

## Scholastic excellence of Nalanda and Nalanda contemporary (415 A.D. – 1200 A.D.) Al-Azhar: A comparative evaluation

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### Abstract

This paper tries to make a comparative study between the two ancient pioneer Universities, Nalanda University in India and Al-Azhar University of Cairo in Egypt. India was a great seat of learning in ancient period where people from the various parts of the world used to come to India to acquire knowledge. Nalanda, Taxila, Mithila, Vikramasila, Baranasi, Valabhi etc. were the popular names where systematic ways of higher education prevailed. Al-Azhar is also a popular higher learning institute in Cairo, Egypt, which is the symbol of Islamic tradition, culture and education. It is not too old as Nalanda but it was started its journey when Nalanda reached its highest pride. Though no record was found whether there was any connection regarding the educational transactions between these two Universities existed or not but this study helps to recognize the pattern, structure and other factors which were responsible for the development of higher education in that period. This paper highlights the academic brilliance of Nalanda system of education in the perspective of Nalanda-contemporary (415 A.D. – 1200 A.D.) global higher education with special reference to Al-Azhar. The method employed for the present study is historical and analytical in nature.

**Keywords:** scholastic excellence, global higher education

### 1. Introduction

Nalanda and Al-Azhar are the famous names as higher learning institutions in the ancient world. Pupils from the various parts of the world were attracted and came to these higher learning institutions to satisfy their urge of knowledge. When Al-Azhar started its journey, Nalanda had already reached in its highest pride. In the history of human civilization, it is found that the formal education was started through religious institutions. Nalanda and Al-Azhar were also started primarily as religious centres; Nalanda as a centre of Buddhist religion and culture whereas Al-Azhar was the leading spiritual and religious centre of the Muslim world.

This paper is an attempt to make a comparative evaluation of both the systems of education of Nalanda and Al-Azhar, the two significant ancient centres of higher education in order to focus the scholastic excellence of Nalanda system of higher education. The method employed for the present study is historical and analytical in nature.

### 2. Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the system of education prevailed in Nalanda;
2. To analyze the structure of education prevailed in Al-Azhar;
3. To evaluate the scholastic brilliance of both the systems of education prevailed in Nalanda and Al-Azhar and to make a comparative estimation.

### 3. Nalanda: A Centre of Learning

#### 3.1 Background History

Nalanda has a very long history and great contribution in world education. It was situated in latitude 25°30' and 25°83' North and longitude 85°16' and 85°27' East. The scattered ruins of Nalanda are situated near the village Bargaon, 11 km

north of modern Rajgir and 85 km south-east of Patna in Bihar [1].

In between the period 427 A.D. & 1197 A.D. – Nalanda achieved glorious and incredible position with high status and pride in the world educational scenario though a big confusion is there regarding the time period of foundation of the University. According to the Tibetan historian *Taranatha*, Nalanda was the birth place of the venerable *Sariputra*. *Ashoka* was the first ruler who built a great Buddha temple which probably became the precursor of the later Nalanda *Vihara*. But Nalanda appeared as a learning centre near by the half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. According to Prof. Samaddar (Samaddar, “the Glories of Magadha”, P - 135, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) – the foundation of Nalanda took place in the reign of *Sakraditya* (Kumara Gupta I, *Mohendraditya* – 415 A.D. – 455 A.D.) round 427 A.D. In his language Professor samaddar said, “We reach the year 427 as the initial year of *Sakraditya*’s reign. This date comes very near the earliest known date of *Kumara Gupta I* that is 415-16, of the Bilsad inscription, the foundation of Nalanda took place round 427 A.D.” It is to be noted that Nalanda became flourished when a stream of scholastic pilgrimage began to flow towards the place. The final decline of the University was taken place by a barbarous adventurer, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, in approximately 1200 A.D [2].

