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Nalanda Mahāvihāra as an Early International University-Like Institution: Knowledge Networks, Institutional Structure, and Civilizational Continuity in Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

Nalanda Mahāvihāra (5th to 12th century CE) is an often-overlooked case in the history of international higher education. Based on archaeological evidence, epigraphic records, and the accounts of Xuanzang and Yijing, its institutional structure is examined through a comparative framework. Residential organization, formalized pedagogy, selective admission, disciplinary plurality, and sustained royal patronage indicate a highly organized centre of advanced learning. Its ability to attract students from across Asia and to sustain extensive intellectual exchange reflects a transregional academic culture. Rather than situating Nalanda within a European trajectory, this article argues for its recognition as an independently evolved institutional model. This perspective opens a more plural understanding of global higher education history and highlights the role of premodern knowledge networks.

Keywords: Archaeology; Global higher education; Knowledge networks; Nalanda Mahāvihāra; Premodern universities; Transregional exchange; University-like institutions; Xuanzang.

1. Introduction

The question of what constitutes the “first university” in history remains a central question in global historiography. European historiography has traditionally

privileged the University of Bologna (11th century), the University of Oxford (12th century), and the University of Cambridge (13th century) as foundational prototypes of higher education. However, nearly seven centuries before the consolidation of Bologna, a vast residential scholastic complex flourished in eastern India, Nalanda Mahāvihāra.

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Located in present day Bihar near Rajgir, Nalanda operated continuously for approximately eight centuries, from the Gupta period through the Pāla dynasty, until its destruction in the late 12th century. Archaeological evidence shows that the complex extended across a large area composed of multiple monastic quadrangles, temples, lecture halls, and a monumental library structure (Archaeological Survey of India [ASI], 1938; Ghosh, 1965).



Figure 1. Nalanda University: An Early International Centre of Higher Learning

Note. Photograph of the archaeological remains of Nalanda University, Bihar, India.

Source: Authors (2026).

This is supported by textual accounts from classical Chinese pilgrims such as Xuanzang and Yijing, whose accounts describe its institutional scale, pedagogical organisation, and international reputation (Beal, 1884; Takakusu, 1896).

Despite its historical prominence, Nalanda has been described in different ways in the literature, including as a Buddhist monastic university, a mahāvihāra (great monastery), a scholastic complex, a proto university, and a transregional intellectual hub. Early colonial scholarship focused primarily on archaeological identification and description (Cunningham, 1871; Mitra, 1965), while later nationalist historiography emphasised its symbolic importance within Indian civilizational history (Majumdar, 1951; Sastri, 1930). More recent scholarship focuses on examining global intellectual networks and cross-cultural transmission (Sen, 2005; Pollock, 2006). However, a methodological gap remains, as relatively few studies clearly define the criteria used to classify Nalanda as a university. To address this gap, a criterion based on analytical approach is approached: a premodern institution may be considered “university like” if it demonstrates key structural features such as transregional student mobility, a cosmopolitan faculty composition, and sustained cross cultural knowledge exchange (Altbach, 2013; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Teichler, 2017). This provides a comparative framework through which Nalanda Mahāvihāra can be evaluated

