. It is a good time to celebrate as the first batch of students pass out of the modern Nalanda University and also the special status it received from the UNESCO. Personally I feel it would have been more appropriate if UNESCO declared it as a World Heritage Learning Site rather than World Heritage Site. Heritage Site is a very generic expression for any place worth visiting.

Nalanda and Takshashila had a profound influence on Indian men of intellectuals. I cite here an example of an eminent Indian scientist who founded the first institute of inter-disciplinary research in the world based on the spirit of Nalanda and Takshshila one hundred years ago. He was

Jagadish Chandra Bose who while inaugurating the Bose Institute remarked *“In this I am attempting to carry out the traditions of my country, which so far back as twenty-five centuries ago, welcomed all scholars from different parts of the world, within the precincts of its ancient seats of learning at Nalanda and Taxila”*.

Bose Institute is celebrating its centenary this year and as a part of its celebrations we have decided to publish articles on Bose Institute and its founder in all the issues of 2017. To start with, we are reproducing the inaugural speech called ‘The Voice of Life’ delivered by Jagadis Chunder Bose on November 30, 1917, followed by an article on reflections on the institute written by a person whose association with the institute has been for more than 70 years. He has seen the institute in its different shades, starting as a research scholar and ending up as the Director of the Institute—Professor B. B. Biswas, who is also the immediate Past President of ISNA. □

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