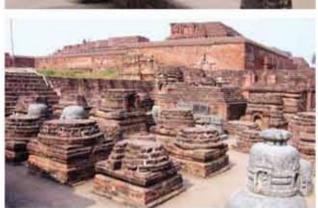
New Delhi, December 15, 2013







THE LEGACY



At its prime, Nalanda had 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers from across the world and the education imparted here was free of cost. SOMEN SENGUPTA has more to say

n 1861, while excavating an enormous mound almost submerged in the ground and covered with wild vege tation in a nondescript village of Bihar, named Bargaon, a British archeologist suddenly found several plaques with an inscription written as "Nalanda Mahavihara Arya Vikshu Sanghasya". Alexander Cunningham, the legendary director of Archeological Survey of India, soon announced that the travelogues of Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang were not mere a figment of imagination. Once there really stood a gigantic university called Nalanda.

Nalanda Mahavihara was the world's first international residential university which flourished due to the patronage of various Indian kings as well as the rulers of Java and Sumatra. For more than 600 years, Nalanda played : important role in spreading education and ideas across Asia. In 1193, before it finally burnt down by barbaric Islamic invaders who had no respect for other religions, Nalanda was a giant institution. Indeed the word "naalam" means lotus or wisdom and "da" means "giver". So, it means a place which provides wisdom.

History takes us back to the sixth century to remind us of one Kumargupta who was the first known patron of Nalanda. It, however, took the shape of a vibrant university during the reign of the legendary Harsha of Kannauj (606-647 AD). Last, it was backed by the Pala dynasty that ruled Bengal and Bihar. So, the university was funded by both Hindu and Buddhist kings in different centuries. Interestingly, the Palas provided patronage to three more universities — Vikramshila and Odantapuri in Bihar, and Somapura Mahavihar in

Paharpur (now in Bangladesh). All these universities had a common network leading to regular exchange of student, teachers, books and many more. As per Tibetan sources, at one time Vikramshila gave a serious competition to Nalanda.

of Nalanda was just unimagin-

able. It had 10,000 students and

At its apex, the infrastructure

2,000 teachers from India, China, Tibet, Siam, Persia, Korea, Java, Sri Lanka, Japan, Sumatra, Nepal and Greece. The education was free of cost as the revenue collected from 200 villages were meant for its expenses. Its campus was always agog with vibrant intellectual discussions and debates. All subjects that were relevant in that era - theology, logic, mathematics, philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, astrology, tantra, medicine, language, etc - were taught. The admission systematical was strict and a student was only allowed if he could satisfy the gatekeepers with his merit and intellectual vibes. One Nagarjuna was the first principal of this university. Vasubandhu, Asanga, Silabhadra, Dharmakriti and Aryadeva were some of the eminent teachers of this institution. Even Hiuen Tsang taught here after completing his education.

There were 11 hostels with more than 3,000 residential rooms. It had a central assembly hall with various prayer halls and votive stupas almost everywhere. There were parks, pavements, rest halls and water canals flowing inside of the campus, which also had a central kitchen. A student's room had stone bed, locker and book shelves with a provision of meditation. The central library was nine-storied and had some of the finest Buddhist and Hindu literary manuscripts. Such was the collection of this library that it

NALANDA MAHAVIHARA WAS THE WORLD'S FIRST INTERNATIONAL RESIDENTIAL UNIVERSITY WHICH FLOURISHED DUE TO THE PATRONAGE OF VARIOUS INDIAN KINGS AS WELL AS THE RULERS OF JAVA AND SUMATRA

took Muslim invaders six month to burn it down completely.

The decline of Nalanda started during the early 11th century when the influence of tantra engulfed Buddhism, especially in Tibet, Nepal, Bihar and Bengal. After the decline of the Pala dynasty, the Senas came to rule Bengal; they more sympathetic towards Hinduism. The final nemesis came in 1193 when Bakhtiyar Khilji, one of the generals of Qutb-ud-din Aibak, invaded east and destroyed Nalanda and Vikramshila. It is said most of the students and monks were burnt alive or beheaded .The entire complex was vandalised beyond imagination. The library building, with invaluable manuscripts, was set on fire. Only few were salvaged by some monks who fled to Nepal, Tibet and south India. Overnight a glorious history of 700 years was destroyed and buried.

