



Intellectual Traditions of Nalanda Mahavihara in Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

Built during the Gupta era (5th–6th century CE), Nālandā Mahāvihāra became a major hub for Buddhist monk instruction and scholarship. The activities of resident monks, their instructional strategies, and Nālandā's influence on Buddhist scholarship are investigated in this paper. Unlike previous monastic schools, Nālandā embraced a disciplined academic approach combining Buddhist teachings with secular topics. Acting as a centre for intellectual conversation, it promoted critical research and disseminated Buddhist ideas over India and beyond. The work looks at its development from a vihāra to a mahāvihāra, its faculty-to-student ratio, and its methodological improvements. Its growth was greatly aided by institutional changes, geographical advantages, and royal patronage as well as by Although outside invasions helped to explain its fall-off, internal changes in Buddhist scholastic traditions also had a role. Still, Nālandā's legacy as a hub of intellectual development and higher education shapes Buddhist ideas and academic traditions all around.



INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent institutions of Buddhist education in ancient India, Nālandā Mahāvihāra was instrumental in South Asian intellectual and religious legacy. Originally founded during the Gupta dynasty, most likely in the fifth century CE, Nālandā developed into a significant hub of higher education drawing academics from all throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Unlike previous Buddhist monastic establishments, which essentially served as centres of meditation and religious instruction, Nālandā evolved into an advanced academic institution teaching Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist topics. It developed over centuries as a centre for textual study, intellectual discussions, and Buddhist philosophy spread around Asia. The actions of monks at Nālandā, their instructional strategies, and the larger relevance of the institution in the intellectual scene of mediaeval India are investigated in this paper.¹

The name "Nālandā" itself has etymological and historical meaning. Some academics propose that the name comes from "Nālam" (lotus) and "da" (giver), therefore representing the institution as a site of knowledge and illumination. Others relate the name to a native Nāga god revered in the area. Whichever its beginnings, Nālandā's historical importance is unquestionable. It was a vibrant university drawing professors and students from China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and Central Asia, not just a monastic retreat. Among them was the most well-known Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang), who studied at Nālandā in the 7th century and left thorough records of its faculty, curriculum, and administration. Another well-known Chinese visitor, Yijing, also noted his experiences at Nālandā and detailed the rigorous training monks received.²

Academic organisation of Nālandā was very orderly. Along with Sanskrit grammar, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and the Vedic sciences, the curriculum covered Buddhist philosophy, logic (hetuvidyā). Learning was based on oral discussions, memorisation, and thorough textual study using a strict pedagogical method. Along with secular courses, students had to become proficient in several Buddhist texts, particularly those of the Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools. The many fields show the inclusive and all-encompassing character of education at Nālandā. Royal sponsorship was one of the main causes of Nālandā's ongoing success. While following monarchs like Harsha (606–647 CE) and the Pāla kings kept supporting and extending its infrastructure, the Gupta emperors—especially Kumaragupta I (c. 415–455 CE)—were crucial in its development. Comprising a sequence of well designed monastery structures, the institution housed thousands of monks and professors. Comprising three major buildings—Ratnaranjaka, Ratnadadhi, and Ratnagirbha—its library, Dharmaganja, was regarded as one of the best stores of Buddhist knowledge. Buddhist writings were greatly preserved and academic interaction was made possible in great part by this enormous collection of manuscripts.

Nālandā had a slow decline notwithstanding its intellectual and institutional successes. Although outside invasions—especially the raid by Bakhtiyar Khilji's army in the late 12th century—played a key role in its downfall, internal changes in Buddhist scholasticism also helped to diminish its impact. Nālandā had already permanently changed Buddhist education by the time it was declining, impacting following monastic establishments in Tibet, China, and South-east Asia.

Objectives

- To examine the daily activities and academic engagements of monks at Nālandā Mahāvihāra.
- To analyse the pedagogical methods employed in Buddhist education at Nālandā.
- To explore the role of Nālandā in the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge across Asia.
- To assess the impact of royal patronage on the institution's growth and sustainability.
- To investigate the reasons for Nālandā's decline and its long-term legacy in Buddhist education.

Methodology

The study adopts a historical and analytical approach, relying on primary sources such as the accounts of Chinese travellers Xuanzang and Yijing, along with archaeological evidence and inscriptions. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and books on Buddhist education, are also examined. Comparative analysis is used to understand Nālandā's influence on other Buddhist institutions in India and abroad.



