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## Intellectual Traditions of Ancient India: An Analysis of Early Universities and their Educational Practices

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19367162>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 16-03-2026

**Published:** 10-04-2026

**Keywords:**

*Ancient Indian Education,  
Takshashila, Nalanda,  
Vallabhi, Odantapuri*

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### ABSTRACT

Education plays an important role in introducing the ideas, customs and social behaviour of the society to the people. It is the process of imparting knowledge and skills and development of attributes in people. Since ancient times, India was blessed with a rich legacy of learning. Ancient India was the birthplace of some of the earliest and influential centres of higher learning in the world. Institutions such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi established themselves as centres of advanced learning attracting students and scholars from faraway regions such as China. This paper examines the development, structure, curriculum, pedagogy of some of the most prominent centres of higher learning in Ancient India. It also assesses their enduring impact in establishing India's educational legacy and focuses on their contribution to the transmission of knowledge across cultural boundaries.

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### Introduction

Education acquired a prominent place in Ancient Indian society. The quest for achieving knowledge was regarded as sacred and life-changing endeavour. Long before the emergence of medieval European universities, India has established an intricate system of higher education due to the support given by royal patronage, institutions with monastic affiliations and scholarly communities. These centres of higher learning were not just places for education, they also served as vibrant hubs of cross-cultural



exchanges, philosophical discussions and scientific reasoning. Education placed a strong emphasis on the holistic development of the individual by attending to their inner and outer selves. Emphasis was placed on virtues such as humility, truthfulness, discipline, self-reliance and respect for all beings.

In Ancient India, both formal and informal ways of education system existed. Families and other people in villages and temples were responsible for giving guidance to children so that they could follow a devout way of life. The instructions were largely given orally, and students retained and utilised what they had learned in class. Gurukuls were the residential places of education and were situated in forests with serene surroundings. They followed the Guru-Shishya Parampara in which teachers and students developed close bonds as they lived together. Students had to live away from their homes for years and follow a disciplined way of living.

This period also witnessed the emergence of various monasteries or viharas where monks could mediate, discuss and debate among each other. The centres of higher learning developed around these viharas as kings started to have an active interest in spreading of knowledge. Among the most notable centres of higher learning were Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi and Odantapuri. Takshashila was established around 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in north-western region of the subcontinent which is now modern-day Pakistan. It is one of the oldest centres of learning and was known for wide variety of disciplines which included Vedic studies, law, medicine, astronomy, grammar and others. It attracted students from faraway lands. Nalanda was a centre of higher education from 5<sup>th</sup> century CE to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE and is described as world's first residential university. Renowned for its library known as Dharmaganja which means mountain of truth was the richest repository of Buddhist knowledge in the world.

Odantapuri was mainly a Buddhist Mahavihara, located in Bihar. According to some Tibetan records, Odantapuri had about twelve thousand students at its peak in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. Vallabhi was a major centre for Hinayana Buddhism in western India. The Maitraka kings who ruled over the region served as the patrons to the university.

All these major educational centres have played a crucial role in establishing India's educational ethos and contributing to spread of knowledge across cultural boundaries. The aims of this study are to analyse the curriculum, organizational structure, historical developments, pedagogy and societal influence of the most prominent centres of higher learning in Ancient India. Understanding of these educational institutions is especially significant in Modern India where discussions on educational reforms frequently take inspiration from the nation's vast educational heritage.



## Literature Review

The following works form the basis of comprehending the history of ancient Indian education systems. These works provide valuable information about the Vedic and Buddhist educational systems as well as famous institutions of higher learning such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi and Odantapuri.

Universities in Ancient India by D.G Apte provides information about Takshashila, Nalanda and Valabhi. He explains the establishment, courses and curriculum, administration, admission criteria and decline of these universities. Education in Ancient India by A.S Altekar is one of the important works on ancient Indian education. He provides detailed explanations about the concept and ideals of education, Vedic and Buddhist traditions of learning, establishment and working of various educational institutions.

Ancient Indian Education by Radha Kumud Mookerji explores the systems of education in ancient India, focusing on Vedic and Buddhist traditions of learning. It provides insights on the pedagogy, curriculum and structure of learning institutions such as the Gurukuls and Mahaviharas.

History of Education in India by R.N Sharma and R.K Sharma traces the history of Indian education from ancient and medieval period to British colonial rule and independence. These scholarly works showcase that ancient India possessed a sophisticated education system consisting of renowned teachers and well supported through royal patronage.

