



## Nalanda University and Buddhism: Its Relevance in Modern Indian Education

Debashish Mandal

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Yunush B. Ed College, Kamalpur, Meherapur, Malda

Mail id- debashishmandalmld21@gmail.com

### Abstract:

*Nalanda University occupies a unique place in the history of world education as one of the earliest residential universities and a prominent center of Buddhist learning. Established during the Gupta period in the fifth century CE, Nalanda developed into an international institution attracting scholars from across Asia, including China, Korea, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. The educational philosophy of Nalanda was deeply rooted in Buddhist principles such as intellectual inquiry, ethical discipline, compassion, and holistic development. These principles shaped a comprehensive educational system that integrated religious studies with various secular subjects including medicine, logic, astronomy, mathematics, and literature.*

*In modern India, the legacy of Nalanda University continues to inspire educational thought and policy. Contemporary educational reforms emphasize interdisciplinary learning, global academic collaboration, ethical education, and research orientation—principles that were integral to Nalanda's educational framework. The revival of Nalanda University in the twenty-first century symbolizes India's commitment to reconnecting with its ancient educational heritage.*

*This paper explores the historical development of Nalanda University, its relationship with Buddhism, and its influence on modern Indian education. The study examines the educational philosophy, curriculum, teaching methods, and institutional structure of Nalanda. Furthermore, it analyzes how the ideals of Nalanda can contribute to addressing contemporary challenges in higher education in India. The paper argues that Nalanda's educational model offers valuable insights for developing a holistic, inclusive, and globally relevant education system in modern India.*

**Keywords:** *Nalanda University, Buddhist Education, Ancient Indian Education, Modern Indian Education, Higher Education in India, Educational Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy.*

### 1. Introduction

Education has always been regarded as a vital instrument for the intellectual and moral development of individuals and societies. Throughout history, various civilizations have established institutions of learning that contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge and culture. Among these institutions, Nalanda University stands out as one of the most remarkable centers of higher learning in ancient India.

Nalanda was not merely a university but a thriving intellectual community where scholars engaged in philosophical discussions, research, and teaching. It became particularly famous as a center of Buddhist

scholarship and learning. The educational practices at Nalanda were influenced by Buddhist philosophy, which emphasized critical thinking, moral discipline, and the pursuit of wisdom.

The university attracted students and scholars from various regions of Asia, creating a cosmopolitan academic environment. This international character made Nalanda one of the earliest examples of global higher education.

In modern times, when education systems across the world are striving to promote interdisciplinary learning, global collaboration, and ethical values, the educational model of Nalanda appears highly relevant. Modern Indian education, especially after independence, has attempted to revive many of the ideals that characterized Nalanda's educational system.

This paper aims to examine the relationship between Nalanda University and Buddhism and explore its significance in the context of modern Indian education. The study highlights the educational philosophy, curriculum, teaching methods, and institutional structure of Nalanda and analyzes how its legacy can contribute to contemporary educational reforms.

## **2. Historical Background of Nalanda University**

Nalanda University was established during the Gupta period, which is often described as the golden age of Indian civilization. The university is believed to have been founded by the Gupta emperor Kumaragupta I in the fifth century CE.

Over time, Nalanda received patronage from several rulers, including Harshavardhana and the Pala kings. This royal support helped the university expand its infrastructure and academic activities.

Historical records indicate that Nalanda had a large campus with monasteries, lecture halls, temples, gardens, and residential facilities. It functioned as a fully residential university where students and teachers lived and studied together.

The Chinese scholar Xuanzang visited Nalanda in the seventh century and provided detailed descriptions of the institution. According to his accounts, the university had around ten thousand students and two thousand teachers.

One of the most remarkable features of Nalanda was its extensive library known as Dharmaganja. The library contained thousands of manuscripts covering various subjects including philosophy, science, medicine, and literature.

Admission to Nalanda was highly selective. Students had to pass rigorous examinations conducted by scholars at the entrance gates. Only those with exceptional intellectual ability were admitted.

The university flourished for several centuries and became a center of international academic exchange. Unfortunately, Nalanda was destroyed in the twelfth century during the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji. Despite its destruction, Nalanda's legacy continues to influence educational thought across the world.

## **3. Buddhism and the Educational Philosophy of Nalanda**

Buddhism played a central role in shaping the educational philosophy of Nalanda University. The teachings of the Buddha emphasized wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline. These principles formed the foundation of Nalanda's educational system.

