

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LIVELIHOOD DEPENDENT ON BUDDHIST TOURISM IN NALANDA REGION**

**Rohit Singh**  
Research Scholar  
Buddhist Studies  
Nava Nalanda Mahavihara

### **ABSTRACT**

COVID-19 has challenged the most advanced form of human civilization. Highly developed Nations such as; the USA, Britain, France & Italy to developing countries like India and many other small Asian countries, nobody was prepared for this pandemic, not even all these great Nations. India, too, was hit by the pandemic, prompting a call for a full market shutdown. The running cities were stopped at all times, governments in almost every country enforced strict lockdowns, and citizens with no other choice returned to their homes without even preparing for the months ahead. Almost all the sectors, private, public, and even educational institutions were completely closed down which later faced a huge brunt. One such sector is tourism which completely came to a standstill because of this unprepared and untimely virulent outbreak.

Thus, many lives had been lost all across the Nations and many are still bearing the loss and in a place like India, where a majority of the people were daily wagers or seasonal contract workers. They are the ones that have undergone the hardest battle, to meet their daily needs or essential commodities.

Therefore, in this paper an attempt has been made, to study the impact of covid-19 in the lives of those people, settled near ancient Nalanda. The region of Nalanda is known for its famous ancient Nalanda ruins and several other great historical sites and Jain temples that are of major tourist interest. Each year, thousands of tourists visit this place that somehow directly or indirectly played an important role in the lives and the livelihood of people living near the sites. This paper mainly focuses on the aspects of the economic hardships they have faced before and after COVID -19.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The proposed work follows descriptive and analytical research methods along with fieldwork. It is mainly based on the personal interview of those who live and earn around ancient Nalanda ruins.

## INTRODUCTION

With Nalanda, the first thing that appears to our mind is the great Ancient Nalanda University, a world-renowned monastic cum residential center located at a distance of approx. 90 km from the capital city of Patna (Bihar), spread over an area of 23 hectares<sup>1</sup>.

Scholars believed that Nalanda was found in (c.427 C. E) by Kumargupta-1, reached its epitome during the Gupta empire. It includes Stupas, Chaityas, Viharas, Shrines, and many votive structures and important artworks in stucco, stone, and metals<sup>2</sup>. When Hiuen-Tsang visited India, during the period of Harshvardhan, he stayed and studied at Nalanda University for five long years. He gave a detailed account of Nalanda, of his teacher Acharya Śīlabhadra and many other great Buddhist teachers and practitioners<sup>3</sup>.

Buddhist teachers like Padmasambhāva, Śāntarakṣita, who were later accredited with the foundering of Buddhism in Tibet were also associated with this ancient university. It continued to propagate Buddhist Philosophy and various other fields of studies such as Logic, Astronomy, and so on<sup>4</sup>. Until later in the 12th century, followed by destruction after Bakhtiyār Khiljī's invasion<sup>5</sup>.

Modern-day Nalanda's remains or ruins were excavated much later in the 19th Century, surrounded by many villages of *Badgaon*, *Surajpur*, *Kapatiya*, *Muzafarpur*, *Nirmal Bigha*, *Sarichak*, *Sobha Bigha*, and *Nananda*. All the surviving remains of Nalanda are present in the property area of 23 Hectares comprising 11 viharas and 14 temples, besides many smaller shrine and votive structures<sup>6</sup>. The property also retains a Corpus of both moveable and immovable artifacts and artistic embellishments<sup>7</sup>. The whole property is protected and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The property and the buffer zone are protected by AMSAR (Ancient Monument and Archaeological Sites and Remains) Act 1958 and maintained by the National Monument Authority (National authority) and District Commissioner of state government (state authority)<sup>8</sup>.

Due to great historical significance and Buddhist interest, this place developed as a tourist place immediately after few years of its excavation and restoration. This development attracts large numbers of tourists both National and International which in turn, gives sharp impetus to Buddhist tourism all around the world. Few kilometers away is the Dhamma Nalanda, a part of S.N. Goenka Vipassana Meditation center established in the year 2015 that was also one of the major tourist attractions as in this busy technological and stress-oriented world, it provided mental peace to mind and ambiance to the surroundings.

## LIVLIHOOD DEPENDENT ON BUDDHIST TRADITION

In 2020 when COVID struck hardly both the life and livelihood of the people of India, a large section of people who were dependent on this tourism were deeply affected. The only source of livelihood for them were either their small food stalls or shops adjoining Nalanda sites. A small section of these were the migrant workers, who had returned to their villages from metropolitan cities.

Initially, when the Nalanda ruins and museum were just opened, only a few tourists could visit this place as facilities for them were very less. The only source of income at that time for them was agriculture. However, with the increase in tourism, especially international tourism, people of nearby localities started relying on short-term earnings by expanding their small businesses or markets. In this manner, they have either sold their lands or neglected their agriculture system.

