

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 12th century.

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

References

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

