

Indian Journal of Library Science Research & Information Technology

VOL 1 NO.2 (JAN-JUNE 2025)

ISSN - 3048-4677

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<https://www.bmsgroup.in/product/indian-journal-of-library-science-research-information-technology/>

The Centre of Ancient Indian Knowledge: Role of the Library of Nalanda Mahavihara

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Abstract

In ancient India, Nalanda University was one of the venerable institutions of higher education located in Bihar. Its primary focus was on Buddhist literatures. An overview of the renowned ancient Indian university, Nalanda, is given in this study. This university had a lot of significant features. The overview of this university's library will provide a general understanding of the kind of education that has been offered there in ancient India. The university's three magnificent buildings, Ratnasagara, Ratnadadhi, and Ratnaranjaka, housed a vast collection of manuscripts on a variety of topics in a variety of languages. This significantly aided in the spread of information, as seen by the many references to foreign academics copying hundreds of pages from these libraries and bringing them back to their home nations. I-tsing is reported to have been extracted from 400 Sanskrit texts totalling 5,00,000 verses from Nalanda. This paper describes about the rich system of ancient Nalanda library plays the role of learning hub and its role as a global knowledge centre and its relevance today.

Keyword: *Nalanda University, Ancient India, Ancient Nalanda Library, Knowledge Hub.*

1. Introduction:

Ancient Indian education reflected a time of intellectual openness and inventiveness. This learning system reached its pinnacle due to the desire to understand natural and worldly issues, which was mirrored in its well-organized centers. Over the course of thousands of years, the Indian Knowledge has evolved to include a wide range of academic fields, including astronomy, physics, literature, philosophy, art, mathematics, and medicine. Ancient writings, oral traditions, and formalized educational institutions like college and gurukulas are all major components of this system. Originally an unofficial elementary school center, the gurukula eventually developed into a college like Taxila. The foundation of early education was the guru-śiṣya paramparā. However, the mahāvihāras served as hubs for formal education, with a primary emphasis on higher education. Among the principal mahāvihāras of ancient India were Valabhi, Odantapuri, Vikramasila, and Nalanda. Nalanda served as the hub for coordinating

the education of all these Mahavihara. The library of Nalanda Mahavihara represents a key institution in the historical scenery of education in India and beyond. The library, known as Dharmaganja, not only served as a repository of texts but also facilitated cross-cultural exchanges that shaped the educational practices of various regions, notably influencing the development of Buddhist thought in Tibet and beyond. For almost a thousand years, Nālandā was the leading institution for study and higher education in a variety of fields, with a primary focus on Buddhist philosophy and religion, particularly Mahāyāna. Different beliefs, customs, and doctrines of Jain, Buddhist and Brāhmanic religions collided in a shared stream at Nalanda and took on new forms and dimensions (Kumar,2011).

2. Libraries and Educational Institutes in Ancient India

India was the birthplace of the world's first civilization. In actuality, there isn't a single nation where learning has such a long history. In ancient India, education was divided into two categories: viharas, or Buddhist monasteries, and gurukulas, or Vedic institutions. While the viharas were higher education establishments, the gurukulas primarily concentrated on primary education. A collection of monasteries was referred to as Mahavihara. In ancient Indian Knowledge System, the libraries attached with these ancient educational institutions were the hubs of generating, disseminating and preserving the knowledge where knowledge transmission relied on Palm-leaf, Birch-bark, Cloth, tender inner bark of leaf, leather, stone, metal every conceivable material. Khan and Helaluddin (2019) mentioned that the libraries in ancient India were called "Sarasvatibhandagaras (Treasure houses of the Goddess of Learning) or "Bharti-Bhandagaras". They are also termed "Sarasvati Bhandaras". These libraries were attached to temples, monasteries, educational institutions, palaces and even to private houses of the rich. For almost a millennium, Nalanda oversaw the curricula of the four major mahaviharas—Nalanda, Vikramasila, Odantapuri, and Valabhi and acted as a centre for contributing to the dissemination and preservation of knowledge in various fields including philosophy, medicine, and the arts. As a result, it gained notoriety and attracted students from as far away as China and Persia.

