A few years ago, a regional conference in Islamabad gave some of us an opportunity to visit the ancient site of Taxhshala (Taxila). It turned out that there were many of us with the same desire and our hosts obliged by arranging a bus tour. Presumably, they had sorted out the technical problem of our visas being limited to Lahore and Islamabad only. Visas limited to specific cities are issued to Pakistanis by India as well.

There are several sites distributed over a few kilometres pertaining to this ancient university. The relics are exhibited in a small but elegant museum. Such records as are available, including references in the Ramayana, tell us that the town of Taxhshala was founded by King Bharata in the name of his son Taksha. Records also show that the university itself was functioning well around 800 BC. By the time Alexander visited Taxila, the university had developed an international reputation as the prime seat of learning for students from all its aspects, including religion, culture, and philosophy. On his way back, Alexander took several scholars from here back to his native land. Although we call it a university, Taxhshala was patterned differently from today's modern universities. It had distinguished scholars from all over the subcontinent and each one operated a school under their own jurisdiction. Students would decide on what their interests were and choose to follow them. Therefore, there were courses in witchcraft and sorcery, snake handling, omens, etc. Students came from as far away as Babylonia, Persia, Syria, Phoenicia, and China. There was no caste system in place, and the students were accepted on the basis of their family income. Being in the north-western border of India, Taxhshala was vulnerable to attacks from Persians, Greeks, Parthians, Shakas and Kushans. When the celebrated Chinese traveler Huen T'ang visited India in the 7th century, he found Taxhshala a shadow of its former self, having been attacked and razed by the Huns circa 450 AD.

Huen T'ang, however, found another Indian university flourishing and at its prime. Situated near Rajgir (Rajagriha) in today's Bihar, Nalanda had an international reputation. I had the opportunity of visiting the Nalanda site also. Although tourists of today carry back their own impressions of Nalanda, nothing can replicate the glowing descriptions of that observant traveler.

Nalanda deserves to be noticed for what it once was. Surely it deserves an elegant and informative museum and a tourist centre. The Nalanda library was in three sections housed in three buildings. The one called Ratnodaya (moon of pearls) was reputedly nine storeys high. The other two, called Ratnasagar (sea of pearls) and Ratnarangan (pearls of recreation), were six storeys each. The libraries published new works while providing storage for old manuscripts. This description only provides glimpses into what Huen T'sang wrote in detail. History, however, as usual has the last word. This marvellous institution fell victim to the invasion of Bakhthiyar Kihilji in the 13th century AD when humans, manuscripts and buildings were all mercilessly annihilated.

What do we have today? I had visited Nalanda in the late 1990s on a Sunday and the site was almost deserted. The government shop was closed. It is debatable if it could have provided any informative literature, maps, etc. Who would tell us about the relics around us? Our anxious enquiry brought the information that a guide was around with his group. We waited patiently when he at last joined us. And he gave very useful information. The rooms distributed around a square courtyard were for housing the students, their meals, baths etc. and for storage. There was a fireplace in the courtyard. The fire was used for three purposes: to keep warm in winters, to cook food and for scientific experiments. The guide also told us that the site is potentially much bigger and needs to be excavated further.

Looking back on my two visits to the two ancient universities, I strongly feel that Nalanda deserves to be noticed for what it once was. Surely it deserves an elegant and informative museum and a tourist centre near the site. As a people we like to speak in glowing terms of our past, but where do we stand when it comes to preserving its relics for posterity? In the case of Nalanda, at least cross-border initiatives like this one can help us to create an attractive and informative tourist facility.

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