

Nālandā and the Chinese Emissaries: Creation of a Buddhist Knowledge Orbit in South and South- East Asia

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Abstract :

Cross cultural exchange between India and China in the form of commercial relations and transmission of Buddhist knowledge and doctrines go back to the beginning of the early first millennium CE. This process reached its height in the 7th century when around 56 Chinese Buddhist monks and converts visited India. Major stimuli to come to India was to study Buddhist canon at Nālandā, which grew as the premier learning centre and international student concourse and to collect Sūtra and Vinaya texts for the purpose of translation into Chinese languages which created a new genre of knowledge. The usual route from China moved through South China Sea linking important points like Java, Sumātrā, straits of Malacca, coast of Burma and reaching Tāmralipti and finally to Nālandā. So, regular movements of the Buddhist scholars over this route helped a Buddhist milieu to grow over these places. Present paper attempts to examine the nature and extent of the contribution by the University of Nālandā and its visitors for the translation and diffusion of the Buddhist knowledge and thereby creating a Buddhist knowledge circle over this region.

Key words : Nālandā, Buddhism, Knowledge, network, Indianisation, China, South Asia

The cultural milieu of south Asia was enriched by the dynamic reciprocity of two distinct civilizational entities of India and China. Commerce and intellectual mutualism had been the two main foundations of this synthesis and commerce did not mean only material exchange in the modern sense. As Buddhism made headway beyond the Indian territorial limits, Buddhist sermons and doctrines were freely percolated along these commercial lines. Between 1st- 3rd century CE, commercial ties between India and China were well established Under the KucāGas. Around the beginning of the Christian Era, Buddhism was also introduced in China and grew a dominant religion in China too. The trunk routes built for the administrative purposes during the Maurya period were availed by the traders and pilgrims. The route from Takasīlā to Pātaliputra was chief among those routes. With the development and popularity of Mahāyāna school in the early centuries of Christian era and with financial support from traders and guilds there was a steady growth in the number of monasteries along the trunk routes. After the fall of the Kusānas the political centre of North India again shifted to the Middle Gangā Plains and there were political disturbances after the later Han dynasty. Perhaps it resulted into a temporary setback for Buddhism in China. Fa- Xian in the 5th century CE, reports that Buddhist monasteries along the route from Kashgarh to Bactria were depopulated and took a short cut through the Pamir plateau to the Gāndhāra region. Fa- Xian mentioned, in a city called Chieh- Chia (unidentified) at the major route to Kashmir, a grand Buddhist ceremony took place. So, the Buddhist influence was pretty strong in this region. Fa- Xian's visit to India represents this early Sino- Indian cultural contact with Buddhism as the focal point. Afterwards a good number of Chinese monk scholars came to India with the primary intention to learn about Buddhism. Xuang Zang and Yi Jing are the two classic examples of this group of scholars who came to reside in Nālandā in order to learn the Dharma and Vinaya the Buddhist doctrines and rules. Nālandā was by that time linked to the Buddhist ring of South and South East Asia comprising India, China, Srilanka, South East Asian islands, Myanmar, Indonesian Archipelago and Malaysia. But curiously enough, Nālandā, which stood as the votary of Buddhist ideas and doctrines does not find a mention in his account of India. Fa- Xian described the village of Nala or Nālandā and it was sacred and central to Buddhism for being the birthplace of Sariputta and here he attained his parinirvaGa also. A Stūpa was built where his body was burned.¹ Nālandā rather figured frequently in Buddhist or