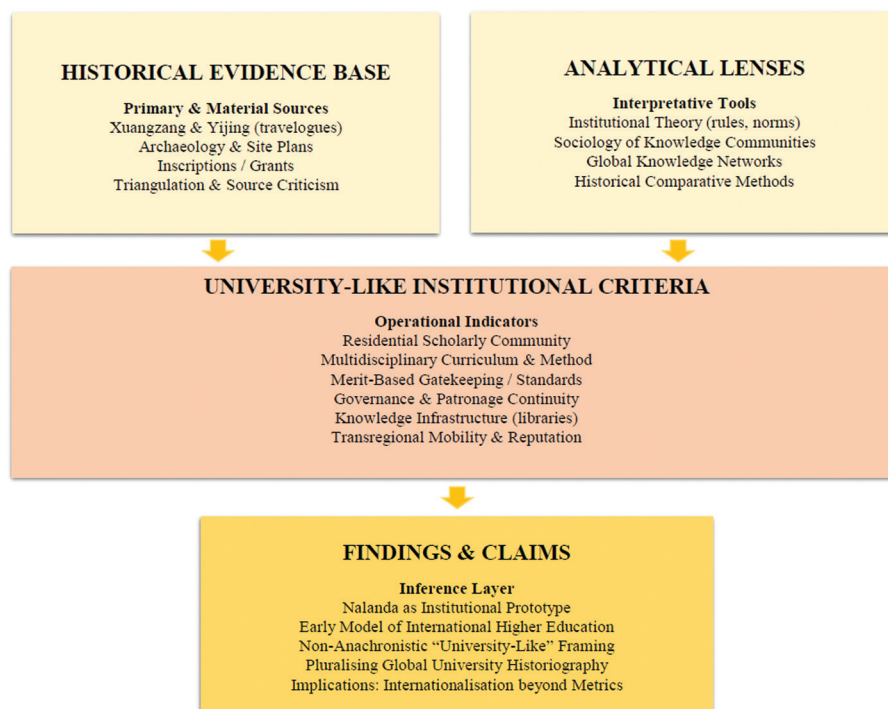


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for evaluating Nalanda as a university like institution based on institutional, pedagogical, and transregional criteria.

Note. Diagram developed by the authors based on comparative institutional analysis.

without imposing anachronistic assumptions. Rather than retroactively labelling Nalanda using modern terminology, its institutional characteristics are assessed in historically grounded and analytically transparent terms.

Within this framework, Nalanda emerges not merely as an instructional centre but also as a complex knowledge ecosystem. Patronage networks, manuscript production, translation movements, and transregional scholarly mobility together formed a dense intellectual infrastructure (Pollock, 2006; Sen, 2005). Its continuity across several centuries suggests a stable and adaptive institutional system capable of sustaining large scale scholarly activity. At the same time, its destruction in the late 12th century represents what may be described as a rupture, a sudden and profound discontinuity in institutionalised knowledge production. Archaeological burn layers and textual accounts point to abrupt devastation rather than gradual decline, marking a significant break in South Asia's intellectual continuity.

The question addressed here is whether Nalanda Mahāvihāra can be historically classified as the world's earliest international university like institution without resorting to conceptual anachronism. While preserving its civilizational context, Nalanda is situated within the broader history of higher education by integrating archaeological data, epigraphic evidence, textual testimony, and comparative institutional analysis. Beyond institutional comparison, Nalanda represents a critical case for rethinking how knowledge has circulated across regions and cultures over time. Its rediscovery and contemporary revival in the 21st century further reopen questions of civilizational memory, epistemic restoration, and the emergence of more plural and multipolar futures in global higher education.



Figure 3. *The Ancient Indian University which begins students' enrolment again after 800 yrs.*

Note. Photograph of the Ancient Indian University, Bihar, India.

Source: Authors (2026).

2. Methodology

The present analysis adopts a historical comparative institutional methodology that integrates archaeological analysis, textual historiography, epigraphy, and global higher education theory. Rather than labelling Nalanda retroactively using modern definitions, the aim is to evaluate its institutional characteristics through analytically transparent criteria. The research design combines three interrelated approaches:

1. Material historical analysis, involving the examination of archaeological excavation reports, site layouts, inscriptions, and structural remains (Archaeological Survey of India [ASI], 1938; Ghosh, 1965).
2. Textual documentary analysis, based on a critical reading of travel accounts by Xuanzang and Yijing, monastic records, and later historiographical interpretations (Beal, 1884; Takakusu, 1896).
3. Comparative institutional analysis, which involves a structured comparison with early European universities and other premodern scholastic complexes using clearly defined criteria.

This triangulated design ensures that no single category of evidence dominates the conclusions. Sources were selected based on evidentiary reliability, temporal proximity, and cross verifiability. Archaeological sources include excavation reports from major investigative phases conducted in 1872, 1915 to 1937, and 1974 to 1984, as well as documentation of the structural layout of monasteries and temples, epigraphic inscriptions recording patronage and donations, and sculptural and architectural remains. These materials are treated as primary evidence and are given the highest evidentiary weight because of their materially verifiable nature.

Classical travel accounts, particularly those of Xuanzang in the seventh century CE and Yijing, offer direct observations of Nalanda's institutional functioning. These accounts describe admission procedures, curricular structures, faculty hierarchy, student population estimates of approximately 10,000 students and 1,500 teachers, and the architectural configuration of the library complex. Although such accounts may contain rhetorical elements, their reliability increases when their descriptions are supported by archaeological findings (Beal, 1884; Takakusu, 1896).