## Objective and Methodologies

The study aims to examine the origin and development of centres of higher education in Ancient India. The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To interpret the establishment and significance of important centres of higher education such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi and Odantapuri,
2. To assess the curriculum, methods of learning and teaching which were followed by these institutions.
3. To comprehend the role played by students, teachers and patrons in the development and administration of these institutions.
4. To assess the reasons that led to the decline of these educational institutions.

The research uses historical and analytical methods as well as secondary sources which are supported by existing primary sources. The study assesses the educational institution in their historical context and critically examines the administration, curriculum, and operations of various centres of higher learning.

**Takshashila (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE – 5<sup>th</sup> century CE)**

Takshashila is one of the oldest centres of higher learning in Ancient India. It was the capital of Gandhara. It is said that the place derives its name from Taksha who was the son of Bharata. The Ramayana narrates that how Bharata established two cities in Gandhara which were Takshashila for Taksha and Pushkalavata for his other son Pushkala. It is also said to be the place where King Janamejaya had performed his serpent sacrifice ritual to avenge the death of his father.

It came to be known as a famous centre of higher learning because various eminent scholars who held authoritative positions of various disciplines resided there. It was due to their excellence that the university could attract students from the entire subcontinent. There was no centralized authority to guide the teachers. Each of the teacher was recognized as an authority on specialised subjects so they acted as an institution by themselves. A teachers admitted as many students as he preferred. He taught what his students most wanted to learn. As each teacher was an authority of his discipline, there was no scope for conflicts of interest or competition between them. The knowledge defined by all these teachers was everything that was worth knowing.

An average student took eight years to master the specializations of diverse subjects; however, the duration of the course could be reduced or lengthened depending on the intellectual ability of the student. In some cases, the teachers had the students leave their studies because they showed themselves unable to fit in with the environment of their schools. There were no examinations held after the completion of studies as examinations were seen as unnecessary because the process of teaching subjects was important and had to be detailed and unless the student had not mastered one lesson thoroughly, he was not allowed to succeed to the other lessons. The students were not awarded with any degrees or diplomas upon the completion of their studied because they believed that knowledge itself was life's greatest reward and using it to achieve any selfish goals was a blasphemy.

Only courses of higher learning were taught at these types of institutions. The process of education began with primary education which began at home and then expanded with secondary education which was taught in the Gurukuls or Ashrams and reached its summit with higher education which was taught in these universities. Children receiving primary education were of ages up to eight years and children receiving secondary education were of ages eight to twelve years. So, it can be said that the students who came to the ancient centres of higher learning were of ages sixteen to twenty years.



Takshashila offered a wide range of courses in both literature and scientific disciplines. The terms used to refer to these two types of disciplines were the Vedas and Silpas. The Vedas studied in Takshashila were three, Rigveda, Yajurveda and Samaveda. There is no specific reason given why the fourth Veda which is the Atharvaveda was not taught. Perhaps the topics contained in Atharvaveda were also included in the other branches of studies so there was no need to study it separately.

The study of the Vedas likely meant learning them by heart as the Brahmanas had considered it the most important step towards preservation and promotion of Vedic culture. It also included interpretation and commentary of the contents of the Vedas. They also included the study of its six auxiliary sciences known as Vedangas which were Shiksha (phonetics), Kalpa (rituals), Vyakaran (grammar), Nirukta (etymology), Chhanda (metrics) and Jyotisha (astronomy).

Regarding Silpas, there is no exact mention of what all the subjects were. Various references highlight that the subjects taught at Takshashila were Law, Mathematics, Accountancy, Agriculture, Commerce, Smithy, Cattle breeding, Carpentry, Surgery and Medicine, Archery and other associated Military arts, Divination, Astrology, Astronomy, Magic, Snake charming, Painting, Music and Dancing. Most of these remain unchanged throughout the university's existence. However, additions were made to some subjects due to the political, religious and social changes that occurred during the university's existence.

The Persians conquered the place in sixth century BCE which led to the replacement of the Brahmi script with the Kharosthi script. Then the Indo-Bactrians came in second century BCE who brought Greek culture with them. The arrival of Scythians and Kushans had minimal impact on the curriculum. But the advent of Hunas in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE led to the ruin of Takshashila as a centre of higher learning.

