

NALANDA : ANCIENT SEAT OF LEARNING

Dr Rajendra Prasad

*RAJENDRA PRASAD (1884 -1962), born in Zeradei, Bihar, was the first President of the Republic of India. As President, he had moderating influence on the political thinking of the period. He also shared Gandhiji's great vision – the making of a new man in society. A living embodiment of 'plain living and high thinking', Dr Prasad, was a statesman, scholar, historian, educationist, lofty idealist, social reformer and above all, great constructive thinker. The speech 'Nalanda: Ancient Seat of Learning', taken from *Speeches of President Rajendra Prasad vol I*, was delivered by Dr Rajendra Prasad at the foundation-stone-laying ceremony of Magadh Research Institute, Nalanda, on November 20, 1951. In this speech, Dr Prasad enunciates the past glory of the Nalanda University, and pleads for its revival. His emphasis on the perfectly harmonious relationship between the guru and the shisya for imparting and receiving of knowledge is of particular interest today.*



A. Work in small groups and answer these questions orally:

1. Who was Dr Rajendra Prasad?
2. When and where was he born?
3. What is his contribution to the nation?
4. Where is Nalanda? What was it famous for in the past?

NALANDA : ANCIENT SEAT OF LEARNING

1. 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.

2. 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 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 14 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 Ashoka who enlarged it by installing a temple around it.
3. Though tradition associates Nalanda with Lord Buddha and Emperor Ashoka, yet it emerged as a flourishing university sometime in the Gupta Age. Taranath maintains that both Bhikshu Nagarjuna and Arya Deva were associated with Nalanda University and says further that Acharya Dingnag visited Nalanda and had a scholarly discussion. In the 4th century AD, Fa-Hien, a Chinese **pilgrim**, visited Nalanda and saw 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 AD when, during the reign of Emperor Harshavardhan, Hieun T'sang came to India, Nalanda was at the height of its glory. Referring to a *Jataka* story, Hieun T'sang writes that it derived its name from *Nalam-Da*, the peace of mind, which Lord Buddha failed to achieve in his previous births.

4. 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 Hieun T'sang's visit, Nalanda had become a full-fledged university and had, at that time, six large *viharas*. The 8th century inscription of Yasovarman 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.

5. Copper-plates and statues of the age of Maharaja Dharmapal Deva and Devapal Deva of Bengal have been found at Nalanda in the course of archaeological excavation. One of these copper-plates 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 his copper-plate **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.

B.1. Answer the following questions briefly:

1. Why had people gathered in Nalanda?
2. What does Nalanda symbolise?
3. With which great religious teacher is Nalanda associated?
4. When did it emerge as a flourishing university?
5. How long did Lord Mahavira live in Nalanda?
6. Who was Lepa? What did he do with Lord Buddha?
7. Who was Fa-Hien? When did he visit Nalanda?
8. When did Hieun T' sang visit India? Why did he refer to a Jataka story?
9. How was Nalanda University born?
10. How many viharas did Nalanda have?
11. What arrangements were made to meet the recurring expenditure of the University?
12. Name the states that contributed to the maintenance of the Nalanda University.

6. At the time of Hieun T'sang's visit, Nalanda had 10,000 students and 1,500 teachers. From this, it is obvious that 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, Turkistan 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 **perseveration** 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 there.



7. 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 18 *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 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.

8. 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. Hicun T'sang 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 *Therawada* at Nalanda....
9. 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 Thonim Sambhot, to Nalanda, where he studied Buddhist and Brahmanical literature under Acharya Deva Vida Sinh. After this, in the 8th century AD, 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 AD, a Buddhist vihar in Tibet. It is necessary that the books available in the *Tripitakar* 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 the *Vinaya* and *Abhidharma* at Nalanda. It is quite possible that Korean translations of original Sanskrit works may still be extant in Korea.

10. 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.
11. We should aim at reviving the educational system of a **bygone era** 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 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.

