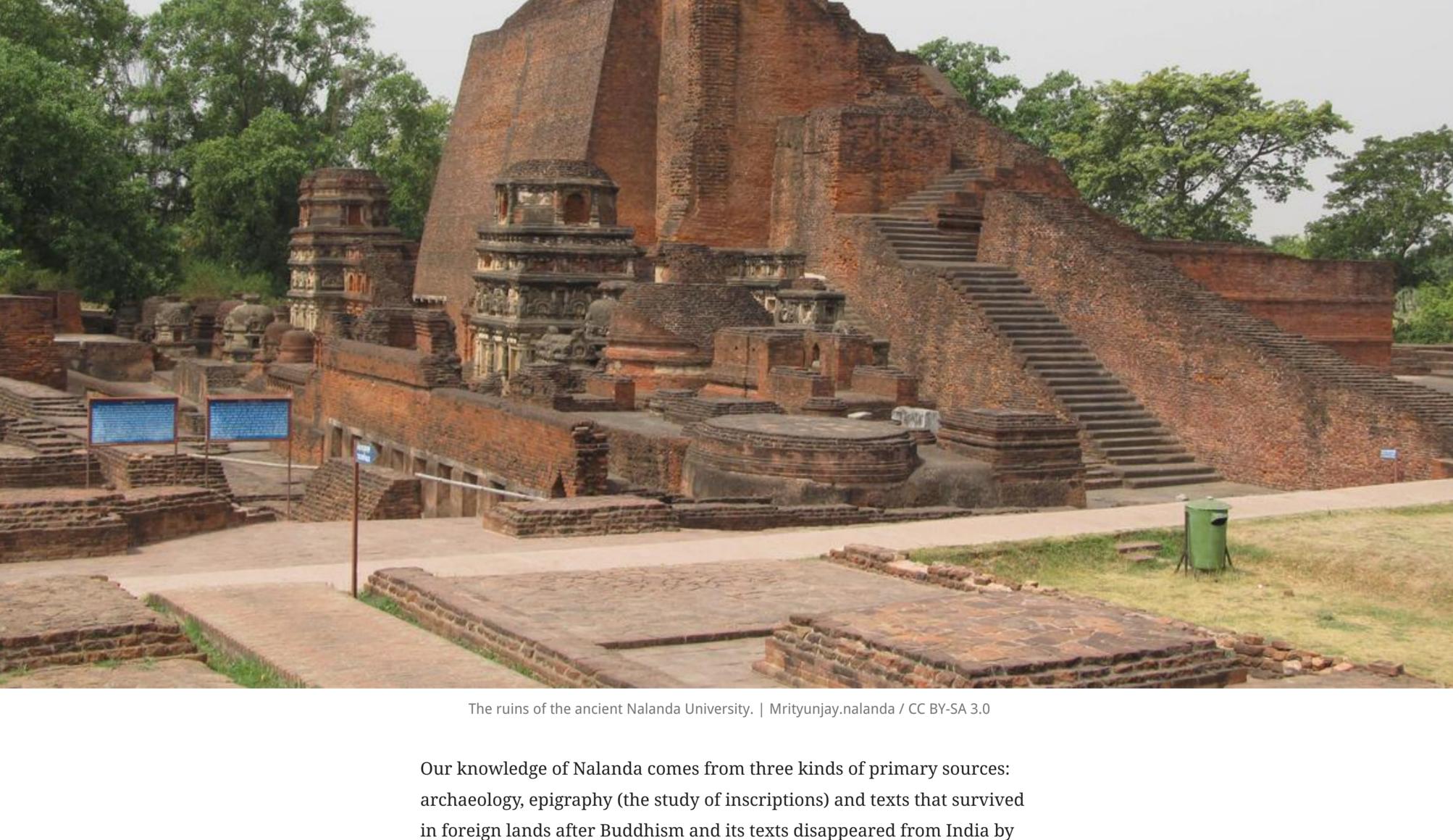
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**BOOK EXCERPT** 

## Nalanda university tell us about an old civilisation of India An excerpt from 'Indians: A Brief History of a Civilisation', by Namit Arora.

**Namit Arora** Feb 01, 2021 · 08:30 am



Legends have long traced Nalanda's origins to the Buddha himself. One

the mid-second millennium. Our chief sources for Nalanda are the

writings of Xuanzang and Yijing, who spent two to three and ten years

century, including its physical spaces, practices and rhythms of daily life,

there, respectively. They've left us a portrait of its life in the seventh

finances, curriculum and other features of its monastic community.

that Xuanzang recorded in the seventh century CE speaks of a naga (serpent) named "Nalanda" who once lived in a pond in a mango grove, later the site of the Mahavihara. "Five hundred merchants," he adds, "bought [the mango grove] for ten kotis of gold pieces and gave it to the Buddha," who preached the law here for three months. From then on, it became a site of teaching and learning, and even Nagarjuna, the leading figure of Mahayana Buddhism and a "second Buddha" to some, was said to have taught here in the second century CE (though evidence for this is scant).

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fifth century CE.