Epigraphic and patronage records, including copper plate inscriptions and dedicatory materials, document royal endowments under Gupta and Pāla rulers, institutional land grants, and the names of teachers and monastic leaders associated with the mahāvihāra. This

evidence provides important confirmation of institutional continuity across several centuries.

Secondary scholarship, including the work of Majumdar (1951), Mitra (1965), Sen (2005), and Pollock (2006), is used analytically rather than uncritically. Interpretive claims drawn from these sources are carefully distinguished from primary archaeological, epigraphic, and textual evidence.

To avoid over reliance on narrative accounts, the study applies a four-tier evidentiary weighting model. Claims regarding institutional scale, curriculum, and international character are accepted only when they are supported by at least two evidentiary tiers. This approach strengthens the methodological robustness of the analysis and addresses potential concerns about historiographical exaggeration.

One major risk in global university historiography is the tendency to retrofit medieval or ancient institutions into modern conceptual frameworks. Nalanda is not presented here as a precursor to Europe, but as an independently evolved institutional formation that shows structural parallels with later universities. To avoid anachronism, the term “university like” is used analytically where appropriate, and institutional characteristics are assessed in structural rather than terminological terms. Comparisons with Bologna, Oxford, and Cambridge are therefore descriptive rather than teleological.

To situate Nalanda within global higher education history, this study compares it with early European institutions across several analytical dimensions, including institutional continuity, corporate identity, residential organisation, disciplinary plurality, and international student composition. The comparison does not assume a linear evolution of universities, but instead highlights structural convergence across different civilizational contexts, including comparable developments in the Islamic world (Makdisi, 1981).

Table 1. *Four Tier Evidentiary Weighting Model Applied in the Study.*

Evidentiary Tier	Weight	Example
Tier 1: Archaeological	Highest	Excavated Monastic Quadrangles
Tier 2: Epigraphic	High	Royal Donation Inscriptions
Tier 3: Contemporary Textual	Moderate	Xuanzang, Yijing
Tier 4: Later Historiography	Interpretive	Colonial & Modern Scholarship

Note. The evidentiary hierarchy was developed by the authors to assess the relative reliability of archaeological, epigraphic, textual, and historiographical sources.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Institutional Structure and Academic Organisation

Nalanda Mahāvihāra functioned as a highly institutionalised centre of higher learning, displaying organisational features that anticipate several characteristics of the modern university. Rather than an informal monastic assembly, it operated as a planned academic township integrating residential, instructional, ritual, and administrative spaces within a coherent institutional complex (Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004).

Archaeological excavations conducted between 1915 and 1937 by the Archaeological Survey of India demonstrate that Nalanda was not a single monastery but a carefully organised scholastic complex consisting of multiple monasteries, temples, lecture halls, stairways, water reservoirs, and library structures (Archaeological Survey of India, 1938; Ghosh, 1965). The remains reveal at least eleven monastic quadrangles arranged along a central axis, each surrounding a courtyard and bordered by residential cells. The extent of the site indicates gradual expansion over time rather than isolated phases of construction. Architectural layering points to repeated renovation and enlargement, particularly during the Pāla period. This structural continuity supports textual accounts describing Nalanda as a stable institutional centre rather than a temporary monastic settlement (Beal, 1884).

A defining feature of medieval universities was their residential and corporate character (de Ridder Symoens, 1996; Rüegg, 1992), and Nalanda’s monastic quadrangles reflect a comparable residential scholastic model. Each vihāra contained student cells arranged around central courtyards together with shared instructional spaces. Xuanzang records that approximately 10,000 students and 1,500 teachers lived within the complex (Beal, 1884). Although these figures may include rhetorical elements, the large number of residential cells and the architectural expansion of the site support the plausibility of a substantial scholastic population. This residential organisation indicates institutional stability, community-based pedagogy, and sustained intellectual exchange, suggesting an integrated academic environment in which instruction, debate, and contemplative practice coexisted.

