
Date : 08/06/2008



The memories of Chinese Buddhist Scholars in connection with Nalanda Monastic International University in India in the 7th century AD

R.H.I.S.Ranasinghe
University of Kelaniya
Sri Lanka.

Meeting: 81. Rare Books and Manuscripts

Simultaneous Interpretation: English, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstract:

Nalanda Monastic University had been flourished in India as a residential education center of Mahayana Buddhism during 5th century AD to 12th century AD. It attracted students not only from India but also from other Buddhist countries. The Chinese scholars, who stayed and studied there, had left an elaborate detailed description of the excellence of education and purity of monastic life practiced there, which contributed to the world knowledge of ancient universities. They revealed the inception of the monastery, royal patronage, methods of admission and education system, students and teachers, buildings etc. Most of their positions can be identified and proved by archeological excavations.

During the past many Asian countries interacted with each other through peaceful means via religion, trade and political missions. The relationship between India and China can be traced back to very early times. The gradual spread of Buddhism into those areas was a further incentive for the development of this relationship.

As the result of this relationship, certain Chinese pilgrim monks travelled to India, with the objects of paying homage to Buddhist sacred places, learning from Indian Buddhist teachers and collecting of Buddhist scriptures. To fulfill their objectives they had been spent several years in India. Records of this intercourse were to be found in a large number of Chinese

works from very early times. The best known are the records left by Fa-Hien, in the fifth century and Hiuan Tsang and I Tsing, in the seventh century.

After the introduction of Buddhism into China, 67 AD, Fa-Hien was the first to make a pilgrimage in India. His visit, which lasted about sixteen years, 399-414 AD, was detailed in his Fo-kue-ki or Records of the Buddhist country. This work is valuable evidence to the strength and in many places to the dominance of Buddhism in India. It is careful and accurate, and most of his positions can be identified.

Next followed the travels of Sun-Yun and Hwui-Seng, 518 AD, unfortunately, their narrative is very short, and not to be compared with that of the other travellers (Takakusu 1966, xvii).

Much later, in the Tang Dynasty, flourished in China, and king Harshaverdhana ruled over in North India, the most famous of the Chinese travellers to India, Hiuen Tsang set out on a journey from China to India in 629 AD. He wanted to visit various places of Buddhist pilgrimage and collect Buddhist scriptures. He spent seventeen years travelling all over India. On his return of China, his extra ordinary journey made him famous, and Emperor himself asked him to write an account of his adventures. The result was the Si-yu-ki or the Buddhist Records of the Western World which has been translated into English by Samuel Beal a British scholar in Chinese, who was once the ambassador to Peking, China. Everything that came under his notice was fully recorded in the work, which is an essential text book for Indian history and geography.

Not very long after Hiuen-Tsang's death in 654 AD, I Tsing the last of the three great travellers, started for India in 671 AD, to study and collect the genuine texts of the Vinaya rules to correct their misrepresentations in China. His travels in India were not so extended as those of Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang. He too like Fa-Hien and Hiuen-Tsang has left an accounts of his travels as Nan-Hae-ki-Kwei-Niu or A record of Buddhist religion as practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago, which was translated into English by the well-known Japanese scholar Takakusu.

All have visited Buddhist sites in India and left records in detail. Their memoirs of Nalanda Monastic University have been indispensable sources to reveal its prevailing nature. They left clear accounts of its inception, royal patronage, method of admission and education system, students and teachers, buildings etc. and the general features. Nalanda the most famous of all Buddhist places of learning in India, which has been called "One of the first great universities in recorded history".

Nalanda Monastic University was established as a Buddhist Monastery, probably during the reign of Kumara Gupta (414-445 AD), situated near Rajgriha in Bihar, the ancient Magadha country. With the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, It developed into a university level (Mookerji 1960, 557). It had been in existence as an extra ordinary center of Buddhist learning for seven centuries, under Gupta and Pala dynasties, from 427-1197 AD.

