



Ancient Universities of Bharat: Centers of Knowledge and Learning

Dr Manoj T R, Associate professor in History, MSM college, Kayamkulam

Article information

Received: 13th September 2024

Received in revised form: 9th October 2024

Accepted: 15th November 2024

Available online: 16th December 2024

Volume: 1

Issue: 1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14499919>

Abstract

Ancient Bharat, which is now known as India, was home to a number of illustrious educational institutions that made significant contributions to the development of education, philosophy, science, and culture through their contributions. This article investigates the historical context and relevance of a number of well-known ancient institutions, including Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Vallabhi, Odantapuri, and Somapura Mahavihara, among others. From the sixth century BCE until the twelfth century CE, these institutions flourished, attracting intellectuals from all over the world and fostering an environment that encouraged intellectual exchange and invention. They provided instruction in a diverse variety of fields, including as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and the fine arts, and they made significant contributions to these areas of study. Despite the fact that these universities eventually fell into disuse as a result of invasions and other sociopolitical causes, the legacy they left behind continues to have an impact on contemporary educational paradigms. These institutions laid the groundwork for higher education systems all around the world by placing an emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, interactions between teachers and students, and holistic development.

Keywords: - Taxila, Nalanda University, Vikramshila, Vallabhi University, Odantapuri, Somapura, Somapura Mahavihara.

Introduction

Ancient India, also known as Bharat, was home to a large number of illustrious educational institutions that were known for their significant contributions to the advancement of education, philosophy, and culture. As a result of these schools' ability to draw academics from all over the world, they developed an atmosphere that encouraged intellectual collaboration and creativity. The purpose of this research is to investigate some of the most important ancient universities in India, as well as their contributions to a variety of academic subjects and their enduring legacy behind them.

There is evidence that institutional centres of learning were established in Bharat as early as the sixth century BCE, indicating that the history of education in Bharat extends back thousands of years. Not only were these universities sites where academic education was provided, but they were also comprehensive institutions that merged knowledge in the areas of philosophy, spirituality, and practical application. There was a correlation between the blossoming of these colleges and periods of political stability and cultural prosperity, particularly during the reigns of powerful dynasties.

Objectives

- To investigate the historical relevance of ancient universities in Bharat (India) and to investigate the role that these universities played in developing education, philosophy, and cultural practices.
- To study the contributions that important ancient colleges made to a variety of subjects, such as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and the fine arts.

- To examine the legacy left by these universities and the impact they have had on contemporary educational systems and practices, notably in India.

Notable Ancient Universities

Takshashila University (Taxila)

In the period between the fifth century BCE and the fifth century CE, Takshashila University flourished. This university is located in the region that is now known as Pakistan. Despite the fact that its history is shrouded in mystery and is the subject of much discussion, it is sometimes believed to be one of the first universities in the entire world. It is widely held that the Bharata dynasty was the one responsible for its establishment, and that it played a significant role in the growth of educational institutions across the entirety of Asia. As a result of the broad variety of classes that Takshashila offered, which encompassed Vedic studies, grammar, medicine, military science, and statecraft, the educational establishment was able to attract students from all over the world. As a result of the presence of well-known intellectuals who taught at this institution, such as Chanakya and Panini, the university gained a reputation for being a centre for intellectual growth. There is still a dearth of archaeological evidence to support its claim that it was a formal university, despite the fact that it developed into a prominent ancient hub of learning during the period that Buddhism was a significant influence on the region. After conducting excavations, it has been found that there are no clear indications of the existence of an educational institution that existed during the Vedic or Buddhist eras (Gohar, 2023). According to (Khan et al. 2014, Aerde 2018), the strategic location of Takshashila along the Silk Road made it possible for East and West to engage in cultural exchanges. As a consequence, of these exchanges, a comprehensive collection of Greco-Buddhist artefacts was created. These artefacts are representative of a wide range of cultural connections. The contributions that it has made to fields such as Ayurveda and Sanskrit are illustrative of the significance that it has played in the development of Indian scientific knowledge (Shah, 2018). Gohar (2023) asserts that the story of Takshashila is still evolving, despite the fact that its historical significance is almost universally acknowledged and lauded. This is due to the fact that contemporary interpretations and nationalistic historiography continue to have an impact on the historical narrative.

