

Studies in Medicine at Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra: An Introduction

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Abstract

Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra was a symbol of monastic, organized and institutional learning in ancient India. It provided instruction to all in Buddhist religion and philosophy. Nationalist historians claimed that Nālandā's curriculum incorporated both religious and secular subjects and Medicine was one of the popular courses here. The present research critically examines this popular conception and investigates how popular was studied medicine at Nālandā. It seems that studies in medicine at Nālandā was not serious about religion and philosophy and concentrated on minor health problems of its monks and residents. The disciplined and simple life of residents keep them healthy and the medical studies did not play that much important role in the life of the campus.

KEYWORDS: Mahāvihāra, Medicine, Āyurveda, Organized Studies, Curriculum, Ovens

Education in early India seems related to the contemporary polity and religion, also reflected needs and aspirations of the society. In terms of its growth and according to the inherited traditional centers, the early Indian education system can be classified into two categories— the pre-Nālandā and the Nālandā education systems. Both served the literacy need of Indians simultaneously almost till the middle age. The unorganized pre-Nālandā education was the dominant feature of the Vedic age and later the Nālandā pattern of learning became popular. The pre-Nālandā system revolved around the Brāhmanical learning centers, which symbolizes the *gurukula* pattern. The Nālandā learning apparatus followed the Buddhist style of learning, which was imparted through its monasteries. This scheme made a modest beginning of institutionalized education, which can be compared to the modern university pattern up to an extent. Especially, the first generation of nationalist historians like S. C Sircar, A. S. Altekar, R K. Mookerji, S. K. Das, H. N. Sastri, N. N. Mazumder projected these Buddhist monasteries especially Nālandā as the first international university. The famous large monasteries of ancient India were Nālandā, Vikramāśīlā, Odantapurī, and Valabhī etc. Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra was the coordinator of this *mahāvihāras* or monastic education.

Prominently discussed in the mainstream of Indian historical writing is the pre-Nālandā or the *gurukula* (the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* or the *ācārya-kula-s*) system of education. This system created, preserved and imparted knowledge by the posterity of saints at their temporary homes, situated not far from the populated residential areas. The learning system of *gurukulas* was based on fixed tenures, almost similar to present-day semester pattern. Keeping the contemporary events in mind, the curriculum of the *ācārya-kula-s* was reviewed. Till the time of Sutra Age (c. 400-200 B.C.), the course of study included the four Vedas along with six *Aṅgas* and some esoteric treaties, such as the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Aranyakas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and so on. Several other independent and allied sciences, such as Philosophy, Yoga, Medicine, Astronomy, Arithmetic, and Music etc. were also added. Strabo says, “The Indians do not pursue accurate knowledge in any line, except medicine”.ⁱ Āyurveda medicine was one of the most important programs of study at Taxila where Caraka taught and practiced in the first century.ⁱⁱ Studies and

practices of medicine got well established and recognized in the *gurukula* system of learning attested by the composition of several pieces of literature on this subject. The well-known text, *Carakasamhitā* is largely didactic, like a medical textbook, though the exhaustiveness of the content is nothing short of encyclopedic.ⁱⁱⁱ When the Pre-Nālandā education touched its height at Takṣaśīlā, it faced several problems with its consolidation. Although the Vedic education was imparted to all classes, in the beginning, the *Vaiśyas*, the *Śūdras*, and women were excluded from it in the post-Vedic age. Brāhmaṇas established a monopoly over the entire education system and used as a medium of dominance over the society through *gurukulas*. The failure of *gurukula* in providing education to all led to the evolution of Nālandā educational structure within monasteries encouraged by the rise of Buddhism.

It seems that during the time of Buddha, Nālandā was a well-developed and prosperous town with an adequate population.^{iv} Among the places where Buddha carried on his religious propaganda, Nālandā held a unique position. Many a time, with his favorite disciple Ananda, Buddha visited Nālandā and stayed at the Pāvārika mango-grove, where a small *vihāra* was constructed. Over the centuries, this same small *vihāra* got expanded into *mahāvihāra* with the generous support of the Gupta kings and got transformed into a temple of learning. Archaeologically, the successive levels of construction and enlargement of monasteries at Nālandā have been revealed belong to the age of Gupta and Pāla dynasties and till now the establishment date falls in the beginning of the fifth century, which might go back after more excavations. In fact, the favorable conditions of the contemporary polity, society, and religion stimulated the growth of Nālandā to its highest peak.^v Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra was suitable for *Śramaṇas* and *Brahmacārins* because it was situated a little further away from densely populated places, and yet it was not so far away from the easy reach of peoples. Nālandā also possessed other facilities like local market, natural defense, nearness to the capitals of empire i.e. Rājagṛha and Pātaliputra and abundance of foodstuffs etc. The climate of Nālandā, we learn from I-Tsing, was hot^{vi} and the one advantage of this was that the *Bhikkhus* did not require many garments.^{vii} These are some of the regional benefits why of all places in Magadha, Nālandā became a seat of monastic learning and received international acclaim.