Xuanzang also describes rigorous oral examinations administered at the entrance gates, with only a minority of applicants reportedly gaining admission (Beal, 1884). Although no surviving institutional charter documents these procedures, the consistency of textual testimony suggests the presence of an established system of scholastic evaluation. Admission appears to have required

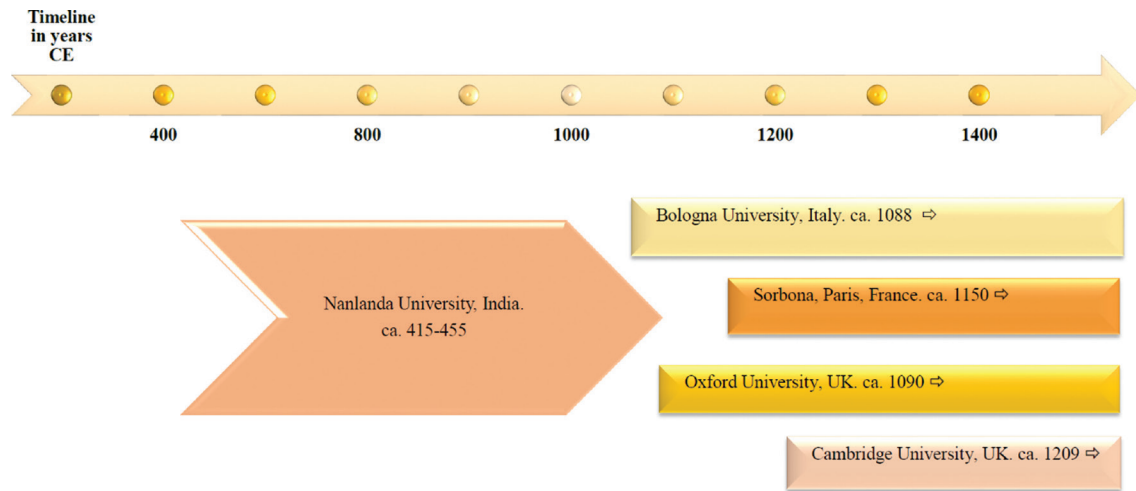


Figure 4. Comparative timeline showing the establishment of Nalanda Mahāvihāra (5th century CE) in relation to the University of Bologna (11th century), University of Oxford (12th century), and University of Cambridge (13th century).

Note. Figure created by the authors based on historical events.

demonstrated mastery of logic and doctrinal systems, implying mechanisms of academic selection, faculty oversight, and a structured hierarchy of knowledge. Nalanda therefore functioned not simply as an open monastic community but as a regulated intellectual institution with defined academic standards.

Nalanda's faculty reportedly included renowned ācāryas whose reputations extended across Asia. These teachers functioned not only as instructors but also as intellectual authorities whose debates influenced doctrinal development. Available evidence suggests a hierarchical institutional structure comprising senior abbots who led the mahāvihāra, resident scholar monks, junior instructors, and student monks. Although the terminology differs, this layered structure broadly parallels later university arrangements involving masters, regents, and scholars.

3.2 Disciplinary Plurality and Pedagogical System

Although Nalanda is often characterised primarily as a Buddhist institution, evidence indicates that its curriculum extended well beyond doctrinal instruction. Studies included logic within both Nyāya and Buddhist traditions, grammar, medicine, astronomy, cosmology, and philosophical inquiry encompassing both Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems. Yijing reports that students commonly engaged with multiple traditions before specialising in particular fields (Takakusu, 1896).

This breadth of study demonstrates that Nalanda cannot be reduced to a theological seminary but operated as a multidisciplinary scholastic complex. The presence of medical sciences is especially notable, as it reflects the inclusion of applied knowledge systems alongside scriptural and philosophical learning. This reinforces

Nalanda's character as a comprehensive centre of knowledge.

Pedagogically, structured debate formed a central method of instruction. Students trained in logic and epistemology were expected to defend positions in formal disputation. This culture of contestation reflects a highly developed intellectual environment in which knowledge was actively tested and refined. While such practices resemble disputation methods later seen in European medieval universities, they developed independently within a distinct civilizational context.

3.3 Internationalism and Transregional Networks

Nalanda Mahāvihāra was not a regionally bounded institution but a transregional intellectual centre embedded within a dense network of mobility, translation, and scholarly exchange. Classical accounts describe students and monks arriving from China, Korea, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the subcontinent (Beal, 1884; Takakusu, 1896). Xuanzang's account is particularly detailed, describing scholars travelling vast distances to study under renowned masters.

