

# Study Abroad

right information, right decision

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## Travelling across seven seas for education is nothing new



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TRAVELLING beyond one's own horizon to get education or acquire knowledge is not a modern phenomenon. Since the beginning of human civilization people have been seeking knowledge in foreign lands under the tutelage of great scholars. In those early days they had to walk miles, sail across seas and even cross mountains with great devotion to learn about things unknown to them.

We have heard of Guru Griha in ancient India, where pupils used to go from faraway places to live in the house of a teacher (Guru) and help in his household chores. In return, the teacher would teach them everything, like mathematics, philosophy, religion and so on. The students of Socrates did not come from Athens only but from places far beyond. His disciple Plato travelled to India and other Asian countries to acquire knowledge. The Prophet of Islam, Hazrat Mohammad (peace be upon him) told his followers to travel to distant lands like China to acquire knowledge. Many scholars believe that Jesus Christ (Islam's Prophet Isa, peace be upon him) travelled to some Central Asian countries as well as India to acquire knowledge, especially on religious philosophy and medicine between the age 15 and 30.

Nalanda University, an ancient Buddhist monastery in today's Bihar was a religious centre of learning from the fifth century CE to about 1197 CE. Nalanda was at its height in reputation under the patronage of the Gupta Empire and Emperor Harsha and later also of the rulers of the Pala Empire. This widely acclaimed great seat of learning in its heydays attracted scholars and students from as far away as Tibet, China, Korea, and some countries of Central Asia. Similarly we can say that pupils came from different South-Asian countries to our very own Mainamati and Paharpur monasteries to get education.

Our discussion on the subject would find profundity if we cite examples of one or two knowledge seekers

from the ancient world.

The hunger for knowledge of Al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Ibn al-Haytham, Ibn Khaldun, and Al-Farabi is well documented by scholars from both east and west. Al-Biruni travelled extensively across Central Asia and India to learn about history, physics, mathematics, astronomy, comparative religion, the Arabic and Persian languages, as well as basic Islamic studies, and natural sciences. In his 20s, he moved away from home in his pursuit of knowledge. For 3 years he traveled throughout Persia and then India for learning from various scholars about numerous subjects. Arab and Persian scholars travelled to Greece to learn about the works of Plato and Aristotle. They learned Greek language, came back with the manuscripts and translated the works into Arabic. They even gave these two great Greek scholars Arabic names. They called Plato as Aflatoon and Aristotle as Arustoo.

From China came many visitors to India, especially since the opening of the Silk Route. It is said that between AD 400-700, Chinese travellers such as Fa Hsien, Sung Yun, Hsuan Tsang and I Tsing travelled to India taking the famous Silk Route. They were interested in obtaining the original Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit and Pali and also to learn about philosophy, medicine and other subjects. These travellers also introduced Chinese culture to India.

During the modern era, from the 17th Century onwards education began to be more formalized and as a result some institutions started to be set up to impart higher education. These were colleges where mathematics, basic science subjects, philosophy etc., were taught by appointed teachers. By the 18th Century a good number of such colleges were set up across Europe and some of the Asian countries. Education became more focused, organized and result oriented.

Pupils from all over the world started to go to these colleges in Europe and Asia to obtain higher studies. Hundreds of students from India, including undivided Bengal went to London and Paris in pursuit of higher

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studies in advanced courses. They came back to enrich our education as well as open new colleges here. MK Gandhi left India for London in 1888 when he was 19 to study law at the prestigious Inner Temple. Rabindranath Tagore went to London in 1878 to study law. He attended a Brighton school and later enrolled at University College London. However, he did not complete his studies there and returned to India. It is said that his exposure to English culture and language brought him closer to Bengali musical tradition, poetry and plays.

Going to London or Paris those days was an arduous task that only very rich and physically strong men and women could undertake. Initially going to those countries meant embarking on a long sea voyage on steamers. Much later the first generation airplanes came and made travelling less time consuming and cumbersome.

In the present era also, students are regularly travelling to foreign lands to get better education in prestigious institutes. They aim for various colleges and universities located in the USA, Canada, England, France,

Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, India, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and China.

In present days, may be travelling is not so physically challenging with the availability of modern aircraft, but because of the complex geo-political reasons, getting admission in foreign universities and obtaining visa for going there have become more arduous and time consuming. There were times when students would feel helpless in collecting required information regarding address of the universities, availability of seats, admission procedure, financial involvement etc. Some embassies and high commissions offered some help but students had to depend on sending letters by post mail and wait for months for the reply. Later, some organisations like the USIS and British Council came forward to assist in this regard.

Things however have dramatically improved in the last decade and a half. Not only Internet has made connectivity faster, rather instantaneous, almost all the major universities and colleges in North America, Europe and Asia have appointed local consultants to provide necessary guidance to students in their attempts to get admission there. These highly professional groups of service providers receive students in their office with cordiality, respond to all their queries and help them all the way in selecting a university and processing the visa needed to travel.

Except for a few unscrupulous agencies, all the others have earned their due respect and reliability through offering these services to students some of whom may never have travelled beyond their district town in life. Giving proper information to students, maintaining liaison with the university authorities, keeping in touch with the local embassies and monitoring the visa processing formalities are by no means simple job. It really takes total commitment and honesty to earn reputation as a guide/agency/consultant of foreign colleges and universities and we have come across many such people in our search. In other articles we have written a few words about them.

The writer is Special Supplements Editor, The Daily Star.

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