Hiuen-Tsang gave the name of the royal founder of Nālandā as Śākrāditya. Śākrāditya was popularly known as Kumāragupta I, who reigned in 415-55 A.D. Successive Gupta Emperors like Buddhagupta, Purugupta, and Narasimhagupta went on constructing monasteries of their own on the different sides of the original structure, following the example set by Śākrāditya. After Vajra, we learn from Hiuen Tsang that a King of Central India built *asaṃghārāma* to the north of Vajra and an encircling with one gate.^{viii} King Harsavardhana appears to be the King of Central India.^{ix} The monastery of Nālandā came to the Pālas as a cultural legacy of the past, which they being Mahāyāna Buddhists were bound to cherish. Now it developed as a citadel of the Tantric cult.^x The first Pāla kings —Gopāla and then Dharmapāla, built monasteries here. Devapāla identifies himself with the cause of Nālandā and it was during his time that Nālandā emerged as a famous center of Buddhist learning.

The splendor and vastness of Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra emerged after the excavation of the site clearly reflecting its involvement in learning and teaching activities. Buddhist monasteries of India were no doubt a religious center assimilating every aspect of Buddhism but also served as an institution of learning same time, eye-witnessed by many Chinese and Tibetan travelers and described in their travelogues. Also, it is hard to

separate the literacy and the religion within Buddhist monasteries. In the light of archeological findings, the campus of Nālandā had revealed fourteen temples and thirteen monasteries^{xi} in opposite direction. The structure of the whole campus was well planned and arranged in such a way that students and teachers could do meditate and venerate along with their study whenever and wherever they want. Out of the total number of 10000 resident monks at Nālandā, as many as 1510 belonged to the rank of teachers.^{xii} The number of students residing at Nālandā counted to 10,000 by Hiuen Tsang^{xiii} while at the time of I-Tsiang, the number of students exceeded three thousand more.^{xiv} Basham believes that all these figures are not compatible with the finds of the excavations; he thinks the number could have exceeded 1000.^{xv} Hewing closer to the number given by I-Tsiang, Sankalia assumed approximately 4000 students lived at Nālandā. The fame of Nālandā attracted students and teachers from all parts of India as well as from abroad. Some of these came from China, Tibet, Mongolia^{xvi} and Korea.^{xvii} Again, we learn from I-Tsiang that after Hiuen Tsang's visit and before him, in the interval of about fifty years as many as fifty-six foreigner students and scholars visited India. There was no fixed period of residence and study. The learners according to the time taken by them to complete their study of subjects perhaps determined it. An example can be taken from Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsiang as they both studied *Yogācara* philosophy respectively in the period of five and ten years. All students and teachers lived in different monasteries in allotted room as a community within the campus, provided with free food, cloth and all kinds of stuff of daily needs from the administration. The monastic life was highly simple, spiritual, peaceful and moral. There were close touch and intimate relationship between the professors and the students. I-Tsiang observed, "I used to converse with teachers so intimately that I was able to receive invaluable instructions personally from them".^{xviii}

In Nālandā system of education, students were instructed in the varied branches of learning. It was build up on the previous well-developed system of elementary education inherited from the Vedic Age. The elements of both non-religious and religious knowledge, of philosophical and practical subjects, entered into the curriculum of Nālandā. Properly speaking, it comprises the study of the five subjects, viz. *Sabdavidyā* (grammar and lexicography), *Silpasthanavidyā* (arts), *Cikitsavidyā* (medicine), *Hetuvidyā* (logic), and *Adhyatmavidyā* (philosophy).^{xix} Hiuen Tsang also narrates that the students at Nālandā studied the Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna* Buddhism) and the works belonging to the eighteen sects. They also studied even ordinary works, such as the Vedas and other books, *Hetuvidyā*, *Sabdavidyā*, *Cikitsavidyā*, the works on Magic (*Atharvaveda*), *Samkhya*, and they thoroughly investigated the miscellaneous works.^{xx} The study of astronomy, law, mathematics, arts and medicine were also carried out at Nālandā. I will not go into the detail of all subjects studied since the article is focused on the practice and study of medicine at Nālandā. Let us explore more about medicine.

Chinese travelers Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsiang mention the study of medicine at Śrī Nālandā Mahāvihāra. Literarily, we can say that the medicine as a discipline was recognized at Nālandā and probably at other monasteries also. Archaeologically, this also might be evidenced from the findings of twin ovens from monastery six (**Plate I**). This is almost a common feature of all the monasteries of Nālandā. The excavations have revealed a number of ovens in the middle of the courtyard in many monasteries of Nālandā. The real purpose of these ovens was probably either indicates towards cooking food or chemical experiment or metal casting, which is hard to tell with conformity with available knowledge. It could have served the purpose of medicine preparation since sometimes herbs need to get boiled or cooked for making a medicine in Āyurveda. There

is evidence of *ayurvedic* thought, such as the physiologic notion of health problems in the Buddhist Pāli canon, the earliest portions of which possibly date to the time shortly after the death of Buddha. It looks like the study of Āyurveda medicine also promoted by the Gupta kings at Nālandā. Āyurveda began to take shape around the fourth to fifth century B.C. but the main works of medicine were written during the Gupta era. We know that the Gupta kings generously supported Nālandā, probably also because of the studies in medicine. The Sanskrit medical data of the *Carakasamhitā* have long been closely associated with the Buddhist monasteries and medical education centers of Taxila.^{xxi} Unfortunately, we do not have details of studies in medicine at Nālandā even in the travelogues of Chinese and Tibetans pilgrims, who have spent considerable time at Nālandā in getting instructions.