The presence of international students was not incidental but structurally integrated into institutional life. This transregional dimension distinguishes Nalanda from localised monastic institutions and aligns it structurally with later universities that attracted diverse student populations.

Mobility at Nalanda operated in multiple directions and formed a key mechanism of knowledge circulation. Students travelled to the institution for advanced study, while scholars trained at Nalanda later moved across Asia transmitting texts, intellectual traditions, and doctrinal systems. Manuscripts composed or preserved at the

site were translated into Chinese and Tibetan, creating extensive translation networks. These patterns resemble early forms of academic mobility identified in global higher education research (Teichler, 2017; Zhao, 2019).

Linguistically, Nalanda operated within a multilingual environment. Sanskrit functioned as a scholarly lingua franca, while translation into Chinese and later Tibetan expanded the institution's intellectual reach. Manuscripts copied at Nalanda circulated across Asia, embedding its scholastic models within distant monastic universities. This cosmopolitanism parallels Latin scholasticism in medieval Europe, although it emerged independently within a different cultural context.

Nalanda's international stature was further reinforced by sustained royal patronage from Gupta and Pāla rulers. Epigraphic records document land grants, temple endowments, and financial support that contributed to the institution's stability and long-term continuity (Majumdar, 1951; Mitra, 1965). This political support enhanced Nalanda's reputation and enabled it to function as a recognised intellectual destination beyond regional boundaries.

3.4 Knowledge Infrastructure and Manuscript Culture

A defining element of Nalanda's institutional identity was its extensive library complex. Later Tibetan sources refer to major library structures such as Ratnasāgara and Ratnarañjaka. Although full archaeological confirmation remains partial, structural remains and textual accounts strongly indicate the existence of a large manuscript repository (Ghosh, 1965).

Nalanda participated in a transregional manuscript economy in which texts were produced, copied, preserved, and circulated across Asia. Many Sanskrit works that are now lost in India survive only in Tibetan or Chinese translation, reflecting the role of Nalanda trained scholars in intellectual transmission (Pollock, 2006; Sen, 2005).

Manuscript production likely involved systematic copying, the composition of commentaries, and the documentation of doctrinal debates. Through these

processes, manuscripts functioned as the connective medium linking Nalanda to a broader scholastic network.

This system can be understood as an intellectual environment, a framework that highlights the interdependence between patronage, pedagogy, manuscript production, scholarly mobility, and institutional memory. Nalanda's continuity across centuries suggests the presence of a stable intellectual ecosystem capable of sustaining complex knowledge systems over time.

3.5 Destruction and Epistemic Rupture

Nalanda's decline culminated in its destruction in the late 12th century, commonly associated with military incursions in the region. While later textual accounts must be interpreted cautiously, archaeological evidence provides independent confirmation of large-scale structural damage and burn layers across the site (Archaeological Survey of India, 1938; Ghosh, 1965).

Excavations have revealed charred structural remains and patterns of abrupt abandonment consistent with violent destruction rather than gradual decline. This event represents more than architectural loss. It constitutes a rupture, understood as a disruption in institutionalised knowledge production.

Over approximately eight centuries, Nalanda functioned as a repository of manuscripts, a training centre for scholars, and a node within transregional intellectual networks. Its destruction disrupted these interconnected functions. Manuscripts were lost, institutional continuity collapsed, and scholarly lineages dispersed. Although Buddhism did not disappear immediately from India, the loss of major scholastic centres significantly weakened organised knowledge transmission.

3.5.1 Epistemic Consequences

Over approximately eight centuries, Nalanda functioned as a repository of manuscripts, a training centre for scholar monks, a node within transregional intellectual circuits, and a site of philosophical innovation. Its destruction disrupted these interconnected functions. Manuscripts were lost, institutional continuity collapsed,

Table 2. *Chronology of Archaeological Excavations and Major Discoveries at Nalanda Mahāvihāra*

Year	Activity	Details
1811	Initial Identification	Francis Spokane found remains but did not recognize it as a university.
1872	First Excavation	Small-scale excavation initiated by Cunningham.
1915 - 1937	Major Excavation	Entire temple complex and monastic areas excavated.
1974 - 1984	Additional Excavation	Smaller-scale excavations conducted.
Not Specified	Excavations near Temple No. 3	Revealed inscriptions including those of kings and donations, and sculptures of Lord Buddha.