Nalanda Monastic University attained an important position and reputation in the Buddhist world for the scholastic approach. Streams of students used to come here in search of

knowledge, not only from all the regions of India but also from China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

When the first Chinese monk Fa-Hien visited Nalanda in 410 AD, which was called Na-lo, prevailed as an ordinary Buddhist monastery (Beal 1993, 111), which within the next three centuries grew up to be the greatest education center of Mahayana Buddhism.

The second Chinese monk Hiuen-Tsang, during his 17 year period in India, studied with many famous Buddhist masters, specially learned the principles of yoga sastra at Nalanda University, from 635-640 AD (Hwui Li 1973, 107). He has left an elaborate detailed description of the excellence of education and purity of monastic life practiced there.

The third Chinese monk I Tsing studied at Nalanda University for ten years, 675-685 AD (Takakusu 1966, xxxiii). He too like Hiuen-Tsang has left an account of Nalanda.

I Tsing mentions that there was a strict oral entry examination, conducted by the Gate Keeper. Hiuen Tsang states that there was only one gate in the south wall, by which to enter the compound, and attended by a gate keeper. Strangers who come to the university were screened with questions by this keeper, in order to determine to extent of their previous education before they were allowed to enter. He further says that only two or three visitors out of every ten managed to pass their different text (Beal 1991, ii, 171).

I-Tsing states that the minimum age for admission to Nalanda University is twenty years. This indicates that scholars who had already passed out from some other university were admitted to Nalanda to pursue higher knowledge. Hiuen Tsang states a student must have studied deeply old and new books before getting admission at Nalanda (Beal 1991,ii, 171). By old and new books it included the Vedas, Upanisads, works of different systems of philosophy, Samkhya, Vaisesika, Nyaya, and all the works of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism (Chatterjee 1999, 26).

According to Chinese memories, Nalanda Monastic University was a stronghold of Mahayana Buddhism and all the works of Mahayana was compulsory for all students. Hiuen Tsang gives the details of study where the five branches (vidyas) of knowledge were thought. All the priests belonging to the University study the Great vehicle (Mahayana), and also the eighteen (Hinayana) sects, and not only so, but even ordinary works such as the Vedas and other books, The Hetuvidya (logic), Sabdavidya (grammar and lexicography), Chiktsavidya (medicine), Adhyatmavidya (science of the universal Soul), Sankhya (system of philosophy). Besides these, they thoroughly investigate the miscellaneous works, by which is probably meant works of literature and general knowledge (Hwui Li 1973, 112). The priests learn besides all the vinaya works, and investigate sustras and sastras as well (Takakusu 1966, 181-2).

Lecturers and discussions were regarded as the important methods in education system in Nalanda. Hiuen Tsang states “ The day is not sufficient or asking and answering profound questions. From morning till night they engage in discussions ; the old and the young

mutually help one another. Those who cannot discuss questions out of the 'Tripitaka,' are little esteemed, and are obliged to hide themselves for shame" (Beal 1991, ii, 170).

Hiuen Tsang says according to their fraternity, they were governed by distinctive rules and regulations (Beal 1991,i,80). He further states " Their conduct is pure and unblamable. They follow in sincerity the precepts of the moral law. The rules of this conventare severe and all the priests are bound to observe them" (Beal 1991, 170). I Tsing also admired the regulations of the monastery and the strict discipline enforced on more than 3000 resident monks (Takakusu 1966, 65).

The routine of daily duties of the monastery was regulated strictly according to the time. It was measured by means of the clepsydra (water-clock) which was used in the great monasteries in India. The clepsydra was a contraption consisting of a small perforated copper bowl floating in a larger filled with water, time being noted by each immersion of the smaller bowl and announced regularly. I Tsing describes at some length how it used to be done (Takakusu 1966, 144-6).

The major authority of Nalanda was the assembly, which was taken all the major decisions concerning the internal administration as well as the property. The assembly met in sessions, presided over by a senior monk, to decide the affairs of the monastery. When Hiuen Tsang sought permission to stay at Nalanda, his request was put to the Assembly, which announced its approval through the deputy incumbent (Hwei Le 1973, 106). I Tsing also states that it was the Assembly that assigned rooms and servants to residents. The disposal of the belongings of the dead monks was also carried out by the Assembly (Takakusu 1966, 63,147-9).

