

Third Convocation

Nalanda and the Idea of Responsible Knowledge

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Principal Secretary to
the Prime Minister of India



Nālandā
UNIVERSITY




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Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain, Governor of Bihar; Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Vice-Chancellor, Nalanda University; Shri Rudrendra Tandon, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs; members of the Governing Board, members of the Academic Council; faculty members, distinguished representatives of the Embassies and High Commissions of our partner nations; members of the Alumni Association; the graduating class of 2024-26; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen,

* The Convocation Address delivered on 19 May 2026.



It is a privilege to be present with you here today on the occasion of the Third Convocation of Nalanda University. The ancient Nalanda Mahavihara was among the greatest centres of learning in the ancient world, attracting students from far-off places. I am happy that today's Nalanda University also has students from many South Asian and Asian countries. I extend my warm congratulations to all graduating students.

Today marks a major milestone of your accomplishment, through your hard work, perseverance, and reflection. It is a moment of pride for your parents, teachers, mentors, and loved ones who have supported your journey.

A convocation at Nalanda carries a meaning that extends beyond an academic ceremony. There are universities that are institutions. And then there are universities that are civilisational symbols. Nalanda belongs to the latter category.

Nalanda represented a remarkable idea: that knowledge must remain open to dialogue, connected across disciplines, and ultimately directed towards the larger well-being of humanity. That idea remains deeply relevant in the 21st century.

Nalanda is also very close to the holy place of Bodh Gaya, where Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment. The profound teachings of Lord Buddha spread across Central Asia, Tibet, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Kampuchea, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and many other parts of Asia. Indeed, the entire Asian continent has greatly benefited from the teachings of Lord Buddha. I am sure, the learning from this great University will spread far and wide across the continents.

Today this university feels like it is sixteen centuries old and about ten years young at the same time. 221 graduates from 14 nations. Studies across Buddhist philosophy, ecology, sustainable development, management, and international relations. This

new campus inaugurated by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, with its Net Zero design and architectural reference to the original mahavihara, makes a clear physical statement of intent for this university.

My young friends,

We are living through one of the most transformative periods in human history. Humanity today possesses unprecedented technological capability. Artificial intelligence is reshaping economies and societies. Biotechnology is changing medicine. Quantum technologies may redefine computing. Digital networks connect billions of people instantaneously.


Yet, at the same time, the world confronts profound uncertainties. Climate change threatens ecological balance. Conflicts and geopolitical tensions continue to destabilise regions. Societies across the world are witnessing growing polarisation and fragmentation. Information has become abundant, but wisdom often appears scarce.

In such an age, the central question before humanity is not merely whether we can generate more information or more technology. The real question is whether knowledge will remain connected to wisdom, ethics, compassion, and human responsibility.

It is in this spirit that I would like to share a few thoughts today on the theme: ‘Responsible Knowledge in the 21st Century’.

Nalanda and the Idea of Knowledge

The story of Nalanda is not merely a story about the past. It is also a story about the future. Nalanda represented a civilisational understanding that knowledge cannot exist in isolation. The pursuit of knowledge here was interdisciplinary before the term



itself existed. Philosophy coexisted with mathematics, astronomy, medicine, governance, linguistics, ecology, logic, and spiritual inquiry.

Equally important, Nalanda cultivated a culture of debate and disciplined reasoning. Its intellectual traditions emphasised vāda – rigorous dialogue and inquiry. Learning was not merely about memorising conclusions. It was about cultivating the capacity to question, reason, reflect, and engage with complexity. This has immense relevance today.

One of the paradoxes of our age is that information has become abundant while reflection has become increasingly difficult. Technology can provide answers instantly. But it cannot always teach judgment. Artificial intelligence can organise information. But it cannot replace ethical reasoning or moral responsibility. Algorithms can predict behaviour. But they cannot fully comprehend human meaning, suffering, dignity, or aspiration.