The activities of resident monks at Nālandā Mahāvihāra hold crucial significance in understanding its didactic structure. As a premier Buddhist study centre in ancient India, a thorough examination of Nālandā's contributions to contemporary society, knowledge structures, and Buddhism becomes imperative. This chapter will critically address fundamental questions: What was the objective of education offered at Nālandā? Was Nālandā a centre of both religious and secular learning? Was it an inclusive institution? What was its faculty-to-student ratio? What were its pedagogical methodologies? How did Nālandā contribute to the dissemination of knowledge? Most importantly, what role did it play in the expansion of Buddhism both within India and beyond?³

Nālandā Mahāvihāra represents a transformative phase in monastic life and scholarly pursuits. Established during the Gupta period (5th–6th century CE), it rapidly evolved into the most celebrated Buddhist learning institution of the eastern world. A.L. Basham and A.K. Warder identify Nālandā as the most renowned university of the medieval period in India, distinguished by its extensive academic curriculum, diverse student body, and expansive campus. However, whether Nālandā qualifies as a 'university' in the modern sense is a matter of intense scholarly debate. While it shared characteristics with a university, its primary function as a monastic educational institution should not be overlooked. This discussion will be set aside here, focusing instead on Nālandā's role as a centre for monastic learning.⁴

Nālandā's emergence marked a significant departure from earlier monastic educational practices, representing a transition from the traditional monk-centric learning system to a broader, more inclusive educational model. Early monastic education was largely insular, designed for monks' internal doctrinal development. However, Nālandā redefined this paradigm by opening its doors to all seekers of knowledge, irrespective of their religious affiliation. The monastic curriculum was gradually liberalised, accommodating diverse branches of learning and integrating secular subjects alongside Buddhist philosophy.⁵

The roots of institutionalised education in India can be traced to Takṣaśīlā, an early centre of higher learning. However, Takṣaśīlā lacked the formalised infrastructure of an academic institution, as evident from the absence of lecture halls or dormitories in archaeological records. Unlike Takṣaśīlā's gurukula-style education, Nālandā Mahāvihāra developed into a fully institutionalised scholastic centre, complete with an elaborate campus, multiple lecture halls, and residential facilities for students and teachers. This shift set a precedent for the subsequent establishment of numerous mahāvihāras, which followed Nālandā's educational model and further contributed to the diffusion of knowledge. Eventually, Nālandā emerged as the coordinating hub of these mahāvihāras, shaping a structured Buddhist scholastic network.⁶

The rise of Nālandā Mahāvihāra was a gradual process. Initially, Nālandā existed as a small chaitya, which later expanded into a vihāra, and ultimately transformed into a mahāvihāra of international repute. This transformation was intrinsically linked to the ideological and institutional growth of Buddhism. The seeds of Nālandā's development were sown during the time of the Buddha, but it reached its zenith during the Gupta and Pāla periods. Despite its historical significance, there is no comprehensive, systematic account of Nālandā's institutional evolution. Chinese and Tibetan sources provide invaluable insights into its curriculum, scholars, and royal patrons, though they primarily document its golden age and subsequent decline.⁷

Archaeological excavations reveal the vast scale of Nālandā's ruins, offering glimpses into its past grandeur. However, determining the exact period of its inception remains challenging. Literary sources suggest that by the Buddha's time, Nālandā was already a prosperous town. The prosperity of its residents is evident from references to affluent villagers, such as Lepa, whose wealth and luxurious lifestyle indicate an economically thriving settlement. The Buddha frequently visited Nālandā, often accompanied by his disciple Ānanda, and stayed at Pāvārika's mango grove, where a small vihāra was constructed. Over centuries, this vihāra expanded into a grand mahāvihāra and ultimately became an internationally acclaimed learning centre.⁸

Nālandā's geographical location played a pivotal role in its emergence as an educational hub. Situated away from densely populated areas yet within proximity to major political centres such as Rājagṛha and Pāṭaliputra, Nālandā offered an ideal environment for monastic education. Additionally, its accessibility, local market facilities, natural defensive advantages, and ample food resources made it a favourable location for both monks and lay scholars. I-Tsing's accounts indicate that Nālandā's climate was warm, reducing the



necessity for monks to possess extensive clothing, which may have been a practical advantage for maintaining a large monastic community.⁹

Determining the exact date of Nālandā's royal recognition is complex. The year 450 CE marks the earliest approximate date for its state patronage, though its origins likely predate this. Tibetan historian Tārānātha attributes Nālandā's founding to Emperor Aśoka, citing his construction of a Buddhist temple at the site of Sāriputra's chaitya. However, the absence of Nālandā in Fa-hien's travel accounts makes it difficult to substantiate this claim. Hiuen-Tsang credits Nālandā's establishment to Śākrāditya, identified with Gupta ruler Kumāragupta I (415–455 CE). Subsequent Gupta monarchs, including Buddhagupta, Purugupta, and Narasimhagupta, expanded the monastic complex by constructing additional structures, reflecting continuous state patronage.¹⁰

By the time of Harṣavardhana (7th century CE), Nālandā had grown into a vast educational complex with a coordinated administrative structure. Harṣavardhana's contributions further solidified Nālandā's academic prestige. The integration of various monastic establishments into a single mahāvihāra indicated a significant transformation in the nature of Buddhist institutions, evolving from isolated monasteries into unified centres of scholastic excellence. The expansion of Nālandā was not merely an internal development but a reflection of broader educational trends in early medieval India, where monasteries increasingly served as intellectual hubs for both Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars.¹¹