In this first residential international monastic university of the world, there were about ten thousand residents from all over the Buddhist world, lived and studied in the seventh century. When Hiuen Tsang was studying at Nalanda, 635-640 AD, at the height of its activity, there were 1510 teachers and 8500 students. Out of the total number of 10,000 resident monks at Nalanda, as many as 1,510 belonged to the rank of teachers. Of these, there were 1000 who can explain twenty collections of Sutras and Sastras; 500 who can explain thirty collections and perhaps ten (including Hiuen Tsang) who can explain fifty collections (Hwui Le 1973, 112). From the reports of Chinese travellers, it appears that the number sometimes rose and sometimes reduced. In I Tsing's period, 675-685 AD, the number of priests were three thousand. He further states that it was difficult to assemble so many together in one place (Takakusu 1966, 154).

Nalanda was graced by the presence of India's most brilliant Buddhists teachers (Pandits). Some of these wrote encyclopedic works dealing with various forms of Buddhism, philosophy, logic and grammar. As Hiuen Tsang mentions it was enriched with Pandits like Gunamati, Sthiramati, Prabhamitra, Jinamitra, Jnanachandra, Sigrabuddha, Santaraksita, Silabhadra, Dhammapala, and Chandrapala. He further mentions each of these not only taught but composed some tens of treatises and commentaries which were widely diffused, and which for their perspicuity are passed down to the present time (Beal 1991, ii,171-2).

According to Chinese memoirs, Vasubandu, tutor of Baladitya, was for sometime the head of Nalanda Monastery and had a number of disciples. Gunamati, Sthiramati, Dinnaga, Dharmapala and others, each of whom won fame in the field of Mahayanists philosophy as a scholar and writer of eminence (Dutt 1988, 285). When Hiuen Tsang was at Nalanda (635-640 AD), the head of the university was Silabadra (Hwui Li 1973, 106)

In actual practice, it seems that it was the deputy incumbent who was mainly responsible for the conduct and the overall supervision of the affairs of the monastery. Both Hiuen-Tsang and I Tsing refer to administrative functions carried out by the deputy incumbent. When Hiuen Tsang was admitted to the Nalanda Monastery, it was the deputy incumbent who made the relevant announcement to the community (Hwui Li 1973, 106). According to I Tsing, it was the duty of this monk to announce the time and commencement of any service or ceremony by striking the gong (Takakusu 1966, 148-9). He further mentions that the deputy incumbent supervised monastic affairs, but it is not mentioned what particular affairs they were.

I Tsing seems to have had a very favorable impression of learning at Nalanda. He mentions the names of many distinguished teachers and states, “ I have always been glad that I had the opportunity of acquiring knowledge from them personally, which I should otherwise never have possessed, and that I could refresh my memory of past study by comparing old notes with new ones”(Takakusu 1966, 184-5).

During the period of Chinese scholars, Nalanda Monastic University was greatly helped by the patronage of Gupta kings, though none of Gupta rulers was a professed Buddhist. It was recorded that Sakraditya or Kumaragupta the first, an early Gupta monarch who reigned between 415- 456 AD, built the earliest monastery. In the century following, his successors, Buddhagupta-rajā, Tathagata-rajā, Baladitya and Vajra, each built a further monastery. Between the years 530-535 AD, a king of Central India, perhaps Yoshodharman, added another and by building an encircling wall around them all created a Mahavihara (Beal 1991,ii,168-170).

In addition, Gupta kings maintained monk communities with grants. From time to time Nalanda was endowed with a wide variety of economic assets such as land, houses, money and livestock. Nalanda also had a large labour force in its service. Hiuen Tsang reports that when he was a resident of the monastery, Nalanda had no less than one hundred villages under its control (Hwui Li 1973,112-3) and in I Tsing’s time the number has risen to about two hundred (Takakusu 1966, 65). Out of the income of these, university provided for all free of cost, their four main requisites of clothes, food, bedding, and medicine (Hwui Li 1973, 112-3).

