

The Revival Plan of Nalanda University

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AT the outset I would like to say how happy and honoured I am to be here, in this beautiful setting to participate in this seminar on “A New Humanism for World Peace.” The phrase “new humanism,” embodies within it a world view and philosophy that while it could be summarized in one simple sentence, carries within itself a much deeper and profound philosophy which could take many pages to explain.

I do not claim to be an expert on the idea or to have mastered it to any degree. I will honestly state that in thinking about today, I have re-discovered the concept afresh and am hoping that it will stay with me as I embark on my current assignment in what is going to be a long journey to re-build Nalanda University. I am sure you will all agree that the process of building a university like Nalanda cannot be the outcome of one person’s thoughts alone. It is through collaborative effort and an exchange of ideas that the shape, form and structure of this great institution is going to be given substance and reality. I am a firm believer in the consultative process. To this end, I do not miss any opportunity to try out my ideas on the project and at the same time to gain from other thinkers. Therefore on the long journey that building Nalanda entails, I am happy to have this chance to share my thoughts on the same and to engage with some new ideas.

Before I tell you about the Nalanda project, I think it is only fitting that I tell you that I have returned from Rajgir and Nalanda only last evening. When I was on the ropeway to visit the Eagle peak site, I could not help wondering how one man 2500 years ago, could make his way up what is clearly a very rocky terrain covered with thorny shrubs to preach what was his greatest sermon, the Lotus Sutra. It was an overwhelming experience and very humbling.

It brought to my mind, the sentence of President Ikeda, spoken at this very venue in 1997 and I quote: “The central theme of my own life is this: That a great revolution in a single individual can change the destiny of an entire society and even of humankind.”¹ This is the idea at the core of the philosophy of humanism which President Ikeda has said time and

again, must expand to meet new challenges.

It is this link that I want to be able to live with and think about in the coming months as I and my Governing Board confront the challenge of building Nalanda. Professor Amartya Sen, Chairman of the Board of Nalanda University, while delivering the keynote address at the Indian Science Congress in January said that restoring Nalanda was one of his most challenging assignments. He said and I quote: "I am finding out how hard it is to re-establish a university after a 800 year hiatus."

My Board which has engaged with the project for over three years comprises some leading international scholars who have brought to the project not only international perspectives but also a level of sincerity and seriousness of purpose that is truly unmatched.

The re-creation of a university with the historical gravitas of Nalanda requires thought and action on many fronts. One of these is the nature and structure of a university *per se*. But before we move in that direction, we have to be aware of the incredible legacy of the original Nalanda. We need to be fully aware of the history of this institution and the factors that made it what it was.

In addition, there is the further knowledge that in the 800 years between the destruction of the old Nalanda and the current project to establish a new university with the same name, the nature and form of the university as an institution has undergone remarkable changes. We stand today at a juncture where many scholars and administrators and others are grappling with questions like: where the university as such is headed? Are universities even viable in their current form or do they need innovation too? In addition, the Indian university while reflecting some of these changes has its own set of issues which Nalanda will have to address and overcome in order to take its rightful place as a true centre of learning and research.

I will end with trying to set out how this juxtaposition of history and reality may be resolved at Nalanda and how our current project has the opportunity to break the mould and chart a unique course. I reiterate that this is a work in progress and will only get better with time and experience, as ideas strengthen and Nalanda grows.

To go back to the beginning, the original Nalanda university as we know from history lasted for almost 800 years and ended at a time when the much acclaimed universities of Oxford and Paris had just been founded and Cambridge was yet to come into being.² Bologna came into being when Nalanda was 600 years old and Al Azhar in Cairo when Nalanda was 500 years old. Nalanda was thus by far the oldest university in the world that we know of.

The legend of Nalanda however is not due to its age alone. It is due to the fact that here was an institution that imparted organized learning and functioned for nearly 800 years. Moreover, it was truly international in that it drew students from all over the region. We know from records that Nalanda had students from places like China and Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Japan as well as Turkey. It also existed alongside a wider tradition of organized higher learning as exemplified by the existence of Odantapuri and Vikramashila in the vicinity.

Nalanda records also show us that the university was not just a centre of teaching and learning—it sent out scholars and experts to various places on request—to administer over debates, to set up centres, and to spread learning and enlightenment to a larger corpus of people. The most distinctive aspect of Nalanda learning, and one that we can never afford to lose sight of was that it was all about giving, dispersing and sharing knowledge. Professor Sen has, in his Chennai speech which I was quoting earlier, told the story of Xuanzang who when asked to stay on at Nalanda after completion of his studies said that following the Buddha’s dictum of spreading enlightenment, “who would wish to enjoy it alone and forget those who are not yet enlightened.” Nalanda’s greatest gift was to liberate knowledge from the narrow confines of geography or religion and seek to share knowledge with the world at large.