B.2. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. How many students and teachers were at Nalanda University When Hieun T'sang visited?
2. How was the pupil teacher ratio significant?
3. Name the countries from where the scholars came to study and collect Buddhist literature?
4. What kind of library did Nalanda possess?
5. When was it destroyed?
6. What kind of library is there in your school/ college?
7. How did several manuscripts survive?
8. How many lectures were delivered daily at Nalanda?
9. What was so unique about the academic attitude at Nalanda? How does it compare with the academic attitude at your school/college?
10. How many subjects were made compulsory?
11. What appeal does Dr Rajendra Prasad make to the people?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

renowned (adj): well-known, famous

symbol (n): emblem

quest (n): pursuit, search

blossom (v): flourish, develop

racial distinctions (np): ethnic or cultural differences

consciousness (n): awareness, experience

realm (n): field, ambit

pilgrim (n): traveller

telling (adj): impressive, powerful

remains (n): relics

archaeological excavations: digging ancient sites to find relics of the past to study ancient culture and civilization

envoy (n): emissary, ambassador

inscription (n): writing, script

devotion (n): dedication

indelible (adj): impossible to remove

perseveration (n): conservation

bygone (adj): past

era (n): age

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. Describe, after Dr Rajendra Prasad, the academic activities at Nalanda. Assess the activities at your school/ college in the light of the academic activities at Nalanda.
2. 'The syllabus of Nalanda University was drawn with great wisdom.' Explain.
3. Why were the students of Nalanda University increasingly successful in their daily life? How did the syllabus of Nalanda University help its students? Do you find your syllabus helpful to you? Evaluate your own syllabus in the light of the syllabus of Nalanda University.
4. What do the copper plates tell about the international relation maintained by Nalanda? Describe in details.
5. What have been found in the archaeological excavation in Nalanda? What do they suggest? Explain.
6. How did the scholars of Nalanda carry the torch of knowledge to foreign courtiers? Give details.
7. "Nalanda is the symbol of the most glorious period of our history". How? Explain.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

- a. There are no national and racial distinctions in the realm of knowledge.
- b. Education is must for a fruitful life.

C. 3. COMPOSITION

- a. Write a letter in about 150 words to a Japanese pen friend describing the centres of learning in ancient and medieval India.
- b. Prepare a speech **on the Importance of library** in about 200 words to be delivered at the annual function of your school/college.

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Look up a dictionary and find out how these words are different from one another

charity donation endowment

Ex. 2. Use the words given in 'Ex.1' in sentences of your own.

D.2. Word-meaning

Ex. 1. Write the synonyms of the words given below:

disciple
 resolve
 pursue
 resolve
 inscription
 inspire
 attitude

Ex. 2. Write the antonyms of the following words

revive
 glory
 consciousness
 various
 liberalism
 prejudice

E. GRAMMAR

Study the following sentences from the lesson

- (a) *Lepa, a rich citizen of Nalanda, welcomed Lord Buddha.*
- (b) *The message of Nalanda was heard across the mountains and the ocean of the Asian main-land.*

The first sentence given above is in active voice, the passive equivalent of which would be:

Lord Buddha was welcomed by Lepa, a rich citizen of Nalanda.

The second sentence is in the passive voice; its active equivalents would be:

They heard the message of Nalanda across the mountains and the ocean of the Asian main-land.

Ex.1. Now change the voice of the following sentences:

- (i) Emperor Ashoka enlarged the samadhi of Sariputra.
- (ii) Acharya Dignag visited Nalanda.
- (iii) The revenue of 100 villages had been set apart to meet the recurring expenses.
- (iv) Copperplates have been found at Nalanda.
- (v) The syllabus of Nalanda University was drawn up with great wisdom.

F. ACTIVITY

1. Make a list of the words of Indian languages in Dr Prasad's speech and find out their meanings.
2. Take help from your teacher or reference books to find out the difference between syllabus and curriculum.
3. Take help from your history teacher and/or consult library to do the following:
 - a. Write a short report on the present condition of Nalanda.
 - b. Where is Vikramshila? Write a short report on its importance.
 - c. Where is Takhseela? Why is it famous? Write a short report.