Religious influence over Takshashila involved the emergence of Buddhism as a major religion in mid sixth century BCE. Even though birth and evolution of Buddhism took place in regions far away from Takshashila, it is the arrival of students from the eastern regions that led the Buddhist principles in the university's curriculum.

In subjects of science, arts and crafts, both practical and theory were taught. After every theoretical discussion a practical performance soon followed. However, certain important principles were not taught, and the students had to find and practice them on their own. Medicine was a special science where it was necessary to ensure that all areas of were perfectly taught and practiced because lack of specific medicinal knowledge could result in disaster.



Regarding the financial operations of Takshashila, financial assistance was taken care by society such as kings, rich merchants. Teachers were also responsible for providing free boarding and lodging to all students. No student was required to pay the fees on a compulsory basis. There was no expulsion or punishment given to students for not paying the fees because knowledge was believed as too sacred to get exchanged with money.

Takshashila did not face any financial difficulties as what was needed became easily available. Many rich people started to voluntarily help as they became inspired by the hardworking teachers. Kings helped either by directly sending funds to the university or by sending students to the university and deciding for boarding and lodging for them. Wealthy parents also used to provide generous financial assistance to the university. People who could not afford to pay for fees were allowed to conduct their studies if they wished to do and without any restrictions imposed on them. These people enjoyed the same right and privileges as those who were financially comfortable.

It was unholy to consider that knowledge could be brought with money. However, students after the end of their studies paid their teachers through Dakshina which included money, but it was not enough to cover the cost of their studies and things like sandals, turbans or other clothing items.

Admission to Takshashila was free to every caste except for the Chandalas who were outside the four-fold Varna system. The responsibility of selecting subjects was entirely left to the students. The process of learning was based on this dictum 'Knowledge for knowledge's sake'. The students had to follow a common code of conduct irrespective of their social or economic status. The students could be freely admitted to any course if they had the necessary background.

Some famous students of Takshashila were Panini renowned grammarian of Sanskrit language and the author of Astadhyayi, Chanakya also known as Kautilya author of the Arthashastra and minister to Chandragupta Maurya, Jivaka was an expert in medicinal science, and it is said that he had cured Emperor Bimbisara of fistula and was appointed as the royal physician to the king. He is also said to have cured King Pradyota of Ujjain of jaundice.

As mentioned before the arrival of Kushans in first century CE had minimal impact on Takshashila. They were succeeded by Yueh-Chis who were barbarous chiefs and had no interest in education. Fa Hsein had visited Takshashila in fifth century CE and stated that nothing there was of educational importance. With the invasions of Hunas whatever was left of the city was now destroyed and in ruins.



## **Nalanda (5<sup>th</sup> century CE – 12<sup>th</sup> century CE)**

Nalanda is one of the greatest centres of higher learning and world's first residential university. It was situated in Bihar, southeast of Patna. It is said to witness several discussions on Buddhist doctrines between Buddha and his disciples. Jain sources state that is the place where the Jain Tirthankara Mahavira met Gosala. Ashoka had built a temple and vihara at Nalanda as it was convenient for religious practices.

The university was founded by Sakraditya also known as Kumaragupta who established a monastery also known as Sangharam. His son Buddhagupta built another monastery in South, his successor Tathagatagupta built one in the east. Baladitya built one in the northeast and his son Vajra built one in the north. New buildings continued to be developed by Buddhist and Hindu donors till the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsang mentions that during his visit Nalanda consisted of six monasteries. It is said all the buildings were grand in size and height with elaborate towers which touched the clouds. The grounds of Nalanda contained various deep and clear ponds covered with blue lotuses and red kanaka flowers. It was also surrounded with an encircling wall that had a door in the southern side.

Admission was given only those who passed the eligibility criteria to pursue studies at Nalanda. All the students had to go through a strict examination. Scholar Hiuen Tsang claims that only 20% of the students were successful in passing the examination. The examiners used to be expert in religious studies and used to ask difficult questions to test the ability of the students. The university also had place for primary and secondary where children could learn for free. Students had to follow strict codes of conduct, and it is said that during Nalanda's entire existence not a single case of misconduct was reported.