#### 3.2 Scholastic Brilliance

Though Nalanda was emerged as a centre of Buddhist tradition and education, still gradually it covered a wide range

<sup>1</sup> Background History of Nalanda University. Available in...file:///F:/Banglapedia.htm,... retrieved on May,15, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Salletore, R.N., (1984), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Culture*, Volume III, New Delhi, Sterling Publisher Pvt. Ltd. p. 1044.

of subjects including all branches of Buddhism, other Indian philosophical systems, *Chikitsavidya* or Medicine, Astronomy, Geography, Mathematics, *Hetuvidya* or logic, *Sabdavidya* or Grammar and other arts and science subjects of the day. The wonderful event is that when the present highly economic developed countries asleep into the depth of darkness mainly in the area of literacy and civilization, the then India was mostly advanced in the field of education through the ancient educational institutions like, Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramasila *Mahavihara* etc. So, Nalanda should not be considered as only an educational institution but it should be treated as the witness of the educational history of the human civilization. Thousands of years passed over, dynasties passed, political ups and downs had been occurred – Nalanda and its pride may be de-memorised but its significance is still very much important and without it the history of Indian education system cannot be possible to analyse.

Nalanda *Mahavihara* being a seat of higher studies had a system of specialization. I-tsing wrote, “In the Nalanda monastery, the number of priests is immense and exceeds three thousand; it is difficult to assemble so many together in one place. There are eight halls and three hundred apartments in this monastery. The worship can only take place separately, as most convenient to each number. Thus it is customary to send out, everyday, one preceptor to go round from place to place chanting hymns being preceded by monastic lay servants and children carrying with them incense and flowers. He goes from one hall to another and in each time he chants the service, every time three or five slokas in a high tone and the sound is heard all round. At twilight he finishes this duty. This preceptor generally is presented by the Monstary with some special gift (Puga). In addition, there are some who, sitting alone, facing the shrine (Gandhakuti), praise the Buddha in their hearts. There are others, who going to the temple, (in a small party) kneel side by side with their bodies upright and putting their hands on the ground, touch it with their heads and thus perform the three fold salutation”.<sup>[3]</sup>

The subjects taught at Nalanda cover almost every aspect of education which could be classified broadly into religious and secular groups laying more emphasis on the former. The subjects can be given as follows-

- Buddhist – Tripitika, Jatakamala poems, Abhidharmakosa of vasubandhu, Yogasastra, Nyayanusara sastra, Tantras, Buddha-charita-kavya etc.
- Brahmanical – *Vedas*, *Samkhya*, other old and modern learning of Brahmanical works.
- Secular – *Hetuvidya*, *Sabdavidya*, *Chikitsavidya* and Miscellaneous works, *Vyakarana*, Sanskrit language, Sculpture, Paintings, Metallurgy, *Sarpavidya* etc.

According to Hiuen-Tsang students of Nalanda were regulated strictly according to proper time schedule. The teachers made the gift of the sacred law to the students which excelled all other gifts as it aimed at extinction of craving and suffering. They unfolded the meaningful knots in the texts. According to I-tsing – “Monks generally assemble at a place in the vihara where they take seats. Then a lecturer ascends the simhasana and recites a short sutra. After the lecture, the assembled monks say “sadhhu-sadhhu”. Then the lecturer comes down and

the monks bow down to the simhasana respectively”. The type of teaching was mainly professional in nature.

In the course of studies the *yogi* learnt preaching, discussions, heard lectures, memorized them and grasped the *Abhidhamma*, *Vinaya*, Gatha etc. The aim was to become a man of letters (Vidya-purusha). Students were under the strict discipline. For offences the brethren has a gradation of penalties. According to Hiuen-Tsang there were nearly 10,000 students but I-Tsing’s time the number of the students supported at the monastery exceeded 3000 [other view 5000 and in his (I-Tsing) memoirs, as 3500]. So, there was a confusion regarding the number of students studied at Nalanda. But it is no doubt that huge number of students from the various parts of the world studied there. The admission of a student possessed a complex procedure. The entrance examination was very strict so that its standard might be in keeping with that of its studies. *Dwar-pandita* asked various questions, which were connected with difficult problems. Most of the students were failure in giving answers. Only about twenty to thirty percent students could be able to success. Nalanda Mahavihara possessed a very large and rich library which comprised three monumental edifices, called Ratna Sagara, Ratna Dadhi and Ratna Ranjaka, of which Ratna Sagara that was a nine-storeyed building, was specialized in the collection of rare and sacred works.

Nalanda was noted for its specialization in the last stages of a University education. At that time Nalanda was particularly a research institute for advanced students. The stamp of its approval was necessary for any opinion to gain currency in the country. The highest academic degree of distinction of the times was a fellowship of Nalanda. Nalanda also had a department of secondary education for regular internal students for whom the above tests of admission did not apply. It admitted youngsters, the *Brahmacharis* and *Manavakas*. The University provided for all alumni free of cost there four requisite of clothes, food, bedding and medicine. The students could give themselves whole heartedly to their studies and self culture.

