

Nalanda

Rows of monasteries, their turrets licking the clouds

King Yaśovarman

Each storey has dragon-like projections and coloured eaves, red pillars carved and ornamented, richly adorned balustrades ... while the roofs are covered with tiles reflecting the light in a thousand shades. There are thousands of monastic establishments in India but this one is most remarkable for its grandeur and its height.

Hwui-li

There are fifteen hundred masters of dharma and ten thousand students ... one hundred teaching thrones are arranged daily for lectures.

Yuan Chwang

Probably the most famous of all Buddhist establishments, the monastic university of Nalanda, famed throughout Asia, flourished from the fifth through to twelfth centuries CE. Tradition says that it was built on a site visited on several occasions by the Buddha himself. Its ruins are at present-day Badgaon near Rajgir. Literary evidence indicates a monastery there in the days of King Aśoka (3rd century BCE) but archaeological remains unearthed to date only go back to the Gupta period (4th and 5th century CE). Indian history is often poor in detail, its natives not having been good chroniclers. Fortunately, we have graphic and detailed accounts of life at Nalanda through the writings of seventh century Chinese pilgrims such as Yuan Chwang, Hwui-Li and I-tsing.

Nalanda was a *mah-vih-āra*, i.e. a grand grouping of monasteries — an educational establishment not unlike Oxford or Cambridge with their many colleges, each with its own identity. Covering more than six square kilometres, its ten magnificent four-storey colleges were separated by eight landscaped gardens and mango groves, with bright red *kanaka* shrubs making a colourful counterpoint to the profusion of blue lotuses on the many lakes. Some buildings had gilded roofs, others were tiled in ceramics lacquered blue and green. Mynahs, peafowl and many other tame birds abounded in a site of ravishing beauty and harmony. Around the seventh century, it was the largest and most prestigious mah-y-na establishment in India, with scholars coming from the extremities of

Asia to reside there for several years in order to complete their education. This magnificence was in large part due to the munificent patronage of successive Gupta kings and later of King Harsha, their successor and last great monarch of India. Nalanda's influence, both spiritual and artistic, was felt as far afield as Java and Sumatra.

A Revolution in Education

Today, education is the concern of the state. In ancient times, in both Europe and Asia, it was a function of religious organisations. In India, the Brahminical education system, dating back to Vedic times and still practised today, is centred around an individual teacher and his local group of disciples. Each small unit is called a *gurugrha* — teacher's house. As a system, it tends to intimacy and smallness. The gradual establishment of Buddhism was to modify the face of education in India.

Buddhist study, based upon monasteries and monastic life, favoured the development of large viharas, controlled by a collective body of teachers. As Buddhism came to maturity, with first mahayana and then vajrayana being taught in a widespread fashion, monastic universities came into being. Some of these attained huge proportions, having thousands of students. In the final four centuries of Buddhism in India, the fame of establishments such as Nalanda, Valabhi, Vikramaditya, Jagaddala and Odantapuri spread throughout Asia. They became important international centres of learning. This growth was brought abruptly and definitively to a halt by the savage and destructive conquest of first the kingdom of Delhi and then the whole Gangetic plain by Muhammad of Ghur, whose Turko-Afghan armies swept across Northern India between 1182 and 1206.

The Broadening Scope of Monastic Study

Education is but one aspect of monastic life. Its history, however, provides an interesting reflection of the progressive enrichment of the intellectual life in the viharas, as it broadened its scope and became more liberal. Until the first century CE, vihara training was not unlike Brahminical education. The disciple spent many years in *Nissaya*, an intellectual apprenticeship under the tutelage of a spiritual mentor (*upajjh-ya*) and a doctrinal tutor (*ac-rya*). As few people were literate, most learning was achieved by committing things to memory. At that time, this was confined uniquely to the classic Buddhist canon. Monks were expected to think, reason and decide for themselves and enjoyed an unrestricted freedom to express any opinion and defend it in debate. Despite this personal freedom, the Buddhist community as a whole took great care in preserving the authenticity of its stated views and its official canon. Any new addition to, or commentary on, traditional Buddhist thought could only be admitted after passing through considerable scrutiny, involving the overall consent of the community.

With the growth of *mah-y-na*, in the first six centuries of our era, came greater literacy and the gradual disappearance of a cloistered mentality in favour of a broad-minded one. Monks learnt the tenets of other faiths and other schools of Buddhist philosophy, and developed expertise in such varied topics as architecture, agriculture and medicine. At first, these non-religious studies were necessary for the efficient upkeep of ever larger and larger monasteries, each of which was supported by a number of villages and was very practically involved in management of land and resources. Nalanda, for instance, was supported by two hundred villages, given by king after king through royal charter as acts of pious generosity. Later, monasteries changed into national and international centres of learning, no longer catering to their own requirements but to those of the larger community of humankind — very much in the spirit of *mah-y-na*. The body of all these fields of knowledge was preserved in manuscripts, kept at first in the viharas but eventually requiring their own libraries. These took on more and more importance. Although still primarily monasteries, the doors of the great vihara now also opened to lay seekers of wisdom, Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

This openness, broad-mindedness and breadth of interest reached its peak as vajrayana flourished, from the seventh century onwards. Widespread literacy in the monastic community led to a deep interest in language, composition, poetry and grammar. One must remember that India was a land of

many dialects (it still has nineteen languages and hundreds of dialects) and that Buddhist learning had developed in parallel in several of these, reflecting its impact on different regions and social classes. As is often the case with areas which have been invaded and reinvaded, settled and resettled, language and dialect is intimately linked with social differences between the newcomers and earlier settlers. Buddhism, beyond race or clan, had to make itself available to all, and to learn to express its universal notions in a way which spoke, in every sense of that term, to its very varied audiences.

Tibetan commentators tell us that a whole area of Nalanda was set apart from the other buildings to accommodate libraries. The 'Sea of Jewels' library, nine storeys high, was one of the world's earliest skyscrapers. Other libraries there, with names like 'Ocean of Jewels' and 'Jewel Adorned' were also many storeys high. Within their walls, each hand-written text was a unique work, serving as a basis for visitors to make their own manuscript copies. Yuan Chwang, for instance, copied several hundred works during his seventeen years in India, principally at Nalanda, and spent the rest of his life training colleagues in language and grammar and striving to translate the scriptures into Chinese. Legend has it that many of Nalanda's libraries were destroyed at one point by a Turkish arsonist, through religious malevolence. Thousands of unique manuscripts were lost forever.

One striking feature of Nalanda was the tutor-student ratio. At the time of its students Kiai-jien and Yuan Chwang — who were later to found the Vijn̄-*nav*-*da* School of Buddhism in China — there were fifteen hundred dharma masters and ten thousand students, i.e. one tutor for every seven students. Using a system of memory-training based upon repetition and an alphabetised index, these teachers developed tremendous powers of scriptural recall. Hwui-Li recounts that the Supreme Abbot of Nalanda, Silabhadra, had studied and mastered the entire canon. Five hundred of the teachers had mastered thirty collections of texts and the remaining thousand could explain at least twenty collections.

In a sincere quest for true knowledge, dogma was shunned and intellectual enquiry stimulated at Nalanda. To this end, Buddhist dialectics was brought to a fine art, enabling students to test their understanding against that of their fellows. Their non-aggressive, lightning-fast debates led to sharpness of wit, humble acceptance of one's own intellectual shortcomings and a vivid appreciation of the harmful absurdity of so many of humankind's beliefs.



Asoka		Harsa	Islamic
Maurya Dynasty		Gupta Dynasty	Invasions
500BCE	0	500 CE	1,000 CE