The University of Nalanda

It was in the fifth century CE that Kumaragupta I of the Gupta Empire created the city of Nalanda, which is situated in the Indian state of Bihar. Students could pursue studies in Buddhist philosophy, logic, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and the fine arts at this institution, which was renowned for its extensive teaching program. At its height, Nalanda was a bustling centre of learning that housed over 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers. It also had a massive library that served as a focus for intellectual interaction and scholarly activity. This ancient centre of higher learning flourished beginning in the year 427 CE and continued until the year 1193 CE, when it was tragically destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khilji. According to (Tamrakar and Jadon, 2022) and (Malik et al., 2023), Nalanda was able to draw experts from all around Asia, all of them were primarily interested in Buddhist studies and had an impact on educational paradigms all over the world. (Sinha and Sudarsan, 2024) state that its legacy continues to reverberate, which has led to the establishment of a new Nalanda University. This university has the goal of achieving net-zero emissions and serving as an example of practicing sustainable educational practices. This contemporary school is a symbol of educational quality and cultural renaissance. It draws inspiration from the historical Nalanda and acknowledges the significance of the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, which was established after independence for the purpose of studying Buddhist literature (Marston & Geary, 2023). The revitalisation of Nalanda's legacy highlights the significance of heritage diplomacy and the role that education plays in the process of building worldwide linkages, particularly within the Buddhist community. In general, the many historical and contemporary interpretations of Nalanda shed insight on the key role that it played in the development of higher education in India and abroad.

The University of Vikramshila

King Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty is credited with establishing Vikramshila in the eighth century CE. Vikramshila is situated in the Indian state of Bihar. In addition to being well-known for its emphasis on Buddhist studies and tantric rituals, the institution was comprised of six colleges, each of which specialised in a distinct disciplinary area. As a significant centre for monastic instruction, Vikramshila was an essential component in the resurgence of Buddhism in India. It was responsible for nurturing intellectual and spiritual development up to the year 1203 CE, when it began to deteriorate. It is frequently compared to Nalanda and Taxila, which demonstrates India's advanced educational systems in ancient periods (Malik et al., 2023). Given its historical significance, it is frequently linked to these two places. Recent excavations have led to speculation that it may be located close to Colgong, Bihar, where descriptions by Taranath are consistent with archaeological findings (Mishra, 2023). The

precise location of this site has been the subject of speculation. Vikramshila was a prominent institution that made significant contributions to the academic community, particularly in the field of Buddhist studies. It was also an important contributor to the dissemination of knowledge throughout Asia (Malik et al., 2023). The area surrounding Vikramshila is also significant ecologically because it is the location of the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, which was established in 1991. This sanctuary emphasises the importance of conservation efforts to protect the region's biodiversity, which includes the Ganges river dolphin, which is in danger of extinction (Choudhary et al., 2006; Sharma, 1995). Therefore, Vikramshila is a place that exemplifies the convergence of historically significant educational quality and contemporary ecological protection.

The University of Vallabhi

During the period between the sixth century CE and the twelfth century CE, the Maitraka dynasty supported the flourishing of Vallabhi, which was situated in the Indian state of Gujarat. Vallabhi was a notable centre of learning. The university, which was renowned for its varied curriculum, was particularly successful in teaching Buddhist philosophy in addition to Vedic sciences, economics, statesmanship, and agriculture. As a result, it left an indelible marking on India's educational history, despite the fact that it was subjected to invasions from other countries. Vallabhi University, which is affiliated with Vallabh Vidyanagar in Gujarat, is a manifestation of the region's abundant cultural and educational heritage. It is especially influenced by the Vallabha Sampradāya, which is a devotional community that was established by Vallabhācārya in the 16th century. This community places a strong emphasis on the philosophy of Pure Nondualism (śuddhādvaita), which views individual souls as manifestations of Krishna, the ultimate reality (Saha, 2009). In addition, the region is confronted with substantial public health concerns, such as high rates of anaemia among adolescent girls. Studies have shown that sixty to seventy percent of this population is impacted by this condition, which highlights the necessity for improved nutritional education and health interventions (Gajjar et al., 2015). According to (Jain and Manjunath, 2016), the academic environment may also draw from historical books such as Vaidyavallabha, which presents traditional Ayurvedic methods, hence further extending the educational opportunities that are available by the setting. As a result, Vallabhi is a convergence of historical learning, philosophical investigation, and practical knowledge, and it continues to be relevant to situations that are occurring in the modern world.

