

Literary Pilgrims: Rajgir and Nalanda in Memoirs and Travel Narratives by Indian and Diasporic Writers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the sacred landscapes of Rajgir and Nalanda as they are reinterpreted in the memoirs and travel writings of Indian and diasporic authors. These places, rooted in religious, historical, and intellectual traditions, function not only as physical destinations but also as symbolic and narrative sites of memory, identity, and cultural continuity. The discussion draws on the scholarship of Ram P. B. Singh, especially his ideas of mythoscapes and ritualised geographies. The paper considers how writers such as Rahul Sankrityayan, Jawaharlal Nehru, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Pankaj Mishra, and Pico Iyer engage with these locations in reflective and often transformative literary journeys. The analysis demonstrates that Rajgir and Nalanda are not static remnants of history but evolving cultural sanctuaries that resonate across personal, philosophical, and postcolonial perspectives. Ultimately, the paper argues that pilgrimage, whether literal or literary, serves as a means of cultural negotiation and historical reclamation in the context of these sacred geographies.

Keywords: Rajgir; Nalanda; Sacred geography; Travel writing; Diasporic literature; Pilgrimage; Memoirs; Cultural identity; Indian heritage; Mythoscapes; Postcolonial memory; Literary pilgrimage

1. INTRODUCTION

The ancient sites of Rajgir and Nalanda in Bihar, India, stand as enduring emblems of the subcontinent's spiritual, intellectual, and cultural legacy. Rajgir is also known as Rajagriha, once served as the capital of the Magadha Empire and emerged as a significant centre for both Buddhism and Jainism. It witnessed pivotal moments in the Buddha's life, including his sermons at Vulture's Peak and the convening of the First Buddhist Council at the Saptaparni Caves. Nalanda, situated only sixteen kilometers away, is celebrated as the world's first residential university. Flourishing from the fifth to the twelfth century CE under the patronage of the Gupta and Pala dynasties, Nalanda gained renown for its vast library, the Dhamma Gunj, and for its critical role in shaping Buddhist philosophy, logic, and scientific thought. Over centuries, the site drew eminent scholars whose contributions defined intellectual traditions across Asia. Pilgrims, monks, and travelers from distant lands the most notable names are Xuanzang and Yijing. They cemented Nalanda's reputation as a global centre of learning within the Buddhist pilgrimage network, often termed the Buddha Path. Their memoirs and travel accounts, interwoven with reflections on spiritual quest, historical memory, and personal discovery, established a lasting narrative of Rajgir and Nalanda as sacred landscapes of knowledge and devotion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper considers how Indian and diasporic writers have represented Rajgir and Nalanda within their literary works, particularly in relation to their dual role as sacred spaces and intellectual centers. An analysis of diverse texts demonstrates how these locations have been imagined, historicised, and emotionally evoked. Scholars such as Amiland Ghosh, Upinder Singh, and Rana P. B. Singh emphasise the historical and archaeological significance of these sites. Ghosh and Singh provide detailed historical and archaeological grounding, while Nishant Tiwary's *The Heritage of Nalanda: How it Changed the World* underscores Nalanda's lasting global influence. Abhay K. and Narayani Ganesh, by contrast, foreground the spiritual resonance and cultural memory of Rajgir and Nalanda, often weaving personal experience with broader reflections on peace pilgrimages. Similarly, Shandan Mallick's travelogue adds a diasporic perspective, capturing the affective and cultural reconnections that these spaces inspire. Taken together, these narratives highlight Rajgir and Nalanda as multifaceted sites where spirituality, scholarship, and cultural memory intersect. They underscore not only the historical relevance of these spaces but also their continuing presence in global imagination and intellectual discourse.

