

THE OLDEST UNIVERSITY IN THE WORLD

Nalanda, India

Nalanda attained the status of a sacred place not only in the eyes of Buddhists alone. It has often been mentioned in Buddhist and Jain literature. Sariputta, the chief disciple of Lord Buddha, was born near this place and the Buddha himself visited it on the way to and from Rajgir. The real importance of the place for Buddhists began with the establishment of the Nalanda University which became world famous on account of its galaxy of brilliant professors and high standard of teaching.

The actual date of the founding of the University is not known but it must have been about the beginning of the Christian era, as Nagarjuna, the famous founder of the Mahayana form of Buddhism, who lived in the second century A.D., is said to have studied here and later on became its principal. In the course of a few centuries Nalanda grew enormously and at a certain period, the students numbered no less than ten thousand. All necessary arrangements for their board, lodging and education were made by the University free of charge. This was made possible by the munificence of the ruling princes who made liberal endowments to this University. Among the Gupta Kings who supported the University was Sakraditya. According to Hsien Tsiang, he built here a monastery for the resident monks. His successors Buddhagupta, Tathagatagupta, Baladitya, Kumaragupta and Vijra also emulated his example by adding their monasteries.

Fa-Hien who visited India in the 5th century A. D. does not mention Nalanda University. Hsien Tsiang who came in the 7th century, however gives a vivid account of the place as a centre of learning. He spent about 7 years as a student of the University studying the different Buddhist Philosophical systems under his principal, Silabhadra.

By about the 8th century, Nalanda began to decline partly as a result of the vast political and other changes that were taking place in India. The final blow was delivered by invaders who were no respectors of other forms of religion. They not only drove away or killed the monks but also made it a point to set fire to the monasteries.

Objects of Interest

1. Stupas and Monasteries - It was in 1915 that the Archaeological Department commenced systematic excavation work and thus unearthed the wonderful monuments which have won today the admiration of the whole world. The ruins of Nalanda are very extensive and from a distance they appear as a great fortress. The general plan of the establishment was to have a row of chaityas and other public buildings on one side and just opposite them a row of monasteries and colleges running parallel. Some of these buildings are several storeys high and of enormous proportions. There are also several layers of buildings indicating the fact that the place was revived again and again by erecting new buildings on old foundations which have disappeared under the earth in the course of centuries. The summit of the stupa can be reached by a staircase which is also ancient. From the top, the visitor can obtain a panoramic view of the whole site. Further from the variety of sculpture and stucco figures round the stupa it is self evident that it is not one single structure but has been added to in different times. The sculpture belongs to the Gupta period and are some of the finest specimens extant. The main stupa is surrounded by a large number of votive stupas.

Inside the wooden shed on the north east of the main stupa is the fine figure of Avalokitesvara Bodhisatva. It is one of the biggest images found in the place. The image on the south east side is supposed to be that of Nagarjuna, the first principal of the University. The visitor should now proceed to the east and examine the various monasteries in that section. The monastery marked Number 1 is the most important. It is large and has no less than nine strata. The entrance is from the north wall. As one enters the monastery, one will notice the stone bases of pillars which supported a verandah round the courtyard. There is evidence to show that this monastery was once gutted down by a fierce fire. The lower stratum is probably the monastery built by the Sumatran King during the reign of King Devapala, the third King of the Pala dynasty (815 - 854 A.D.). This was a double storeyed building. The existence of upper and lower walls is explained by the fact that the upper monastery was erected on the ruins of the lower one. There must have been a colossal statue of the Buddha in the shrine.

Monastery site no. 4 is worth mentioning on account of two interesting features. The first is the opening in the wall adjoining the staircase. The second is the discovery of a coin belonging to the reign of King Kumara Gupta (413-455 A.D.) Passing through the monastery site No. 5, the

visitor reaches monastery No. 6, which has two brick courtyards. A peculiar feature of this monastery is the double set of ovens in the middle of the upper courtyard. It is not known for what purpose these were made. To the north-east of the monastery No. 7, is the stone temple site No. 2. This is interesting on account of the line of 211 sculptured panels over the moulded plinth of the 6th or 7th century. These panels contain many different scenes such as human beings in different postures, Kinnaras playing on instruments, makras, the God Agni Kuvera, Gajalakshmi, Kartiyeka on his peacock etc. Among the jatakas represented here is the Kacchpa jataka.

We now turn back and reach the monastery site No. 8. The features of this monastery are the same as in others. In No. 9 there are six dye-containers in the courtyard. An underground drain runs the whole length of the courtyard. Then we come to the 10th and 11th monastic sites. The 10th site is interesting on account of the use of arches for doors. Mud mortar is used here in a clever manner.

To the north of chaitya No. 3, is chaitya No. 12. The stupa is most interesting as its walls contain niches and pilasters of various designs which enhance its beauty. All these niches contained images but only a few remain at present. Again to the north of the chaitya we come across another numbered 13. To the east of this stupa is a courtyard where there was formerly a shrine. At present there are no objects of interest except a few votive stupas. This site is however important on account of the discovery of a furnace to manufacture metal images. Chaitya No. 14 is interesting as it contains the pedestal of an image with fragments of paintings. There must have been a colossal image on the pedestal.

Archaeological Museum - In the museum valuable images, coins and plaques discovered at the site are now safely housed. The antiques kept in the museum can be classified under the following heads:-

1. The inscriptions,
2. Images,
3. Sealings and plaques and
4. Pottery.