The University of Odantapuri

Odantapuri University, which was historically connected to the Odantapuri Mahavihara, was an important centre of Buddhist study that was created in the eighth century by Gopala, the first Pala Emperor. With evidence of a massive structure that resembles other Mahaviharas such as Vikramasila and Somapura revealed through advanced remote sensing techniques, recent archaeological findings suggest that it may be near Bihar Sharif. This is despite the fact that its precise position is still unknown (Rajani & Kumar, 2021). As seen in contemporary universities such as UTFPR, which actively promote sustainable practices and community engagement through structured programs and policies (Aires et al., 2023) (Yoshida, 2016), this historical context highlights the importance of integrating cultural heritage and sustainability into modern educational frameworks through the use of structures. The emphasis placed on sustainability in higher education is in line with broader initiatives, such as the guidelines advocated by the UGC for vibrant university-industry linkages. These guidelines aim to improve research and practical training opportunities for students, thereby contributing to the development of an educational environment that is holistic (Naveen, 2024).

Somapura Mahavihara

The Somapura Mahavihara, which was founded by Dharmapala in the eighth century CE and is situated in Paharpur, Bangladesh, flourished as an important centre of learning until the twelfth century CE. It was situated within the cultural and intellectual framework of the Pala dynasty. The institution, which is well-known for its concentration on Buddhist studies and philosophy, evolved into a significant centre of intellectual and spiritual activity. Despite the limitations given by imperfect archaeological evidence and restricted epigraphic documents, the monastery is a prime example of the development of Buddhist monastic architecture. Its distinctive design, which reflects symbolic meanings and rigorous spatial organisation, is a testament to the growth of Buddhist monastic architecture (Elahi, 2018; Rashid, 2006).

Reconstructing and interpreting its past has been accomplished by researchers through the use of novel approaches, such as interactive virtual models and community-driven engagement (Rahaman et al., 2010; Rashid & Rahaman, 2008). Because of the architectural splendour that it possesses, this location has been designated as a UNESCO World legacy Site. It also serves to highlight the historical and cultural value of Bengal's Buddhist legacy. Taking into consideration the sociopolitical circumstances that shape narratives surrounding such landmarks, discussions about preservation techniques further emphasise the necessity of nuanced heritage management (Sen et al., 2006). In addition to continuing to pique the interest of both academics and the general

public, the Somapura Mahavihara is a living testimony to the extensive Buddhist heritage that the region possesses.

Legacy

At the very least, the third century BCE marks the beginning of a long and illustrious heritage of holistic and multidisciplinary education in Bharat, which is reflected in the significant legacy that ancient universities have left behind. By placing an emphasis on critical thinking, moral and spiritual development, and interdisciplinary study, educational institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila have established a global standard for higher education systems. It was common practice for these universities to draw inspiration from foundational literature such as the Vedas and the Upanishads (M et al., 2023). These universities addressed a wide range of topics, including philosophy, medicine, and the arts. According to (Tilak, 2019), the educational framework encouraged a tight interaction between teachers and students as well as community engagement, which in turn enabled a culture of inquiry and discussion to flourish. Distinguished academics such as Aryabhata and Charaka came from these schools, thereby contributing to the formation of intellectual traditions that continue to have an impact on contemporary curriculum. Inspiring educational reforms like as the National Education Policy 2020, which strives to integrate historical insights into contemporary learning methods (Kumar, 2018; Chahar & Singh, 2018), the remains of these old institutions serve as reminders of India's academic legacy. These universities were founded several centuries ago. In spite of the colonial legacy that transformed Indian education, the fundamental concepts that guided these ancient centres of learning continue to be applicable and are directing attempts to improve India's higher education landscape in the present day (Schenkman, 1954).

Conclusion

Ancient educational institutions such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, and Vallabhi, amongst others, were not only centres of study but also beacons of cultural interaction that influenced the intellectual landscape of Bharat and beyond. Their achievements not only provided the framework for future generations but also brought attention to the significance of education as a method of advancing society. As our thoughts turn to their pasts, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that their legacies are preserved for the purpose of future investigation and comprehension.

