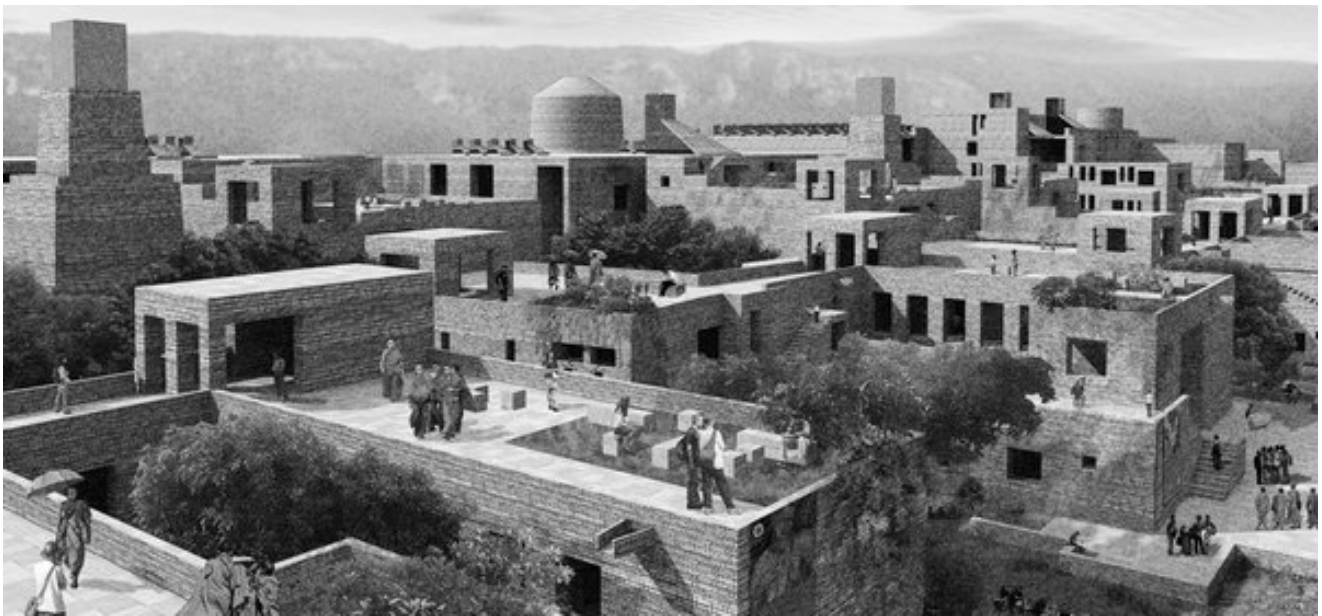


India: The Stormy Revival of an International University

Amartya Sen
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Vastu Shilpa Consultants

A rendering of the new campus of Nalanda University, to be built in the town of Rajgir, Bihar, India, a few miles away from the original university, which was founded in the early fifth century and destroyed in the 1190s

1.

Classes began in early September last year at a small new international university, called Nalanda, in Bihar in northeast India—one of the most backward parts of the country. Only two faculties—history, and environment and ecology—were holding classes for fewer than twenty students. And yet the opening of Nalanda was the subject of headlines in all the major newspapers in India and received attention across the world. “Ritorno a Nalanda” was the headline in *Corriere della Sera*.

The new venture is meant to be a revival of Nalanda Mahavihara, the oldest university in the world, which began in the early fifth century. By the time the

first European university was established in Bologna in 1088, Nalanda had been providing higher education to thousands of students from Asian countries for more than six hundred years.

The original university at Nalanda was run by a Buddhist foundation in what was then the prosperous region of Bihar—the original center of Buddhist religion, culture, and enlightenment. Its capital was Pataliputra (now called Patna), which also served, beginning in the third century BC, as the capital of the early all-India empires for more than a thousand years. Nalanda drew students not only from all over India, but also from China, Japan, Korea, Sumatra, and other Asian lands with Buddhist connections, and a few from elsewhere, including Turkey. It was the only institution of higher learning outside China to which any Chinese in the ancient world ever went for education.

