

Nalanda and Independent Thinking: A Critical Review

Sourabh (Research Fellow)

School of Sanskrit and Indic Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper presents a critical assessment of independent thought, its basis, nature and consequences at Nalanda Mahavihara, the great intellectual centre of ancient India. This paper analyzes the method of admission to Nalanda Mahavihara(University), the curriculum structure, the tradition of Sastrartha, academic and ideological freedom, and the Acarya – Siṣya relationship, their functions, and attempts to examine whether thought in Nalanda was truly independent.

Objective

The present research work examines the following situation prevailing in the then Nalanda Mahavihara(University).

- Ideological freedom.
- Academic freedom.
- Independent thinking.
- Respect for disagreements.
- Other

(Keywords : Nalanda , Knowledge, freedom)

Introduction

The history of the ancient Indian education system has been renowned as a golden age of pursuit of knowledge, philosophical debates and ideological freedom, where knowledge was not seen confined to any one limit or narrow scope.

The Nalanda Mahavihara (5th century CE to 12th century CE) in the land of Magadha was the zenith of this liberal intellectual consciousness, as it was a forum of global thinkers where ideas clashed and coalesced.

Academic freedom and free thinking are considered to be the basic pillars of modern universities, but Nalanda not only adopted these values a thousand and a half years ago, but formed the backbone of its education system, because Nalanda was not just a center of Dharmika Sikṣa, but it was the most vibrant symbol of ‘free thinking’ and ‘academic freedom’ globally.

This paper presents a critical and unbiased analysis of this independent thinking.

Independent Thinking

Independent thinking is the first step towards the development of any awakened, progressive society and individual. When we analyze any subject, idea, or situation on the basis of our own intelligence and conscience without being influenced by any external pressure, bias, or others' ideas, it is called independent thinking.

Here, the ideas are your own. You don't simply repeat others' ideas, but rather analyze them and form your own opinions. Therefore, it's not just about thinking outside the box, but about attempting to see the truth in its original authenticity.

The Elements of Independent Thinking

Just as a strong building requires a solid foundation, similarly independent thinking also has some key elements without which ideological freedom is not possible, which are as follows:

Intellectual Curiosity

Intellectual curiosity is the desire to know the truth behind every fact, which is the first step towards independent thinking. It involves asking questions like "what, why, how, who, and when" rather than blindly accepting established beliefs, traditions, or information.

Objectivity

Objectivity is putting aside your emotions, likes, dislikes, or biases when thinking about any topic and focusing only on the facts.

Rationality

Rationality involves proceeding step-by-step based on evidence and proof, rather than blindly following established beliefs. This involves independent thinkers verifying the authenticity of available sources of information and conducting scientific analysis based on logic and evidence.

Intellectual Courage

This is the most practical and difficult aspect of independent thinking, in which the independent thinker stands by his or her truth even when it goes against established beliefs or popular opinion. In this situation, he or she may face social ridicule, ostracism, punishment, etc. For example, Socrates was forced to drink poison and Galileo was imprisoned because their independent thinking was based on "ideological courage."

The need for independent thinking

Establishment of Truth

Falsehood has no existence of its own; it is merely the absence of truth. An independent thinker discovers the truth based on Tarka(logic) and Pramaṇa(evidence). The process of discovering truth in independent thinking works like the scientific method.

[Established Belief] → [Doubt/Question] → [Independent Analysis] → [Evidence and Reasoning] → [Actual Truth]

Establishment of Innovation

All the world's greatest inventions, social reforms, or philosophical revolutions have been the result of independent thinking. Therefore, new discoveries and improvements in every field, whether science, art, literature, or law, occur only when someone thinks outside established norms.

Independent thinking acts as a catalyst at every stage of innovation.

[Identification of the problem] → [Brainstorming] → [Experimentation and risk taking] → [Innovation]

Defense of democracy

Democracy is not merely the choice of power in a system of governance, but it is a 'way of life' and 'ideological discourse'. A free-thinking citizenry chooses power on merit by evaluating policies rather than propaganda and political posturing, which is the backbone of a vibrant democracy.

Maturity in decision making

When you start thinking for yourself, you learn to take responsibility for your decisions. This builds self-confidence and gives you the mental strength to handle life's challenges.

Nalanda and independent thinking

Nalanda University (Nalanda Mahavihara), which sprouted in the fifth century under the patronage of the Gupta dynasty and later became a centre of global intellectual discourse, was not merely a centre of dharmika Sikṣa but a global laboratory of logic and intellectual freedom, embodying human intellect, scientific outlook and ideological pluralism.

Nalanda emerged at a time when, in most parts of the world, knowledge was monopolized by a particular religion, king (special power), orthodox system and speaking against established beliefs was considered punishable. Nalanda made the 'Right to Dissent' and Rational Skepticism the core of education, in which ideological freedom and scientific approach held the highest place.

