

SPEECHES OF
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NALANDA—ANCIENT SEAT OF LEARNING

We have gathered here in Nalanda, the renowned ancient University town, with the noble aim of reviving the ancient glory of Nalanda in the world of knowledge. It is with this object in view that the Government of this State has decided to establish the Magadh Research Institute for the study of Pali and Prakrit and research in Buddhist literature and philosophy. Nalanda is the symbol of the most glorious period of our history, for not only did the quest for knowledge blossom here into its finest shape but also because it bound together, at that time, the various different parts of Asia with links of knowledge. There are no national and racial distinctions in the realm of knowledge and this was true of Nalanda. The message of Nalanda was heard across the mountains and oceans of the Asian mainland and, for nearly six centuries, it continued to be the centre of Asian consciousness. The history of Nalanda dates back to the age of Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira. According to Jain records, Lord Mahavira met Acharya Mankhila at Nalanda. Lord Mahavira is said to have lived here for fourteen years. According to the *Sutra-Kritanga*, Lepa, a rich citizen of Nalanda, welcomed Lord Buddha with his entire wealth and possessions and became his disciple. According to Lama Taranath, the learned historian of Tibet, Nalanda was the birthplace of Sariputra, whose "samadhi" survived till the reign of Emperor Asoka who enlarged it by installing a temple around it. Though tradition associates Nalanda with Lord Buddha and Emperor Asoka, yet it emerged as a flourishing university some time in the Gupta Age. Taranath maintains that both Bhikshu Nagarjun and Arya Deva were associated with Nalanda University and says further that Acharya Dingnag visited Nalanda and had a scholarly discussion. In the fourth century A.D., Fa-Hien, a Chinese pilgrim visited Nalanda and the stupa constructed at the spot where Sariputra took birth and died. But, it was not until much later that Nalanda acquired its outstanding position. In the 7th century A.D. when, during the reign of Emperor Harshavardhan, Huan-Tsang came to India, Nalanda was at the height of its glory. Referring to a *Jataka* story Huan-Tsang writes that it derived its name from *Na-alam-Da*, the peace of mind which Lord Buddha failed to achieve in his previous births. However, the gift of knowledge is, by its very nature, so inexhaustible that neither the giver nor the recipient can ever feel totally satisfied. The gift of money,

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no doubt, has its limits, but knowledge is free of any limits, and even one solitary individual can, by his sole effort, flood the whole earth by the light of his attainment. The urge, imperceptibly bound with the name of Nalanda, was not valid only for the past, but should also continue to inspire in future the newly established Magadh Research Institute. We should resolve to pursue truth and present the results of our research to humanity, with an open mind.

Nalanda University was born with the help of liberal public charity and donations. It is believed to have been founded originally with an endowment created by 500 traders who purchased land with their money and offered it to Lord Buddha as a gift. By the time of Huan-Tsang's visit, Nalanda had become a full-fledged university and had, at that time, six large Viharas. The 8th century inscription of Yasoverman contains a telling description of Nalanda. The high spires of the Viharas, in a row, seemed to be sky high, and around them were tanks of clear water, in which floated red and yellow lotuses, interspersed by the cool shade of the mango groves. The architecture and the sculptures of the halls containing rich ornamentation and beautiful idols, filled one with wonder. Although there are many *sangharams* in India, but the one at Nalanda is unequalled. At the time of the Chinese traveller It-Sing's visit, there were 300 big rooms and eight halls. The remains discovered by archaeological excavations fully bear out the truth of these descriptions. The teachers and students at Nalanda were made completely free of economic worries. Besides the gifts of land and buildings, the revenue of 100 villages had been set apart, in the form of a Trust, to meet recurring expenditure. This property of the Trust had increased to 200 villages by the time of It-Sing's visit. The three States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal had taken considerable part in the building and financial maintenance of Nalanda University.

Copperplates and statues of the age of Maharaja Dharmapal Deva and Devapal Deva of Bengal have been found at Nalanda in the course of the archaeological excavations. One of these copperplates sheds light on the international relations maintained by Nalanda. We learn from it that Shri Balputra Deva, the Shailendra Emperor of Swarna Dwipa (now a part of Indonesia) had sent his envoy to Devapal Deva, the ruler of Magadha, with a request that he should make a gift of five villages to Nalanda on behalf of the former. According to this copperplate inscription, Balputra, the Emperor of Java, being deeply impressed by the achievement of Nalanda, had a large Vihara constructed here to give visible expression of his devotion to Lord Buddha. This is, but, an example that has survived

by sheer chance and which gives us an indelible impression of the glory which Nalanda enjoyed the world over. Indeed, the Nalanda Mahavihariya Arya Bhikshu Sangh was held in great esteem all over Asia. Many clay seals of this Sangh have been found at Nalanda.

At the time of Huan-Tsang's visit, Nalanda had 10,000 students and 1,500 teachers. From this, it is obvious that the teachers could pay individual attention to the education and training of their students. In fact, Nalanda was, then, only a centre of higher education, similar to the institute of post-graduate research which we are now proposing to establish here. Scholars from such distant countries as China, Korea, Tibet, Turkestan and Mongolia came to Nalanda to study and collect Buddhist literature. It had the biggest library in Asia. It was from Nalanda that copies of many manuscripts, through travelling pilgrims, reached China and were translated in Chinese. In a way, Nalanda had blossomed forth as a centre of higher learning, and it was considered a mark of honour to be associated with Nalanda. The citizens ensured the preservation of many a rare volume by getting copies and keeping them here for safe custody. When, in the 12th century, its library was destroyed, many of the manuscripts had, already, found their way to Nepal and Tibet, and many of these manuscripts are still intact there.