Jain texts of the 6th- 5th centuries BCE as a prosperous bāhirika or suburb of Rājagha.² Here stayed the rich householder Lepa who owned the great pillared bath hall Sesadravya and the pleasure park Hastiyama at Nālandā and possessed immense wealth. Mahāvīra himself spent fourteen rainy seasons in the Rājagha - Nālandā region. Near Nālandā there was a flourishing Brāhmara village named Khanumata possessing natural bounties.³ The Buddha and his crew frequently moved in the Rājag[ha - Nālandā route and the park of Abālithika was the favourite rest stop for the Buddha,⁴ somewhere near Nālandā in this Rājagha - Nālandā route. From these textual evidences the idea that can be formed of Nālandā is exclusively of a rich suburb of the old Magadhan capital with a teeming population of mixed nature. It did not attain any particular settlement identity but offered an open field for indoctrination to all the new religious groups of the 6th century BCE. Buddhism was surely the most promising among them and exerted much influence over this belt. Eventually Nālandā proved to be very receptive in imbibing Buddhist philosophy and assumed a new identity of a noted Buddhist monastic –pedagogic site. It is difficult to date the physical growth of the site, but at any rate it cannot go before the late Gupta period, as the earliest epigraphic records as only historical evidence come from this period. So, it appears that Nālandā had a late rise as a premier Buddhist monastic site but soon attained the glories of peerless fame within a very short span of time. This brief paper is in no way an exhaustive study of this heterogeneous academic engagement, but a rather an attempt to identify the range of academic propensities that it showed.

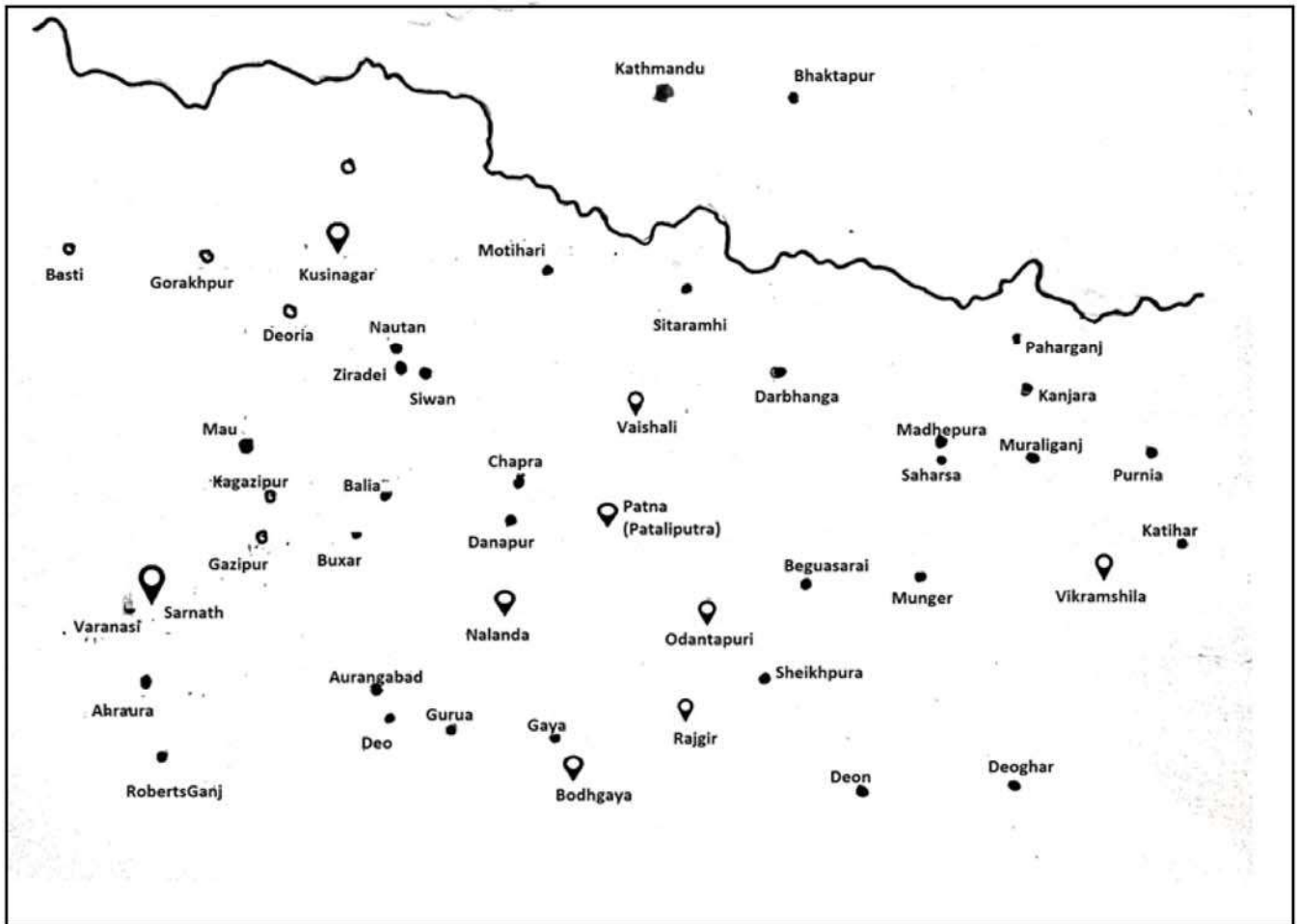
In the local plain, Nālandā stood at the top of a conglomerate of universities located in the nearby Bihar sharif. Odantapuri, a haven of Tantric ideas and practices derived its name from high mansions and noble education kept the flag of Buddhism soaring high. An inscription of Nārāyanapāladeva of the year 54 recalls that it became the capital of Magadha under the Pāla rulers. The area derived its name Vihāra from the large vihāras of Odantapurī, Yasovarmapura, Nālandā and others forming an educational hub in the area in the early medieval times. This was even mentioned by subsequent Muslim writers and Ain-i- Akbari even recognizes this place as a rich revenue yielding subah.⁵