3. Historical Context

On 9th January of 2009, "The Excavated Remains at Nalanda" was added to the tentative list of World Heritage. And on 15th July, 2015, UNESCO has listed it as a World Heritage Site. It, situated around 88 kilometres from Patna, was established by Kumargupta 1 in the fifth century CE, regarded a genuinely global centre for structured education of the then world. Numerous rulers, such as King Harshavardhana of Kannauj (7th century CE) and the Pala rulers (8th–12th century CE), as well as numerous academics, patronized it. Later, due to number of factors spanning generations this renowned institution destroyed. Approximately 6 centuries after Nalanda's decline, Sir Francis Buchanan was the first to unleash and prepare a report on the site. Archaeological Survey of India steered an extensive excavation and merging of the site between 1915 and 1937 and again between 1974 and 1982 (Kumar, 2016). The word Nalanda, a fusion of 'NA+Alam+Da' - means the "contributor of inexhaustible knowledge" or "Vidya-Dana," calls up a far-fetched anecdote of knowledge dissemination which has never been expressed in history (Thakur, 1995). With more than 2000 teachers and 10,000 students, Nalanda, a prosperous university known as "Nalanda University", was referred to as the first higher education institution in history (Patra, 2021).

4. The Library of Ancient Nalanda

The library of Nalanda university was referred to as the "Mountain of Truth" or "Dharma Gunj." In East Asian countries, the Nalanda Library would be considered as an information-hub which offers incredible services while fostering intercultural dialogue and intraregional connectedness across the globe (Patra, 2021)



Fig-1: Great Monument. The stupa base in the foreground is imagined by some to be the location of Nalanda Library

Source: Asher, 2015

4.1 *Structure and Organization of the Library*

Many historians believe that Nalanda University had a vast library which acted as the pioneer centre of teaching and learning from the fifth to the twelfth centuries. The Dharmaganja, Nalanda University's magnificent library, was one of the institution's most notable and renowned assets. The library was a knowledge-hub that drew researchers across the world due its elephantine collection of books, manuscripts, and writings. The Dharmaganja was being considered as the representation of intellectual achievement in that period of ancient India because of its rigorous organisational structure, architectural beauty, and scholarly value. The three huge multi-storied structure, namely, Ratnasagara (Ocean of Jewels), the Ratnodadhi (Sea of Jewels), and the Ratnaranjaka (Jewel-adorned) make up Dharmaganja. The most revered texts, including the Guhyasamaja and the Prajnyaparamita Sutra, were kept with safety and security in the nine-storied building-Ratnodadhi (Chandrashekhar, 2024).

- Ratnasagara (Ocean of Gems-Six storied building): One of the biggest library structures at Nalanda University was Ratnasagara. It has not only the collection of treatises on philosophy, logic, physics, medicine, and other topics, but also an extensive collection of Buddhist texts. The rarest and most valuable texts were kept in this region.
- Ratnadadhi (Sea of Jewels-Nine storied building): Lots of holy manuscripts and texts were kept in Ratnadadhi. It had many areas for reading materials along with book storage, and it was several floors with high peak. Numerous scholars completed their researches in this building.
- Ratnaranjaka (Jewel-adorned: Six storied building): Another significant tower of the library complex was Ratnaranjaka. It had the vast repository of Buddhist texts, a variety of literary literature, and also perhaps some secular publications. Ratnaranjaka was famous for its striking architecture and easily accessible locational facilities for both teachers and learners.

There was a separate dedicated room for the researchers coming at this library. Researchers and knowledge seekers across the world are still captivated by that appealing environment of Nalanda library.

