



Revival of Nalanda University

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Abstract

Eight hundred years after the destruction of Nalanda, former president of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, while addressing the Bihar state legislative assembly, in March 2006 mooted the idea of reviving the university. Almost simultaneously, a proposal termed the 'Nalanda Proposal' was forwarded to government of India by Singapore. This proposal sought the re-establishment of a University like Nalanda which would once again be the focal point of Asia. The state government of Bihar quickly adopted the visionary idea and consulted the government of India on the way ahead. It also began its search for a suitable location for the new Nalanda University. It identified and acquired 450 acres of land for the university in Rajgir, Bihar. The establishment of this university was thus marked by a high degree of co-operation between the state of Bihar and the government of India.

Since the hallmark of the ancient Nalanda was its internationalism, the government of India decided to share this proposal with the leaders of the East Asia Summit ('EAS'). The proposal was first shared with the sixteen members' states of the EAS at the cebu summit in Philippines in January 02007. The member states welcomed the regional initiative for the revival of Nalanda University. At the fourth Summit held in October 2009, at Hua Hin, Thailand members supported the establishment of the Nalanda University and encouraged regional networking and collaboration between the University and existing centre's of excellence in East Asia.

Keywords: revival, establishment, networking, excellence

Introduction

The proposed revival of the once world-renowned Nalanda University is taking place in Bihar, one the most backward provinces of India. Moreover, despite long-standing hostility between China and Japan and between China and India, the proposal enjoys extensive support from the most powerful countries of Asia - China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and India. Though the idea of reviving this ancient University was initiated in the late 1990s, it picked up momentum in February 2006 when the former Indian President A P J Abdul Kalam suggested taking up to the idea again to his counterpart in Singapore. Since then a partnership of Asian countries, especially Singapore, China, Japan and South Korea have played active roles in reviving the university. The leaders of Singapore and South Korea, during their bilateral discussions on the sidelines of the second East Asia Summit, decided to support the efforts to revive the University^[1].

Now the question arises as to why are seemingly hostile countries of the Asia-Pacific working together to translate this programme into reality by 2009. Is it only about the revival of an ancient Buddhist University in India or a part of larger politico-strategic calculations based on culture-driven soft-power diplomacy. Does their involvement have any bearing on their foreign policy objectives. Is culture becoming an important conduit of international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific or is it being pushed forth to secure strategic ambitions in the region. In order to address these questions it is important to understand the politico-strategic considerations of major payers involved in the revival programme. Before examining the strategic imperatives of each player, it is important to know what Nalanda University signifies and

what its revived shape and structure is going to be.

Historical significance of the university

Built in the 4th Century A.D. by Kumargupta, a ruler of the Gupta dynasty in ancient India, Nalanda University is considered to have been the most famous academic institution of its time in the world. The significance of this university emanates from its international outlook, contribution to the spread of Buddhism in Asia, and the academic scope and range of studies.

As a completely residential academic institution, the Nalanda University gained an international outlook and drew students and scholars from almost every part of Asia with its total intake of approximately 10,000. These students, after returning to their respective countries, spread Mahayana Buddhism in different parts of Southeast and East Asia. Fa-Hsien, who received Buddhist knowledge at Nalanda University in 5th century A.D., spread Buddhism in China while serving at the royal court of Sung Dynasty of China^[2]. Besides establishing links between India and China, Fa-Hsien also translated and preserved Buddhist texts, a trend continued and furthered by Hsieu Tsang. In fact, Hsieu Tsang has proved to be an important link in the scholarship of Nalanda and the spread of Buddhism in East Asia. He visited India in 7th century A.D., and studied and taught in Nalanda University for twelve years. He translated and brought Buddhist Sutras, the basic canonical books of Buddhism, back to China and also spread Buddhism in his home country^[3]. In fact, Hsieu Tsang's writings are one of the most authoritative literary sources on ancient India and the spread of Buddhism in Asia.

Emerging Structures of the University

With the idea of keeping its international outlook of ancient times, the Indian government has formed an 11 member 'Nalanda Mentor Group (NMG)'; headed by the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen with the mandate of discussing the administrative structure of the university, academic curricula and funding for the university. The NMG - comprised of internationally-known scholars and intellectuals and political leaders, and bureaucrats - held its first meeting on 13-14 July 2007 in Singapore and released a nine-point press statement laying out the primary objectives of the proposed university, curriculum development and securing international support in setting up the university and its future maintenance^[4]. The NMG has decided to set up an 'Advisory Council' of scholars from Thailand, Sri Lanka, China, South Korea and India to further streamline the curriculum and academic structure of the university^[5]. The NMG will hold three more meetings in Tokyo, Beijing and Bihar before submitting its report to the Indian government in 2008.

