Taxila aglow, but Nalanda in shadow

Jayant V. Narlikar

A few years ago, a regional conference in Islamabad gave some of us Indian scientists an opportunity of a visit across the border. I was keen to take advantage of this occasion to see the site of the ancient university of Takshashila (Taxila). It turned out that there were many of us with the same desire and our hosts obliged by arranging a bus tour. Presumably, they had sorted out the technical problem of our visas being limited to Lahore and Islamabad only. Visas limited to specific cities are issued to Pakistanis by India as well.

There are several sites distributed over a few kilometres pertaining to this ancient university. The relics are exhibited in a small but elegant museum. Such records as are available, including references in the Ramayana, tell us that the town of Takshashila was founded by King Bharata in the name of his son Taksha. Records also show that the university itself was functioning well around 800 BC. By the time Alexander visited India, the university had developed an international reputation as the prime seat of learning for Hinduism in all its aspects, like religion, culture and philosophy. On his way back, Alexander took several scholars from here back to his native land. Although we call it a university, Takshashila was patterned differently from today's recognised structure of a university. It had distinguished scholars from all over the subcontinent and each one operated a school under their own jurisdiction. Students would decide as per their interests whom to choose as their teacher. Thus Dhaumya Muni, Nagarjuna and Atreya were part of this system. It was here that Chanakya taught Chandragupta, who later went on to found the mammoth Maurya Empire.

Nalanda deserves to be noticed for what it once was. Surely it deserves an elegant and informative museum and a tourist centre.

Although Takshashila did not operate a specified syllabus for its subjects but left the contents of a course to its guru, the institution was like a university in the sense that it had on its menu a wide variety of fields ranging from the arts, literature, music, architecture and sculpture to chemistry, biology, medicine, astronomy and mathematics. There were courses even on witchcraft and sorcery, snake handling, omens etc. Students came from as faraway places as Babylon, Persia, Syria, Phoenicia and China. There was no caste bar here, although there was an evident disparity in living standards of the students depending on their family incomes. Being on the north-western border of India, Takshashila was vulnerable to attacks from Persians, Greeks, Parthians, Shakas and Kushanas. When the celebrated Chinese traveller Huien T'sang visited India in the seventh century, he found Takshashila a shadow of its former self, having been attacked and razed by the Huns circa 450 AD.

Huien T'sang, however, found another Indian university flourishing and at its prime. Situated near Rajgir (Rajagriha) in today's Bihar, Nalanda had an international reputation. I had the opportunity of visiting the Nalanda site also. Although tourists of today carry back their own impressions of Nalanda, nothing can replicate the glowing descriptions of that observant traveller.

Huien T'sang visited the Indian subcontinent between 630 and 645 AD, and it is entirely because of his meticulously written records that we are able to get details of Nalanda's golden age. In fact, Nalanda flourished at the time when Takshashila was tottering in the aftermath of the Hun invasion.

Structured more along the lines of a residential university today, Nalanda had a large campus surrounded by a protective wall. The campus itself had a pleasing appearance, with gardens and multi-storeyed buildings, bathing pools, playing fields and streams for boating. The head of the institution was *kulapati*, or a vice-chancellor, who was assisted by the management council and the academic council. About 30 kilometres away, there was another institution, called Vikramasheela, which had close links with Nalanda, with some scholars having joint appointments in the two places. Huien T'sang describes Nalanda as having 10,000 students on the campus with the student to teacher ratio as low as seven to one. The student selection process was through a tough entrance test conducted by "scholars at the door" who would pass only 20 to 30 per cent of the aspirants.

The Nalanda library was in three sections housed in three buildings. The one called Ratnodadhi (ocean of pearls) was, reportedly, nine storeys high. The other two, called Ratnasagar (sea of pearls) and Ratnaranjak (pearls of recreation), were six storeys each. The libraries published new works while providing storage for old manuscripts. This description only provides glimpses into what Huien T'sang wrote in detail. History, however, as usual has the last word. This marvellous institution fell victim to the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji in the 13th century AD when humans, manuscripts and buildings were all mercilessly annihilated.

What do we have there today? I had visited Nalanda in the late 1990s on a Sunday and the site was almost deserted. The government shop was closed. It is debatable if it could have provided any informative literature, maps, etc. Who would tell us about the relics around us? Our anxious enquiry brought the information that a guide was around but at the time with another tourist group. We waited patiently when he at last joined us. And he did give very useful information. The rooms distributed around a square courtyard were for housing the students, their meals, baths etc and for storage. There was a fireplace in the courtyard. The fire was used for three purposes: to keep warm in winters, to cook food and for scientific experiments. The guide also told that the site is potentially much bigger and needs to be excavated further.

Looking back on my two visits to the two ancient universities, I strongly feel that Nalanda deserves to be noticed for what it once was. Surely it deserves an elegant and informative museum and a tourist centre near the site. As a people we like to speak in glowing terms of our great past, but where do we stand when it comes to preserving its relics for posterity? In the case of Nalanda, at least cross-border rivalry should inspire us to create an attractive and informative tourist facility

The writer, a renowned astrophysicist, is professor emeritus at Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune University Campus