The danger before humanity today is not merely misinformation. It is intellectual passivity – the gradual weakening of the human habit of thoughtful inquiry. Civilisations decline not when they lose information, but when they lose the capacity for reflection and independent thought.

The 21st Century and the Return of Civilisational Confidence

For nearly two centuries, large parts of Asia experienced colonial domination. Colonialism did not merely reshape economies and political systems. It also altered intellectual frameworks and affected how societies understood knowledge itself.

Our older traditions approached knowledge holistically. Ayurveda connected biological knowledge with ethics and

lifestyle. Buddhist epistemology linked logic with psychology and cosmology. The Arthashastra brought together political economy, statecraft, and moral questions. They linked ethics with governance, language with identity, ecology with culture, and learning with social responsibility. Over time, many of these traditions became fragmented or marginalised within modern institutional systems.

The challenge before societies today is, therefore, not isolation from the world, but intellectual self-confidence within the world. The 21st century cannot be viewed only through the lens of economics or geopolitics. It must also involve the recovery of intellectual confidence — the confidence to contribute ideas, frameworks, and knowledge systems rooted in our own civilisational experiences while remaining fully engaged with the world.

The revival of Nalanda University reflects precisely this spirit. It reflects the understanding that ancient institutions are not merely objects of heritage, but living sources of intellectual inspiration. It reflects India's belief that openness, pluralism, dialogue, and inquiry remain essential to the future of humanity. And it reflects a larger Asian resurgence — not rooted in narrow nationalism, but in cultural confidence, cooperation, and exchange. While the political decolonisation of Asia is largely complete, the task of intellectual decolonisation remains unfinished. The responsibility of shaping ideas, institutions, and knowledge systems rooted in our own realities now rests with this generation.

Democratising Knowledge in the Digital Age

The responsibility of knowledge in the 21st century is not only to preserve wisdom traditions, but also to democratise access to learning and opportunity. For generations, access to quality education, research, and scholarly resources remained deeply



unequal across societies. Technology now provides humanity with a historic opportunity to expand access at an unprecedented scale.

India today is attempting to build one of the world's largest and most inclusive knowledge ecosystems. The National Education Policy seeks to encourage multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, critical thinking, and greater integration across disciplines. It supports mother-tongue instruction and multilingual education as teaching principles. It makes Indian Knowledge Systems part of the curriculum at all levels. It also links vocational education with academic learning, bringing together practical skills and formal knowledge.

India's digital public infrastructure efforts are not limited to commerce or governance alone; they are also increasingly being used for the preservation, democratisation, and protection of civilisational knowledge systems. Through the National Mission for Manuscripts, India has undertaken a monumental task to document intellectual heritage, with an estimated five million manuscripts identified across fields such as mathematics, medicine, astronomy, metallurgy, linguistics, and philosophy. A significant part of this knowledge still awaits deeper scholarly engagement, translation, and interpretation.

India's approach increasingly recognises that technology can play an important role not only in expanding access to modern education, but also in preserving and revitalising older knowledge traditions for future generations. The Traditional Knowledge Digital Library represents another important example of this effort. By digitally documenting traditional systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, Yoga, and Sowa Rigpa in multiple languages, India has sought to protect traditional knowledge from misappropriation and ensure that civilisational knowledge systems are treated as valuable intellectual assets.

At the same time, India is also attempting to reduce barriers to knowledge access across languages and institutions. Bhashini, India's National Language Translation Mission, uses artificial intelligence to enable translation across Indian languages and make public communication more accessible, while the One Nation One Subscription initiative expands access to global research journals for students and researchers across institutions.

Civilisations preserve themselves not merely through monuments, but through memory — through language, literature, archives, and knowledge traditions passed across generations. At the same time, India is also investing significantly in frontier technologies and research ecosystems — including artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technologies, biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, and scientific research.

This dual responsibility — preserving civilisational memory while building future capabilities — will define the success of societies in the coming decades.