Note. Compiled from Cunningham (1871), Mitra (1965), and Archaeological Survey of India (1938).

and scholastic lineages dispersed. Unlike gradual institutional decline, this rupture appears to have been abrupt. Although Buddhism did not disappear immediately from India, the loss of centralised scholastic complexes significantly weakened organised doctrinal transmission.

3.5.2 Civilizational Discontinuity

To claim that the destruction of Nalanda alone caused the decline of Buddhism in India would be analytically reductive, as multiple political, economic, and doctrinal factors were involved. Nevertheless, Nalanda's scale and symbolic authority meant that its destruction marked a profound discontinuity in India's scholastic landscape. Major monastic universities such as Vikramashila and Odantapuri faced devastation within similar historical contexts. The cumulative effect was the erosion of institutionalised Buddhist higher learning within the subcontinent.

3.5.3 Memory, Loss, and Historical Silence

For centuries after its destruction, Nalanda faded from living institutional memory. The site remained buried, and local settlements developed over its remains. In the early nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan Hamilton documented extensive ruins in the region of Bihar, although he did not immediately identify them as a major scholastic complex. Systematic archaeological work began later under Alexander Cunningham, and large-scale excavation in the twentieth century gradually revealed the extent of the site. This long interval between destruction and rediscovery underscores the depth of the civilizational rupture.

3.5.4 Analytical Synthesis

The destruction of Nalanda terminated approximately eight centuries of institutional continuity, destroyed manuscript archives, disrupted transregional intellectual networks, contributed to the decline of centralised Buddhist scholasticism in India, and generated a prolonged period of historical amnesia. The concept of epistemic rupture is therefore not rhetorical but historically grounded in archaeological evidence and documented discontinuity of institutional knowledge production.

3.6 Rediscovery and Archaeological Reconstruction

Following its destruction, Nalanda gradually disappeared from active historical memory. The site remained buried for centuries until early nineteenth century documentation identified extensive ruins in the region of Bihar. Subsequent investigations by Alexander

Cunningham and later archaeological work led to the systematic excavation of the site (Cunningham, 1871).

Large scale excavations conducted between 1915 and 1937 revealed monastic quadrangles, temples, inscriptions, and architectural foundations (Archaeological Survey of India, 1938). Later excavations expanded understanding of the site's full extent.

The work of Percy Brown contributed to early attempts at architectural reconstruction, offering visual interpretations of Nalanda's structures. Although such reconstructions must be approached cautiously, they provide useful context when considered alongside archaeological evidence.

Epigraphic findings, including inscriptions documenting patronage and institutional activity, provide material confirmation of Nalanda's long-term continuity. Archaeology therefore plays a crucial role in reconstructing civilizational memory, transforming textual accounts into empirically grounded historical knowledge.

3.6.1 Archaeology as Recovery of Civilizational Memory

Archaeology does more than uncover architectural remains. It reconstructs intellectual memory. Nalanda's rediscovery reinserted India into global discussions on the history of higher education. The excavation record enabled scholars to reassess the sophistication of premodern Asian institutions, to challenge Eurocentric linear narratives of university origins, and to reconstruct networks of transregional knowledge exchange. Rediscovery therefore functions as a form of epistemic restoration that, although necessarily partial, has proven historically transformative.

3.6.2 Analytical Synthesis

The rediscovery of Nalanda converted textual memory into material evidence, confirmed the scale and



Figure 5. India's PM Modi Inaugurates new Nalanda University Campus in Rajgir, Bihar, India

Note. Photograph of the new Nalanda University, Bihar, India.

Source: Authors (2026).

structural complexity of the site, provided inscriptional validation of patterns of patronage and institutional continuity, and repositioned Nalanda within global higher education historiography. Archaeology thus serves as an essential bridge between rupture and historical recovery.

3.7 Contemporary Revival and Global Significance

The re-emergence of Nalanda in the twenty first century represents more than symbolic reconstruction. It reflects a renewed engagement with a historical knowledge tradition that once connected large parts of Asia.

The contemporary Nalanda University operates within a modern global academic context while invoking the legacy of a transregional scholastic institution. Although it does not represent a direct institutional continuation, it embodies a form of symbolic continuity rooted in civilizational memory.