In all Buddhist centres of higher learning all accommodations were offered free of cost as these institutions were very wealthy due to donations. Because there were no worries about payment of fees, students focused more on their studies. Chinese monk I-tsing claimed that during his time, there were about 3,000 students studying at Nalanda. It is also stated that the number of students would have been about 5,000 in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The vast curriculum of Nalanda included Buddhist and non-Buddhist subjects. It involved both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism. Other disciplines were Logics, Astronomy, Dialectics, Tantra, Medicine, Grammar, Law, Vedas and Vedangas. It is said that the university had manage about 100



lectures of various subjects every day. Students did not have to select every course but some of these were compulsory.

The administration of Nalanda was headed by the chancellor or Kulapati. He was elected by the other monks. He was elected based on experience and characteristics. He was also assisted by two councils; one was the academic council who gave guidance in matters of education and teaching. It was also responsible for the management of the library. The other council was responsible for administrative matters such as management and maintaining of buildings, constructing new buildings, ensuring proper distribution of food and clothing. They also were responsible for handling 200 villages which were dependent upon the university.

The daily management of the university was done on the directions given by the several heads of departments. Students managed the boarding houses under the supervision of the department heads. Rooms were allotted to students based on age and older students were more privileged than the newer ones. The students were also responsible for deciding punishment for any offence and that is why offences rarely happened. The relations between the students and the teachers were built on mutual trust and respect which led to a safe and supportive learning environment.

Nalanda also maintained a grand library that met the needs of hundreds and thousands of teachers and students. The library was called as Dharmaganja and consisted of three tall buildings known as Ratnasagara, Ratnodadhi and Ratnaranjaka. The library was one of the reasons why scholars from abroad used to stay for months in Nalanda. I-tsing is claimed to have copied 400 works in Sanskrit which consisted of 5,00,000 verses.

Scholars of Nalanda also played a major role in the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. Tibetan language had become part of the numerous courses of Nalanda's curriculum. Several works of Nalanda scholars had been translated into Tibetan language. Such as that of Aryadeva who wrote the Madhyamika-bhramaghata-nama, Silabhadra's Arya-Buddha-bhumi-vyakhana, Padmasambhava's Samya Parichasika.

The success of Nalanda as a centre of higher education is validated by the demands of kingdoms of foreign regions for the service of its esteemed scholars to enlighten them with knowledge. Santarakshita was a scholar who was invited by the king of Tibet Trisong Detsen to preach Buddhism. The first Buddhist monastery known as Samye was established under the instructions of Santarakshita. He became its abbot and helped in the propagation of Buddhism till his death.



Nalanda continued to remain one of the most famous centres of learning, but it started to decline in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as Vikramshila began to receive a major share of patronage from the kings. The university finally came to its end with the attack of Bakhtiyar Khilji in the beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> century. All buildings were either burnt or destroyed and no survivors remained.

### **Odantapuri (8<sup>th</sup> century CE – 12<sup>th</sup> century CE)**

Odantapuri was a prominent buddhist centre of higher learning built during the reign of the Pala kings. It is the second oldest buddhist mahavihara after Nalanda. The monastic university was founded by Pala king Gopala at Odantapuri. It was a part of a network of five viharas of the eastern region of India at that time. The other four universities in the network included Nalanda, Sompur, Vikramshila and Jagaddala. Vikramshila was the most prominent of them all during that period. The state budget allotted to Vikramshila and Odantapuri universities was much higher than what was given to Nalanda.

There are several legends that talk about the establishment of Odantapuri. Taranatha and Sumpa claimed that Odantapuri was established using gold which was discovered in a miraculous event. This legend talks about a tantric yogi named Narada who wanted someone well versed in all branches of knowledge to assist him in a ritual which involved a corpse. He found a buddhist Upasaka who initially refused but became convinced by the promise of wealth.

During the ritual, Narada told the Upasaka that when the corpse sticks its tongue out, he must catch it and will only get three attempts to catch the tongue. If he succeeds on the first try, he will achieve supreme success, if he catches it on the second try, he will attain medium level success and if he does it on the third try, he will get small level of success. Narada warned him that if he failed to catch it after three attempts, the corpse would eat them both and would go on to devour the whole world. The Upasaka failed in the first two attempts and only succeeded in the third attempt because he had caught the tongue with his mouth. The tongue then transformed into a sword and the corpse became gold. As the Upasaka held the sword he began to fly and reached the summit of mount Sumeru and went in circles around the mountain along with four islands and peninsulas. Upon his return, he gave the sword to the Yogi who let him have the gold but warned him to not use the gold for any immoral purposes.