By the seventh century Nalanda had ten thousand students, receiving instruction not only in Buddhist philosophy and religious practice, but also in a variety of secular subjects, including languages and literatures, astronomy and other sciences, architecture and sculpture, as well as medicine and public health.

As an institution of higher learning, where the entry qualifications were high, Nalanda was supported by a network of other educational organizations that provided information about Nalanda and also helped to prepare students for studying there. Among the Chinese students was the well-known Yi Jing (635–713 AD), who studied in Nalanda for ten years, and wrote what was perhaps the first comparative study of different medical systems, comparing Chinese and Indian medical practices. Before coming to India, he went first to Sumatra (then the base of the Buddhist Srivijaya empire and now a part of Indonesia) to learn Sanskrit. By the seventh century, there were four other universities in Bihar drawing on Buddhism, all largely inspired by Nalanda. They worked in collaboration, though by the tenth century one of them—Vikramshila—emerged as a serious competitor to Nalanda in higher education.

After more than seven hundred years of successful teaching, Nalanda was destroyed in the 1190s by invading armies from West Asia, which also demolished the other universities in Bihar. The first attack, it is widely believed, was led by the ruthless Turkic conqueror Bakhtiyar Khilji, whose armies devastated many cities and settlements in North India. All the teachers and monks in Nalanda were killed and much of the campus was razed to the ground. Special care was taken to demolish the beautiful statues of Buddha and other Buddhist figures that were spread across the campus. The library—a nine-story building containing thousands of manuscripts—is reputed to have burned for three days. The destruction of Nalanda took place between the establishment of Oxford in 1167 and the founding of Cambridge in 1209.

2.

A proposal to revive Nalanda as a modern international university, though originating in India (particularly in Bihar), has been a pan-Asian initiative from the beginning. The idea was endorsed by all of the sixteen governments that attended the so-called East Asia Summit in January 2007, meeting in Cebu in the Philippines. They represented mostly Asian countries, including (in addition to India) China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but also Australia and New Zealand.

The aim of the founders of the new Nalanda was not only to have a first-rate university but to encourage cooperation and interchange of ideas across national borders (again, reflecting the traditions of the ancient Nalanda). They endorsed a “vision” of a new university that would be “open to currents of thought and practice from around the globe.”

Following the summit decision, the project to reestablish Nalanda was led by a “mentor group,” formally appointed by India but with members drawn also from other Asian countries. Distinguished intellectuals, serving as members, come from India as well as China (Wang Bangwei), Japan (Susumu Nakanishi), Singapore (Wang



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George Yeo, Singapore's foreign minister at the time, and Amartya Sen at a meeting about the reestablishment of Nalanda University, New Delhi, August 2010

Gungwu and George Yeo), and Thailand (Prapod Assavavirulhakam). The university was established by an act of the Indian Parliament in 2010, and following that, the mentor group became the governing board of the revived Nalanda University. I have until recently been serving as chair of the board and chancellor of the new university.

The funds for rebuilding Nalanda have come mostly from the government of India, which made a further financial commitment in January 2014 to meet the basic costs until 2021. However, the citizens and governments of a number of other countries have also made contributions, including China, Australia, Singapore, Thailand, and Laos. All the land for the university has been donated by the government of Bihar, which is also assisting with ground and other facilities.

The reestablished Nalanda University will eventually have its new campus in the ancient town of Rajgir, a few miles away from the old Nalanda. The design and planning of the new campus, by the well-known architectural firm Vastu Shilpa Consultants (chosen by an international competition), are now completed, and the work of construction is about to begin. Since even the first phase of the work will take a few years, Nalanda has started functioning, on a small scale, in rented premises in Rajgir, under the incisive leadership of the vice-chancellor, Dr. Gopa Sabharwal, and the dean of academic planning, Dr. Anjana Sharma.