### 3.3 Eminent Teachers and Scholars

Nalanda was too much enriched with its high degree of teachers. Actually so much fame of Nalanda as a centre of learning was mainly due to the fame of its teachers. Among them Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dinnaga, Sthiramati, Gunamati, Chandragomin, Chandrakirti, Dharmapala, Dharmakirti, Silabhadra, Pravakara Mitra, Rahulabhadra, Nagarjuna II, Aryadeva, Santideva, Santarakshita, Kamalasila and many of others.

According to Hiuen-Tsang, the ranking of monks led to the institutions of academic titles indicative of the different degrees of status, standing and grade to which they belonged. The highest title was *Kulapati*. Next title of distinction was *Pandita*, *Maha-pandita* etc. The rooms of the monks were distributed according to their ranks. Better rooms were allotted for highest ranks and gradually to the lowest.

The great university demise was result of waning enthusiasm for Buddhism in India, declining financial support from successive Indian monarchs and corruption among university officials and a huge straw may be called as final straw was the burning of the building by Muslim invader Bakhtiyar Khalji.

<sup>3</sup> Takakusu, J., (1896, reprint 2005), *I-Tsing, A Record of the Buddhist Religion: As practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695)*, Translated work, New Delhi, 154-155

## 4. Al-Azhar: A Centre of Learning

### 4.1 Background History

Al-Azhar is a University located in Cairo, Egypt. It is situated in latitude 30°02'45" North and longitude 31°15'45" East. It was founded as Mosque by the Fatimid commander *Jawhar* and it was founded by the order of the Caliph *Al-Muizz*. Traditionally, propaganda was that the Caliph *Al-Muizz* is the founder of the city Cairo. It was so named in the honour of Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad and Ali and son-in-law and cousin of Prophet Muhammad. Fatimah was also called *Al-Zahra* which means 'the luminous'.<sup>4</sup> The building of the Al-Azhar Mosque primarily completed in the year 361 A.H. (972 A.D.). Later *Al-Aziz Billah* and Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah extended its premises. The building again repaired, renovated and extended by Al-Mustansir Billah and Al-Hafiz Li-Din-illah. It appeared as a study centre in 975 A.D. by incorporating an attached Madrasa. Fatimid Caliphs had a sincere urge of knowledge and encouraged knowledgeable persons and scholars of the different parts to assemble here to deliver their valuable lectures. By this it appeared gradually a University. Now it is claimed that Al-Azhar University is the oldest still functioning University in the world. Though debate is there regarding its oldest stand.

### 4.2 Structure and System of Education

Al-Azhar Madrasa in the 10<sup>th</sup> century appeared as a symbol of the development of Islamic culture and education. Here, attention was given to spread the philosophical studies among the learners. The administrators paid their attention not only to develop Islamic philosophy; they were much influenced by Greek thought and Indian philosophy. So, they warmly received the personalities in this field. A large collection of books written on various subjects also brought here to meet up the urge of knowledge of the students. According to Syed Farid Alatas, all branches of Islamic law and jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, Islamic astronomy, Islamic philosophy and logic taught here.<sup>5</sup> Though the valuable books were once destroyed by Salah-ud-Din Ayyubi and the treasures were lost forever. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the tassel between Shia and Sunni affected the University environment by which the Shia Fatimid dynasty over throne and it became 'Sunni Centre of Learning.'

Al-Azhar University though emerged for the development of Islamic culture and education but the other religions also had a provision to enter. For example, during the time of Saladin in the 12<sup>th</sup> century a Jewish philosopher Maimonides delivered valuable lectures on medicine and astronomy. But before 20<sup>th</sup> century no evidence is there, whether secular subjects and secular departments were there or not. Initially, there were no entrance requirements, no formal curriculum and no degrees. The basic programmes of studies were Islamic law, Theology and the Arabic language. The method of teaching was traditional in nature. Lecture method mainly used with maintaining all rules and regulations of Islamic school.

<sup>4</sup> Halm, Heinz., (1997), *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning*, The Institute of Ismaili Studies and I.B. Tauris, London.

<sup>5</sup> Alatas, Syed Farid., (2006), *From Ja mi ah to University: Multiculturalism and Christian- Muslim Dialogue*, *Current Sociology*, 54(1), 112-132, doi: 10.1177/0011392106058837.