In a multipolar academic landscape, the recognition of Nalanda contributes to a broader rebalancing of global higher education narratives. It challenges linear accounts that situate the origins of universities exclusively within Europe and highlights the existence of multiple centres of intellectual development across different civilizational contexts.

Institutional Revival After Eight Centuries

Following approximately eight centuries of institutional discontinuity, Nalanda was re-established in the twenty first century as an international university located near its ancient site in Rajgir, Bihar. This revival was not conceived as a purely commemorative gesture but as an attempt to reconnect with a historical legacy of transregional intellectual exchange. The temporal symmetry is striking. Roughly eight hundred years of continuous education in antiquity were followed by nearly eight hundred years of absence before revival. Yet this restoration is not a simple replication. The contemporary institution operates within a modern global academic framework while symbolically invoking the civilizational memory of the ancient mahāvihāra. The revival therefore raises an important analytical question concerning whether institutional memory can survive rupture.

3.7.1 Civilizational Continuity and Symbolic Reconstruction

The reimagined Nalanda represents more than infrastructural development. It constitutes a project of civilizational continuity. While the ancient university functioned within a Buddhist scholastic framework, the modern institution positions itself as a platform for global dialogue across disciplines and cultures. This

transformation reflects both continuity and rupture. Elements of continuity are visible in its international orientation, residential model, and emphasis on cross cultural exchange, whereas rupture appears in governance structures, epistemic frameworks, and disciplinary configuration. The modern Nalanda does not attempt to reproduce ancient doctrinal curricula but instead invokes the ethos of intellectual openness and transregional engagement that historically characterised the mahāvihāra.

3.7.2 Nalanda in a Multipolar Knowledge Order

In an increasingly multipolar academic landscape, the revival of Nalanda acquires symbolic significance. Global higher education has long been narrated through European institutional genealogies, and recognising Nalanda complicates this linear narrative while contributing to a more plural historiography situated within broader world systems of intellectual exchange. The contemporary university explicitly positions itself as a hub for Asian intellectual cooperation, welcoming students from multiple countries. In this sense, it echoes the patterns of transregional mobility described in classical accounts, although now operating within modern diplomatic, regulatory, and accreditation frameworks. The revival therefore participates in a broader rebalancing of global knowledge geographies.

3.7.3 From Ruins to Future Oriented Institution

If the destruction of Nalanda constituted a rupture in institutional knowledge, its revival may be understood as an epistemic rearticulation rather than a simple restoration. The ancient manuscripts cannot be recovered, and the scholastic debates that once animated the institution cannot be reconstructed in their entirety. Yet the symbolic architecture of intellectual cosmopolitanism can be reinterpreted and reactivated. The transformation is therefore not a continuation but a foundation informed by historical memory.

3.7.4 Limits of Continuity

It would be a historiographical misleading to claim a direct institutional lineage across eight centuries. The revival represents a deliberate reconstruction rather than organic continuity. Nevertheless, symbolic continuity retains significance. Institutional memory, even when mediated through archaeology and historiography, can shape contemporary academic identity. The importance of modern Nalanda therefore lies not in asserting uninterrupted succession but in consciously engaging with its civilizational past.



Figure 6. *The Marvellous Revival of Nalanda University*

Note. Photographs of the Nalanda University, Bihar, India.

Source: Authors (2026).



Figure 7. *Indian PM Modi unveils New Nalanda University Campus*

Note. Photograph of the new Nalanda University, Bihar, India.

Source: Authors (2026).

3.7.5 Analytical Synthesis

The contemporary revival of Nalanda reclaims a neglected chapter of global higher education history, reinserts South Asia into narratives of early institutional

learning, demonstrates how civilizational memory can inform modern institutional design, and contributes to the broader multipolar rebalancing of global academic discourse. Nalanda's historical trajectory therefore spans three broad epochs: an era of ancient institutional flourishing, a period of destruction and rupture, and a modern phase of revival and reinterpretation.

4. Conclusions

This study examines whether Nalanda Mahāvihāra can be legitimately classified as the earliest sustained international university like institution without resorting to conceptual anachronism. Rather than relying on symbolic or retrospective claims, the analysis draws on a structured evidentiary framework that integrates archaeological findings, epigraphic records, textual testimony, and comparative institutional criteria. The cumulative evidence indicates that Nalanda showed long term institutional continuity, a large scale residential scholastic structure, formalised admission practices, a hierarchical faculty system, disciplinary plurality extending beyond doctrinal instruction, international student mobility across Asia, a centralised manuscript repository, and sustained royal patronage.