This unbroken tradition of independent thinking in Nalanda was strengthened mainly by the following pillars –

Entrance Exam

Admission to Nalanda was extremely difficult. At the main gate sat the “Gatekeepers of Knowledge,” who rigorously tested the logical abilities of students seeking admission. Only those who possessed the ability to reason independently were admitted.

According to the Chinese traveler Xuanzang, most of the students who wanted to enter the debate schools were defeated by the difficulties of the questions and went back. Those students who were proficient in ancient and modern knowledge were given admission, but out of them (say 10 students) only two or three students were able to succeed. Because of this, the brightest minds from India and abroad gathered there. When such highly intellectual students lived and discussed among themselves, an atmosphere of independent thinking was automatically created.

Diversity In Curriculum

The development of independent thinking is not possible unless the mind gets the opportunity to understand different perspectives. Nalanda was a Buddhist institution, yet the curriculum here was not limited to a narrow school of thought, as the Acaryas of Nalanda had created an academic culture where Vedic, Jain, Buddhist, and Dharmanirapekṣa Vidya (such as Hetu Vidya, Cikitsa Vidya, Khagola Vidya etc.) could flourish together. Therefore, the students here studied various subjects under one roof.

According to Xuanzang's biographer, Hwui-li, Nalanda Mahavihara was a centre of study of philosophies other than Buddhist texts. The main subjects taught included Mahayana Buddhist philosophy (**Great Vehicle**), **texts of the 18 Buddhist schools** (Hinayana & other schools), **Vedas and other texts** (possibly commentaries on the Vedas and Vedanga texts), and general texts such as **Hetuvidya, Sabda Vidya, Cikitsavidya, Atharvaveda** and **Saṃkhya**.

Apart from this, according to the Chinese traveler Yijing, the following subjects were the centre of study in Nalanda .

- **Siddhirastu**– Elementary Alphabet and Grammar
- **Paṇinī Sūtra and Khila**– Basic rules and metals of grammar
- **Kaśika Vṛtti** – detailed commentary on Paṇini sutras
- **Nyayamukha** – Gateway to Buddhist Logic and Epistemology
- **Mahabhaṣya and Vakyapadīya** – Higher Grammar and Linguistic Philosophy
- **Pramāṇasamuccaya and Pramāṇavartika** – Advanced Logic
- **Abhidharmakośa, Madhyamika and Yogacara** – Higher Buddhist Philosophy, Sūnyavada and Vijñānavada
- **Saṃkhya and Vedic texts** – Study of non-Buddhist/anti-philosophies

Thus, despite being a Buddhist institution, Nalanda taught non-Buddhist and opposing philosophies with equal seriousness. This is evidence that Nalanda did not accept the monopoly of any single ideology in the search for truth. Thus, the result of this multidimensional and interdisciplinary education was that instead of becoming narrow, the outlook of the students became very broad and liberal, which is the first condition for becoming an independent thinker.

Sastrartha Paddhati : The Test of Independent Thinking

In the ancient Indian knowledge tradition, 'Sastrartha(debates)' was not just a means to prove one's scholarship, but it was the biggest medium to reach the truth and keep 'free thinking' alive.

The Sastrartha in Nalanda was a democratic structure of intellectual conflict, because the educational system of Nalanda was not based only on lectures, but its soul lay in academic debates and dialectics. According to the Chinese traveler Xuanzang, serious discussions and debates on philosophical topics continued every day from morning till night in more than a hundred rooms of the university.

On the stage of Sastrartha, no king or monk was superior; only logic was superior. Buddhist monks, Jain scholars, and Acarya of the Sanatan tradition sat together and refuted each other's theories. This process taught society to transform differences into constructive and intellectual discourse rather than violent ones.

Therefore, in Nalanda, knowledge was not attained by accepting the principles as the ultimate truth, but by testing those principles through debate and discussion.

Major debates(Sastrartha) held in Nalanda :

- Acarya Aryadeva vs. maṭṛceṭa – (circa 3rd-4th century AD)
- Acarya Diṇnaga vs. Sudurjaya and other Tīrthika – (circa 5th-6th century AD)
- Acarya Dharmapala vs. Nyaya-saṃkhya scholars – (around late 6th century CE)
- Xuanzang vs. Lokayata/brahmaṇa scholars – (circa 640 AD)
- Acarya Candrakīrti vs. Caṃdragomin – (circa 7th century AD)
- Acarya Santirakṣita vs Tīrthika – (circa 8th century AD)
- Other

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is an institutional and legal right. It primarily grants universities, research institutions, faculty, and students the right to create and disseminate knowledge without external pressure (political, religious, etc.), as universities are the checks and balances of society. Academic freedom empowers intellectuals to impartially review government policies, which is essential for a healthy democracy.

