

Insights on Democratic Governance in Ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra

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Introduction

Democratic governance is often associated with western political traditions which refer to a political system characterized by representative democracy, the protection of individual rights, and the rule of law. Meanwhile, the non-western society before the development of modern nation-states was an ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra in eastern society, that thrived between the 5th - 12th centuries CE, and had its unique governance structures that allowed for a collaborative and inclusive academic environment. Although it was not strictly democratic in the modern sense, the decision-making at Nālandā was often conducted through councils of senior monks, who collectively deliberated on educational and administrative matters (Dutt 1962, 292-294).

However, despite the abundance of literature on ancient education systems and Buddhist monastic structures, there is a noticeable gap in research when it comes to linking the governance model of Nālandā with modern concepts of western democratic governance. Most studies focus on the religious or philosophical aspects of the institution, often overlooking the political and administrative frameworks that may have operated in a manner resembling early democratic principles. Dutt's work (1962, 187-189) focuses on its religious and philosophical significance. It discusses the hierarchical organization of monastic education under senior monks holding authority. Still, it does not delve deeply into the political or governance aspects in a way that compares with modern democratic systems. In addition, the Tibetan Taranatha monk (1970, 154-157) highlights the academic freedom at Nālandā but does not link it to democratic decision-making processes. Both have not been widely studied in the governance mechanism at Nālandā Mahāvihāra in table or diagram.

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Therefore, this research seeks to bridge the gap in the existing literature with 2 objectives: 1) examining the governance structures of Nālandā and assessing how they embodied democratic principles, and 2) analyzing how democratic governance was applied within the unique context of this ancient educational institution.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology aimed at exploring the governance structures of Nālandā Mahāvihāra and assessing how they reflect democratic principles. Grounded in historical analysis, the study utilizes both primary and secondary sources to construct a comprehensive understanding of Nālandā's administrative framework. The research follows an exploratory and descriptive design, progressing through three phases: data collection, thematic analysis, and comparative analysis, intending to situate Nālandā's governance within the broader context of democratic governance traditions.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection is primarily archival and textual. The primary sources include detailed accounts of Chinese pilgrims such as Xuanzang and Yijing, who documented their observations of Nālandā's governance during their visits. These first-hand reports are invaluable for understanding the administrative systems at Nālandā. In addition, inscriptions found at the Nālandā site, preserved in archaeological records, provide further evidence of the institution's governance framework.

Secondary sources comprise scholarly literature on Nālandā Mahāvihāra, Buddhist monastic governance, and democratic traditions in ancient India. These sources are selected for their academic rigor and relevance, providing the necessary context to translate and interpret the primary data within a broader scholarly framework.

The collected data is examined using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to governance. The analysis centers on three core areas: collective decision-making, administrative responsibilities, and power distribution within the institution. The study seeks to determine how these aspects align with democratic principles, such as inclusivity and equitable power-sharing.

Limitations

The study contains several limitations, particularly the challenges associated with the historical nature of the sources. Ancient texts and inscriptions

can be difficult to verify for accuracy and completeness, as they may reflect the perspectives and biases of their authors. Furthermore, much of the available evidence comes from external sources, rather than from internal Nālandā documents. To mitigate these challenges, the research involves rigorous cross-referencing of sources and a cautious approach to interpretation. Though acknowledged, these limitations are inherent to historical study and managed through careful analysis. It is challenging to trace primary historical evidence with a precise translation or interpretation becoming secondary sources later.

Results and Discussion

This section outlines the findings related to democratic governance at Nālandā Mahāvihāra and situates these within broader historical and theoretical frameworks. The results are organized according to the following two key themes:

1. Decision-Making Processes

The study reveals that decision-making at Nālandā Mahāvihāra was notably inclusive and participatory. Xuanzang's historical accounts highlight that decisions were made collectively by assemblies of monks, embodying a democratic spirit within the monastic community (Li Rongxi 1996, 142-143). These assemblies, known as the Mahāsaṅgha, were central to the institution's governance, overseeing critical decisions such as admissions, curriculum development, and disciplinary actions. This collective approach underscores the democratic ethos that permeated the administrative framework at Nālandā, reflecting principles of shared authority and community involvement in governance.