People soon forgot this great institution, which was discovered as late as in the early 19th century. The rediscovery of Nalanda is a watershed in our history and we must be indebted to our former rulers for this. Ever since the university was destroyed, the entire area was deserted and soon the complex went under deep jungle. Even the name Nalanda was forgotten and a village named Bargaon came up. Around 1820, British geographer Buchanan Hamilton visited Bargaon village and found many Hindu and Buddhist stone images scattered all over the place. Based on his study, Sir Cunningham did scientific excavation in 1861. He explored countless number of inscriptions, coins, copper plates, statues, etc.

This was followed by many other excavations - first in 1872 and then in a bigger way from

1915 to 1936. In each of these excavations, a plethora of artifacts like Buddhist and Hindu images, coins, inscriptions, copper plates, murals, plaques, university seal, murals, terracotta, etc, were found. Most of these are today kept at Patna, Nalanda and Calcutta museums. Post-Independence, between 1974 and 1982, another round of excavation was conducted in Nalanda. What we see today is not even

a pale shadow of its original glory. Yet, the central mound — known as temple 3 - built in the Kushan architectural style makes us euphoric. Apart from this, we find an amalgamation of two different architectural schools - classical Gupta and Pala. The huge central brick mound is surrounded with decorated votive stupas. It was built in seven phases. It was a typical Pancharatna style of architecture where the central building was surrounded by four subsidiary smaller temples in each corner. There is a large chamber which might have contained a Buddha statue. Most of the stupas are embellished with curving in stucco or terracotta. Buddha in various forms performing a penance-like lotus position or bhumisparsha is the main subject of all statues. Still almost every small chapel contains half-broken Buddha statue. The basement of ruined hostel with stone beds of the students in quadrangle cells and their recreation places are really amazing.

So in its town planning, Nalanda was a masterpiece. It is a testimony to the quality of life and wisdom that India offered to the mankind in an era when most of the contemporary civilisations were still in their primitive stages. No wonder, Nalanda is today an UNESCO world heritage site and a place one must necessarily visit.

Confines of the creator

Pushkar in Rajasthan witnesses a constant flow of visitors throughout the year. After all, this is the only place where Lord Brahma has temples dedicated to him, says NAVNEET MENDIRATTA



ell hath no fury as a woman scorned. This adage couldn't have fit anywhere better than in the case of Lord Brahma himself. For it was the wrath of his wife that ensured that the creator of the world (according to Hindu mythology) has only one temple dedicated to him in the whole world!

And that is what makes Pushkar, a sleepy town in Rajasthan, so famous with tourists and the Hindus. The other reason is the biggest five-day annual cattle and livestock fair in the world that is held here at the village grounds and attracts over a million people from all over the world. The snake charmers, men competing for the longest moustache, women on a husbandhunting mission and photographers looking for the best shot of their lifetime - it all appears like a colourful scene straight out of a fantasy movie.

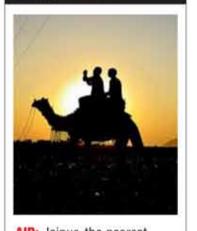
Sister! do you want a guide to how you around? Only at ₹20.. markets a young guide. Another little kid nudges at my bag. I look down severely at the two boys, not giving in and pretending every bit to not look like a tourist I am. All in vain. There is no way I can do that, only maintain that this in not my first time in the temple town. "It's afternoon. Siesta time for the gods. What would you show me about the temple?" I quiz him. The boys give up known that their bluff has been called off.

Instead, I trudge down the road leading to the main bazaar, scouting for beautiful stuff to shop. The temple gates would reopen in another half an hour. I make a mental note to come back.

Located in the Ajmer district of Rajasthan, Pushkar is one of the five sacred dhams or pilgrimage sites for devout Hindus. The sacred waters of its lake are considered to be at par with the waters of the Mansarovar lake that is situated on way to Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva. It is said that Brahma performed penance here for 60,000 years. The Pushkar lake has 52 ghats where pilgrims descend to the lake to bathe in the sacred waters.

The first Sikh guru, Guru Nanak is believed to have bathed here and the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh is said to have visited Pushkar in 1705. Guru Gobind Singh Ghat is named after him. The markets sell traditional Rajasthani wares and I happily splurge only to return to the temple well in time for the evening aarti ...

