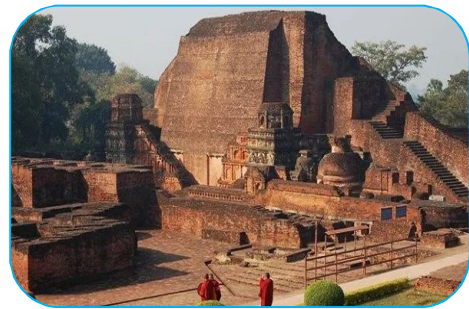




NALANDA AND TAKSHASHILA: THE ANCIENT UNIVERSITIES THAT EDUCATED THE WORLD**Prof. Venkatrao palati****Professor and Chairman, Department of History and Archaeology,
Davangere University Davangere.****ABSTRACT**

Long before the rise of Oxford, Bologna, or Cambridge, the Indian subcontinent was home to two of the world's earliest and most influential centers of higher learning — Takshashila (modern Taxila, Pakistan) and Nalanda (in present-day Bihar, India). These institutions not only revolutionized ancient education but also served as global hubs of intellectual exchange. Scholars from Greece, China, Persia, and Central Asia flocked to their halls to study philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and Buddhist scriptures. This paper examines the origins, curricula, pedagogical systems, and global impact of Nalanda and Takshashila, highlighting their role in shaping Asia's intellectual landscape. The article also explores their decline and the lessons they offer for the modern education system.



KEYWORDS: Nalanda University; Takshashila; Ancient Education; Buddhist Learning; Global Knowledge Exchange; Indian Philosophy; Higher Learning; Gupta Period; Cultural Heritage; International Scholars

1. INTRODUCTION:

Education has always been the cornerstone of civilization, and ancient India contributed immensely to its global development. Among the most remarkable achievements of ancient Indian civilization were the universities of **Takshashila** and **Nalanda**, both of which became centers of transnational learning and spiritual inquiry.

Long before the medieval European universities emerged, these Indian institutions nurtured an environment where philosophy, science, and ethics flourished under state patronage and monastic discipline. Takshashila, dating as early as the **5th century BCE**, and Nalanda, founded around the **5th century CE**, symbolize the continuity of India's intellectual tradition—from the **Vedic gurukula** to institutionalized higher education.

Their legacy demonstrates that the pursuit of knowledge was regarded not merely as a profession but as a sacred duty — a means to understand the universe and the self.

2. Takshashila: The World's First University**2.1 Origins and Historical Background**

Takshashila, often identified with the ruins near modern Rawalpindi in Pakistan, was among the earliest organized centers of learning in the world. Mentioned in ancient texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Jataka tales*, it flourished between the **6th century BCE and the 5th century CE**.

Situated strategically on the **Grand Trunk Route**, Takshashila became a melting pot of cultures — Indian, Persian, Greek, and Central Asian. Its position at the crossroads of trade and empire made it ideal for intellectual and cultural exchange.

2.2 Administration and Organization

Unlike modern universities with centralized authority, Takshashila consisted of **autonomous teachers (acharyas)** who ran independent schools (*pathshalas*). Students selected teachers according to their chosen discipline. The system emphasized **individual mentorship and dialogue**, a hallmark of the Indian educational ethos.

Famous scholars who taught there included:

- **Chanakya (Kautilya)**, the author of *Arthashastra* and advisor to Chandragupta Maurya
- **Panini**, the great grammarian who codified Sanskrit grammar in the *Ashtadhyayi*
- **Jivaka**, the royal physician of Magadha and disciple of Buddha

2.3 Curriculum and Pedagogy

Takshashila offered over 60 disciplines, including:

- Vedas and Vedangas
- Grammar, Logic, and Philosophy
- Medicine and Surgery
- Political Science and Economics (*Arthashastra*)
- Astronomy, Mathematics, and Architecture
- Military Science and Ethics

Teaching was conducted through **oral discourse, debate, and memorization**, but also emphasized critical inquiry and application. Students from across Asia — especially from **China, Babylon, and Greece** — studied there, making Takshashila a truly cosmopolitan institution.

2.4 Student Life and Ethics

Admission was rigorous, and moral discipline was central. The goal was not only intellectual excellence but also **ethical and spiritual development**. The *Gurukula* ethos persisted—students lived simply, practiced meditation, and engaged in community service.

2.5 Decline

Takshashila's decline began with the **Huna invasions** in the 5th century CE. Later, it was completely destroyed by the **White Huns under Mihirakula**. Despite this, its educational model profoundly influenced later universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila.

3. Nalanda: The Apex of Ancient Learning

3.1 Founding and Patronage

Established around the **5th century CE** during the Gupta period (possibly under **Kumaragupta I**), **Nalanda University** was located near Rajagriha (Rajgir) in Bihar. The term *Nalanda* is derived from *Na-Alam-Da*, meaning “no end to giving,” symbolizing the boundless generosity of knowledge. Supported by successive dynasties — the **Guptas, Harsha of Kanauj**, and **Pala rulers** — Nalanda grew into a vast residential university with over **10,000 students** and **2,000 teachers** at its peak.

3.2 Campus and Architecture

Excavations at Nalanda have revealed:

- **Nine monastic complexes (vihāras)** and several **temple structures (stupas)**
- Lecture halls, libraries, hostels, meditation halls, and gardens
- A sophisticated drainage and water management system

The campus layout reflected both architectural ingenuity and spiritual symbolism — blending **Buddhist aesthetics** with urban planning.