Most of the first students at Nalanda have come from India, but there are some from other Asian countries as well (Japan and Bhutan in particular), and the teachers have been recruited not just from India, but also from the United States, Germany, and South Korea. In addition to classes now being taught in history, environmental studies, and ecology, plans are being made for teaching economics and development studies, public health, and Buddhist philosophy and comparative religions. Eventually, Nalanda will offer courses in international relations, linguistics, and literature, as well as information science and technology.

In my visits to the campus, I have been impressed by the quality of teaching and discussion among the faculty and students. In view of the deep skepticism that many critics had earlier expressed about the possibility of having a successful international university in a remote and backward part of India, there is something very reassuring about what has been achieved, and about the academic climate that has already become palpable.

“Ritorno a Nalanda” was a remarkable and hopeful moment. But relations have become troubled between the newly elected government of India and the governing board of Nalanda University. The previous coalition government, with the National Congress Party as its dominant partner, initiated the revival of Nalanda University in collaboration with the government of Bihar and the East Asia Summit. When the national government lost the general elections in the spring of 2014, it was replaced by members of a very different political alignment, with a new prime minister, Narendra Modi, of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)— a part of the powerful Hindutva movement, which is dedicated to promoting India’s Hindu traditions, with Modi himself supporting not only Hindutva but also the goals of private business.

At the time of the general elections, I saw it my duty, as a citizen of India, to argue publicly against Modi’s sectarian political leadership, which posed a threat to India’s long-standing commitment to secularism. While critical of some features of the Congress-led coalition government (particularly its growing inefficiency and corruption), I strongly feared that minorities, particularly Muslims as well as Christians, would be insecure under Modi’s rule. This fear was based partly on his long history as a member—and a public advocate (or *pracharak*)—of the Hindu right-wing movement called Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The fear was also based on the history of communal violence in Gujarat when Modi was chief minister of the state. More than a thousand people, mostly Muslims, perished in the riots there in 2002. Modi had a good reputation as an economic administrator in Gujarat but he failed to take effective action to protect non-Hindus from attack. My worries, I am afraid, have not been dispelled (despite verbal reassurances from Modi). Under the new regime, there have been sporadic occurrences of church burning and the concerted efforts of Hindutva activists to encourage conversion of non-Hindus to Hinduism, called *ghar wapsi* (“returning home”).

I was, therefore, not entirely surprised to find that the new government opposed my continuing as chancellor of Nalanda University. However, the larger issue concerns the academic independence of institutions of higher learning. The new government and its allies have been active in trying to impose their own views on many academic institutions, and Nalanda’s academic independence has been under considerable threat over the last year. Many of the statutes concerning the governance of Nalanda that were passed by the board (as it was authorized to do) have not been acted on or even presented by the government to the Visitor of the

University—the president of India—for endorsement. (All such statutes require formal government approval before they become effective.) The government tried suddenly, without any consultation with the governing board, to make radical changes in the board’s membership—a move that did not work because the proposed changes violated provisions of the Nalanda University Act passed by the Indian Parliament in 2010.

The government has also tried, much more successfully, to remove me as chancellor, overruling the unanimous decision of Nalanda’s governing board that I should continue—a decision arrived at in the board’s meeting in January chaired by George Yeo, the former foreign minister of Singapore. While I appreciated the unanimous support, it soon became clear to me that the tension between the government and the governing board of Nalanda over my continuing as chancellor was proving to be a barrier to the work of rebuilding the school. It also became obvious that the government’s hostility would prevent me from being an effective leader. I told the board that, under the circumstances, I will not accept reappointment when my present term comes to an end in mid-July of this year.