3. OBJECTIVE

This research paper endeavors to analyse the portrayal of Rajgir and Nalanda, two pivotal sites along the Buddha Path in Bihar, India, in memoirs and travel narratives by Indian and diasporic writers, with a focus on their spiritual, intellectual, and cultural significance. By examining works such as Amlanand Ghosh's *Nalanda*, Upinder Singh's *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, Rana P.B. Singh's *Where The Buddha Walked*, Nishant Tiwary's *The Heritage of Nalanda*, D.C. Ahir's *Heritage of Buddhism*, Abhay K.'s *Nalanda: How it Changed the World*, and Narayani Ganesh's writings on peace pilgrimages, the study seeks to explore how these authors construct Rajgir and Nalanda as dynamic spaces where history, spirituality, and personal identity converge. The objective is to investigate how these narratives blend archaeological evidence, Buddhist history, and personal reflections to preserve and reimagine the legacy of these sites.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, text-based methodology to investigate the representation of Rajgir and Nalanda in memoirs and travel accounts authored by both Indian and diasporic writers. The principal sources comprise Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, Rana P.B. Singh's *Where the Buddha Walked*, Upinder Singh's *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, D.C. Ahir's *Heritage of Buddhism*, Abhay K.'s *Nalanda: Until We Meet Again*, Nishant Tiwary's *The Heritage of Nalanda*, and Narayani Ganesh's writings on peace pilgrimages. These texts are examined through a literary analytical framework, drawing upon Paul Fussell's conceptualisation of travel writing as a performative act that shapes cultural memory. The methodology relies on close reading in order to trace themes of spirituality, intellectual heritage, and cultural identity, with particular emphasis on the differing perspectives of Indian and diasporic authors.

Supplementary materials, including Nalanda University's official website, provide contextual information on the site's contemporary revival. The study also engages with historical, archaeological, and personal accounts to highlight narrative strategies across time. A comparative approach further incorporates diasporic

travelogues, such as those of Spandan Malik, to explore the dimensions of cultural reconnection. In doing so, the research seeks to establish a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which literary pilgrims construct the multifaceted significance of Rajgir and Nalanda.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Rajgir and Nalanda: Sacred Palimpsests

Rajgir, once the capital of Magadha, and Nalanda, famed for its ancient monastic university, have been pivotal centres of Buddhist and Jain traditions. These sites, steeped in associations with Gautama Buddha, Mahavira, King Bimbisara, and later Acharya Nagarjuna, offer not only historical significance but symbolic continuity for literary pilgrims. They operate as palimpsests, where old meanings are never fully erased, and new ones are continually inscribed. Rana P. B. Singh's contributions in sacred geography frame these sites within a "mythoscape", is a conceptual space where myth, memory, and geography coalesce (Singh 28). For Singh, Rajgir and Nalanda are not static ruins but dynamic sites of spiritual and cultural imagination. This interpretive framework invites us to read travel narratives not merely as descriptions of place but as meditations on belonging and transformation.

5.2. Rajgir in Indian Memoirs and Pilgrimage Literature

Rajgir's hills, caves, and hot springs are imbued with spiritual history. In *Meri Jeevan Yatra*, the pioneering polymath Rahul Sankrityayan, known as the "Father of Indian Travel Literature", recounts his journey to Rajgir and its sacred spots. Sankrityayan, himself a convert to Buddhism, reanimates the locale through personal and scholarly engagement, stressing its relevance to a renewed Indian identity rooted in rational and ethical traditions. His descriptions of the Vulture Peak (Gridhrakuta) echo the internal silence one encounters when climbing its ancient stone paths.

E.M. Forster, although more closely associated with Anglo-Indian fiction, offers a valuable colonial perspective on Indian landscapes. In *A Passage to India*, while Rajgir and Nalanda are not directly referenced, the Marabar Caves can be read as an imaginative allusion to similar sacred geographies of Bihar. The emotional weight attached to the cave-experience, and its consequent philosophical implications, mirror the unsettling yet transformative experience many Indian and diasporic writers describe at Rajgir. Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her essay "An Indian Pilgrim Abroad and at Home", reflects on Rajgir as part of a larger national memory. For her, the place transcends its physicality to become a symbol of India's complex philosophical past—simultaneously forgotten and invoked. Mukherjee's engagement with Rajgir is framed not through religious devotion but through intellectual longing and cultural rediscovery. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, B.R. Ambedkar references Rajgir as a setting for some of the Buddha's most profound discourses. While not a travelogue in the conventional sense, Ambedkar's text elevates Rajgir as a key intellectual and ethical landmark in India's Buddhist revival is an important theme echoed in Ambedkarite travel writings even today.