Education at Nalanda aimed at the holistic development of the individual. Students were encouraged to develop intellectual abilities, moral character, and spiritual awareness.

The concept of compassion and universal brotherhood was an important aspect of Buddhist education. Students were trained to cultivate ethical values and social responsibility.

Nalanda became a major center for the study of Mahayana Buddhism. Scholars associated with the university made significant contributions to Buddhist philosophy and literature.

Famous scholars connected with Nalanda included Nagarjuna, Dignaga, Dharmapala, and Shantarakshita. Their works influenced Buddhist thought across Asia.

Debate and discussion were essential components of the educational process. Students participated in philosophical debates that encouraged critical thinking and analytical reasoning.

The Buddhist approach to education emphasized experiential learning and intellectual freedom. This allowed scholars to explore different ideas and develop innovative perspectives.

#### **4. Educational System and Curriculum at Nalanda**

The educational system at Nalanda was highly organized and advanced for its time. The university offered instruction in a wide range of subjects, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach to learning.

Although Buddhist philosophy formed the core of the curriculum, students also studied grammar, logic, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and literature.

Teaching methods at Nalanda included lectures, debates, discussions, and personal instruction. Teachers played an important role as mentors guiding students in their intellectual and spiritual development.

The residential nature of the university facilitated close interaction between teachers and students. This created an environment conducive to collaborative learning and intellectual growth.

Students were encouraged to engage in independent study and research. The vast library resources enabled them to explore different fields of knowledge.

The emphasis on dialogue and debate helped develop critical thinking skills among students. This pedagogical approach resembles modern academic practices such as seminars and research discussions.

#### **5. Decline of Nalanda University**

Despite its remarkable achievements, Nalanda eventually declined due to several factors. Political instability and the decline of royal patronage weakened the institution.

The final blow came during the twelfth century when Nalanda was attacked by the forces of Bakhtiyar Khilji. The university was destroyed, and its valuable manuscripts were burned.

The destruction of Nalanda marked the end of one of the greatest centers of learning in the ancient world. However, its intellectual legacy continued through the works of scholars and the spread of Buddhist teachings across Asia.

#### **6. Revival of Nalanda and Its Modern Significance**

In recent years, efforts have been made to revive Nalanda University as a symbol of India's ancient educational heritage. The modern Nalanda University was established in Bihar in 2010 with the support of several Asian countries.

The revived institution aims to promote interdisciplinary research and international collaboration. Its vision reflects the spirit of the ancient university.

The revival of Nalanda highlights the importance of preserving educational traditions while adapting them to contemporary needs.

## **7. Relevance of Nalanda in Modern Indian Education**

The educational philosophy of Nalanda has significant relevance for modern Indian education. Several principles practiced at Nalanda align with contemporary educational goals.

First, Nalanda emphasized interdisciplinary learning. Modern educational reforms, including the National Education Policy 2020, also encourage multidisciplinary education.

Second, Nalanda promoted international academic exchange. In today's globalized world, collaboration between universities across countries is essential.

Third, the university integrated moral and ethical education with intellectual development. Modern education systems increasingly recognize the importance of value education.

Fourth, Nalanda encouraged critical thinking and open intellectual debate. These practices are fundamental to modern higher education.

Finally, the holistic approach to education practiced at Nalanda offers valuable lessons for developing balanced and socially responsible individuals.

## **8. Nalanda and the Vision of NEP 2020**

The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary learning, research orientation, and global academic collaboration. These principles closely resemble the educational practices of Nalanda.

NEP 2020 also encourages the revival of India's ancient educational traditions and knowledge systems. Nalanda represents a powerful symbol of this heritage.

By integrating the values of ancient educational institutions with modern scientific knowledge, India can create a more comprehensive and innovative education system.

## **Conclusion**

Nalanda University remains one of the most significant educational institutions in world history. Its unique combination of Buddhist philosophy, intellectual inquiry, and interdisciplinary learning created a model of education that was far ahead of its time.

The legacy of Nalanda continues to inspire modern educational thought. Its emphasis on holistic education, ethical values, and global academic exchange offers valuable insights for contemporary education systems.

In modern India, the revival of Nalanda represents an effort to reconnect with the country's rich educational heritage. By incorporating the principles of Nalanda into modern educational policies and practices, India can develop an education system that promotes knowledge, wisdom, and social responsibility.

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