From Bihar Sharif a Buddha Image Inscription dated 4th year of the Pratihāra king of Kanauj- Mahendrapāla's rule and 10th day of the bright half of Caitra this image was erected by Kumārabhadra as a gift of Saindhava or the people of Sindh.⁶ Though Magadha was under Pratihāra rule, Nālandā doesn't miss its usual gifts and patronages. In a group of three little stone stūpas, one bears an inscription from the 11th year of Mahendrapāla's reign and attributes the building of these caityas to the son of Panthaka, a Kayastha. The Pratihāra king Mahendrapāla was the successor of Bhoja and ruled between 896-908 CE or the 9th- 10th centuries.⁷

From the monastery VII of Nālandā a twelfth century Sanskrit epigraph was recovered recording the benefactions of the Buddhist monk Vipulaurīmitra of Somapura. A long list of donations made by him was mentioned. But his offerings were really great at Somapura. Here he built a temple for Tārā with an attached court and a tank. He caused reconstruction of cells at the site, presented gold ornaments to the image of the Buddha. Most importantly he built a monastery for the Mitra group of ascetics.⁸ It is curious to note that Vipulasrīmitra was originally an ascetic of Somapura but his inscription was found at the site of Nālandā. In a network of close lying monastery- university sites was Nālandā held some superior position to issue decrees.

The seal of a bhiksu community of Bodhisatvagama located at Udantapuri or Bihar sharif reads “*Srimad Uddandapura sri Bodhisatvayama Mahavihari Arya Bhiksusamghasya*”.⁹ These seals originally belonged to subordinate colleges affiliated to Nālandā as tokens of their authority to prove ingenuity of their certificates and diplomas (prasamsa or pramana patras). It maintained the sanctity of the students of Nālandā. Often students of these subordinate colleges travelled to far off places with their certificates. Stamp of Nālandā validated their degrees and abilities. Nālandā's authority was certainly that of an overseeing and recognizing agency atop a number of Buddhist academic institutions. It also confirms Nālandā's superior position as the curator of the Buddhist knowledge.

Highlighted Buddhist sites of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh Sector



Between the 3rd to 5th centuries increasing number of south and Central Asian monks arrived in China. Early Chinese sources indicate familiarity with the products of mainland South-East Asia. Chinese Han style potteries were discovered at Thailand, Sumatra and Java. By the 7th century China, India and their respective spheres were fully integrated into this network. The Chinese travellers started their pilgrimages to Buddhist sites.¹⁰ Through their descriptions found in their diaries and translation of Buddhist works information about India continuously percolated to China. India acquired the image of a mystic land in the minds of both Chinese clergy and laity. A major hurdle that China needed to overcome was its peripheral existence in the Buddhist world in respect to India. Being the birthplace of the Buddha and Buddhism, having monopoly over Buddhist doctrines and scriptures, India was central to the Buddhist world and China suffered from a borderland complex. China's position was not only peripheral in a geographical sense but intellectually too she depended on India for all kinds of doctrinaire authentication. The Chinese clergy, being aware of this gap between China and Buddhist-Indic world tried to institute a legitimate and accepted Buddhist terrain in China and to eliminate the borderland complex.¹¹ Bringing out the Buddhist doctrines into China and translating them in their vernaculars was a good way to fill up the doctrinal lacuna. China took an active part in the translation and preservation of Buddhist works and increasing number of Chinese Buddhist monks started to visit India in search of Buddhist doctrines and relics and to infuse Buddhist teachings in China through translation. We get to know from Fa- Xian's account that around 400 CE he and his companions decided to visit India to learn authentic rules and regulations of Vinaya. They traversed a long and arduous journey and on the way found Buddhism being followed in many places, particularly those bordering India. For example, in both the provinces of Shen-Shen and