Without any reference to one particular religion, 100 lectures were delivered, every day, at Nalanda. Both Brahmanical and Buddhist literature, philosophy, sciences and art formed part of the syllabus of Nalanda University. A majority of the monks used to study the works on *Mahayana* and the other eighteen *Nikayas* of the Buddhist faith, but there also was provision for the study and teaching of the Vedas and allied literature. The liberalism practised by the educational authorities of Nalanda was unique and the seeds of Nalanda's rise and progress lay in the academic attitude which freely exposed itself to the religion and philosophy of all mankind, without any prejudice, whatsoever.

The syllabus of Nalanda University was drawn up with great wisdom, and by following it, students were increasingly successful in their daily life. It had made a study of five subjects compulsory: Grammar, by which one could get an adequate mastery of the language; Logic, which taught the student to judge every issue rationally; Medical Science, a study of which enabled the student to keep himself, as also others, in perfect health; and, lastly, handicrafts. Knowledge of one craft or another was compulsory to make the students financially independent. Besides these four subjects, Religion and Philosophy were studied, depending on one's

own special interest. The high ideal which Nalanda had set in the matter of the courses of study deserves our attention and consideration even now. It was this well co-ordinated course of studies which made the knowledge of its students both deeply penetrating and utilitarian in its practical application. Huan-Tsang studied Law, Yoga, Phonetics and Panini's Grammar at the feet of Acharya Shila Bhadra, the Chancellor of the University and after it, for a period of five years, read through many Buddhist works, and was specially interested in the works of *Mahayana*. Similarly, It-Sing, the Chinese traveller, studied books on *Therawad* at Nalanda.

Acharya Shila Bhadra was then considered to be the greatest authority on Yoga. Before him, Dharmapal was famous as the Chancellor of Nalanda. Shila Bhadra, Gyan Chandra, Prabha Mitra, Sthiramati, Gunamati and other learned teachers were contemporaries of Huan-Tsang. Even after he had returned to China, his close contact with his Indian friends continued as before. When he was leaving Nalanda, Acharya Shila Bhadra and other monks requested him to stay on. In reply Huan-Tsang said:—"It is impossible not to have deep affection for this land—the birthplace of Lord Buddha. But my only purpose in coming to this country was to make further research into the religion of the Lord so that I may benefit my fellow brethren. My visit to this place has proved of immense benefit to me, but on my return to China, I intend to benefit others through what I have learnt here, as also to use my knowledge for purposes of translation so that other men may also have for you the same gratitude which I feel towards you."

Even after Huan-Tsang's return to China, correspondence continued between him and Gyan Prabh, the chief disciple of Acharya Shila Bhadra. Of this correspondence, three letters still exist, which reveal that even subsequently, the scholars of Nalanda continued to send copies of Sanskrit works to China. On his return to China, Huan-Tsang spent the rest of his life in translating religious books of India into Chinese and in this, the literature from Nalanda occupied a prominent place. He has written that the Emperor of China himself wrote a preface to these translations and ordered the authorities to propagate these books in every country. The result of these worthy endeavours for which Chinese scholars and Indian scholars worked enthusiastically and unhampered by distances of place and time, was that about 2,000 books which were translated from original Sanskrit into Chinese are still intact in the Chinese *Tripit*, even though the Sanskrit originals are lost. I hope one of the objectives of the Institute we are establishing, today, would be to publish this Chinese literature in its Sanskrit form with Hindi translations. In order to have a extensive library like the

Ratna Sagar at Nalanda in Huan-Tsang's time, we would have to draw up a comprehensive plan to collect, on behalf of the Magadh Institute, all the Pali, Prakrit and Sanskrit original works, as also, works written on them in other languages; we must also resolve to implement that plan fully. This project can be completed only with the co-operation of the Government and the people.

The scholars of Nalanda carried the torch of knowledge to foreign countries. For instance, Strong Chan Gampo, the Emperor of Tibet, with a view to introducing and popularising Sanskrit script and the knowledge of India in his country, sent a scholar called Thonmi Sambhot, to Nalanda, where he studied Buddhistic and Brahmanical literature under Acharya Deva Vida Sinh. After this, in the 8th century A.D., Acharya Shanti Rakshit, the Chancellor of Nalanda University, went to Tibet in response to an invitation from the Emperor. Acharya Kamal Shila, the chief authority on Tantra Vidya also visited Tibet. Nalanda scholars learnt the Tibetan language and translated Buddhist and Sanskrit works into it. Thus, they presented an entirely new literature to Tibet and gradually converted its inhabitants to Buddhism. Acharya Shanti Rakshit of Nalanda established, for the first time, in 749 A.D., a Buddhist Vihar in Tibet. It is necessary that the books available in the *Tripitak* literature of Tibet, be translated, once again, into Sanskrit. They would not only shed new light on Indian history and culture, but would also help us to form a complete picture of the contribution made by Nalanda University in the pursuit of knowledge. Further, it is also believed that Korean scholars came to study *Vinaya* and *Abhidharma* at Nalanda. It is quite possible that Korean translations of original Sanskrit works may still be extant in Korea.

Besides being famous for its studies in literature and religion, Nalanda was also a centre of fine arts and influenced the art of Nepal, Tibet, Indonesia and Central Asia. The bronze statues of Nalanda are impressive and beautiful and scholars believe that statues of Buddha found at Kurkihar bear traces of the Nalanda school. It is true that the achievement of Nalanda was born of an all inclusive pursuit of knowledge in which Religion and Philosophy, language and handicrafts had equal importance. We should aim at reviving the educational system of a bygone age and re-establish Nalanda as a centre of art, literature, philosophy, religion and science. Cultural renaissance can come about in the life of nation only when a large number of determined scholars devote a life time to a search after truth. Though the Magadh Research Institute is still very young, but, moulded to the need of the age, it can be expected to develop into the centre we wish it to be.