4.2 Collections and Manuscripts

Nalanda University library was renowned for its wide range of collection comprising both ancient texts from other countries and traditions and recognized literatures. It had the extensive collection of not only Buddhist philosophy and Hinduism but also Jainism and other fields. The study at Nalanda included the pious copying of sacred texts.

The Nalanda Library's collections were indexed and grouped topically. Visitors from both local and foreign countries were drawn to the organisation of the full material. They would so remain there for years, translating and copying numerous priceless works. One of the blessings granted to Nalanda library by Balaputradeva, the king of Java and Sumatra, was the ability to copy the manuscripts Nalanda was a magnificent repository of invaluable texts (Kumar, 2011). I-tsing spent nearly 10 years (675–685 CE) for studying at Nālandā University. He gathered 400 copies of Sanskrit books in Nālandā during that period. These writings contained 5000,000 shlokas. He claims that his collection of manuscripts was added to this library following the passing of Buddhist scholars at Nālandā. I-tsing's account also tells that Nalanda library stocked both Buddhist non-Buddhist scriptures (Lama, 2022). The renowned scholar Silabhadra claims that after the demise of I-tsing, a Buddhist monk, Nalanda library was expanded to include I-tsing's books and manuscripts, but other assets, including non-Buddhist literature, were disposed of. These materials demonstrated how the Nalanda Monastic Library eventually developed into a magnificent repository of priceless manuscripts through the peaceful acquisition of deceased people's priceless and meticulous collections (Mukherjee, 1966). The Vedas, the Hetuvidya, the Sabdavidya, the Chikitsavidya, the works on Atharvavidhya, the Sankhya, and other literatures from the eighteen sects were amongst the books studied there, according to Hiuen-Tsang. He also noted that there were at least 10 individuals, including the Master of the Law, who could explain 50 collections of Shutras and Shastras, 500 who could explain 30 collections, and 1000 who could explain 20 collections (Beal, 1911). With 9 million handwritten palm-leaf manuscripts, the university's library was the biggest collection of Buddhist knowledge in the world (Economic Times, 2024).

Many of the manuscripts and texts in the Dharmaganja's remarkable collection have been kept for centuries. The wide range of topics covered in these texts reflected Nalanda University's varied curriculum. Amongst the remarkable items in the collection of this renowned university were (Chandrashekhar, 2024):

- Buddhist literature: The library had vast collections of Buddhist literature, such as the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the Vinaya Pitaka, the Mahayana Sutras, and many commentaries by several distinguished scholars.
- Philosophical Treatises: Several treatises on various schools of thoughts on Indian philosophy, such as Nyaya, Samkhya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta, were set aside in Nalanda library, which was considered as the hub of philosophical discussion. Both Indian and international experts' writings were included in these texts - demonstrating the university's comprehensive collection of educational philosophies of India and abroad.
- Scientific Works: Manuscripts on astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and other sciences were also kept in this Dharmaganja. Works of very well-known academics like Aryabhata, the famous astronomist and mathematician, were included in these texts. These scientific texts collection in the library exemplified the status of Dharmaganja status as a hub of invention & research.

- Literary and Artistic Texts: Dharmaganja held manuscripts on literature, music, art, and drama along with religious and philosophical resources. Researchers gained a lot thorough understanding of India's very rich creative and cultural traditions because of these texts.
- Manuscripts from Other Countries: Academics from across Asia came to Nalanda due its standing as a major learning-hub, and many of them brought enormous manuscripts from their home-grown countries. Nalanda university's role in hastening the cross-cultural knowledge exchange was reflected in the huge collection of this library, which had comprehensive literatures in various languages ,like, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, and others

4.3 Influence on Scholarship

Historical narratives, especially those written by visiting monks like Xuanzang and Yijing, show how deeply Nalanda influenced the philosophical and educational institutions of these areas, underscoring the library's significance as a pillar of ancient scholarship (Kumari, et al, 2024)

4.4 Preservation of Collection

Classically, the palm-leaf manuscripts were enfolded in cotton and kept between two slabs of light-weight marble that were regarded as the same size as of the texts. Resultantly, the manuscripts in the library's collection were safeguarded from dust and fire, and kept intact for use for a very long tenure (Biswas, 1962). The preservation of the library collection and its artifacts at Dharmaganja has become a matter of serious concern in recent years as researchers work to preserve and repair this important part of Nalanda's history. To better understand and preserve the site, contemporary methods like ground-penetrating radar and 3D mapping are now being used (Kadavil,2023).

