

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE
AT THE FIRST CONVOCATION OF NALANDA UNIVERSITY AND
LAYING OF THE FOUNDATION STONE OF ITS CAMPUS**

NALANDA, RAJGIR, BIHAR : 27.08.2016

It gives me great pleasure to be here today for the first Convocation of the Nalanda University. It is personally a proud moment for me as the idea to revive Nalanda University took shape during my years at the South Block as the External Affairs Minister during 2006 to 2009. I had the special privilege of being closely involved with it during its gestation period.

The new Nalanda University is envisioned as a non-state, non-profit, secular, and self-governing international institution. Our goal is to bring together the brightest and the most dedicated students from all over the world, especially Asia - irrespective of gender, caste, creed, different abilities, ethnicity or social-economic background and enable them acquire a liberal education. Our intention through this University is to give the youth of the world the means necessary for pursuit of intellectual, philosophical, historical and spiritual studies as used to happen in the Nalanda of yore.

I am particularly happy to see the first batch of students from this University graduate today. I have often spoken of the time when India played a dominant role in the higher education system of the world. Renowned seats of learning like *Nalanda*, *Takshashila*, *Vikramashila*, *Valabhi*, *Somapura* and *Odantapuri* were magnets which attracted scholars from all over the world. They stood at the crossroads of many civilizations and spread knowledge far and wide. Sadly, India's modern day universities are yet to reach the top position in world rankings. We must work towards regaining that glory of the past.

I am particularly happy that as a result of my persistent efforts, Indian institutions for the first time secured ranks within the top 200 universities in the world in the QS world university rankings 2015. IISc, Bangalore at 147th and IIT, Delhi at 179th position have done exceedingly well, with IIT, Bombay close on the heels at the 202nd rank. Three other IITs were within the top 300 institutions and they can come within the top 200 in the next one or two years. In the QS university rankings 2015 for the BRICS region, five Indian institutions came in the top 20, including IISc, Bangalore which was ranked fifth. In the list of top 20 small universities (criteria: less than 5,000 students) by the Times Higher Education, there were two Indian institutions – IIT, Guwahati at 14th and Savitribai Phule, Pune University at the 18th position. Recently, in a ranking amongst Asian institutions, five Indian institutions are placed in the top fifty.

Friends, ladies and gentlemen,

As Visitor to Nalanda University, it is my hope that this University will truly attain the status of Nalanda of yore. There are many practices of the ancient Nalanda which are worthy of emulation by the new Nalanda.

One of the most important characteristics of ancient Nalanda was that it was an international institution where inter-Asian connections, in particular, flourished. Chinese monks like Xuan Zang, Yijing and Huichao among others visited, lived, studied and taught in Nalanda. At a later period, scholars from Tibet kept coming to Nālandā for studying Buddhism and other branches of knowledge. Monks from several other countries including Sri Lanka also came to Nālandā, revealing the diversity of religious and cultural influences on the institution. And, the traffic was not just in one direction. Monks from Nālandā spread their wisdom across the world and had reached China before Xuan Zang's visit to India.

I am pleased to know that the Nalanda University has around 125 students including about 25 foreign students from countries such as China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Brazil. With students and faculty from many countries, modern day Nalanda is a novel institution pioneering a new model of learning. Its vision is to *"be universalist in its outlook, open to currents of thought and practice from around the globe, and respond to the needs of a world."* It is a matter of satisfaction that within a short period of time, Nalanda has established linkages of various kinds with many leading educational institutions around the world. I was personally witness to the signing of an MOU between Nalanda University and Peking University during my recent visit to China in May of this year.

Ancient Nalanda was known for the high level of debate and discussion it nurtured. It was not a mere geographical expression but it reflected an idea and a culture. Nalanda conveyed the message of friendship, cooperation, debate, discussion and argument. Discussion and debate are part of our ethos and life. They cannot be done away with. Universities and higher education institutions are the best forums for debate, discussion and free exchange of views. Though the main subjects of study were the Buddhist texts, importance was also given to critiques of Buddhism by various schools, study of Vedas and beyond. Nalanda was a melting pot of civilizations and modern India should remain the same. We should not close our windows and yet we should not be blown off by winds from outside. We should let the winds flow freely from all over the world and get enriched by them. We should embrace free discussion and debate leaving behind narrow mindsets and thoughts. Prof. Amartya Sen who is with us today has written about how our history and traditions have always celebrated the 'Argumentative Indian'. The lesson for modern Nalanda is to ensure that this great tradition finds new life and vigour within its precincts. Universities must be the bastions of free speech and expression. It must be the arena where diverse and conflicting schools of thought contend. There should be no room for intolerance, prejudice and hatred within the spaces of this institution. Further, it must act as flag bearer for the coexistence of multiple views, thoughts and philosophies.