In fact, I strongly believe that it should not be difficult to find a very distinguished candidate who understands the vision that lies behind Nalanda’s revival and appreciates what Nalanda has to offer to contemporary higher education in India and elsewhere. It is, however, extremely important to make sure that the academic independence of Nalanda under the new chancellor is respected. The university must not be subject to partisan political pressure.

The central issue goes well beyond the headline of a well-researched recent report in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*: “Il Nobel e il Premier: Sen contro Modi.” While it is certainly true that the Modi government is not pleased with the political positions I have taken, the confrontation is ultimately not about personalities. It is about the principles governing public institutions, particularly the importance of academic independence.

4.

Unfortunately, the government’s pressures on Nalanda are part of a general pattern of interference in academic leadership across the country. For example, in January of this year, Dr. Sandip Trivedi, a widely respected physicist, was appointed the director of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR)—perhaps the most prestigious scientific institution in India—by a selection committee chaired by one of India’s most well-known scientists, C.N.R. Rao. But

the institute was told by the prime minister's office that Trivedi had to be removed from his post, and Trivedi stepped down. This led to a good deal of public criticism, and the government told the TIFR in June that Trivedi could return as director.

In December, Raghunath Shevgaonkar, the well-known director of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Delhi, also resigned from his position, alleging government interference in the IIT's decisions. In March, Dr. Anil Kakodkar, one of the leading nuclear scientists of India (and a former chair of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission), who chaired the governing board of the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, protested against meddling by the government and made it clear that he was unwilling to serve in future activities.

In late February the government asked the famous writer Sethumadhavan to leave his position as chairman of the National Book Trust, which was set up decades ago as "an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education." The trust has had an excellent record of supporting the publication of worthy books. Following Sethumadhavan's removal, his position was given to a Hindutva ideologue, Baldev Sharma, a former editor of the journal *Panchajanya*, which *The Times of India* described as "the RSS mouthpiece." More recently, the government has proposed a bill that would give it direct control over India's thirteen Institutes of Management (IIM), the country's main institutions for postgraduate education in management. This has been sharply protested by the directors and chairmen of the institutes themselves.

It is hard not to conclude that the government has difficulty in appreciating the distinction between (1) an autonomous institution supported by the government, using state resources, and (2) an institution under the direct command of the government currently in office. For many hundreds of years universities in Europe have been helped to become academically excellent by governments that respect their autonomy. The British protect academic independence with much care in their own country even though the British rulers of colonial India very often violated the independence of public academic institutions. The government of India seems to prefer the colonial model.

This is, of course, not the first time that a ruling Indian government has interfered in academic matters. The record of noninterference of the previous Congress government was far from impeccable. And yet the extent of intervention has become both unprecedented and often politically extreme under the present regime.¹

The newly appointed head of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), Yellapragada Sudershan Rao, is perhaps more well known for his Hindutva-oriented opinions than for any historical research he has done. For example, in his paper “Indian Caste System: A Reappraisal,” Rao praises the caste system, which—we are told—is often “misrepresented as an exploitative system.” Rao’s strong links with the group called Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (ABISY), which is known as the “history wing” of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has been a source of concern in the academic community, especially after four ABISY activists were appointed to the council of the ICHR. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, a leading historian and the chief editor of the official journal of ICHR (the *Indian Historical Review*), resigned in protest against the transformation of the ICHR.

The new head of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, Dr. Lokesh Chandra, appointed by the Modi government, has informed *The Indian Express* that “from a practical point of view [Modi] supersedes the Mahatma [Gandhi].” Chandra has also expressed the view that Modi is, in fact, “a reincarnation of God.” Chandra has said he believes that six million Koreans trace their ancestry back to an Indian princess from Ayodhya.