Thus, one major positive change of Covid-19 is a massive shift in the perspective of humans, who were running blindly after the short-term earnings, which was now proved to be insufficient and unreliable. that's why most of the migrants are moving back to their ancient system of agriculture, which at such critical juncture or delicate period of Covid-19, proved to be a more sustainable and reliable source of livelihood.

Today, we are seeing more than 150 shops including *dhabas*, artifacts shops, and fast-food vendors around and majority of them are dependent on their shops for livelihood purposes. All these shops remained closed for almost one year and it is recently opened for the outsiders. The customers are mostly Buddhist followers from all across Asia and South East Asian countries like Myanmar, Thailand, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka along with a large number of local tourists as well. Some of the shopkeepers even have learned one or two foreign languages because of the influence of foreign tourism.

Because of the historical interest of this place, educational trips from many different educational institutions were organized for this place. This one aspect dominated in the context of national tourism for this place. A decent number of people also drive e – Riksaw from Nalanda Mod to *Kandahar* (Nalanda ruins) and *Badgaon*. Although they are not dependent on foreign and national tourists as villagers and students of Nava Nalanda Mahavihara use them very frequently for transportation purposes.

## PRE COVID AND POST COVID

*Pramod Kumar*, who is running a small *Dhaba*, just 30 meters away from the gate of ancient Nalanda, narrates this story of the past 20 years as, “*Before Corona, they were easily able to feed all members of their family with some extra savings. The streets were full of tourists and the market was running smoothly. But, after lockdown, they hardly even compensate their daily expense.*” Before 2020, their daily sale was 1500- 2000 rupees, but now the total sale is less than 300 rupees per day. Pramod Kumar does not even hold a single piece of land. During the lockdown period, they even took loans for survival purposes. Now, the bank and moneylenders both are pressurizing him for the loan instalments.

*Chandan Kumar*, who owns an antique shop on the gate of Nalanda Museum, also going through the same situation, his profit decreased almost 90% since pre COVID period. While describing his experience, he shed some tears also. He said, before COVID he was having a good time as foreign tourists were all over in Nalanda and their business was running well. Like Pramod Kumar, Chandan also does not have any source of side income. He is a converted Buddhist also. Once in a week he even has to pack up without even a single sale in the day.

*Kunal Kaushal*, who runs a fast-food stall near the ruins said, he also used to run a similar shop like Chandan, but after lockdown, he switched to a fast-food stall. He briefly described his situation as, ‘*first of all there is no profit in that business in near future, until tourism revives. If I won’t earn how am I going to feed my family? Even, if I continue with that shop, I need some capital to invest and for that, I need a loan from any moneylender. I am already under debt since the lockdown period. I cannot afford more.*’

*Rajesh Kumar, Shivam Kumar Singh, Kundan Kumar, Golu Kumar, Ajeet*, and others narrate the same story.

*Pramod* even mentions that some of the *dhabas* were closed and they are not even able to reopen after the lockdown. They migrated back to cities to earn their livelihood. He also has some complaints from the administration for their partial treatment towards the development of this site and regions. He tells us, cleanliness, proper washroom, lack of guest houses, and poor waste management are some of the problems which need to be resolved soon. He shows concern by saying, suppose some guest arrive at my shop and ask me to recommend some nice place to stay I have to send them back to Rajgir and other places, due to shortage of guest houses and hotels in Nalanda.

While if any aid was yet received from the government, he immediately said nNo, without any hesitation. Although, they still hope that tourism will revive soon and will flourish the economy more effectively.

## CONCLUSION

The famous historical ancient Nalanda site attracts a large number of tourists which makes the spot a tourism-dependent economy on which largely all the nearby villages are dependent. people mainly from Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Bhutan, China, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal come here in large numbers. They shape the local market where exists small-scale dhabas, artifacts shops, fast food vendors, etc. These shops are the major source of livelihood for more than hundreds of families.

Before 2020 when there was no COVID the situation here was quite good, almost every vendor was doing pretty well, they were able to earn and save. In 2020, when COVID 19 struck, almost every sphere of their lives were severely affected. They were left with no other option than either to close their only source of income, without even being prepared for upcoming months. Some of them have taken debt from moneylenders and banks, some of them switched to other businesses, some migrated back to industrial cities of Delhi, Mumbai, etc. Their profit dropped almost 90%, to walking back in the evening without any sale. Those who hold some piece of land are a bit relaxed, but their number is less than 10% of this population. The concern of daily needs of family and children has turned into big question which seems not in a condition which can be resolved. Those who are still trying to resume their business are sitting empty-handed every day, with a hope that good days will back soon.

Thus, the government must understand their situation and come forward with some reliable methods to take them out of their debts, to provide the new and reliable means of income by opening up new dimensions and scope, to back up their small scales business. Since, our Nation, as we all know, has not yet properly developed and therefore many rural and backward areas equally require all level of great care and consideration, in terms of Business, Educational infrastructure, Tourism, and proper waste management as any other smart cities. Only then we can together proceed hand in hand, otherwise, the future envisioned by our forefathers seems futile and less uplifting or directional.

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