

## B.A. Part 1 (Hons) – Subject – AI & AS

### The fall of Nalanda University

According to the records Nalanda University was destroyed three times by invaders, but rebuilt only twice. The first destruction was caused by the Huns under Mihirakula during the reign of Skandagupta (455–467 AD). But Skanda's successors restored the library and improved it with an even bigger building.

The second destruction came in the early 7th century by the Gaudas. This time, the Buddhist king Harshavardhana (606–648 AD) restored the university.

The third and most destructive attack came when the ancient Nalanda University was destroyed by the Muslim army led by the Turkish leader Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193. It is believed that Buddhism as a major religion in India had a setback for hundreds of years due to the loss of the religious texts during the attack. And, since then, the NU has not been restored until the recent developments.

The decline of Nalanda is concomitant with the disappearance of Buddhism in India. When Xuanzang travelled the length and breadth of India in the 7th century, he observed that his religion was in slow decay and even had ominous premonitions of Nalanda's forthcoming demise. Buddhism had steadily lost popularity with the laity and thrived, thanks to royal patronage, only in the monasteries of Bihar and Bengal. By the time of the Palas, the traditional Mahayana and Hinayana forms of Buddhism were imbued with Tantric practices involving secret rituals and magic. The rise of Hindu philosophies in the subcontinent and the waning of the Buddhist Pala dynasty after the 11th century meant that Buddhism was hemmed in on multiple fronts, political, philosophical, and moral. The final blow was delivered when its still-flourishing monasteries, the last visible symbols of its existence in India, were overrun during the Muslim invasions that swept across Northern India at the turn of the 13th century.

In around 1193 CE, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, a Turkic chieftain out to make a name for himself, was in the service of a commander in Awadh. The Persian historian, Minhaj-i-Siraj in his *Tabaqat-i Nasirii*, recorded his deeds a few decades later. Khalji was assigned two villages on the border of Bihar which had become a political no-man's land. Sensing an opportunity, he began a series of plundering raids into Bihar and was recognised and rewarded for his efforts by his superiors. Emboldened, Khalji decided to attack a fort in Bihar and was able to successfully capture it, looting it of a great bounty. Minhaj-i-Siraj wrote of this attack:

Muhammad-i-Bakht-yar, by the force of his intrepidity, threw himself into the postern of the gateway of the place, and they captured the fortress, and acquired great bounty. The greater number of the inhabitants of that place were Brahmans, and the whole of those Brahmans had their heads shaven; and they were all slain. There were a great number of books there; and, when all these books came under the observation of the Musalmans, they summoned a number of Hindus that they might give them information respecting the import of those books; but the whole of the Hindus had been killed. On becoming

acquainted [with the contents of those books], it was found that the whole of that fortress and city was a college, and in the Hindi tongue, they call a college Bihar.

This passage refers to an attack on a Buddhist monastery (the "Bihar" or Vihara) and its monks (the shaved Brahmins). The exact date of this event is not known with scholarly estimates ranging from 1197 to 1206. While many historians believe that this monastery which was mistaken for a fort was Odantapura, some are of the opinion that it was Nalanda itself. However, considering that these two Mahaviharas were only a few kilometres apart, both very likely befell a similar fate. The other great Mahaviharas of the age such as Vikramshila and later, Jagaddala, also met their ends at the hands of the Turks at around the same time.

Another important account of the times is the biography of the Tibetan monk-pilgrim, Dharmasvamin, who journeyed to India between 1234 and 1236. When he visited Nalanda in 1235, he found it still surviving, but a ghost of its past existence. Most of the buildings had been damaged by the Muslims and had since fallen into disrepair. But two viharas, which he named Dhanaba and Ghunaba, were still in serviceable condition with a 90-year-old teacher named Rahula Shribhadra instructing a class of about 70 students on the premises. Dharmasvamin believed that the Mahavihara had not been completely destroyed for superstitious reasons as one of the soldiers who had participated in the desecration of a Jnananatha temple in the complex had immediately fallen ill.

While he stayed there for six months under the tutelage of Rahula Shribhadra, Dharmasvamin makes no mention of the legendary library of Nalanda which possibly did not survive the initial wave of Turkic attacks. He, however, provides an eyewitness account of an attack on the derelict Mahavihara by the Muslim soldiers stationed at nearby Odantapura (now Bihar Sharif) which had been turned into a military headquarters. Only the Tibetan and his nonagenarian instructor stayed behind and hid themselves while the rest of the monks fled Nalanda. Contemporary sources end at this point. But traditional Tibetan works which were written much later suggest that Nalanda's story might have managed to endure for a while longer even if the institution was only a pale shadow of its former glory. The Lama, Taranatha, states that the whole of Magadha fell to the Turks who destroyed many monasteries including Nalanda which suffered heavy damage. He however also notes that a king of Bengal named Chagalaraja and his queen later patronised Nalanda in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, although no major work was done there.

An 18th-century work named Pag sam jon zang recounts another Tibetan legend which states that chaityas and viharas at Nalanda were repaired once again by a Buddhist sage named Mudita Bhadra and that Kukutasiddha, a minister of the reigning king, erected a temple there. A story goes that when the structure was being inaugurated, two indignant (Brahmanical) Tirthika mendicants who had appeared there were treated with disdain by some young novice monks who threw washing water at them. In retaliation, the mendicants performed a 12-year penance propitiating the sun, at the end of which they performed a fire-sacrifice and threw "living embers" from the sacrificial pit into the Buddhist temples. The resulting conflagration is said to have hit Nalanda's library. Fortunately, a miraculous stream of water gushed forth from holy manuscripts in the ninth storey of Ratnodadhi which enabled many manuscripts to be saved. The heretics perished in the very fire that they had kindled. While it is unknown when this event was supposed to have occurred, archaeological evidence (including a small heap of burnt rice) does suggest that a large fire

did consume a number of structures in the complex on more than one occasion. A stone inscription notes the destruction by fire and subsequent restoration at the Mahavihara during the reign of Mahipala (r. 988–1038).

Johan Elverskog, a scholar of Central Asia, Islam and Buddhism, professor and chair of religious studies at SMU, looking at the wider reasons for Nalanda's decline as a cultural centre, and how it is used in certain anti-Islamic rhetorics, talks of local Buddhists making deals with Muslim rulers early on, which assured that Buddhist activities in Nalanda went on for centuries: he says that one Indian master "was trained and ordained at Nalanda before he traveled to the court of Khubilai Khan", Chinese monks were travelling there to get texts as late as the fourteenth century, and concludes that "the Dharma survived in India at least until the seventeenth century." He mainly blames British historiography, which used these "claims of Muslim barbarity and misrule in order to justify the introduction of their supposedly more humane and rational form of colonial rule"

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