Woo- e he found four thousand practising Buddhist monks, all students of Theravadin Buddhism.¹² Hence, much before the time of Xuang- Zang, Buddhism grew as a dominant force over a sizeable area in China and places bordering India. Their regular visit and interest about India and Buddhism might have induced some concern among the royal class to preserve a renowned Buddhist centre like Nālandā.

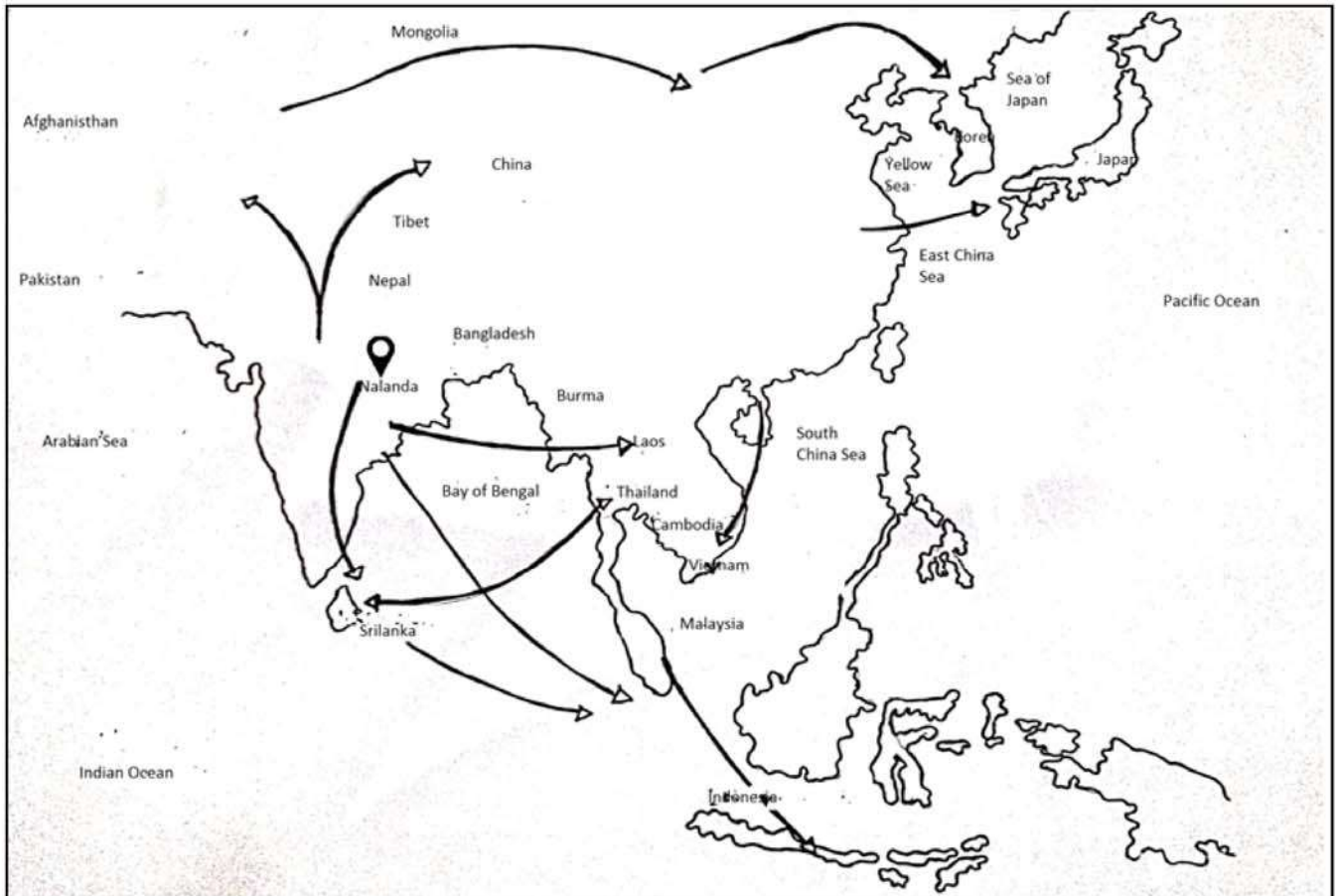
Nālandā, as the Buddhist intellectual centre of the highest ranking, attracted multitude of ambitious students from a loosely integrated Buddhist circle of South and South East Asia, and stood as the foremost nodal point of this extensive terrain. XuangZang is an early and excellent example of earnest sincerity and dedication to the cause of learning and dissemination of knowledge.