Table 01: Key decision-making bodies at Nālandā Mahāvihāra

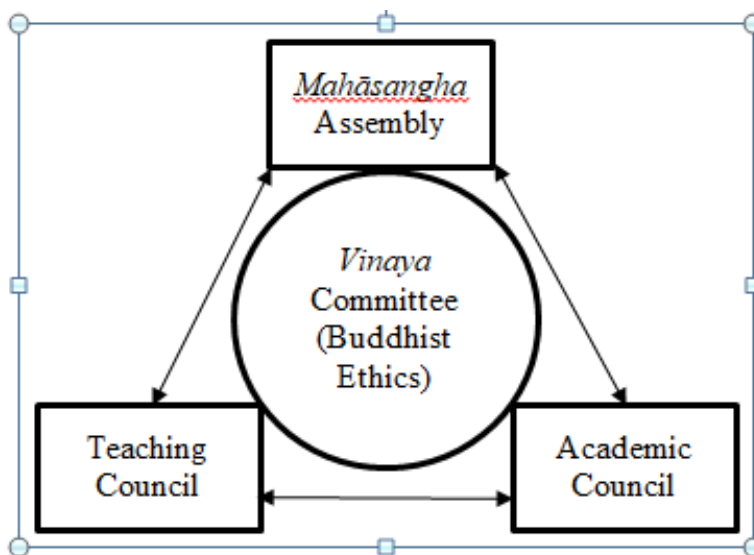
Decision-making Bodies	Functions
Mahāsaṅgha Assembly	Oversaw general administration and missions' major decisions
Vinaya Committee	Managed monastic in Buddhist discipline and ethical issues
Administration: - Academic Council - Teaching Council	- created academic accounts and religious doctrines - gathered and retained Sutras in the library - developed (interdisciplinary) teaching - generated higher learning and seminars - consolidated conspicuous talents

Source: Phra Dechkhajorn Phuthip, et.al. 2024, figured out from Xuanzang (translated by Samuel Beal 1884, 170-171. & Li Rongxi 1996, 142-143)

The table above demonstrates the decentralized governance structure at Nālandā, where authority was distributed among various councils. This power-sharing model differed from the hierarchical governance structures in many contemporary institutions, suggesting that Nālandā emphasized collective decision-making over autocratic control. Yijing’s accounts further confirm this, noting that decisions were made through consensus. He describes the open debates in these assemblies, where diverse viewpoints were considered, underscoring the participatory and inclusive nature of governance at Nālandā (Kern 1884, 278-280).

2. Distribution of Administrative Responsibilities

Diagram 01: Administration with checks & balances of each body at *Nālandā Mahāvihāra*



Source: Phra Dechkhajorn Phuthip, et.al. 2024

The study also highlights the balanced distribution of administrative responsibilities at Nālandā. Unlike systems that concentrated power within a small group, Nālandā’s governance was spread across various bodies. Teachers, known as ācāryas, and spiritual guides, or upādhyāyas, held significant influence. Still, their authority was balanced by the collective oversight of the Mahāsaṅgha and other governing councils, ensuring a democratic framework in decision-making processes. Accordingly, Nālandā promoted mass religious learning (without caste-based) as “education for all” that was more democratic in both its accountabilities and functions (Kumar 2018, 253-254).

The responsibilities demonstrate the hierarchical yet distributed governance system at Nālandā Mahāvihāra. This framework ensured checks and balances, preventing the centralization of power, and aligning closely with the democratic principle of power-sharing. Inscriptions from Nālandā, detailed in the Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, further corroborate this. These records reveal that multiple officials frequently issued administrative orders rather than a single authority figure, highlighting a balance between structured authority and collective responsibility (Cunningham 1871, 46-52).

Discussion

The study's findings reveal that Nālandā Mahāvihāra's governance model encompassed key democratic principles, such as collective decision-making and power-sharing. This challenges the conventional notion that democracy is exclusively a western concept, demonstrating its existence in ancient India. As illustrated by the assembly, committee, and councils, the inclusive, decentralized nature of Nālandā's governance resembles modern democratic institutions with various durations of studies depending on the student's progress (Dutt 1962, 276-278). However, what distinguishes this system is its incorporation of Buddhist ethical principles, which place a significant emphasis on moral responsibility in governance. This crucial factor remains relevant in modern debates about governance and ethics.

Conclusion

Nālandā Mahāvihāra offers a profound example of democratic governance in a non-western context, expanding our understanding of global democratic traditions. Its governance featured collective decision-making and distribution of authority among councils and assembly, fostering inclusivity and shared responsibility. Uniquely, Nālandā's governance was rooted in Buddhist ethical teachings, emphasizing compassion, non-violence, and community welfare. These values were central to its participatory governance, where open debate and consensus-building were key elements. The study highlights how moral and democratic ideals intertwined at Nālandā, offering valuable insights into contemporary governance models. Future research could further explore the influence of Buddhist ethics on ancient institutions' governance and compare it with other ancient monastic systems to deepen our understanding of democracy's global roots.

Keywords: Ancient Institutions, Buddhist Ethics, Collective Decision-making, Democratic Governance, *Nālandā Mahāvihāra*

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