



ALEXANDER CUNNINGHAM WAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE EXCAVATION OF MANY SITES IN INDIA, INCLUDING SARNATH, SANCHI AND MAHABODHI TEMPLE. HE IS KNOWN AS THE FATHER OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

# 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



## GETTING THERE



**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 *gharokha*, 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.

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# THE LEGACY OF WISDOM



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

In 1861, while excavating an enormous mound almost submerged in the ground and covered with wild vegetation in a nondescript village of Bihar, named Bargaon, a British archaeologist suddenly found several plaques with an inscription written as "Nalanda Mahavihara Arya Vikshu Sanghasya". Alexander Cunningham, the legendary director of Archaeological Survey of India, soon announced that the travelogues of Chinese traveller Hsien 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 an 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 "nalam" 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.

At its apex, the infrastructure of Nalanda was just unimaginable. It had 10,000 students and 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 system 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, Dharmakirti and Aryadeva were some of the eminent teachers of this institution. Even Hsien 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

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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 *bhumisparsa* 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.

FROM PAGE 1

# Rise of an assertive China

China, 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 policy agenda.

There can, however, be no denying that the announcement of an air defence

identification zone is part of China's larger anti-access/area-denial strategy that would aid in establishing its superiority and leverage in existential territorial and boundary disputes and simultaneously 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.

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