UP TO \$1500 **NJ HOMEOWNERS AND RENTERS APPLY TODAY** DEADLINE EXTENDED TO FEB. 28 When Faxian passed through the adjoining "village of Nala" in c 407 CE, he noted a stupa with relics of Sariputra, one of the two closest disciples of the Buddha. Sariputra, the locals told Faxian, was a native of Nala and so was cremated at the site of the stupa. Oddly, no community of monks had grown around the relics of a figure as eminent as Sariputra. Faxian did

not mention any such community. It's therefore reasonable to conclude

that there was no monastery at Nalanda when Faxian visited in the early



Survey of India, which he founded, surveyed the site. The ASI led formal excavations and restorations at Nalanda from 1915-37 and then again from 1974-82.

French translation of Xuanzang's travels in 1853 that kindled interest

among colonial archaeologists in identifying the site, which they soon did.

In 1862, Alexander Cunningham and the freshly minted Archaeological

Eighth century Dunhuang cave mural depicts Xuanzang returning from India | Image credit: Anonymous

Their work uncovered eleven monasteries, six temples and a giant stupa,

aka the Great Monument. The monasteries, laid out in a row, face a

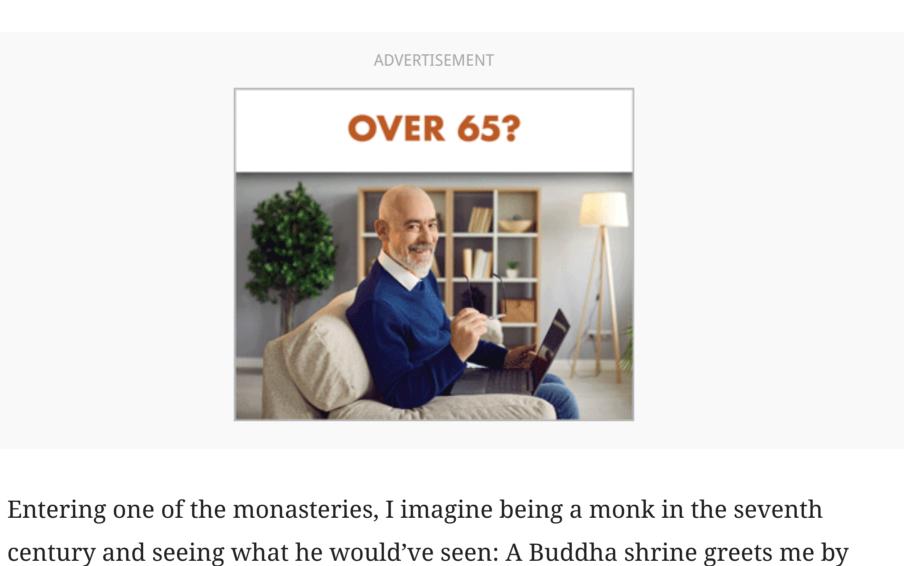
parallel row of temples directly across. A 30-metre-wide path runs

appearance and layout; if you see one, you have seen all the seven".

between the two rows. Each monastery, averaging about 40m x 60m, is

made of oblong red bricks, once plastered with a paste of lime and sand.

In Yijing's time, there were seven monasteries, all "very similar in general



the main entrance. Walking through a thick-walled corridor, I reach an

inner courtyard. It is enclosed on all four sides by two storeys of rooms,

perhaps thirty-two on each floor. A veranda lines the courtyard on all four

sides; stone pillars hold up a wooden roof over it. The open courtyard has

a podium for lectures, a brick oven/stove, a well (with an octagonal cross-

section, supposedly inspired by the eightfold path) and bathrooms with

covered drains leading out.

Caddy, British Library, Public Domain

Statue of Gautama Buddha at Nalanda, photographed in 1895 | Image credit: Alexander

Parts of the courtyard floors that aren't brick or stone are daubed with a

mixture of dried cow dung and straw, which provides termite repulsion,

thermal insulation and a cleaner, firmer surface than mud. All rooms in

students live together in the monastery; each year before the monsoon,

temple priests get a room with a purpose-built niche for a holy image, to

Rooms host either one or two monks and have wooden doors. The monks

the eldest monks are given the best rooms. Monks training to become

which they offer flowers and incense after bathing each morning.

the monastery have walls that are multiple feet thick. Teachers and

sit on simple chairs, wood blocks or small mats. Each morning, the monks roll up their mattresses – two sewn sheets of cloth with a layer of wool in between. Pillows are stuffed with "home products, such as wool, hempscraps, the pollen of Typha latifolia, the catkins of the willow, cotton, reed, Tecoma grandiflora, soft leaves, dry moths, the ear-shells, hemp or beans". The monks store books and utensils in niches cut into the thick walls. All this reminds me of my own spartan hostel room at IIT Kharagpur, which too had just enough room for a narrow cot, a desk and a chair, and a cupboard with stone slabs for shelves.

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I walk up to the Great Monument, which is still decorated with a few fine sculptural panels of stucco or stone. It has multiple stairs going to the top.