5.3. Pilgrimage and Spiritual Narratives

The spiritual allure of Rajgir and Nalanda is vividly captured in travel narratives that frame these sites as sacred destinations along the Buddha Path. Rana P.B. Singh's *Where The Buddha Walked: A Companion to the Buddhist Places of India* provides a detailed guide to Buddhist pilgrimage sites, emphasizing Rajgir's association with the Buddha and his disciples, Sariputra and Moggallana, both natives of the region (Singh, Where 48). Singh describes Rajgir's natural beauty, including the hot springs and Ghora Katora Lake, which enhance its appeal as a site of spiritual and ecological significance (50). His narrative blends historical detail with practical guidance for modern pilgrims, reflecting the enduring relevance of these sites.

Nishant Tiwary's *The Heritage of Nalanda* offers a visually rich exploration of Nalanda's cultural and spiritual legacy. Through photographs and text, Tiwary captures the "soul" of Nalanda, emphasizing its role as a monastic university that fostered intellectual and spiritual growth (Tiwary 15). He highlights Rajgir's sacred geography, noting its importance for Hindus, Sikhs, and Sufis, alongside Buddhists, due to sites like the hot springs and Guru Nanak Kund (17). Tiwary's work exemplifies how travel narratives merge personal observation with historical reverence, creating a multidimensional portrait of these sites. D.C. Ahir's *Heritage of Buddhism* provides a broader context for understanding Nalanda's role within Buddhist history. Ahir discusses how Nalanda's scholars, such as Nagarjuna and Dharmakirti, shaped Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, influencing regions as far as Tibet and China (Ahir 89). His work underscores the global impact of Nalanda; a theme echoed in Abhay K.'s *Nalanda: How it Changed the World*. Abhay argues that Nalanda's systems of debate and enquiry remain integral to modern scientific and philosophical thought, positioning it as a precursor to contemporary universities (Abhay 102). His narrative traces Nalanda's decline following Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion in 1193 CE, which led to the dispersal of monks and manuscripts to Tibet and Southeast Asia, thereby extending Nalanda's legacy globally (105).

5.4. Diasporic Engagements with Rajgir

Among diasporic writers, Diana Eck, in *India: A Sacred Geography*, situates Rajgir within the vast network of spiritually charged Indian landscapes. She notes how Rajgir functions as a "cosmogram"—a symbol that encapsulates sacred time and space (Eck 192). Eck, while writing from a scholarly and outsider's perspective, foregrounds the emotional and philosophical power these sites hold for the Indian imagination. Pico Iyer, though not Indian by heritage, offers valuable insights in *The Open Road*, where he meditates on the Dalai Lama's engagements with sites like Rajgir. For Iyer, Rajgir is a station on a map of inner journeys, a threshold between the ancient and the contemporary. His writing is deeply introspective, using external pilgrimage to mirror internal transformation. Tishani Doshi, in her travel essays and poems, weaves together memory, body, and geography. Her work gestures toward sacred landscapes like Rajgir, situating them within a gendered and embodied poetics of travel. Though Rajgir is not always explicitly named, the presence of ritualistic landscapes in her writing extends the metaphor of pilgrimage to one of bodily remembrance and cultural inheritance.