3.3 Curriculum and Fields of Study

Nalanda's curriculum combined religious and secular learning. The six primary disciplines were:

1. **Buddhist Studies** (Mahayana, Hinayana, and Sarvastivada schools)
2. **Logic and Philosophy (Nyaya and Samkhya)**
3. **Grammar and Linguistics**
4. **Medicine and Ayurveda**
5. **Astronomy and Mathematics**
6. **Arts and Literature**

Texts were studied in **Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit**, and the pedagogical system encouraged **dialogue and debate**. Knowledge was transmitted through both oral tradition and manuscripts stored in the vast university libraries.

3.4 The Libraries of Nalanda

Nalanda possessed one of the **largest ancient libraries** in the world, known as *Dharmaganja*, which housed three main buildings:

- **Ratnasagara (Ocean of Jewels)**
- **Ratnodadhi (Sea of Jewels)**
- **Ratnaranjaka (Jewel Adornment)**

These libraries contained thousands of manuscripts on philosophy, science, medicine, astronomy, and literature. Many texts were later carried to Tibet and China by Buddhist scholars, ensuring their survival.

3.5 International Students and Teachers

Nalanda attracted scholars from across Asia, including:

- **Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang)** and **Yijing (I-Ching)** from China
- **Dharmapala** and **Silabhadra**, renowned Indian philosophers
- Scholars from Korea, Tibet, and Indonesia

Xuanzang's 7th-century account offers invaluable details about Nalanda's organization, daily life, and intellectual vibrancy. According to him, entrance examinations were extremely rigorous, and only a fraction of applicants were admitted.

3.6 Administration and Pedagogical Model

Nalanda followed a structured administrative system:

- A *Chancellor (Adhyaksha)* headed the university
- Monastic rules ensured discipline
- Collective decision-making guided pedagogy and research

Instruction relied on lectures, discussions, and disputations — foreshadowing modern academic seminars. Teachers encouraged **reasoned argumentation and independent thought** rather than rote learning.

4. The Role of Religion and Philosophy

While both Takshashila and Nalanda had Buddhist affiliations, they were ecumenical in spirit. Non-Buddhist philosophies such as **Vedanta, Jainism, and Lokayata** were discussed alongside Buddhist metaphysics.

In Nalanda, the **Mahayana school** dominated, but **Hinayana and Vajrayana** philosophies coexisted harmoniously. The pursuit of **wisdom (prajna)** was considered superior to mere ritual, reflecting the Indian emphasis on *jnana marga* — the path of knowledge.

5. Science, Medicine, and Mathematics

Both universities made significant contributions to scientific knowledge:

- **Medicine (Ayurveda):** Students studied anatomy, surgery, and herbal pharmacology. Jivaka, the royal physician, exemplified medical excellence at Takshashila.
- **Mathematics and Astronomy:** Scholars advanced concepts of zero, infinity, and planetary motion.
- **Logic and Epistemology:** Nalanda philosophers refined theories of perception and inference, influencing later Buddhist and Hindu schools.

Their multidisciplinary curriculum anticipated the **liberal arts model** of modern universities, integrating humanities, sciences, and ethics.

6. Global Impact and Cultural Exchange

6.1 Transmission of Knowledge

Through scholars and pilgrims, the knowledge of Nalanda and Takshashila spread to:

- **China and Tibet** (via Xuanzang, Yijing, and Atiśa)
- **Southeast Asia** (through maritime Buddhist missions)
- **Islamic scholars** (who translated Indian works into Arabic during the Abbasid period)

The **Tang Dynasty** in China modeled monasteries and educational systems on Nalanda's structure. Similarly, **Tibetan Buddhism** was deeply shaped by Nalanda's scholasticism, particularly through **Shantarakshita** and **Padmasambhava**.

6.2 Comparative Perspective

In comparison to Greece's Academy or medieval Europe's universities, Nalanda and Takshashila were **more inclusive, interdisciplinary, and international**. They emphasized moral and intellectual training rather than sectarian instruction.

7. Decline and Destruction

7.1 The Fall of Nalanda

Nalanda suffered decline due to political instability after the fall of the Pala Empire. The final blow came in **1193 CE**, when **Bakhtiyar Khilji**, a Turkic general, invaded Bihar and **set fire to Nalanda's libraries**. According to Tibetan sources, the libraries burned for months, erasing centuries of accumulated wisdom.

The decline of Buddhist monastic education, coupled with invasions and changing trade routes, led to the eventual disappearance of both Nalanda and Takshashila as centers of learning.

7.2 Historical Legacy

Despite their destruction, the memory of these institutions lived on through texts, travelers' accounts, and oral traditions. The philosophical and scientific insights they generated survived in **Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia**, ensuring that their influence endured for millennia.

8. Modern Revivals and Lessons for Today

8.1 Revival of Nalanda

In the 21st century, the Indian government, in collaboration with international partners, revived **Nalanda University (2014)** near the ancient site. The new institution aims to embody the spirit of transnational learning and cultural dialogue that characterized its predecessor.

8.2 Educational Philosophy for the Modern World

The ancient universities' holistic model offers timeless lessons:

- **Interdisciplinary learning** that bridges science, philosophy, and ethics
- **Global collaboration** across cultures and languages
- **Moral and ecological consciousness** as integral to education
- **Teacher-student mentorship** emphasizing personal growth

Their legacy urges contemporary education systems to balance **technological advancement with spiritual and moral development.**

9. Conclusion

Nalanda and Takshashila were not merely universities—they were **civilizational beacons**. They demonstrated that true education transcends borders, religions, and professions. Their integrated approach to knowledge — blending intellectual rigor, ethical conduct, and global vision — remains relevant today.

While Takshashila pioneered the world's first organized higher learning model, Nalanda perfected it into a transnational institution of knowledge. Together, they represent India's **millennia-old commitment to wisdom, compassion, and inquiry.**

Their story reminds the modern world that education's ultimate purpose is not just to produce professionals, but to cultivate enlightened human beings capable of contributing to universal well-being.

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