On his way to Nālandā, XuangZang took many detours from the major routes to cover important Buddhist sites in this region.¹³ He arrived in the kingdom of Magadha to learn the Buddhist doctrines at Nālandā. He found there, at least fifty monasteries and the people are really learned.¹⁴ He had the desire to learn Yoga sâstra in Nālandā, and so, he was introduced to Sīlabhadra. About the general curriculum of Nālandā, he recalls ten thousand pupils of Mahâyânism learnt Hetuvidya, sabdavidya, Cikitsâvidya, sâñkhya, magic based on Atharvaveda were the subjects. Thousand men could explain twenty sūtras and ūâstras, five hundred mastered thirty collections and some ten of them could correctly tell about fifty collections. Sīlabhadra was the chief among them, by his excellent command over all the studies.¹⁵ Xuang Zang learnt Yoga- sâstra for fifteen months and cleared his doubts about the subject and for his maintenance Siladitya Harcavardhana allotted him the revenues of three villages. This makes it clear that other than gifting or donating to the monastic establishment, land grants or village grants were also given to really gifted students of the Nālandā mahāvihāra. He also learnt the vyākaraṇa or Sanskrit grammar.¹⁶ He travelled thoroughly at various Buddhist places in India and outside. Taking the route from Campā reached KarGasuvarGa where he noticed twelve saGgharāmas with three hundred monks. In south Bengal or Samatama he noticed three thousand monks of Sthavira school belonging to twenty monasteries. It gives the picture, as reflected in the Samatama seals also that these monasteries all located close to Nālandā, might have served as distinct colleges under Nālandā mahāvihāra. So, a large area of Karnasuvana and Samatama adjoining to Samatama formed a Buddhist intellectual circuit. From there the route he took passed through Srikhetra, Kāmalankā (Pegu), Dvārapati, Isānpura and the kingdom of Mahācampā or Siam and the nearby six kingdoms. He had the desire to go to Simhala because it was famous for the Sthavira school scholars and those who could explain Yoga- sâstra. Taking his way from Odissa, Kosala, Andhra, Dhanakamaka, Chulya and the Dravida capital Kañcīpura he finally reached Simhala.¹⁷ He described there were at least ten thousand Buddhist monks at several hundred monasteries and largely affiliated to the mahâyāna faith. He extensively toured the country and visited all the Buddhist places. Joining the dots of the spots that he visited a Buddhist pilgrimage cum interactive route may be derived and Nālandā would stand as the central node emanating knowledge to various other monasteries through a pilgrim. In his return journey to Nālandā at a place called Tiladhaka where a renowned scholar named Prajñabhadra stayed. He was an expert of three pitakas, œabdavidya, hetuvidya and Xuang Zang had a long discussion with him about various matters. He met Jayasena of Yacmīvana, a disciple of Sīlabhadra regarding some philosophical queries. Knowing Xuang Zang's vast and deep knowledge the Magadhan king Pūrnavarma assigned him the revenues of twenty large towns but he declined this offer.¹⁸ Siladitya Rāja i.e. Harsavardhana also wanted to endow him with the revenues of eighty large towns but refused by Xuang Zang. From the biography of Xuang Zang by Hwui-Li we learn that after few years of Xuang Zang's death Yijing and thirty seven other disciples set out for a westward trip in 671 CE. Deserted by his companions, Yijing took the Southern Sea Route to India.