In view of the general record of the Modi government it was not particularly surprising that the government chose to interfere in the governance of Nalanda. But the confrontations between the governing board and the government, and the removal of the chancellor, got unusual public attention, with wide coverage in the press and editorial criticism of the government in several papers. These reactions have certainly helped to have a restraining effect on the government, unlike the case of many other academic institutions. The widespread public attention and questioning have, in effect, helped the minister of external affairs, Sushma Swaraj, to seek a solution that would be publicly defensible—rather than insisting on the unilateral extremism that characterizes many of the academic interventions by the Modi government.

The presence of intellectuals from other Asian countries on the governing board of Nalanda has also helped to protect the university from the government’s sectarian pressures. The board, which I continued to chair until July, decided in early May to name three non-Indian Asian members of the board, putting George Yeo of Singapore at the top of the list, as possible chancellor with Wang Bangwei of China and Susumu Nakanishi of Japan as reserves. Yeo has just accepted the position with the assurance that he will have the independence that will be required for running the university. Given his commitment to the principles of

Nalanda, in addition to his vast knowledge of Asian traditions and remarkable intellectual and administrative skills, his appointment is a very good outcome.² It will remain extremely important, however, for the government to give Yeo the independence he will need to make Nalanda an academic success.

5.

When the old Nalanda began functioning in the fifth century, there was no other university in the world. There are now 687 universities in India—and others are being established. Why do we need one more? What makes Nalanda so special?

The history of education at the old Nalanda, which inspires the teachers and students of the reestablished Nalanda, remains powerfully relevant here. The tradition of Nalanda insisted on high educational standards, which are certainly important in India today where there is a conspicuous lack of official commitment to improving the quality of education. But it is also important now to follow the Nalanda tradition of global cooperation, a systematic attempt to learn across the barriers of regions and countries. What the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore called “the Nalanda trail” in its remarkable exhibition during 2007–2008 (when the proposal to restart Nalanda University was being planned) emphasized the spread of knowledge and understanding from one country to another across Asia, driven by intellectual curiosity and interest rather than the pursuit of material profit.

The pedagogy that prevailed in the old Nalanda is strongly relevant here. The school regularly arranged debates between people—teachers, students, and visitors—who held different points of view. The method of teaching included arguments between teachers and students. Indeed, as one of Nalanda’s most distinguished Chinese students, Xuan Zang (602–664 AD) noted, education in Nalanda was not primarily offered through the “bestowing” of knowledge by lecturers, but through extensive debates—between students and teachers and among the students themselves—on all the subjects that were taught.

I have been impressed to find that the emphasis on debate is already strong in the pedagogy of the new Nalanda, not just on the topics in the syllabus, but also on more general subjects. For example, when I visited Nalanda last October—a month after classes started there—we discussed the respective roles of “the Silk Route” and “the Nalanda trail” in the development of intercountry connections. There has been much historical discussion of the trading links between Asia and Europe, and particularly the Silk Road linking China with regions in the West.

Originally established between the third century BC and the third century AD, during the Han dynasty, the Silk Road was of great importance not only for trade and commerce, but also for the intermingling of people and ideas.

A critical question can be asked, however, whether an exaggerated focus on trade of commodities, and related to that, an excessive emphasis on the role of the Silk Road, may result in the neglect of intellectual influences—in religion, science, mathematics, art, and architecture—that were not dependent on trade. If trade is a big influence in getting people to take an interest in one another, as David Hume famously noted, so is the sheer pursuit of human curiosity, as Hume also observed. The “Nalanda trail” is, in this sense, a kind of rival to the Silk Road. The rightly admired exhibition at New York’s Metropolitan Museum during 2012–2013, called “Buddhism Along the Silk Road, 5th–8th Century,” merged the two; but the disparate elements in the two types of routes in that grand history can be usefully distinguished.³

Unlike Yi Jing, who journeyed to Nalanda by sea in the seventh century, Xuan Zang came, in the same century, on the land route, which coincided in some parts with the Silk Road (even though Nalanda is quite far away from that route). But what motivated Xuan Zang—no less than Yi Jing—to undertake that long voyage (and to spend a decade in Nalanda) was his huge curiosity about Buddhism, Buddhist enlightenment, and the subjects taught at Nalanda, in all of which the influence of trade and material pursuit was minimal.