The Indian government, with the help of other partner countries, has decided to develop a US\$ 1 billion corpus fund to be used for the university's construction and administrative management. Out of this sum, half will be spent on infrastructure development and the other half on maintenance^[6]. The Indian government is planning to set up an Asian Consortium led by Singapore, to oversee the collection. N K Singh, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Board of Bihar stated, "Singapore can play the role of facilitator a catalyst in being able to garner support of countries in this region. Other countries of Southeast and East Asia have also agreed to contribute to the revival of Nalanda.

The NMG has already suggested a tentative administrative structure for the university, though it will become concrete only after the submission of its report. An internationally known scholar will be the chancellor of the university, overseeing the work of four hundred teachers, including forty-six scholars from outside India and 6,000 students from within and outside India^[7]. The university will be spread over 200 acres of land, which has already been acquired by the provincial government of Bihar through the necessary legislation^[8]. The total student enrollment will be 1,100 students in the first year and will reach 4,500 students in five years^[9].

The NMG, in its Press Statement, outlined five important areas of study. These are:

- Philosophy and Buddhist Studies;
- Regional History (focusing on Comparisons and Connections among Asian Countries fostered through culture and trade);
- Business and Management Studies;
- International Relations and Peace Studies; and
- Study of Languages including Asian Languages, both classical and modern, as well as linguistics^[10].

Nalanda as an instrument of soft-power diplomacy

Defining soft power as 'co-optive power' the ability of a country to get others do what it wants- Joseph S Nye, Jr. identifies soft power as non-material or intangible resources of power, such as culture, ideology or institutions^[11]. In contrast to coercion, soft power rests on attraction value and universal

acceptability. Given the difficulties and growing opposition to the application of hard power - military and economic strength - in an interconnected and interdependent global society of the 21st century, countries have begun to rely more on soft-power diplomacy to achieve their foreign policy objectives^[12].

Nalanda represents the entire Buddhist world and therefore can facilitate cooperation at the much wider geographical scale of Eastern Asia.

However, in order to truly understand the underlying objectives of various players in reviving the University of Nalanda, it is important to understand as to how each player approaches the issue and how they want to use Nalanda to further their politico-strategic interests.

India's two-fold agenda: East Asian integration local development

India's initiatives for the revival of Nalanda University are driven by two overriding concerns - greater integration with the East Asian community and attracting foreign investment for local development, especially in infrastructure. The politico-cultural integration agenda, which forms a key component of India's Look East Policy (LEP), has been articulated by the central Indian government. The central government identifies Nalanda as a platform from which it can project the idea of shared culture, shared interests and mutual understanding of the strategic atmosphere in the Asia-Pacific. While giving an update on the progress in the revival efforts, Pranab Mukherjee emphasized that that the Nalanda University Project "will rekindle ancient links between East and South Asia and will help us come closer together^[13]."

The provincial government of Bihar has focused more on the development of its economically backward but historically and culturally important places, such as Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, and Nalanda. Nalanda has figured prominently in its explanations for the revival of Nalanda University. Laying emphasis on the development aspect of Nalanda revival programme, N K Singh, argues that the Nalanda project is "part of a larger vision to develop the infrastructure of Bodh Gaya, Gaya, Nalanda and Rajgir as a region to attract the pilgrim, the tourist." and build "Brand Bihar by harnessing the goodwill generated by the project." The local development element was echoed also when Abdul Kalam identified the revival of Nalanda as one of the ten visions for development of Bihar in his address to the joint session of provincial legislature in March 2006^[14].

China's agenda of positive image construction and engaging India

Chinese participation in the rehabilitation of Nalanda is a projection of its peaceful rise and growing engagement with India. During the last few years, China has been presenting itself as a responsible player and positive force in Asia through soft-power diplomacy.

While China's peaceful rise approach offers conceptual justification for Chinese support to the Nalanda project, the Chinese policy of engaging India as civilization forces offers the practical thrust. Taking part in the formal inauguration of the Xuan Zang Memorial Hall in Nalanda in February 2007, Ye Xiaowen, the Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs in China, Stressed the important role of

Buddhism in establishing communication between the two countries in the past, present and future^[15].

Conclusion

It is obvious that major impetus to the involvement of important players in the revival of Nalanda has come from different politico-strategic considerations. Emerging as an important example of soft-power diplomacy, Nalanda offers a multi-focal template of regional cooperation, cultural assertion and integration, geopolitical rivalries, and normalization of long-standing bilateral hostile relationship. However, amidst all these discourses of politico-strategic equations and the use of Nalanda as an instrument of soft power diplomacy, there is a growing fear of losing out the very essence of the entire exercise - developing a world-class academic institution in Asia, which can parallel Harvard, Oxford or Cambridge in the Western world. The academic discourse has its own narrators, a few in number and scattered all over the world. This discourse stands apart despite the focus on the politico-strategic underpinnings of the revival of Nalanda. Scholars and intellectuals, both from the West and the East, put forth a common agenda - develop Nalanda as a world-class centre for learning. For them, Nalanda is the first comprehensive and institutionalized human endeavour towards scientific learning, cutting across boundaries and empires.

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