By Yijing's time, South East Asia became an active participant in the Buddhist exchange sphere. With the political integration and consolidation under the Guptas a coherent politico- social and religio- cultural model was adopted across a vast portion of Indian land. The Guptas and Vākātakas promoted a greater visibility of religious motifs and political ideologies. Merchants and religious people were actively associated with the transmission of Indian constructs including iconography, Sanskrit language and religious practices over a vast area of greater South-East Asia from modern Bangladesh to Vietnam and Indonesia. Adoption of an orchestra of religious and cultural ideas from India and their combination with local South-East Asian elements resulted in a syncretic composite cultural tradition. As early as the early centuries of the Common Era, Sanskrit made its appearance in Southeast Asian inscriptions. The oldest known Sanskrit inscription was discovered from Indonesia known as the Yupa inscription of king Mūlavarman from Koetai. Professor Kern who gave a transcription and translation of this pure Sanskrit

inscription, suggests a date of the inscription as early as 4th century CE. Professor Kern draws our attention to Mulavarman's father's name was Asvavarman and his grandfather being KuGunga, a non-Sanskritic name, it is highly probable that Asvavarman adopted his name after his conversion to Hinduism. Professor Kern concluded that KuGunga was not an immigrant

The Integrated Buddhist Knowledge Circuit of South and South- East Asia in 7th- 8th C.



from India but a native of Borneo and they underwent a process of Hinduization and Indianization.¹⁹ Under the spell of Indianization, between 300-1300 Traditional intellectuals, religious professionals, traders, adventurers Sanskrit virtually ruled over this region and stood as the language of epigraphs. In Malaysia, prior to the Sailendra rule was established, Indian culture took deep roots. Hindu gods and their images were extremely popular. Indian months and attendant astronomical details, Indian system of weights and measurement were quite familiar to the place. Transplantation of the Indian river names like Candrabhâgâ and Gomatî to the islands show the degree of Indianization Buddhism was also introduced and was much popularized by the 5th century CE. Yijing learnt Sanskrit for six months in the beautiful city and great Buddhist centre of Srî- Vijaya and translated large volumes of Buddhist texts collected from India. In this fortified city there lived at least thousand Buddhist priests and a large number of followers and admirers of the Buddha. By 7th century CE Indian culture at large and Buddhist philosophy became a dominant force. At Srî- Vijaya Tantric Mahayanism was in preponderance and this is a form of Buddhism that actually developed in Bengal in the 7th century CE. This Bengal connection may be strengthened by the reference of professor Dharmapâla of Nâlandâ who visited Suvarnadvîpa. Building Buddhist relics was also not unknown to the land and the people. The Ligor inscription dated 775CE records that at the instance of king Srî Vijayendrârâja's chief priest Jayanta built three stûpas and after his death his disciple Adhimukti built two more brick caityas by the side of three caityas.