In contrast to the days of Nalanda, where the Universities were few and far between, in the next 800 years, the world saw an explosion in the establishment of universities. The greatest universities that now exist and dominate the academic firmament came into existence during this phase. The establishment of a new type of institution such as the university also marked a ‘significant departure in the life of society’ as significant as the emergence of a new branch of learning.³ Universities can and did unleash a new kind of social imagination and experience which had transformative effects on many aspects of the social life. The universities then underwent a series of alterations at various points in time before they came to acquire their current form.

If I may set out those milestones very briefly, the first real change was at the turn of the eighteenth century and took different directions in France and Germany, that led to the formation of a new kind of university. The French model was more focused on training people for particular employment and the other model—as epitomized by the University of Berlin—was based on the unity of teaching and research. The French idea linked education to careers and subsequently employment, doing away with patronage and birth as being the sole determinants for seeking and gaining an education.

The German model of unity of research and teaching which ensured that universities no longer only transmitted existing knowledge but became instead creators of knowledge, went on to influence the creation of universities in the United States where John Hopkins and the University of Chicago became the first 'research universities' to be established. Until this time most of the productive research work had been done outside the formal university. After World War there was another change, namely the emergence of what has come to be called the 'mass university,'⁴ a term coined by Edward Shils to refer to the American university which had a population of over 20,000 students.

Furthermore, other changes that occurred over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continue on till today have, by and large, freed academic education from the control and regulation of religious rules or religious authority. One of the revolutionary changes that has greatly impacted how university education is now formulated and dispensed is the opening of education not only to both genders but also to all classes and communities, thus establishing the open and secular university in contrast to one that was small and socially exclusive. However, it must be remembered, that the opening up of the universities was not something that happened with ease and without resistance. It was a slow and halting process with many turns and counterturns. Nevertheless, as a result of this prolonged struggle, universities slowly emerged as less conservative places rather than remaining bastions of traditional values as they did in Europe for much of their earlier history.

The expansion in knowledge led to yet another change, namely, the emergence of new branches of science and scholarship—a process that only increased as time passed. In fact, such was the situation by the twentieth century, that it became difficult for any *single* university to include within the ambit of its disciplines (that now constituted university curricula) all the new branches of learning and at the same time retain the hallmark of the university which was a community of scholars and scientists with specialised skills.

In consequence, the progress in the branching off of new specialisms and the increase in disciplines has led to the development of new kinds of universities. What now emerged was the specialist university concentrating on law, or agriculture or education etc. A far cry from the original idea of a university being a coherent unit covering the full range of academic engagement from philosophy to medicine. Universities that imparted a holistic education largely focused on creating possibly citizens, and, hopefully, leaders of their respective communities, countries and continents. In contrast, the new, single discipline model of universi-

ties instead claim the edge with their focused attention and limited scope as being ideally suited to create a set of employees who can be the perfect fit for the prospective employers in their chosen field.

Sadly then, the university is increasingly being regarded as a business enterprise, a market oriented institute whose credibility depends on the readiness of its students for the job market. There is also the view of the university as a service industry with the students as clients and the resultant general decline in the position of the academics and intellectualism. Academics are now often viewed as service providers and intellectual engagements have to be explained using benchmarks of relevance, popularity and other such markers.

Given this scenario, the whole nature and form of university education is being questioned anew. The university enterprise is undergoing transformation. Among the buzz words on that front for universities lately is 'knowledge producers' so much so that there are some who believe that teaching is a waste of time and is to be regarded as time away from research. The knowledge society is obsessed with the production of knowledge rather than the transmission and criticism of existing knowledge.

In the Indian context, many of these questions take on another dimension and I will not go into the details at this moment except to put on record the fact that the story of the university in India, after the destruction of Nalanda and after the end of similar institutions, really takes off only in 1857 when the three "Presidency" universities came into being.

The encounter with the modern university in India, albeit through a new language, was also marked by the encounter with western thought and ideas and an exposure to new subjects and approaches. It also had other consequences in terms of social significance. The university in India has done more for the emancipation of women than any other institution. They not only prepared women for entry into the work sphere as equals with men but also allowed more than any other institution, men and women unrelated by kinship, to interact freely. The university also allowed similar interaction between people of different castes and communities.