Under the Pāla dynasty (8th–12th centuries CE), Nālandā received substantial patronage, particularly from Dharmapāla and Devapāla, who expanded its influence beyond India. During this period, Nālandā became a centre of Buddhist art and culture, significantly contributing to the spread of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism across Tibet and Southeast Asia. The maintenance of such a large institution required extensive resources, which were provided through land endowments. By I-Tsing's time, the monastic estate had expanded from revenues of 100 villages to 200 villages, underscoring the economic stability that sustained its academic functions.¹²

The causes behind Nālandā's decline remain a subject of historical debate. While external invasions are often cited, internal structural changes, including shifts in Buddhist scholastic traditions and declining state support, likely played a significant role in its gradual downfall. Nevertheless, Nālandā's legacy as a pioneering institution in higher education remains undisputed, shaping the intellectual traditions of South and Southeast Asia for centuries to come.¹³

Nālandā Mahāvihāra emerged and developed from the conceptual basis set by Buddha's lectures. Not only was the architectural or logistical need for vihāras as monastic homes, but also a deliberate attempt to provide places where monks may reflect, examine the tragedies of life, and pursue the one way to atonement. But this was not a passive process; to solve the existential conundrums of life, one must actively participate intellectually and closely review Buddha's teachings. Nālandā Mahāvihāra was essentially an academic institution committed to the spread of Buddhist philosophy rather than just a religious haven. Aiming at this intellectual objective, the sequence from vihāras to mahāvihāras and finally into a disciplined temple of learning was methodically evolved.¹⁴

It is noteworthy how Fergusson compares Nālandā to what Cluny and Clairvaux were to mediaeval France. It emphasises Nālandā's key part in forming the intellectual terrain of key India, hence establishing it as a lighthouse of knowledge radiating its impact throughout the Buddhist globe. Still, it would oversimplify to reduce Nālandā to a simple Buddhist propagandist tool. Although the main goal of Buddhist philosophy was surely its spread, the techniques used were academic and complex, including careful study, analysis, and recording. Buddhist ideas underwent examination, formalised, and polished to fit modern socio-religious settings rather than being passive accepted. This critical approach not only made Buddhist ideas more relevant but also guaranteed their flexibility for different eras and regions.¹⁵

Nālandā Mahāvihāra's instruction was to build analytical thinking and self-confidence rather than just rote memorising of texts. It was a two-complementary goal organised system. The first aimed for newcomers who had just arrived in Nālandā. These young candidates received a first round of instruction familiarising them with Buddhist ideas and their application. This era was important in two ways: people who decided not to become monks would incorporate Buddhist ideas into their daily life, therefore spreading Buddhism across



society. Conversely, individuals who committed monastic vows helped the Buddhist order grow by adding more committed adherents. By means of lay members or ordained monks, this deliberate arrangement of instruction guaranteed that Buddhism penetrated many spheres of society.¹⁶

Nālandā's second and maybe most important goal was the search of atonement by means of thorough study of Buddhist doctrine. Reserved for fully ordained monks, this was a lifetime intellectual and spiritual quest around which all religious and educational activity spun. Unlike traditional monastic establishments where spiritual development was often valued over intellectual curiosity, Nālandā combined the two. Making an enlightened monk was seen as a continuous, creative endeavor—a constantly changing improvement of the moral, spiritual, and intellectual capacities of the person.¹⁷

Nālandā had a distinct identity because of this all-encompassing form of education that gave knowledge and spiritual enlightenment first priority. Intellectual quest was never compromised; spiritual achievement always defined me. This dual focus distinguishes Nālandā and qualifies it as the "Oxford of Buddhist India." It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Nālandā still has a deep and proud place in the Indian intellectual mind, thereby generating great cultural and historical relevance.¹⁸

Nālandā's unmatched position in the ancient world is shown by I-Tsing's appreciation of it as the most beautiful "Temple of Learning in Jambudvīpa".¹⁹ But its importance went beyond religious study; it was an institution fostering intellectual discipline, critical thinking, and Buddhist philosophical development. Nālandā's educational system was meant to develop academics able to question and improve tradition, not to generate simple heirs of it.²⁰ A pillar of Buddhist intellectual history, this dynamic and analytical approach guaranteed Nālandā's continuing influence.

CONCLUSION

Attracting academics from around Asia, Nālandā Mahāvīhāra was a lighthouse of Buddhist knowledge, forming intellectual traditions for millennia. Its demanding academic program, varied course of study, and great sponsorship helped to define it as a centre of excellence. Apart from developing Buddhist philosophy, the school helped in other general disciplines like linguistics, medicine, and astronomy. But its fall, characterised by foreign invasions and changing sociopolitical environments, exposes the fragility of even the most well-known universities. Notwithstanding its devastation, Nālandā's influence persisted and shaped Buddhist education in Tibet, China, and South-east Asia. Monastic institutions all throughout the Buddhist world revealed continuity between the instructional methods and academic traditions evolved at Nālandā. Modern projects aimed at revitalising Nālandā University highlight its historical significance and ongoing relevance of its academic legacy.

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