Artificial Intelligence and Human Judgment

The most important test of humanity's relationship with knowledge, may perhaps emerge in the age of artificial intelligence.

Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform healthcare, agriculture, governance, scientific discovery, education, manufacturing, and public service delivery in ways that were unimaginable only a generation ago. As AI systems become more powerful, questions relating to ethics, accountability, privacy, bias, employment, intellectual property, and human agency will become increasingly significant.

Artificial intelligence systems ultimately depend on data, language, and context. Many models today are trained predominantly on English-language datasets and shaped by assumptions emerging



from particular historical and social experiences. This has important implications for Asia and the Global South.

Agricultural systems trained primarily on temperate-zone farming conditions may not always fully capture the realities of tropical agriculture. Medical models built largely around Western datasets may not adequately reflect the health conditions, genetic diversity, or disease patterns of Asian populations. Climate models calibrated around other geographies may not fully capture the dynamics of Himalayan ecosystems or Bay of Bengal cyclones. In each case, there can emerge a gap between the model and local reality.

This raises an important question of knowledge sovereignty in the age of artificial intelligence. Societies that depend entirely on external systems risk inheriting assumptions, priorities, and frameworks that may not always reflect their own realities and developmental needs.

India's response has therefore been not merely to adopt AI technologies, but also to build domestic capabilities. Initiatives such as the IndiaAI Mission and Bhashini reflect the recognition that technological self-confidence will become increasingly important in the knowledge economies of the future. But beyond infrastructure and capability lies an even deeper challenge.

A machine may generate an answer. But only a thoughtful human being can ask whether the answer is just, ethical, humane, or wise. This distinction will become increasingly important in the years ahead.

The future will belong not merely to societies that produce advanced technologies, but to societies capable of combining innovation with ethical responsibility. Technology must ultimately strengthen human capability rather than weaken human thought.

The Question Before Asia – Sustainability and Shared Futures

Asia is at an inflection moment. Countries such as India, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Lao PDR, and others are growing and developing fast. Over the last thirty years, Asia has had many of the world's fastest-growing economies. India, for example, moved from being counted amongst the fragile five to being the bright spot of the global economy.

But the future of Asia cannot be defined only by GDP growth or technological capability. The key question is whether Asian societies can contribute new models of coexistence, sustainability, and human-centred development to the world.

At a time when the world confronts ecological stress, social fragmentation, and geopolitical uncertainty, the future will require not only smarter societies, but wiser societies. Not only innovation, but balance. Not only competition, but cooperation. And not only economic growth, but sustainability, dignity, and social harmony.

Prime Minister has stated India's national position clearly:

“

My mission is that India becomes the centre of education and knowledge for the world. My mission is that India should again be recognised as the most prominent knowledge centre of the world.

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Ancient knowledge traditions across Asia often emphasised interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Modern science now increasingly confirms what many civilisational traditions intuitively understood — that ecological imbalance ultimately threatens human well-being itself. The responsibility of knowledge today therefore includes the responsibility to build sustainable futures.

A Message to the Graduating Students

Dear graduating students,

You leave this university at a moment of profound global transition. You will enter a world shaped by technological disruption, artificial intelligence, climate transitions, demographic shifts, geopolitical uncertainty, and rapidly evolving knowledge systems. Many of the professions and technologies that will shape the next three decades are still emerging. In such a world, adaptability, curiosity, and interdisciplinary thinking will become essential.

The knowledge architecture we need at this juncture cannot be built by any one country alone. It will require collaboration, shaped by shared priorities and supported by intellectual traditions that have long worked across borders.

I will take this opportunity to ask of you, as scholars, to:

- Look for the "question behind the question." In the spirit of *vāda*, do not just try to win an argument. Find the underlying assumption that, once seen can change the whole picture. The more humanity learns, the more

it discovers the limits of our understanding. Intellectual arrogance closes the mind; curiosity keeps it alive.