### 4.3 Eminent Teachers and Scholars

A large number of notable persons associated with the Al-Azhar University. It has also produced a valuable range of eminent teachers and scholars. Fatimid commander Jawhar (972 A.D.), Al-Aziz Billah (975-996 A.D.), Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996-1021 A.D.), Al-Mustansir Billah (1021-1036 A.D.) and Al-Hafiz Li-Din-illah — these were the great name who maintained their responsibilities as a Grand Imam. In the later period the founder of Islamic Modernism Muhammad Abduh and Sayd Jamal edin Afghani, the Mufti of Jerusalem Mohammad Amin al-Husayni and so many names were associated with the University.

### 4.4 Al-Azhar at Present

In 1961, Government of Egypt declared Al-Azhar University as a full-fledged government University and launched a number of secular faculties such as Business, Economics, Science, Pharmacy, Medicine, Engineering and agriculture etc. An Islamic women's faculty was also added. Al-Azhar University is now one of the leading Universities in Egypt.

## 5. Comparative Evaluation

From the above discussion a comparison between the two systems of education of Nalanda and Al-Azhar has been drawn.

### i) Nature of Institution

Nalanda and Al-Azhar both were fully institutional with definite location and fully furnished buildings. Other facilities of higher educational system like students' hostel, library, specialized teacher etc. were present there.

### ii) Religious Factors

Nalanda was initially emerged as a centre of Buddhist tradition and education but gradually covered a wide range of secular subjects like Logic, Medicine and Grammar etc.

On the other hand, Al-Azhar was fully a centre of education following Islamic tradition, culture and education with a greater emphasis on Islamic law, Theology and Arabic language. Though in the later period especially after 1961 A.D. many secular subjects like Medicine, Astronomy, Science, Economics, Pharmacy, Business, Engineering, Agriculture and Women's study etc. have been included.

### iii) Method of Instruction

In Al-Azhar mainly lecture method that is traditional method of teaching was followed. Here, in the time of instruction Islamic rules, regulations and techniques were strictly maintained.

Whereas in Nalanda Lecture method was the leading method but other methods like discussion, education by work experience etc. were used side by side. It can be said that the activity of the students, that is the child – centric education was taken place in the institution. Seminar was considered as one of the important criteria of Nalanda education system. Hence, it was more up-to-date.

### iv) Admission Procedure

Initially, Al-Azhar University had no entrance requirements. All students belonging from Muslim community were eligible for study. But when Al-Azhar was nationalized, a formal way of admission procedure was adapted.

In Nalanda only those students were admitted who had the necessary background to follow higher studies. Students came from the various parts of the world like Mongolia, China, Korea, Tibet etc. According to Hiuen-Tsang that only 20% of those who came seeking for admission came out successful at the entrance test and the remaining had to go back in disappointment. Those who examined the candidates seeking admission were experts in religious controversies and were always ready with difficult problems to try the competence of aspirants for admission. The probable age of admission was not less than 20. Four experts popularly known as Dwar-Pandita asked them various questions. If the answers were satisfied then the students should be given permission for admission. So, student's quality was only the condition of eligibility for admission.

#### v) Medium of Instruction

In Nalanda, 'Pali' was the main medium of instruction but the knowledge of Sanskrit language was also very essential. In Al-Azhar 'Arabic' was only the medium.

#### vi) National and Global Appeals

Nalanda had international appeal; it was an organized learning centre. It drew students from all over the world like China, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, Japan and Turkey etc. Al-Azhar always maintained a prestigious and colourful position in respect of Islamic culture and tradition. The Muslim students of all over Egypt gathered for seeking admission in Al-Azhar as it was the symbol of high pride and prestige. In the later period, a large number of students from Middle East Asia, and even from South-Asia including Africa of the Muslim community came here for study so, in the initial stage, Al-Azhar had no international appeal but gradually it was developed in the later period but it is never comparable with Nalanda as Nalanda occupied a unique stand in the-then international level of education.

### 6. Concluding Remarks

Nalanda and Al-Azhar- both had a significant role in the history of education. Actually, Nalanda was the symbol and the starting point of modern concept of higher education. Nalanda system of education is still very much relevant and it has a great impact on the modern concept of University level education. Nalanda had been dilapidated by the devouring time but Al-Azhar still exists. Al-Azhar at present is the oldest existing and continually operating educational institution in the world.

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