Accommodation is not an issue in this temple town. There are lodgings to suit every pocket - some in the main city overlooking the lake and the others scattered in the town and built on lavish expanse of scrubland. Pushkar reminds you of being a hill town without being one going by the winding roads. Separate temples of Brahma's two consorts are situated on two separate hillocks and appear to be looking over" the God, making sure he makes no further mischief. It is said that one must visit the two temples for their visit to be considered successful. My chosen weekend destination is Orchard, an exclusive tented resort run by the Eastbound Group. It is actually an *aamla* orchard and houses 11 air-conditioned tents (each about 600 sq ft, with a living area, dressing room, bedroom, bathroom and a verandah). The bathrooms are permanent structures equipped with modern amenities.



AIR: Jaipur, the nearest airport is 138 km. RAIL: Ajmer is connected to Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Udaipur, Abu Road and Jodhpur by regular trains. Two of the best trains of the Indian Railways, Pink City Express and Shatabdi Express, connect Ajmer to Delhi and Jaipur.

ROAD: It is well connected by surface transport. Jaipur is 138 km and Delhi 392 km from Pushkar.

Well into my second day, back after a good walk to see the sunset, I am torn between crashing out on the welcoming bed inside the cool room and venturing out to explore the baag. I would have given in to the temptation had it not been for a call that pulled me to the "window". From the jharokha, I could see peacocks calling out to each other. It is such a rare sight, even at any offbeat destination, that I found it tough to break away. Not at least till there was a knock at the door, summoning me for the evening snacks and a dance show.

Pushkar being a religious city (teerth sthan) is strictly vegetarian. Alcohol is also prohibited. This results in the chef offering us indigenous Rajasthani fare to make up for any limitation in food experience. The dance show was the traditional Kalbelia performed by the locals, complete with the blow-fire act. The guests happily joined the belles, aping their thumkas minus any attempt to dance with the matkas. It's good to know one's limitations.

The dinner was served al fresco around the bonfire. It being a particularly warm day, I chose to move in to the Golghar, or a circular tent that serves as dining space, offering a 360 degree view of the orchards during the day. I am told it gets very busy during the fair, when the accommodation is tough to find. But that is another couple of weeks to go. Till then, it is best to soak in the silence and bird calls..

Copyright: Exotica, the wellness and lifestyle magazine from The Pioneer Group, available in all rooms of select five-star hotel chains

Rise of an assertive China

hina, by virtue of its offensive posturing, has triggered a chain of responses from regional players. Japan has stepped up air surveillance in the East China Sea by stationing E-2C airborne early-warning aircraft at the Naha base in the Okinawa region and intensifying the use of unmanned Global Hawk aircraft. Tensions in the region are certainly rife with responses to declaration of the ADIZ including two US B-52 bombers sent in from the military base in Guam flowing through the Chinese ADIZ over the Senkaku Islands without identifying themselves/notification to Chinese authorities — something that China would have expected under the new regulations. Washington appears to be sending a clear signal to Beijing regarding its treaty commitments to
Tokyo. Besides, the US Navy's first two
advanced P-8A Poseidon patrol aircraft have already arrived in Japan. Equipped with the latest radar equipment and armed with torpedoes and anti-ship missiles, the P-8A has greater capacity to stay out on a mission for much longer than



the Lockheed Martin P-3 Orion patrol aircraft. Another batch of four P-8As is expected to arrive in another few days.

It would be known as time flows by whether Chinese declaration of this air defence identification zone hold much ground, or is it mere political and military symbolism to placate rising domestic nationalist responses. Given that this decision comes in soon after the recent

conclusion of the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing, which set forth a grand agenda for reform including national security, it might just be that Xi Jinping's administration is pitching for domestic support on its foreign

There can, however, be no denying that the announcement of an air defence ority and leverage in existential territor-ial and boundary disputes and simulta-neously expand Beijing's long-term access to the Western Pacific. China's unbridled politico-strategic assertiveness has been witnessed on multiple fronts simultaneously, including provocations that led to a protracted border standoff with India in the eastern Ladakh region. Although China has denied the possibility of establishing an air defence identification zone near the contested areas along India's borders, it would come in as no surprise that Beijing ultimately decides to set up such an identification zone close to India's borders, primarily because China has explicitly assured that following the East China Sea ADIZ, it will establish other zones "at the right time after necessary preparations" are completed.

identification zone is part of China's

larger anti-access/area-denial strategy that would aid in establishing its superi-

The writer is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi, where she heads the China-study programme