- Learn to sit with complexity. The problems your countries face will not have simple solutions. A serious education should help you map a problem honestly, and act wisely even when information is incomplete. In an age of algorithms and instant opinion, do not surrender the habit of reflection. Learn to sit with complexity. Learn to examine the question behind the question.
- Work without walls. Be confident in the tradition that trained you, but remember that Nalanda's true lesson was its openness. It took the best from everywhere and gave back even more. The great challenges of our age — climate change, AI governance, sustainability, inequality, public health, and conflict — cannot be solved within isolated silos. The future belongs increasingly to those who can connect disciplines, cultures, and perspectives. Take that spirit with you.
- And to, never lose the human dimension of knowledge. Behind every policy are communities. Behind every technological system are human lives. Behind every dataset are human experiences. And behind every civilisation lies a moral imagination about how society ought to live together.
- The responsibility of the educated today is not merely to be informed. It is to remain humane in an age of acceleration, thoughtful in an age of distraction, and open to dialogue in an age of polarisation.

Concluding Remarks

As you graduate from Nalanda today, remember that you inherit more than a degree. A multi-disciplinary education, a multi-national peer network, and an institutional identity rooted in one of humanity's great intellectual traditions. You inherit a civilisational legacy. A legacy to remain open to inquiry, to welcome dialogue across cultures, to understand that learning without ethics can become dangerous, and power without wisdom can become destructive.

Furthermore, this knowledge is not an end in itself, it leads to even deeper qualities and values. An elegant shlok from *Hitopadesha* captures this beautifully:

विद्या ददाति विनयं विनयाद् याति पात्रताम्।
पात्रत्वाद् धनमाप्नोति धनाद्धर्मं ततः सुखम्॥

Which means “Knowledge makes one humble, humility begets worthiness, worthiness creates wealth, enrichment leads to right conduct, and right conduct brings contentment.”

It is also important to keep in mind the ancient lesson from the Subhashitani:

विद्या विवादाय धनं मदाय शक्तिः परेषां
परिपीडनाय।
खलस्य साधोर्विपरीतमेतत् ज्ञानाय दानाय च
रक्षणाय॥

The mischievous use their education for conflict, money for intoxication, and power for oppressing others. Honest ones use it for knowledge, charity and protecting others, respectively.

The world today needs not only skilled professionals, but thoughtful human beings. It needs individuals capable not merely of

succeeding in their careers, but of strengthening society, deepening understanding, and building bridges across communities, nations, and civilisations.

As I reflect on a convocation ceremony such as this, I am reminded that perhaps one of the world's oldest recorded convocation addresses appears in the Taittiriya Upanishad. What is remarkable is not merely its antiquity, but how deeply relevant its messages remain even today.

The Taittiriya Upanishad lays out in detail, advice given by the Guru to his graduating Shishyas. The 11th anuvaka of the Shiksha Valli lists out a series of golden rules on the ethical way of life:

सत्यं वद ।
Speak the Truth.

धर्मं चर ।
Abide by your dharma.

स्व अध्यायान मा प्रमदः ।
Never be idle in your studies.

यानि अनवद्यानि कर्माणि तानि सेवितव्यानि ।
Whatever deeds are blameless, they are to
be practised,

यानि अस्माकं सुचरितानि ।
Whatever good practices are among us.

तानि त्वया उपास्यानि ॥
Are to be adopted by you.

एष आदेशः ।
This is the Command.

एष उपदेशः ।
This is the Teaching.

एषा वेदोपनिषत् ।
This is the essence of the Veda.

एतत् अनुशासनम् ॥
This is the Instruction.



This is the Instruction.

A simple but profound idea. Education is not simply the acquisition of knowledge or professional competence. It is cultivation of judgment, character, and ethical responsibility.

My heartfelt congratulations once again to all graduating students, to your proud parents and families, and to the faculty and leadership of Nalanda University.

I wish you wisdom, courage, compassion, and success in the journey ahead.

Thank you very much.









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