

THE ANCIENT UNIVERSITY OF NALANDA (PART-1)

PG HISTORY, SEM-2, PAPER CC:7

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INTRODUCTION (परिचय)

Ancient Nalanda University is located in Bihar.

Historical records suggest that Nalanda was a Buddhist monastery of considerable repute with immense physical dimensions, which remained in existence from the 4th-5th century until at least the end of the 12th Century.

The Chinese travellers of ancient India mentioned a number of educational institutions. The most famous among them were the *Hinayana University of Valabhi* and the *Mahayana University of Nalanda*. Hiuen Tsang gives a valuable account of the Nalanda University.

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The term *Nalanda means “ giver of knowledge”*. It was *founded by Kumargupta 1* during the Gupta period. It was patronized by his successors and later by Harsha. The professors of the University were called *Pandiatas*. Some of its renowned professors were *Dingnaga, Dharmapala, Sthiramati and Silabhadra*. Dharmapala was a native of Kanchipuram and he became the head of the Nalanda University.

INTODUCTION (परिचय)

As a Buddhist centre of learning, Nalanda had a reputation that extended beyond the Indian subcontinent. It is unknown exactly when this centre came into existence, and we do not have a continuous record for its activities. It must have gained a reputation for importance by the 7th Century A.D., attracting scholarly monks such as *Hiuen Tsang* and *Itsing* from China.

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By the 12th Century A.D. However, there were other well-established Buddhist institutions in the region, such as *Vikramasila* (Bhagalpur district, Bihar), *Somapura* (Paharpur, Bangladesh), and *Odantapuri*, competing for royal patronage. Their growing importance may have affected Nalanda's prominence in the region. The Tibetan monk *Dharmasvamin's account* of his visit to Nalanda in 1234–36 A.D. does record some lingering activity in the monastery with a handful of monks, but he later reported witnessing the last of the monks abandoning Nalanda due to regional disturbances.

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There is no record of what happened at Nalanda subsequently, and it is not conclusively known why Buddhist activities in the region ended sometime after the twelfth century. Sparse historical documentations over the subsequent Centuries resulted in Nalanda's erasure from living memory and local lore. Were it not for the accounts of travellers (mainly Chinese) who visited Nalanda in its prime, its very existence might have remained unknown. Those accounts include not only descriptions of travel, stay, and the state of affairs of the region, but some of them also mention

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distances and directions of places relative to other prominent and sacred landmarks in the vicinity. The accounts of the Chinese travelers *Fa Hien* (337–422 A.D.) and *Hiuen Tsang* (596–664 A.D.) were translated into English for the first time in the 19th century, providing added impetus to the already growing interest in the discovery of Indian antiquity among British explorers. *Francis Buchanan* was the earliest European investigator to visit the area. He indicated that he visited the ruins of, *Kundulpur* near the village of Baragaon on

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January 8, 1812, and evocatively recorded the expanse of ruins and details of antiquities he observed.

Captain Markham Kittoe was an archaeologist who visited the site in 1847–48. Aided by the translation of Fa Hien's accounts, Kittoe identified Baragaon as “*Na Lo*” of Fa Hien; later *Alexander Cunningham* identified these remains as the ruins of the famous Nalanda that Huen Tsang visited. Huen Tsang, who resided at Nalanda between 635 A.D. and 641 A.D., made by far the most detailed record of the spatial layout of various structures within the complex.

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He described structures such as monasteries, temples, images, Stupas, a gate, walls, and tanks. These descriptions heavily influenced 19th and 20th Century investigators in identifying structures revealed through archaeological explorations and excavations. However, the layout of structures excavated at the site does not exactly match the layout described by Hiuen Tsang.

(To be continued)