A comprehensive approach to knowledge that merged philosophy, science, arts, and spirituality was exemplified by the ancient universities of Bharat, which were not only centres of academic learning but also exemplified this approach. In the realm of intellectual interaction and multidisciplinary education, institutions such as Takshashila, Nalanda, and Vikramshila, amongst others, have consistently established noteworthy examples. They attracted intellectuals from all over the world and made major contributions to the growth of a variety of subjects, including mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and literature. As a result, they laid the framework for a significant portion of the intellectual advancement that came after them. These colleges acted as crucibles for critical thinking and discussion, nurturing not only academic prowess but also moral and spiritual knowledge in their students. The all-encompassing curriculum that was provided at these schools had a significant impact on the intellectual traditions of the world, which affected educational practices that extended well beyond the limits of Bharat. In spite of the fact that these colleges eventually went out of business, primarily as a result of invasions from other countries and social and political upheavals, their legacy continues to reverberate in contemporary educational systems.

The ongoing legacy of these historic institutions is seen in the resurgence of institutions such as Nalanda University, which aspires to reflect the same principles of multidisciplinary and sustainable education as these ancient institutions. Ancient institutions in Bharat provide essential teachings that continue to inspire contemporary educational practices and changes. These universities provide an emphasis on the importance of community, teacher-student involvement, and the integration of many realms of knowledge.

The historic colleges of Bharat are a source of pride for the country, since they have left an unmistakable impact on the intellectual and cultural landscape of the world. They have made significant contributions to the fields of education, science, and philosophy, which highlight the significance of preserving and revitalising these traditions. These traditions continue to be crucial in the process of forming a worldwide education system that is both holistic and progressive.