The Acharyas and the Chancellor of Nalanda had complete academic freedom. There was no censorship of ideas here. Although the Gupta kings, harṣavardhana and the pala rulers gave Nalanda huge donations and royal patronage, they never interfered with the university's curriculum or ideology. Being free from state interference, the scholars here could freely reflect on the policies of the kings and the contemporary social system.

Ideological Freedom

The 'Academic Hierarchy' in Nalanda did not come in the way of ideological freedom. Even an ordinary student could challenge the logic of his extraordinary Acharya, for there was no ultimate monopoly on knowledge. Although the Acharya had complete authority over the disciple, disagreement was allowed on academic matters. Such as –

Disagreements between Diṇnaga(Acharya) and Dharmakīrti(PraSiṣya) :

Disagreement on the definition of Pratyakṣa Pramaṇa(direct evidence)

In Pramaṇasamuccaya (1/3), Diṇnaga considered the lakṣaṇa(characteristic) of Pratyakṣa to be Kalpanapoḍham(free from imagination) and unassociated with Nama (eg, 'gaya'), Jati (eg, 'gayatva'), Guṇa, Kriya and dravya, But later Dharmakīrti, the PraSiṣya(disciple) of Diṇnaga's disciple (Īśvarasena), seeing the incompleteness in this definition, refined this definition a little more in his book Nyayabindu and added the word "Abhīrantam" to it, because sometimes due to hallucination, blackout, boat movement etc., a person may see wrong perception without imagination (like one moon seeing two moons or a tree seeing moving etc.). Therefore, Dharmakīrti added a new word to it and said that Pratyakṣa Jñāna(direct knowledge) is that knowledge which is free from imagination and is free from illusion. Tatra kalpanapoḍhamabhīrantam pratyakṣam.

Apart from this, in Diṇnaga and Dharmakīrti, differences related to **Īṣṭavighatakr̥t Viruddha Hetvabhasa + Viruddhavyabhīcarī Hetvabhasa + Dr̥ṣṭānta** are visible in Nyayabindu.

Dharmagaṃja – The backbone of independent thinking

Nalanda's vast library, called the "Dharmagaṃja" (Treasury of Truth), was the main source of independent thought. It had three towering buildings: Ratnasagara, Ratnodadhi, and Rantaramjaka. This library contained a collection of knowledge from around the world. When students had access to books on all kinds of literature,

science, and philosophy, their thinking was no longer limited. They were completely free to form their own independent opinions by reading different viewpoints.

Global perspective

Nalanda attracted students from all corners of India, as well as from China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Sumatra (Indonesia), Central Asia, and Persia. When people from different cultures, languages, and backgrounds gather in one place, prejudices are broken and independent thinking is born.

The result of independent thinking

Nalanda Mahavihara(University) was such a centre of ancient education, in which the independent thinking prevalent there gave many epoch-making thinkers to the world, who changed the society and science with their independent thinking by challenging the established beliefs through their creative writings and opened new paths of knowledge, because due to the independent thinking prevalent in Nalanda , the Acarya of Nalanda were not ‘administrators’ of knowledge, but ‘co-travellers’ and the students of Nalanda were not only ‘consumers’ of knowledge, they were ‘producers’ of knowledge. Ther-efore, the graduates coming out from here were not just collectors of information but also became original thinkers.

Prominent scholars (Acarya + Chatra) from Nalanda University

PreNalanda period (early foundations: 2nd to 4th centuries) :

This was a period when Nalanda had not yet been established as a formal residential university, but its monastery tradition and learning centers were highly active. During this period, some great scholars emerged whose works dominated Nalanda 's curriculum and philosophy. These include:

- Nagarjuna
- Aryadeva
- Asaṃga
- Vasubandhu
- Saṃghabhadra
- Other

Nalanda 's early golden age (Gupta Empire: 5th to 6th centuries)

During this period, Nalanda received patronage from the Gupta emperors (especially Kumaragupta Prathama) and emerged as a global centre of Buddhist Nyaya and epistemology.

- Buddhapalita
- Aryabhaṭa

- Dinnaga
- Bhavaviveka
- Sthiramati
- Guṇamati
- Vimuktisena
- Bhadrasena
- Caṇdragomin
- Guṇaprabha
- Caṇdrapala
- Yaśomitra
- Other
 - Thonmī Sambhoṭa

Harṣa period (7th century AD)

Harṣa Period (7th century AD) This was Nalanda 's most glorious era. During this period, Nalanda emerged as a center of global learning.