The new Nalanda stands on this history and marks a first for the Government of India on many counts. First of all, it is only the second international university that has been set up and this one has greater reach than the other which caters to SAARC nations.

Secondly, there has never been a revival university in India before. So often many people are left wondering if we are actually located on the old ruin, which I may clarify is a world heritage site and lies 10 kilome-

tres from where the new Nalanda campus will be. Then of course, India's most prestigious modern university is not going to be located in a major city but in the state of Bihar considered backward by many. To my mind and the mind of our Governing Board, this is not a drawback since we hope to recreate a world class facility on the campus and see the world come to Nalanda to solve their problems.

But we are in uncharted waters and there is much to be done. Logistics are of course going to be just as important in this project as the more fundamental questions that I have been raising about the kind of university we should have at Nalanda. The question I pose for myself and one that I struggle to answer completely is: "What is the Nalanda way?" "How are things going to be different at Nalanda?"

We well know that bricks and mortar do not a university make—Nalanda must have a clear understanding of what it is going to do and stand for. There is also a commitment to the people in the areas surrounding the university and to the villages that traditionally supported the original university. This time it is the chance of the university to support the environs.

Some answers are easy to give with regard to the new Nalanda. It is envisaged as an open, secular, inclusive institution. Nalanda will be a self-regulating institution—in the manner that universities were meant to be. We are sure that teaching and research will go hand in hand and have equal status.

Among what the new university will stand for will be developing an orientation to modern knowledge with the tradition of the original in mind. This is why along with the original concerns of philosophy and comparative religion and literatures, the new Nalanda also has modern intellectual concerns like ecology and environment, peace studies, information technology and development studies. Nalanda is starting small with seven departments at the post-graduate level and will introduce undergraduate courses at a later date. These departments have not been chosen at random—thought has gone into both the contemporary and the conventional and additions will be made as we go along.

Our current challenge is to carve out a unique academic character for ourselves—one that will allow both students, faculty and researchers to pursue knowledge and learning in an inter-disciplinary setting. Lord Desai, member of the Governing Board has said in the vision statement of the university: "Both students and faculty must be chosen for their desire for and capacity to absorb knowledge in diverse fields. It must have as it did before, the best scholars and researchers. It must afford them a vibrant living environment which will also...nurture the next gen-

eration—the children of those creating... knowledge.”

The focus on academic excellence is central to the project and something that cannot be diluted. Nalanda will harness the best talents not only for the creation but also the dissemination of new knowledge, as well as for the recovery and restoration of valuable old insights. In doing so, there will be an academic focus on Asia and the interconnections between Asian regions and also between Asia and the world.

We are living in times where Asia and inter-Asian linkages are on the rise as never before. These inter-linkages between Asian countries operate on various fronts in varied fields. This is a replay in modern times of something that has been on since ancient history. We know that Nalanda was a central part of this great interconnection, which even then spanned intellectual, religious, cultural and material spheres. This great connection between India and its neighbours on all sides got eclipsed by history for a while but is being revived now. Nalanda University wants to regain its central position in this network for we must not forget that in the past if there was an idea that united the area we call Asia, Nalanda was central to it.

The Nalanda of old led in the intellectual sphere with codifying much of what could be called Asian knowledge of the time. Along with other linkages that bound India to other regions, the educational link of Nalanda built bridges and created understanding with regions with whom we are now once again forging meaningful partnerships. There is a need for this interdependence to be recognized at all levels including intellectual and Nalanda University will be in the forefront of this endeavour since this re-emergent Asia needs new ways of thinking about regional connections and new types of knowledge coming from fields like international relations, ecology and environment and computers and I.T. among others to help that integration.

If I may quote once again from Lord Desai: “A university of the third millennium has to be universalist in its outlook, open to currents of thought and practice from around the globe, and it has to respond to the needs of a world which has miles to travel before it can ensure peace and prosperity with equity and hope for all the people of the world.”

These words are echoed also in the writings of President Ikeda on humanism which state the importance of education as a means of transforming society, of liberating people from various confines and allowing them to meet and converse and to contribute to and improve society. I can only promise to never forget these ideas as I move ahead and tackle the nitty-gritty aspects of building a university.

Notes

¹ Daisaku Ikeda, 'A New Humanism for the Coming Century' (Address at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, October 1997); originally from his own preface to *The Human Revolution*.

² Between approximately 425 and 1205 C.E. (Hasmukhlal Dhirajlal Sankalia) or 1199 or 1193.

³ Andre Béteille, *Universities at the Crossroads*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010.

⁴ Andre Béteille following Edward Shils.