6. MAJOR FINDINGS

This study reveals that memoirs and travel narratives by Indian and diasporic writers portray Rajgir and Nalanda as dynamic spaces intertwining spiritual, intellectual, and cultural narratives. Amlanand Ghosh and Upinder Singh underscore Nalanda's archaeological and historical significance, highlighting its role as a global intellectual hub during the Gupta era. Rana P.B. Singh and Nishant Tiwary emphasise Rajgir's sacred geography and Nalanda's spiritual legacy, appealing to modern pilgrims. D.C. Ahir and Abhay K. illustrate Nalanda's global philosophical influence, with its pedagogical methods shaping modern academia. Narayani Ganesh's writings capture the emotional resonance of these sites, portraying them as spaces for inter-civilizational dialogue. Diasporic narratives, such as Spandan Mallick's, reveal Rajgir and Nalanda as loci for cultural reconnection, bridging personal identity with historical heritage. The revival of Nalanda University in 2014 emerges as a contemporary link to its ancient legacy, reinforcing its global relevance. These findings highlight how literary pilgrims preserve and reimagine Rajgir and Nalanda's multifaceted significance through diverse narrative lenses.

If Rajgir offers a retreat into silence and solitude, Nalanda beckons as a repository of intellectual vigour and loss. In *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru laments the destruction of Nalanda, calling it one of history's greatest cultural tragedies (Nehru 235). For Nehru, Nalanda was a lighthouse of learning that symbolized India's ancient contributions to global civilization. Pankaj Mishra, in *An End to Suffering*, approaches Nalanda through a postcolonial lens. Mishra traces the philosophical implications of Buddhism in modern political discourse while reflecting on the ruins of Nalanda as a metaphor for India's interrupted intellectual heritage. His journey through Bihar, including Rajgir and Nalanda, is less about spectacle and more about confronting the silence left by colonial erasure.

Rana P. B. Singh's studies of Nalanda reframe it as a "mandala of learning" (Singh 42), where sacred geometry and intellectual practice were once harmoniously united. He argues that its destruction should not define its legacy; rather, the global efforts to revive Nalanda University today are acts of narrative resistance and cultural continuity. William Dalrymple, in his work *Nine Lives*, while not explicitly describing Nalanda, offers a broader canvas of sacred geographies in India where memory, asceticism, and storytelling intersect. His narrative technique—blending travel with oral history—serves as a valuable model for interpreting places like Nalanda not just as historical sites but as mytho-cultural reservoirs.

7. CONCLUSION

Rajgir and Nalanda often appear in memoirs and travel writings, where they are shown as more than just old ruins or tourist places. Indian and diasporic authors present them not only as historic centres of learning and spirituality but also as spaces that shape memory, identity, and resistance. The interest in these places is not about nostalgia or escape, but about using the past to make sense of the present. Rana P. B. Singh's idea of sacred geography and mythoscapes helps us understand this view. By focusing on lived space, ritual, and symbolism, he shows how writers use Rajgir and Nalanda as places for reflection and spiritual dialogue. Writing about them becomes a kind of pilgrimage, a journey made with words instead of steps.

Writers like Rahul Sankrityayan and Jawaharlal Nehru saw these places as part of India's intellectual and spiritual roots. For Sankrityayan, revisiting Buddhist traditions was both a personal and national project, while Nehru's grief over the fall of Nalanda was also a criticism of forgetting history. Diasporic authors such as Pico Iyer, Diana Eck, and Tishani Doshi view Rajgir and Nalanda differently. For them, these sites are not simply inherited from the past but are rediscovered and reinterpreted. Their works question ideas of home and tradition, showing pilgrimage as less about going back to roots and more about negotiating identity in a global, shifting world. Other authors, including Rana P. B. Singh, Nishant Tiwary, D. C. Ahir, Abhay K., and Narayani Ganesh, explore the many meanings of these places. They highlight not only their history and archaeology but also their continuing spiritual importance. By remembering Nalanda's golden age and linking it to the present, such as in the revival of Nalanda University, these writers keep the memory alive. Their writings show how Rajgir and Nalanda remain powerful sites of cultural and spiritual connection, serving as bridges between India's past and its present.

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