- Candrakīrti
- Dharmapala
- Sīlabhadra
- Prabhakaramitra
- Jñānacandra
- Dharmakīrti
- Other
 - Xuanzang
 - Yijing
 - Hwui-lun
 - Tao-fang
 - Tao-shih
 - Fang-fang
 - Tao-hi
 - Tao-sheng
 - Hwui-ta
 - Hyecho

Pala dynasty (8th to 12th centuries)

During this period, the acarya of Nalanda established Buddhism in Tibet and Tantrika Buddhism emerged, making Nalanda the centre of Vajrayana.

- Santideva
- Santirakṣita
- Padmasambhava
- KamalaSīla
- Jinamitra

- Sarahapa
- Sakyaprabha
- VīryaSrīdatta
- Siṃha Bhadra
- Vimalamitra
- Sumatisena
- Virūpa
- Vinīta Deva
- Prajñakara Gupta
- Jinendra Buddhi
- Devendra Buddhi
- Dharmakaradatta
- Kalyaṇa Rakṣita
- Naropa
- Maitrīpada
- AtiSa Dīpaṃkara Srījñana
- Abhayakara Gupta
- Rahula Srībhadrā
- Other
 - Goh Lotsawa Khonchog Jungney
 - Chag Lotsawa Choeje Pal

Conclusion

In the light of the research study presented, it is concluded that Nalanda Mahavihara(University), reputed to be a major educational centre of ancient India, established in the fifth century, was not just a cluster of brick-and-mortar skyscrapers or rich libraries like ‘Ratnasagara’; but it was an excellent global laboratory of independent and critical thinking and intellectual freedom, where knowledge was not confined to any one ideology or custom. It was this ideological freedom that made Nalanda a place where the search for truth was not subject to any predetermined conclusion. Nalanda thus established an altogether different and revolutionary paradigm in the field of logical inquiry at that time.

Although Nalanda Mahavihara(University), is globally regarded as a centre of free debate, philosophical exploration, and intellectual freedom, Nalanda , like any historical institution, must have had its own internal and external limitations of independent thought. Such as –

- **Institutional Limitations:**
Being a Buddhist monastery, the ultimate horizon of thinking would have been likely to operate within the framework of the Buddha's original teachings.
- **Methodological Limitations:**
Perhaps the rigid logical rules of 'PramāṇaSastra' and 'NyayaSastra' and the necessity of established texts may have inadvertently limited the pace of emergence of completely original and unconventional ideas.
- **Administrative limitations:**
The rigorous entrance examination of the 'Dvara Paṇḍita' may have given rise to a kind of intellectual elitism, automatically barring entry to many original thinkers who thought outside the traditional norms.
- **Other**
 - **The Impact of State Patronage:**
Nalanda received patronage from the Guptas, Harṣavardhana, and the Pala. Although the kings never interfered in its academic affairs, the institution's complete financial dependence on the state can impose an invisible limit on long-term independent thought.
 - **Elite Form:**
The main language of Sastrārtha and education in Nalanda was Saṃskṛta, which was not the language of the common people (Pali or Prakṛta) at that time. Because of this, independent thought that should have engaged with the problems of the masses and reached the lower strata of society was confined to a specific intellectual elite and confined within the walls of the Mahavihara, so that the masses would have been largely insulated from this ideological revolution.
 - **Absence of practical problems:**
The Sastrārtha(debates) at Nalanda appear to have been largely abstract and involved in metaphysical hair-splitting, far removed from practical problems, which undoubtedly led to this endless confusion/controversy distancing itself from the real practical problems of society.

Ultimately, the limits of free thought at Nalanda were not those of an oppressive 'censorship', but were rules voluntarily accepted to maintain the academic discipline, philosophical dignity, and logical purity of the institution. Despite his limitations, Nalanda 's greatest achievement was his preference for reason over superstition and dialogue over dogma. This is why, even after centuries, Nalanda 's intellectual model remains an eternal model of academic tolerance and free discourse for today's modern universities.

Qualities to be imbibed from Nalanda

In today's context, when we talk about independent thinking, Nalanda Mahavihara(University)'s model of independent thinking teaches us that the real purpose of education is not just to absorb information, but to enable the mind to think independently.

The Nalanda model teaches us how knowledge is refined through debate, discussion and skepticism rather than being confined to a single domain.

Nalanda 's Sastrartha model proves that any society or educational institution can survive and thrive only if it allows its students complete freedom to question, doubt, and challenge established beliefs. This tradition of Sastrartha from Nalanda serves as a guiding light for today's modern universities.

In today's times, where attempts are made to suppress voices of dissent, Nalanda 's model of 'independent thinking' serves as a guide for academics across the world, because ideological freedom is the fertilizer that nurtures the flowers of knowledge and innovation.

Other.

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