5. Pedagogical Approaches

Nalanda was called as the "Mediaeval School of Discussion and Logic" for the reason of its emphasis on discussion and critical thinking in its teaching methods. Scholars schooled at Nalanda became experts at debating and employed it as a key technique for learning. This innovative approaches to education served as the foundation for the teaching methodologies of subsequent Mahaviharas which is still reflected in modern monastic establishments in Tibet, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Students were encouraged to participate in group projects & discussions, and the university's policies fostered a culture of rigorous intellectual inquiry.

6. Contributions to Knowledge

Jame Blumenthal (2012) in "The Seventeen Pandits of Nalanda Monastery" said that in addition to being a place of instruction, the institution made a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge worldwide. Numerous works on a variety of topics were written by scholars at Nalanda, which had an impact on disciplines like astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. With hundreds of thousands of manuscripts, the Dharmaganja, Library of Nalanda Mahavihara, was the vital hub for the diffusion of knowledge. Nalanda had a noteworthy influence on Buddhist literature and facilitated to spread Mahayana Buddhism. Prominent Nalanda academics like Nagarjuna and Atisha made substantial contributions to

Buddhist philosophy, and their writings are still relevant in many Buddhist traditions across the world. In addition to making significant contributions to the growth of Buddhist logic and philosophy, Nalanda played a crucial role in the spread of Mahayana Buddhism across Asia. Tibetan Buddhism was greatly impacted by prominent Nalanda scholars like Shantarakshita and Dharmakirti, whose teachings established the foundation for the philosophical system that developed in Tibet.

The Nalanda Mahavihara, India's most illustrious historical educational institution, was crucial to the intellectual and cultural advancement of both India and the rest of the globe. Nalanda, which was founded during the Gupta era, was well known for its wide-ranging curriculum, which included courses in astronomy, mathematics, medicine (Ayurveda), grammar, logic, and metaphysics in addition to Buddhist philosophy. Scholars and students from China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet were drawn to this rich academic history, which promoted a lively cross-cultural exchange of ideas and knowledge (Verma, 2024).

7. Legacy and Influence

The Nava Nalanda Mahavihara and Nalanda University are two vivid examples of contemporary educational institutions which are highly influenced by the methods and knowledge systems taught at ancient Nalanda, demonstrating the previous institution's lasting influence. These modern institutions aim to preserve the essence of the ancient Nalanda as a learning-hub by reproducing the wide-ranging curriculum system and extremely high educational standards that defined it.

Modern innovation and old legacy both are blended on the new Nalanda University campus. The heritage of Nalanda University is not only a relic of the past, but also the living evidence to the continuing force of study and wisdom. Its mammoth contributions to mathematics, philosophy, education, and the spread of Buddhism are still being felt at the moment which has been serving as a cue of the noteworthy influence that the ancient civilisations have had on the culture of present-day. As an acknowledgement to the eternal value of knowledge and the amalgamating strength of speech, the voices which echoed through its halls few centuries ago are still heard today - ramifying its fragrance surpassing national boundaries of India (Samvaadshaalaa, 2024).