Narada flew to heaven with the sword and the Upasaka who came to be called as Unna Upasaka built Odantapuri using this gold. All the artisans and builders who constructed the building were paid with gold and it was also used for the support of five hundred monks and five hundred devotees. Unna buried



the gold under the Earth so that no one can use that gold and prayed that the gold will benefit every life in the future. Then he dedicated Odantapuri to King Devapala.

Odantapuri had played an immense role in spreading of knowledge and propagation of Buddhism. Tibetan scholar Taranatha states that a king by the name of Mahapala had once maintained five hundred monks and fifty teachers. He had also built a vihara called as Uruvasa for provision of accommodation and livelihood to disciples of Sthavira Nikaya which was one of the early Buddhist schools of thought. Taranatha also claims that during the reign of King Ramapala, Odantapuri was a home to about thousand monks belonging to both Hinayana and Mahayana sects of Buddhism. On occasion about twelve thousand monks would assemble at Odantapuri.

Odantapuri is said to contain a magnificent library with an extensive collection of buddhist and Brahmanical writings. The library was claimed to be richer than the libraries of Nalanda. However, it was burned by the army of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khalji around the end of twelfth century CE.

### **Vallabhi (7<sup>th</sup> century CE – 12<sup>th</sup> century CE)**

The university of Vallabhi was situated in Saurashtra, Gujarat in western India. It emerged during the seventh century as a centre of buddhist learning. Chinese buddhist monk I-ting claimed that Vallabhi had become a rival of Nalanda which was in eastern India. Vallabhi was the capital of Maitraka kings who ruled from 480 CE to 775 CE and a port for international trade. Even though it was the premier seat of Hinayana Buddhism, it was not exclusive and provincial. Buddhist as well Brahmanical principles were taught at Vallabhi. Brahmins students used to come to Vallabhi from the regions of the Gangetic plains.

Aside from religious subjects, the university taught subjects such as Niti (political science), Varta (business), administration, law, economics, accountancy and literature. In some cases, graduates of Vallabhi were appointed by Kings to assist them in the administration of their kingdom. There is very little knowledge available about the teachers and scholars of Vallabhi except two scholars named Sthiramati and Gunamati. Hiuen Tsiang stated that during his visit to the place, there were six thousand monks studying at Vallabhi which had about a hundred monasteries for them.

Vallabhi was a very prosperous city. Various affluent inhabitants used to provide financial assistance to the university. The Maitraka rulers were great patrons of learning and gave a large amount of grants to ensure smooth working of the university and strengthen its library. The university suffered a brief setback in 775 CE as the Maitraka kings were toppled by an Arab siege. The university however continued to



operate afterwards as the unknown successors of the Maitraka kings became its patrons. Up to 12<sup>th</sup> century, Vallabhi continued its educational activities and remained an esteemed centre of higher learning.

## Conclusion

The study of centres of higher learning in Ancient India reveal that education given great importance and it was a complex but dynamic system that was shaped by religious ideologies, royal patronages and needs of the society. The intellectual and philosophical roots of later higher education institutions was founded by the Vedic and Buddhist education systems.

Institutions such as Takshashila was known for its wide range of disciplines and versatile learning framework. There was no centralized authority, and the teachers oversaw everything. Whereas Nalanda demonstrated a more organised and residential form of learning equipped with efficient administration and a grand library. The emergence of later institutions like Odantapuri, Vallabhi also immensely contributed to the promotion and preservation of knowledge. Especially to the rise of Buddhism in Tibet.

These learning centres not only taught religious studies but also disciplines of sciences, law, politics, logic, language and grammar. Knowledge was considered sacred and it was blasphemy to believe that it could be exchanged with money. These educational institutions were supported by donations given by Kings and wealthy people, so they never lacked in resources for the students.

However, despite their immense contributions to education these institutions disintegrated because of invasion by foreign armies, loss of royal patrons and political unrest, which eventually led to their disappearance. Still, their legacy endured through writings, traditions of learning that influenced later learning systems.

In conclusion, the centres of higher learning in ancient India demonstrate that they had developed educational systems that emphasized on physical and spiritual growth of an individual. The study of these educational institutions helps in comprehending India's rich educational heritage and can serve as inspirations for contemporary debates on reforms to improve the educational system.

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