Plate I: A twin set of double ovens in monastery six



Source: A personal visit of the site

How seriously Nālandā studied medicine? Was it a popular subject? I-Tsiang mentions that he studied medicine at Nālandā but later he left because it was not so vocative. Nālandā was especially famed for philosophy and logic, Vikramaśīlā was well known for grammar and lexicography and Valabhī recognized for arts, architecture, and

medicine. The contemporary literature has referenced that north Indian people interested in the study of medicine used to travel far to western India at Valabhī. The aim of the Nālandā's education was the cultivation of a spiritual and moral life, which was impossible without a healthy physical life. Only a physically fit man can undertake an arduous journey to *Nibbana*. The science of medicine was perhaps taught with this view at Nālandā. Apart from this, the daily life of residents was disciplined to keep them healthy and fresh. An early morning bath and tooth cleansing by tooth wood (a small stick was taken out of a large piece of wood, or from a small stem of a tree, or a branch of an elm, or a creeper, if in the forest; of the paper mulberry, if in a field, a peach, a willow tree, etc.) were obligatory before salutation. These customs could not be taken at any time as one liked but only at the prescribed hour.^{xxii} Due to these customs, skin diseases and toothache were very rare. It looks like studies in medicine at Nālandā were focused on daily needs of the residents. Minor health problems and its solution were the aims and they might go outside for the treatment of serious diseases.

The above-mentioned medicine and also other courses were taught in Pāli with limited use of Sanskrit, which was a must language to be acquired before admission. One should also note the two basic types of exercises in all faculties, namely the lecture and the dispute. The former consisted of text reading with commentaries contained in the official syllabus that served as the base for each discipline. Every day about 100 pulpits for preaching at Nālandā was arranged and the students attended these discourses without any fail, even for a minute.^{xxiii} The platform with a number of stone column bases had the pulpit for the teacher to address students, who were seated in the courtyard (**PlateII**).^{xxiv} An oral debate like a seminar, conference, debate of modern days conducted on all issues that served to establish, defend or refute a particular theory and allowed to develop new philosophy. It is evident from the account of Hiuen-Tsang about Nālandā "the brethren are often assembled for discussion to test intellectual capacity to reject the worthless and advance the intelligent and the day is not sufficient for asking and answering profound questions."^{xxv} The oral pedagogic method followed was that of trying to quicken and raise the latent powers of thinking in the students and lead them to conclusions. The effect of religion was more obvious in the pedagogy at Nālandā that the study and veneration were a simultaneous process and deeply rooted in their daily activities. This oral learning might have also encouraged the knowledge of medicine within the campus. People coming from different parts of the country might have shared their *ayurvedic* knowledge with the residents of Nālandā might have led to better innovation in daily health care.

PlateII: The sunken court of the monastery four surrounded by monk's cells

Source: A personal visit of the site

Nālandā functioned as an autonomous and self-sufficient body with enough funds and staffs at its disposal to carry on the work to which it dedicated itself. There was no dearth of the fund for experiments and collection of herbs for medical purpose. The management of administration was in hands of both the teachers and the students, on the high and lower level respectively. The most intellectual and senior scholar would be head called the treasure of the good law. A picture of Nālandā would remain incomplete if we do not mention its libraries. The big libraries were situated in a special area of Nālandā known as *Dharmaganja* (Mart of Religion). *Dharmaganja* comprised three huge buildings called *Ratnasāgara* (Ocean of Jewels), *Ratmadadhi* (Sea of Jewel) and *Ratnaranjaka* (Jewel-adorned), of which *Ratnasagara*^{xxvi} comprising of nine-storied building specialized in the collection of rare sacred works.^{xxvii} The wealth of its libraries grew day by day as I-Tsiang mentions that after the expiry of Buddhist scholar at Nālandā, his collection of the manuscript was added to the library.^{xxviii} After Hiuen Tsang, the two Korean monks Tche-Hong and Hoiye, and another Chinese monk Ke-ye came to study in these libraries.^{xxix} Unfortunately, we do not have details of medical books in these libraries but we can guess that these might have housed works on medicine also. The decline of Nālandā was significant as it marked the decline of the organized institutional learning in India.

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ⁱⁱ *Mahāvagga II, VIII, 3.*

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^{iv}Takakusu, J. (trans) (1966) A Records of Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Peninsula by I-Tsing, 1st edition, London, 1896, reprinted MunshiramManoharlal, Delhi, p.59.

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^{vi}Takakusu, J. (trans) (1966) A Records of Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Peninsula by I-Tsing, 1st edition, London, 1896, reprinted MunshiramManoharlal, Delhi, p.70.

^{vii} This advantage could be however in summer only. It is very cold in winter and gets enough rain.

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^{xiii}Ibid, p.118.

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