When considered against clearly defined criteria, Nalanda meets the structural characteristics associated with advanced premodern higher learning institutions. This conclusion does not imply a linear evolution towards European medieval universities, nor does it claim terminological equivalence. Instead, it shows that comparable institutional forms emerged independently across different civilizational contexts. Nalanda therefore represents the earliest historically verifiable example of a sustained residential and transregional scholastic complex with institutional coherence and wide intellectual reach.

The destruction of Nalanda in the late 12th century represents more than the loss of physical infrastructure. Archaeological evidence, including burn layers and patterns of abrupt abandonment, points to a violent interruption of institutional continuity. This event constitutes an epistemic break, understood as a disruption in organised knowledge production. While broader historical processes also contributed to intellectual transformations in the region, the elimination of major monastic universities significantly weakened structured scholastic transmission. The rupture thus reflects structural discontinuity rather than gradual institutional decline, marking both an apex and a fracture in South Asian intellectual history.

The rediscovery of Nalanda through nineteenth and twentieth century archaeological investigation restored material visibility to what had become a form of civilizational amnesia. Excavations transformed textual memory into empirical evidence, allowing Nalanda to re-enter global historiography as a documented institutional formation. This recognition challenges linear narratives that locate the origins of the university exclusively within Europe and contributes to a more plural understanding of global higher education history.

The contemporary revival of Nalanda University near its ancient site represents a symbolic reconnection between past and present. Although the modern institution does not constitute a direct continuation, it engages with civilizational memory in ways that are historically and intellectually significant. The revival raises broader questions about how past knowledge systems may inform present and future academic structures. Nalanda's historical model, characterised by residential organisation, intellectual pluralism, and transregional mobility, offers useful insights for rethinking global academic collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

4.1 Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, much of Nalanda's original manuscript heritage was lost following the destruction of the Mahāvihāra, limiting direct access to its intellectual output. Second, important historical evidence relies on translated travel accounts of Xuanzang and Yijing, which require careful contextual interpretation. Third, although archaeological excavations have revealed substantial portions of the site, only part of the broader Nalanda complex has been excavated, making definitive assessments of its full scale difficult. Finally, unlike medieval European universities, Nalanda did not possess surviving institutional charters that would permit direct documentary comparison.

These limitations were addressed through methodological triangulation, combining archaeological, epigraphic, textual, and historiographical evidence. Consequently, the classification of Nalanda as an early international university-like institution emerges from cumulative structural analysis rather than cultural assertion or civilizational exceptionalism (Altbach, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Teichler, 2017).

4.2 Future Research Directions

This article makes a methodological, historiographical, and conceptual contribution to the field of global higher education research. Methodologically, it proposes a criterion based and evidence weighted framework for evaluating premodern institutions as university like formations. It also repositions Nalanda within global academic history through empirically grounded analysis. Conceptually, it highlights disruption in knowledge systems as key to understanding institutional breakdown and discontinuity.

Several avenues for further research emerge from this analysis. Comparative study of Nalanda with other major monastic institutions such as Vikramashila and Odantapuri may clarify patterns of institutional variation within the broader mahāvihāra system. Archaeometric investigation of burn layers could refine understanding of the chronology and nature of the site's destruction. Digital reconstruction of manuscript circulation networks may illuminate the scale and structure of transregional knowledge exchange, while further analysis of Tibetan scholastic lineages could deepen understanding of Nalanda's intellectual legacy.

Nalanda's historical trajectory encompasses institutional flourishing, destruction, loss, rediscovery, and revival. Its study invites reconsideration of how knowledge institutions emerge, transform, and persist over time. Recognising Nalanda within global higher education historiography expands the geographical and conceptual boundaries of academic history and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of humanity's intellectual past.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Tools in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, language editing tools were used solely for proofreading and formatting purposes to support editorial tasks such as grammatical correction, stylistic refinement, and structural organization of the text. These tools were employed only as linguistic and editorial aids. All substantive arguments, interpretations, data analysis, and scholarly conclusions presented in this paper were developed and evaluated by the authors.

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