Besides above mentioned privileges, the rooms of the monks were distributed every year according to their rank. I Tsing says, “Before the varsha season or the rains set in, rooms are assigned to each member; to the eldest (Sthavira) better rooms are given and thus gradually to the lowest... the great assembly of priests assigns rooms every year...it is very beneficial.

Firstly it removes one's selfish intention; secondly, the rooms for priests are properly protected" (Takakusu 1966, 86).

The university was located in several buildings. Hiuen Tsang states the buildings thus, "One gate opens into great college, from which are separated eight other halls, standing in the middle of the sangarama...all the outside courts, in which are the priests chambers are of four stages. The stages have dragon projections and colored caves, the pearl red pillars, carved and ornamented, the richly adorned balustrades, and the roofs covered with tiles that reflect the light in a thousand shades, these things add to the beauty of the scene "(Hwui Li 1973, 111-2). I Tsing describes the monastery at Nalanda as having eight halls and three hundred apartments (Takakusu 1966, 154). Also it became a centre of religious sculpture in stone and bronze.

Though in the records of Chinese monks libraries were not mentioned, they took away a good number of books to their mother country, when they returned in 645 AD and 685 AD respectively. When Hiuen Tsang returned he brought with him 520 faciculi, comprising 657 distinct volumes, carried upon twenty horses (Hwui Li 1973, 214). We have already seen that I Tsing stayed for his studies at Nalanda Monastic University for the long period of ten years, during which he collected some 400 different texts of Buddhist work with 500,000 slokes (Takakusu 1966, xvii). These huge collections they took away shows, that Nalanda possessed a well equipped library. Information on Nalanda library is given in the Tibetan records, from which we know about the library. It was called Dharmaganja, which consisted of three huge buildings, called Ratnasagara, Ratnodadhi and Ratnaranjaka. Of these, Ratnasagara was a nine-storeyed building, specialized in the collections of sacred works like Prajnaparamita-sutra and Tantrika books like Samajaguhya (Sankalia 1972, 72-3).

Nalanda Monastic University, which had been flourished as the greatest education center of Mahayana Buddhism in India, under Gupta and Pala dynasties, was destroyed alone with other similar places by the Turkey Afgan leader, Muslim invader Bakhtiyar Khilgi in 1197 AD (Sankalia 1972, 238-247).

It ruins are still to be seen at Baragaon, seven miles north of Rajgir in Bihar and forty miles South-east of Patna. There are archaeological sites of eleven of the monasteries and several brick temples. Rows of the monasteries have been excavated, with small opening off an inner courtyard. There is a museum near the ruins which houses a collection of Hindu and Buddhist bronzes, copper plates, stone inscriptions, coins, pottery, and undamaged statues of the Buddha which have been excavated from the site (Sankalia 1972, 248-71).

REFERENCES

1. Beal, Samuel. 1991. Si-yu-ki Buddhist records of the western world. 3rd ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
2. Beal, Samuel. 1993. (1869) Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun Buddhist pilgrims from China to India (400 AD and 518 AD). New Delhi: Asian Education Services.
3. Chatterjee, Mitali. 1999. Education in ancient India. New Delhi: D.K.Printworld.
4. Dutt, Sukumar. 1988 (1962). Buddhist monks and monasteries of India: their history and their contribution to Indian culture. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
5. Hwui Li, Shaman. 1973. The life of Hiuen-Tsiang. With the introduction of Samuel Beal. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
6. Keay, F.E. 1959. A History of education in India and Pakistan. 3rd ed. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.
7. Mookerji, R.K. 1960. Ancient Indian education. 3rd ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
8. Sankalia. H.D. 1972. The University of Nalanda. Delhi: Oriental Publishers.
9. Takakusu, J. 1966. A record of the Buddhist religion: as practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago (AD 671-675). Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.