Nālandā Mahāvihāra flourished for about 800 years. Its survival over such a long duration of time occurred because the monastic scholars of Nālandā created social and political networks that helped them ensure its continuation as an institution of international repute. According to the accounts of Chinese pilgrim Yijing, Nālandā was granted over 200 villages for its sustenance. Scholars of Nālandā must have developed plans to maintain, regulate and retain these village

grants. They also developed adequate infrastructure for these villages to ensure agricultural productivity and retention of manpower. Engaging with the local communities surrounding the Mahavihara was as important as maintaining relationship with the world abroad. I am happy that the Nalanda University is taking steps in this direction through its engagement with the local weavers, farmers and other projects in the field of environment and heritage, including academic support for the Government's efforts to have Nalanda declared as a World Heritage site.

Great educational institutions require good faculty and administrators. Ancient Nalanda was able to attract and recruit outstanding teachers, students and work force. Nalanda's ability to impart organized knowledge in a systematic way for so many centuries was because of the presence of the leading scholars of their time as faculty and a dynamic student community. Likewise, there was an efficient administration at the Mahavihara with the head of the institution at its apex, something akin to the modern day Vice-Chancellor. I am glad current Vice Chancellor Dr. Gopa Sabharwal is doing full justice in this regard and effectively steering this institution on its path to the future.

Friends, ladies and gentlemen,

What ensured Nālandā's rise as a premier institution of the world was its cutting edge curriculum not only in Buddhist knowledge but also in various disciplines including astronomy, medicine, general logic, linguistics, books and manuscript production, architecture and art. The discovery of a furnace at the site of Nālandā and other archaeological evidence indicate that production of manuscripts with textual and pictorial content must have happened at a large scale. The rich stone and metallic image collections from the site also demonstrate the existence of a major art atelier, which developed its distinct style and kept introducing new images. The artists of Nalanda created a wide range of images which showed their knowledge and engagement with myriad religious traditions. In addition to teaching religion, philosophy and other subjects, Nalanda propagated knowledge of disciplines such as sculpting, metal smelting and book production. These show that the Nalanda of ancient times valued inculcating in students and the community around it multiple skill sets. This is yet another lesson worthy of emulation in modern times.

Modern day Nalanda University has a non-metropolitan location in the heart of rural India. All three pillars of the University - the faculty, administrative staff and students need to make a commitment to living and working in these environs. By doing so, Nalanda is setting an example for other institutions to follow. I complement the faculty and students from all over the world and different parts of India who have made this commitment.

I understand Nalanda University is striving to be a *Net Zero Energy, Net Zero Emissions, Net Zero Water, and Net Zero Waste (NZEB)* campus, the first of its kind in India. By adopting a net zero energy goal as early as 2013, the University has attempted to link its historical legacy with urgent contemporary issues of environmental sustainability. Learnings from Nalanda University campus will create awareness amongst the building industry and demonstrate the feasibility of implementing and operating NZEBs in India.

Friends, ladies and gentlemen,

The twenty first century is expected to be an 'Asian century' with countries of this continent regaining their pre-eminence in the world through all-round development. Nalanda University is a symbol of Asian resurgence. At a time when the world is facing complex challenges and the destinies of the peoples across the continents are inter-linked, institutions of knowledge such as Nalanda are of critical importance. Nalanda stands not merely for quality education but also for global cooperation. The Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of Nalanda University has so far been signed by 13 participating countries of the East Asia Summit and four non-EAS countries. Nalanda stands as a symbol of inclusion, harmony, peace, knowledge, inspiration, creativity and innovation. I call upon the faculty and students to internalise these values and instil them in everyone whose lives they touch.

Today, the first Convocation represents the crossing of a major milestone. I acknowledge the tireless efforts of all those involved in this project. I extend my heartiest congratulations to the former Chancellor Professor Amartya Sen, the present Chancellor Mr George Yeo, members of the Governing Board, members of the faculty and all other officers of Nalanda University on this historic occasion of graduation of the first batch of students. I wish the students and the University all success in the years to come.

To the students, let me say that graduation is the beginning of a challenging journey. The education you have received at Nalanda will always stand you in good stead. This is a proud moment not just for you, graduating students, but also your teachers, mentors, faculty members and parents. Sail forth into the world with confidence. Lead us in the building of a better world.

I take this opportunity to record my appreciation and gratitude to all our partners – both in East Asia and outside – who have supported us in making the dream of revival of Nalanda as an international institution come true. Nalanda is integral to India's Act East policy. We hope that the new Nalanda will contribute to further strengthening of the centuries old bonds between India and East Asia.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.