References

- Schenkman, Alfred S. "Higher Education in India." *Far Eastern Survey* 23, no. 2 (1954): 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.1954.23.2.01P08730>.
- Kumar Jain, Arhanth, and Shreevathsa Manjunath. "Vaidyavallabha: An Authoritative Work on Ayurveda Therapeutics." *Ancient Science of Life* 36, no. 4 (2016): 89-95. https://doi.org/10.4103/ASL.ASL_202_15.
- Tamrakar, Amit Kumar, Jyoti Singh, and Jadon. "Library and Education System in Ancient Nalanda University." *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2022): 839-845. <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2022.v4.i3b.839>.
- Naveen, H. M. "UGC Guidelines on Sustainable and Vibrant University-Industry Linkage System for Indian Universities, 2024." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science, Engineering and Technology* 11, no. 4 (2024): 114-119. <https://doi.org/10.32628/ijrsrset24114119>.
- Habib, Gohar. "Ancient Taxila University: Dispelling Myths and Misconceptions." *South Asian History Review* 2, no. 2 (2023): 32-45. <https://doi.org/10.58760/mairaj.v2i2.29>.
- Rahaman, Hafizur, Mizanur Rashid, and Masudur Rahman. "Heritage Interpretation: Collective Reconstruction of Sompur Mahavihara, Bangladesh." *Journal of Virtual Archaeology* 16 (2010): 132-140. <https://doi.org/10.1109/VSMM.2010.5665990>.
- Tilak, B. G. Jandhyala. "What Can We Learn from Universities of Ancient India." *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2019): 15-20. <https://doi.org/10.26689/JCER.V4I1.925>.
- Aires, João Paulo, Tamara Simone von Kaick, Daniel Poletto Tesser, and Laíze Márcia Porto Alegre. "Os ODS e a Cultura de Sustentabilidade da UTFPR." *Contribuciones a las Ciencias Sociales* 16, no. 2 (2023): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.55905/revconv.16n.2-018>.
- Marston, Jonathan Andrew, and David Geary. "Nalanda Rising." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 43, no. 1 (2023): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-10375331>.
- Elahi, Taufiq Khondker. "Study of the Buddhist Viharas During Pala Dynasty in Bengal." *Ancient South Asian Studies* 22 (2018): 45-58.
- Khan, M. Ashraf, Sadeed Arif, Arslan Butt, Amjad Pervaiz, and Muhammad Umair Arif. "Excavation at Badalpur Monastery, District Haripur (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Pakistan: A Preliminary Report of Season 2014." *Archaeological Reports* 7 (2014): 89-96.
- van Aerde, M.E.J.J. "Revisiting Taxila: A New Approach to the Greco-Buddhist Archaeological Record." *Ancient West & East* 17 (2018): 123-135. <https://doi.org/10.2143/AWE.17.0.3284895>.
- Aithal, Sheena K. M., Aithal, S. P., Sharma, K. R. S. "Literature Review on Indian Ancient University in Imparting Holistic and Multidisciplinary: To Create Indian Knowledge System (IKS)." *International Journal of Indian Philosophy and Literature* 13, no. 4 (2023): 57-70. <https://doi.org/10.47992/ijpl.2583.9934.0009>.
- Rajani, B. Mandyam, and Viraj Kumar. "Where Was Odantapuri Located." *Resonance: Journal of Science Education* 26 (2021): 1243-1254. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12045-021-1230-0>.
- Rashid, Md. Mizanur. "Interpreting the Morphology of the Central Cruciform Structure of Sompur Mahavihara, Paharpur: A Cognitive Approach." *South Asian Archaeology Review* 19 (2006): 110-120.
- Rashid, Md. Mizanur, and Hafizur Rahaman. "Bringing Back the Lost Monument: Interactive Virtual Model of Sompur Mahavihara, Bengal." *Journal of Digital Archaeology* 23 (2008): 140-152.
- Shah, C. N. "Origin of Sanskrit, Ayurveda, and Other Sciences in the University of Taxila by Aryans." *Annals of Ayurvedic Medicine* 22, no. 1 (2018): 10-20.
- Gajjar, Parita, Aishwarya M. D. P. Raykundaliya, Rema S., V. H. Patel, and N. R. Dave. "Prevalence and Association of Various Risk Factors with Anemia Among Adolescent Girls of Vallabh Vidyanagar (Gujarat)." *Journal of Health and Nutrition* 31, no. 4 (2015): 23-30.
- Malik, Sahil, Amandeep Dhaliwal, Deepti Dabas, and Hazarika. "Transforming Higher Educational Institutions Into Centres of Excellence." *Advances in Higher Education and Professional Development* (2023): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7059-6.ch006>.
- Chahar, Satyendra Singh, and Nirmal Singh. "Higher Education in Ancient India." *South Asian Studies Journal* 6, no. 26 (2018): 11390. <https://doi.org/10.21922/SRJHSEL.V6I26.11390>.
- Kumar, Shailendra. "Lessons from Nalanda University of Ancient Times and Stanford University of Modern Era for a New India." *Journal of Education and Innovation* 7 (2018): 21-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974173920180119>.
- Saha, Shandip. "The Philosophy of the Vāllabha School of Vedānta (Review)." *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 4 (2009): 621-634. <https://doi.org/10.1353/PEW.0.0093>.
- Yoshida, Soraya Emiko. "Efetividade da Coleta Seletiva Solidária para Alunos de Graduação da UTFPR - Londrina: Aspectos Ambientais e de Sensibilização." *Revista Brasileira de Educação Ambiental* 2, no. 1 (2016): 45-57.
- Sen, Swadhin, Masood Imran, Afroza Khan, Majeda Rahman, Nurul Kabir, Syfur Rahman, Nazmus Sakeb, and Mehbubul Islam. "We Can Protect Our Past?: Re-thinking the Dominating Paradigm of Preservation and Conservation with Reference to the World Heritage Site of Somapura Mahavihara, Bangladesh." *Journal of Social Archaeology* 12 (2006): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605306060563>.

- Sinha, Swati, and J. S. Sudarsan. "Net-Zero Development in Educational Campuses—A Case Study of Nalanda University Campus at Rajgir." *Sustainable Campus Design* 12, no. 3 (2024): 345-356. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-8842-6_15.
- Malik, Sahil, et al. "Transforming Higher Educational Institutions Into Centres of Excellence: The Case Study of the Indian Education System." In *Sustaining Higher Education Through Resource Allocation, Learning Design Models, and Academic Development*, edited by Manyane Makua and Mariam Akinlolu, 129-147. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7059-6.ch006>.
- Mishra, Reeta. "The Glorious Teachers of Vikramshila." *HuSS International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences* 10, no. 2 (December 2023): 55. <https://doi.org/10.15613/hijrh/2023/v10i2/223904>.
- Choudhary, Sunil K., et al. "Conservation and Biomonitoring in the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, Bihar, India." *Oryx* 40, no. 2 (2006): 189-197. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003060530600048X>.
- Sharma, N. K. "Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary." *The Indian Forester* 121 (1995): 895-901.