Politically, majority of small states in the Malay archipelago were integrated and included under the banner of the In the 8th century under the banner of Āilendras, majority of small states of Malaysia were politically integrated and included in the mighty Āilendra empire for the next four centuries. Starting from Canton Yijing reached Śrībhōja or Śrī Vijaya in Sumatra and proceeded to Quedah, Nagapatnam, Ceylon, Arakan and the coast of Burma to Tāmralipta. Xuangzang, Yijing and many more aspired to come to Nālandā to learn the doctrines of dharma. On his homeward journey he collected at least 400 original Sūtra and Vinaya scriptures from Ūrībhōja to Honan, his native state. Most of them were translated within 700-712 CE. Of these translation works “*Kau-fa-kaosang-cheni*” described 56 Buddhist priests and converts from China visited India in the latter half of the 7th century. A part of them followed the same southern sea route and the rest took the northern route through deserts and mountains. The southern sea route to China was under the special protection of Bhāskarvarman, the king of Kāmarūpa. This route existed from the time of Fa- Xian as he returned to China from Ceylon by sea and the same route was taken by Xuang-Zang too. Yijing reports there was a flourishing religious and mercantile establishment at Śrībhōja. There were many more pilgrims and scholars travelled in this route subsequently. The sea route from China to India passed through Java, Sumatra, straits of Malacca, the coast of Burma and Arakan and finally reached Tāmralipta²⁰ and thereby creating a Buddhist circle over a vast stretch of Southeast Asia. This was an active interactive zone for cultural exchange. Buddhist scholasticism was certainly a prime mover in this network and Nālandā was the foremost centre of Buddhist learning and drew the brightest scholars from these places and particularly from China. Glimpses of Nālandā’s internal affairs may be summarized from Xuang Zang’s account. Nālandā was described preeminent among myriads of Sanghārāmas. It was in terms of number of pupils which counted to 10,000, in terms of richness of subjects studied and in terms of superb skill and proficiency of over 1000 men to explain sūtras and ūāstras, Nālandā stood out from the rest. Other than Buddhist studies Nālandā also excelled in logic, phonetics, medicine and the Vedic studies. The academic environment at Nālandā was marked by passionate interest to learning and students attending the academic sessions with utmost regularity and punctuality. This smooth functioning of the convent was backed by the remission of revenues of nearby 100 villages to meet the expenses of it. 200 householders from those villages contributed on a daily basis to supply great quantities of rice, butter, milk and so on.²¹ The high standard of academics, remarkable discipline and steady provision of ration and finance made it attractive to students from the Buddhist circle of Asia. H.D. Sankalia counts between Xuang Zang and Yjing’s visit to Nālandā 57 pilgrims from China, Japan and Korea visited Nālandā.²² At any rate Nālandā acquired the status of an academic institution of international acclaim by the time of 7th-8th centuries CE.

It has already been pointed out that Malay was a great seat of Indian Culture at large and Buddhism under the Sailendras. However, there is no definite clue as regards Malaysia being the original seat of power of the Ūailendras. It seems they are originally from Śrī- Vijaya in Sumātra and slowly extended their authority over Java and Malay peninsula. Their power is testified by how a Ūailendra emperor (Rājādhirāja) VicGu was addressed Ūrī Mahārāja or the lord. The Kelurak Inscription of 782 CE starts with an adoration of three jewels of Buddhism and Buddhist deities and the king named Indra, an ornament of the dynasty and he subdued all the kings of all corners. All major islands- Java, Sumatra and Malay were annexed to Sailendra empire. It appears that Āilendras grew as the imperial power and were devout Buddhists. The Arab writers have appreciated their great wealth and hint that the kingdoms of Kamboja and Campa also came under their influence.²³ An obvious testimony to the Ūailendra interest and admiration to Nālandā was the Nālandā Copperplate of the time of Devapāladeva. It states by the command of the Pāla king Devapāla in the presence of a large number of village to high ranking officials villages Nandivanāka and MaGivamaka of naya (subdivision) Ajapura with Namika of the naya PilipiEka, Hastigrāma of naya Acalā of the Rājag[ha vicaya and Pālamaka of naya Kumudasūtra of Gaya vicaya with the undivided lands between them, their grasslands and pastures, mango groves and Madhuka trees, water and dry lands were transferred to the Nālandā mahāvihāra. In addition, tax exemptions, huge concessions were granted to these villages.

This grant was made on humble request of Bālaputradeva, the illustrious king of Sailendras of Yavabhūmi. Balavarman of Vyāghrataṭī Manala who was very close to Devapāladeva and his companion in many wars served as the messenger of Bālaputradeva. He also caused to build a monastery for the residence of monks.²⁴ It is not mentioned anywhere how Bālaputradeva acquired those five villages from Devapāla, whether he purchased them or requested the Pāla king to cede those villages in favour of Nālandā is not clear.

Nālandā was bound to its clientele at various levels. Maintaining a superlative intellectual standard it held a virtual monopoly over the preserve, creation and circulation of knowledge. Its position was both local and beyond. It served as an umbrella organization to other academic bodies of brilliance at a regional level. As a brilliant Buddhist pedagogical centre, Nālandā attracted accomplished and gifted students from overseas and radiated superior knowledge through scriptures, carried and translated by monk- pilgrims. This put it at the central node of the knowledge orb created over the Bay of Bengal, South China Sea path, many centuries ahead the first batch of universities emerged in human history in a formal sense.

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