In Yijing's time, it had a "hall with mosaic floor", a seat "made of gold and

studded with jewels" and "an image of the Buddha Tathagata" turning the

Wheel of Law. I try to imagine "the ornamentation of the [Great

Monument that] was delicate and superb", according to Yijing.

At its base may have been the famous library of Nalanda, though a

Tibetan source speaks of a library with nine storeys, which seems

implausible for the building technology of the day. In any case, the

library's location remains uncertain. It held the sorts of manuscripts that

the Chinese pilgrims came in search of (at least eight finely illustrated

palm-leaf manuscripts created at Nalanda during the Pala period still

survive).

their lives survives.

Nalanda was a place for advanced learning, not basic education. Some of its teachers both taught and composed path-breaking treatises and commentaries. A Nalanda education held serious cachet in the scholastic community, and it took in the best and the brightest. Or as Xuanzang puts it, they were "men of the highest ability and talent...there are many hundreds whose fame has rapidly spread through distant regions". Aspiring students had to be at least twenty years old and pass an oral

exam at the monastery's entrance. They had to "show their ability by hard

discussion" and demonstrate a deep knowledge of "both old and new

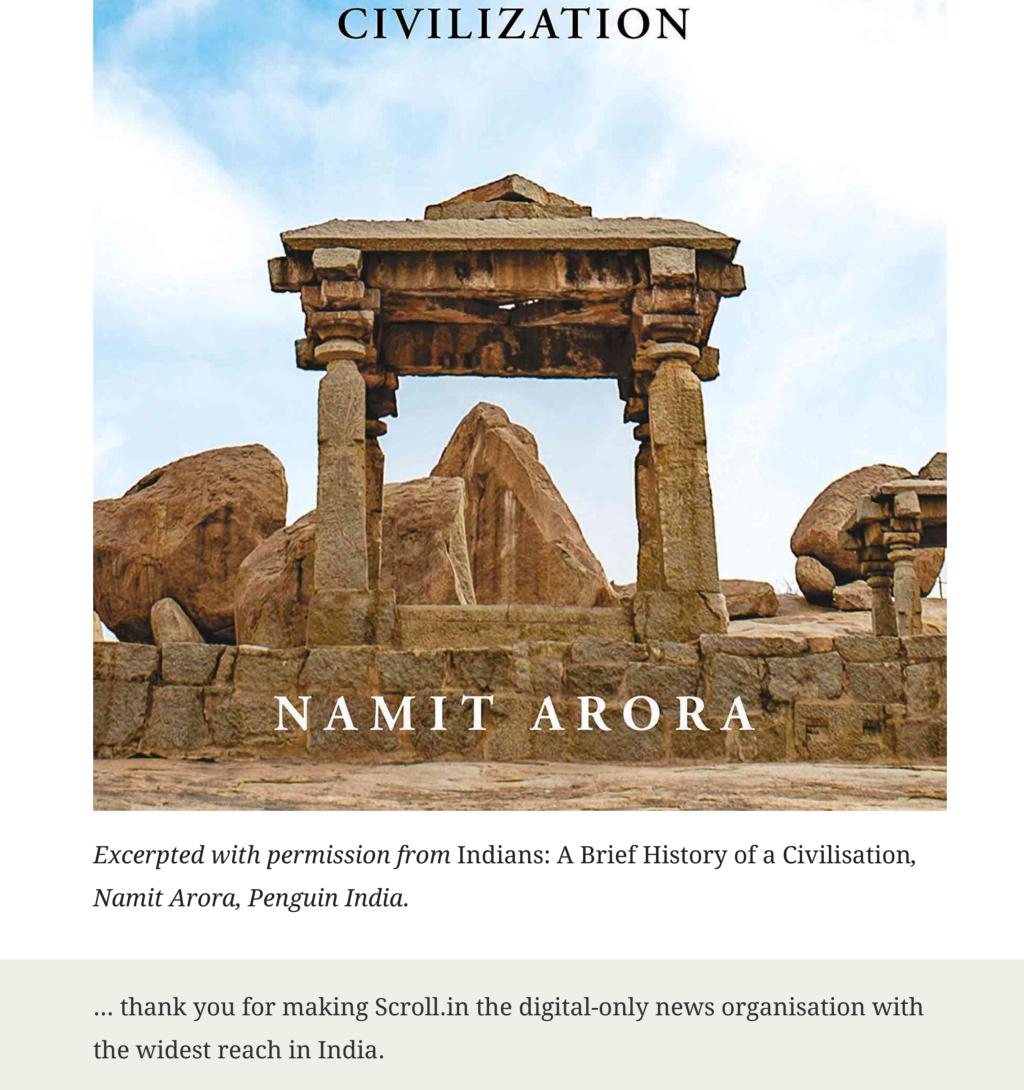
books before getting admission". No more than two or three out of ten

were admitted, and even they were promptly humbled by the calibre of

their teachers and co-students. Nuns were admitted too but little record of

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asked, investigate what needs to be uncovered, document what must not go unrecorded. \$50 \$100 \$200 Other

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