8. Revival of Indian Civilization

Rajesh Talwar (2024) voiced that many people consider Nalanda's legacy to be a ray of ancient Indian civilisation, giving modern Indians a sense of historical assurance. Because of the effects of colonial control, scholars like V.S. Naipaul have called India "a wounded civilisation," arguing that revival of interest in its history—especially in institutions like Nalanda—is crucial to the country's cultural revitalization. Like learning a skill, the unconscious recollection of India's past accomplishments cultivates the conviction that modern Indians can restore their historical splendour.

9. Contemporary Relevance, Sustainable Practices and Modern Challenges

As a historical centre of learning, Nalanda Mahavihara still has a significant impact on academic and cultural environments today. Initiated in 2006, Nalanda University's modern reestablishment demonstrates a renewed dedication to upholding the legacy of its historic predecessor. The

university's emphasis on cultural diplomacy and multidisciplinary studies seeks to create an atmosphere that supports international academic interchange, echoing Nalanda's past function as a gathering place for academics from many backgrounds. The inclusive and free-thinking culture that defined ancient Nalanda is now fundamental to its contemporary equivalent. The goal of the new Nalanda University is to draw in a diverse student body by encouraging intercultural exchanges between academics from different nations, especially those in Asia. In addition to maintaining Nalanda's historical significance, this worldwide orientation makes it a major actor in discussions about education today (Kadavil, 2023). With its rich tapestry of cultural connections and knowledge transfer, Nalanda Mahavihara represents a pre-modern civilisational bridge connecting China and India. Scholars like Xuanzang's experiences underline the university's important role in fostering interfaith communication and intercultural education. As India and China negotiate their intricate geopolitical links today, this tradition of cooperation and intellectual research is indispensable, with Nalanda acting as a symbol of shared history and cooperation.

Echoing the ideals of the historic institution, present-day Nalanda University places a strong emphasis on environmentally responsible practices and sustainable growth. In order to make sure that the university not only acts as a hub for learning but also as a model for sustainable practices in higher education, initiatives like green campus architecture and renewable energy resources are being implemented. But there are still issues with protecting the site's archaeological integrity and dealing with environmental degradation, which calls for creative restoration techniques.

10. Decline of Nalanda Library

Minhāj opines how Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, who lived at the end of the twelfth century, destroyed a city in western Bihar that they called Bihar (Sanskrit Vihara) and which was turned out to be a study area (Raverty, 1881). When the Turkish general Bakhtiyar Khilji's army demolished Nalanda University in the 12th century, the Dharmaraja's importance as a hub of knowledge tragically came to an end. The library was set on fire by the invaders, and it is reported that the enormous collection of manuscripts fed the fire for several months. Humanity suffered a terrible loss when the Dharmaganja was destroyed, as innumerable manuscripts and scriptures were gone forever. One of the world's greatest intellectual treasures was lost, and the information that had been meticulously maintained and developed for ages was reduced to ashes (Chandrashekhar, 2024). Furthermore, the Nalanda university's valuable library was wilfully destroyed by fire (Tamrakar and Jadon, 2022).

11. Conclusion

The University of Nalanda became well-known around the world as a historic centre of study. It is also renowned for offering a wide range of topics, allowing students to select what interests them. Dharmaganja, Nalanda's vast library, had thousands of manuscripts and other literature. Ratnasagara, Ratnadadhi, and Ratnaranjaka were its three main buildings. This library, which symbolized a long history of academic pursuits, served as a testament to the eternal power of learning. Scholars from across India and other countries flocked to the Nalanda Mahavihara's portals because of Nalanda's broad recognition and reputation. Besides I-tsing, several foreign researchers from China, Korea, Tibet, and other places have come to Nalanda, studied here, and copied manuscripts from the Nalanda Mahavihara Library. However, it is regrettable to learn that this great library, with its magnificent collections that enhanced higher education

with all its complexities and adornments, and which proved to be an important partner in the development of scholarship worldwide, perished in flames ignited by a Turu-ka incendiary. Ancient Nalanda's library may be gone, but its spirit endures in the heart of Nava Nalanda Mahavihara.

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