Knowledge of arts, culture, mathematics, science, and engineering, along with religious and ethical reasoning, has moved people across regions for thousands of years. In our divisive world today, the need for nonbusiness and nonconfrontational encounters is extremely strong, and here Nalanda has an important vision to offer.

6.

It is not hard to see how profoundly the intellectual commitment reflected in the pursuit of the Nalanda Trail was inspired by Gautama Buddha’s emphasis on enlightenment without borders—for all people, irrespective of caste, class, and nationality.⁴ The issue of the spread of knowledge was raised in a conversation in the seventh century when Xuan Zang completed his studies and was considering going back to China. The professors at Nalanda asked Xuan Zang to stay on as a member of the faculty. He turned them down, observing that Buddha had taught the world not to enjoy enlightenment by oneself. If one learns something, it is

one's duty to share it with others, and therefore Xuan Zang believed he must go home to do just that. (He was in fact very warmly welcomed back in China.)

Indeed, it can be argued that the vast sweep of Buddhist enlightenment across China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and much of East Asia was so successful because it was not just an imposition of foreign ideas, but was mainly based on cultural interests and intellectual engagement.⁵ Buddha himself was eloquent on that subject, and yet in recent years, some Buddhist groups have been much occupied in fomenting prejudice, for example against Rohingya Muslims in Rakine in Burma. As a result of such persecution, and the violations of human rights by the militarist government, there has been a huge flight of Muslim refugees seeking a new home. Some formally Buddhist institutions badly need to learn from Buddha's advocacy of reasoning and dialogue instead of confrontation and violence.

The town of Rajgir where the campus of the new Nalanda is being built is exactly where the first "Buddhist Council" met two and half thousand years ago, not long after Buddha's death, "to resolve differences by discussion," including divergent views on religious beliefs and social practice. A later Buddhist council, the third, was very large and met in Pataliputra (now Patna) at the invitation of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC. It was the most famous of these councils, but the approach of resolving difference through discussion had been already established three hundred years earlier in Rajgir.

Nalanda has thus been revived near the site of the very first attempt at what John Stuart Mill and Walter Bagehot would celebrate in the nineteenth century as "government by discussion." The powerful vision behind Nalanda is important for India, for Asia, and for the rest of the world. It must be free of authoritarian and sectarian pressures.

1 The interferences have sometimes been accompanied by the planting of false reports, typically through public statements by Hindutva leaders (or by journalists friendly to Hindutva). An example of the crudeness of the attack can be seen in the much-publicized public statement of a prominent BJP leader that the Nalanda chancellor is "paid an annual salary of Rs. 50 lakhs" (\$80,000) rather than no salary at all, or that "so far about Rs. 3000 crores," or about \$484 million, have already been spent by Nalanda University. In fact, rather less than 2 percent of that sum (Rs. 46 crores, or \$7.42 million) has been expended altogether, including construction costs, from the beginning of the university until the end of the last fiscal year (2014–2015).

On misinformation put out to the media by the government itself, see the news interview with Professor Sugata Bose, a member of the Nalanda governing board (and also a member of Indian Parliament), published in *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, April 1, 2015. ⇐

2 For Yeo's analysis of the things that bind Asia together and give us such strong reasons to be hopeful about its future, see *George*

Yeo on Bonsai, Banyan and the Tao, with a foreword by Amartya Sen (World Scientific Publishing, 2015). ↵

3 See William Dalrymple, “[The Great and Beautiful Lost Kingdoms](#),” *The New York Review*, May 21, 2015. ↵

4 I have tried to discuss related issues in my essay “The Contemporary Relevance of Buddha,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2014). ↵

5 On this subject, see also Dalrymple, “[The Great and Beautiful Lost Kingdoms](#).” ↵

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