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## Nalanda University

### Why in news?

Recently, the Prime Minister of India inaugurated the new campus of Nalanda University.

### What is the history of Nalanda University?

- **Literary sources** - **Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang** (Hieuan Tsang or *Mokshadeva*) in the 7th century, traveled across India from 629-645 CE in search of Buddhist manuscripts and accurate teachings.
- He spent about *five years at Nalanda*, studying under the mahavihara's grand abbot, Silabhadra.
- **Yijing's writings** provide a very detailed account of life in Nalanda, and describes it as the "best overall monastery" in the west (of China).
  - For instance, he gave a detailed account of monks' daily bathing ritual.
- **Numismatics sources** - The earliest archaeological evidence from the ruins of Nalanda was *a coin inscribed with the name of Shakraditya*.

*Shakraditya* (known in non-Buddhist sources as Kumaragupta I, the son of Chandragupta II "Vikramaditya") reigned between 415-55 CE.

- **Seat of the university** - It was located *near Rajgriha city* (Rajgir) in the ancient kingdom of *Magadha* (modern-day **Bihar**).
- **Establishment** - It was established in the **fifth century CE** by Emperor **Kumaragupta**.
- **Growth** - It received international acclaim and thrived under the patronage of the *Pala dynasty* during the 8th and 9th centuries.
- **Global university** - It is considered the **world's first residential university**.
- Scholars came from all over the world, including Korea, Japan, China, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Tibet and Southeast Asia.
- **High quality education** - Hiuen-Tsang in his memoirs says that there was a rigorous *oral entrance test* for students who wished to enrol and *only about 20% qualified*.
- **Eminent mentors** - Students who gained admission were mentored by a group of scholars under the guidance of Buddhist *masters like Dharmapala and Silabhadra*.
- Mathematician and *inventor of zero* (*Aryabhata*) is also believed to have studied and taught in Nalanda.
- **The library** - It is also known as '**Dharma Gunj**' or '**Mountain of Truth**,' had over

nine million books, including some of the most sacred manuscripts, stored in a nine-storey building, Ratnodadhi.

- **Subjects taught** - It included Buddhist scriptures (of both Mahayana and Hinayana schools), philosophy, theology, metaphysics, logic, grammar, astronomy and medicine.
- **Recognition** - It was declared a ***UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016*** emphasizing the site's immense cultural and historical importance.

### Decline of Nalanda University

- **Competing monasteries** - It witnessed a gradual decline due to a number of competing monasteries such as Vikramshila and Somapura came up during the Pala reign.
- **Destruction by Bhakhtiyar Khalji** - The invasions of the likes of warlord Bhakhtiyar Khalji (late in the 12th Century) were also responsible for Nalanda's decay.
- **Tilt towards brahminism** - The Buddhism that did survive veered sharply towards more tantric and esoteric versions, which borrowed majorly from Brahmanical religion, not the Mahayana Buddhism that Nalanda propagated.
- **Socio-political changes** - In the eleventh century Islam replaced Buddhism as the greatest trading religion of Asia while the agrarian world within India was gradually lost to the Brahmins.

### How Nalanda University was revived?

- **Discovery of ruins** - The ruins were first rediscovered *in 1812 by Scottish surveyor Francis Buchanan-Hamilton.*
- Later, in *1861*, it was officially identified as the ancient university *by Sir Alexander Cunningham.*
- **Measures by India** - It was *in 2006*, while addressing a joint session of Bihar State Legislative Assembly, that the late former President, Dr. *A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, proposed the revival* of the ancient university.
- Parliament of India passed the *Nalanda University Act, 2010.*
- **Support from other nations** - Concurring ideas came simultaneously seeking the re-establishment of Nalanda from
  - The Singapore government
  - The leaders of 16-member states of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2007
- In total, *17 countries* other than India have helped set up the University.
- Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Mauritius, Myanmar, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.
- **Revival** - In *2013, the master plan* for the campus, proposed by renowned architect *B.V. Doshi's* Vastu Shilpa Consultants.
- It was built at an initial cost of Rs. 1,800 crore (210 million USD).
- It was *reopened in 2014*, after nearly 800 years, marking a significant milestone in the history of the world's oldest centres of learning.

### Features of New Nalanda University

- The new campus signifies the revival of the world's oldest universities, *blending ancient wisdom with contemporary knowledge*.
- It spans *over 485 acres*.
- It includes *over 100 acres of water bodies (Kamal Sagar ponds)*, an on-grid solar plant, a domestic and drinking water treatment plant, and a water recycling plant as well as over 100 acres of green cover.
- The University also has a *250-capacity Yoga Center*, a state-of-the-art auditorium, library, an archival centre and a fully equipped sports complex.
- It is a large *carbon footprint-free Net-zero campus*.
- The university's *Visitor is the President of India*.
- The chancellor and chairperson of the governing board is Prof. Arvind Panagariya.
- The varsity offers *Post Graduate and Doctoral programmes* in Buddhist studies, philosophy and comparative religions; languages and literature; ecology and environmental studies; sustainable development and environment; and, international relations and peace studies.
- At present, students from over 20 countries are enrolled in various courses.

*Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen, who had been associated with the project since 2007, was the first Chancellor and the then President, Pranab Mukherjee, the first Visitor.*

### **What is the cultural significance of the Nalanda University?**

- **Buddhist learning center** - It is attracting scholars and students from across Asia, contributing to the spread of Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy.
- **Intellectual exchange** - Nalanda facilitated intellectual exchange not only in Buddhism but also in various fields such as philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and linguistics, influencing academic developments in Asia.
- **Architectural heritage** - The site's architectural remains and artifacts provide *insights into ancient Indian university life and architectural styles*, reflecting the cultural and academic environment of the time.
- **Historical legacy** - As one of the world's earliest residential universities, Nalanda symbolizes *India's historical commitment to higher education* and its role in global intellectual history.
- **Spiritual and philosophical influence** - It played a pivotal role in *shaping religious and philosophical thought*, fostering debates and dialogues that enriched both Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions.
- **Symbol of tolerance and diversity** - Nalanda's multicultural environment, with students and scholars from diverse backgrounds, underscores its role as a beacon of tolerance and pluralism in ancient India.

### **5 Indian Universities before Oxford University**

#### **Nalanda University**

- It was founded around *427 AD* under *Kumaragupta I of Gupta* Dynasty.
- It is a renowned centre of Buddhist studies and academics.
- It hosted *over 10,000 students* before declining in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

<b>Vallabhi University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is located <i>in Gujarat</i> which flourished during <i>Gupta and early medieval periods</i>.</li> <li>• It is renowned for its excellence in literature, philosophy and mathematics</li> </ul>
<b>Takshashila University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is in ancient <i>Takshashila (now in Pakistan)</i>.</li> <li>• It excelled in mathematics, philosophy, medicine and linguistics.</li> <li>• It declined in early medieval period.</li> </ul>
<b>Nagarjuna Vidhyapeeth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It flourished in <i>7<sup>th</sup> Century</i>, named after <i>Buddhist monk Nagarjuna</i>.</li> <li>• It is located in southern India.</li> <li>• It has its influence in early medieval period.</li> </ul>
<b>Vikramashila University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was founded <i>by King Dharamapala</i> in the <i>late 8<sup>th</sup> century</i>.</li> <li>• It welcomed those aspiring to become Buddhist monks.</li> </ul>

## References

1. [The Hindu| Inauguration of new Nalanda University](#)
2. [The Indian Express| history of Nalanda University](#)
3. [Business Standard| Significance of Nalanda University](#)



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