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A study on Universities and Higher Learning Institutions in ancient India

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Abstract: Prominent Arab scholars of the pre-medieval period, renowned scholars of the European Renaissance as well as many modern scholars, have openly acknowledged the contributions of ancient India to the pursuit of knowledge and science. According to them, among the ancient civilizations, India was the foremost in the cultivation of knowledge and scientific inquiry. Naturally, the tradition and structure of intellectual pursuits in ancient India deserve discussion. We are familiar with the universities and centers of higher learning of ancient India such as Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramashila, Mithila and few others. The fact is that higher learning centres had developed virtually in almost every part of the Indian subcontinent during that era. And we are not acquainted with most of these. The objective of this discussion is to present a concise overview of the higher education institutions of ancient India.

Key words: Universities, Vihara, Gurukuls, Brammapuris, Ghatikas, Maths, Brammapuris

Methodology: Descriptive on basis of available sources

Introduction: Sa'id al-Andalusī (1029–1070) was one of the great Islamic scholars of the pre-medieval period. He is famous for his celebrated book entitled '*Tabaqāt al-Umam*' (Categories of Nations), which is widely regarded as the pioneering work of history of science. He had made a detailed survey of the scientific and intellectual achievements of eight great ancient civilizations, namely, the Indian (Hindu), the Persian, the Chaldean, the Greek, the Roman, the Egyptian, the Arab, and the Hebrew, in this book and came to the view that Hind occupied the highest position in the practice of knowledge and science.¹ He explicitly stated, "The first nation to have cultivated science is Hind. This is a powerful nation having a large population, and a rich kingdom. Hind is known for wisdom of its people. Over many centuries, all the kings of the past have"² (ibid.) Celebrated British philosopher and thinker Roger Bacon (1214-1294) shed light on the highly advanced scientific and intellectual practices of ancient India in his famous book entitled "*The Opus Majus*". The thirteenth-century philosopher, after studying the scientific works of ancient Islamic scholars

of the Middle East, such as, "Al-Battānī", (858–929 CE), Ibn al-Haytham (965–1040 CE), Ibn Sinā (980 – 1037 CE) and others, characterized Indian scientific and intellectual traditions as the most superior.³ (ibid.) Numbers of esteemed Islamic scholars of that time, as well as many thinkers of Europe's Renaissance period, held in high regard the significant contributions of ancient India to the pursuit of knowledge and science. This naturally sparks interest in the educational framework and system of ancient India.

A comprehensive examination of the educational system in ancient India requires a thorough research-driven exploration. It goes without saying that accomplishing this within a confined framework is unfeasible. The purpose of the present article is to provide just an account of the institutions of higher learning centres and universities that emerged in ancient India.

General Characteristics of Higher learning Centres of Ancient India

The narratives what we found in the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the *Puranas* provide us with insight or understanding about the *Ashramic* system of education in ancient Indian society. It is noteworthy to note that Plato's writings mention the Gymnasium and the Academy, which were used as hubs of learning in Ancient Greece. Over time, as necessity demanded, the knowledge and educational centres of earlier societies evolved into more organized structures. Modern universities were established over time to provide higher education. Even before the establishment of the current structured university system, several key features of higher education were already in place in ancient India, including,

- * Students coming from different places to pursue advanced learning
- * Skilled teachers guiding higher studies
- * Large institutions with libraries and laboratories
- * A degree of independence in teaching and research
- * Ongoing research and knowledge creation
- * Application of knowledge for public benefit
- * Financial and other necessary supports from rulers or authorities

India was ahead in pioneering university frameworks

In Western civilization, approximately two centuries BCE, evidence of higher educational institutions is found in the regions of Alexandria, Athens, and Constantinople. Later, in Beirut, Bordeaux, Lyons, and other places, higher education institutions were also established. In the Eastern Islamic world, in Baghdad, Basra, Cairo, and elsewhere, several higher educational institutions were established approximately from the 8th century onward. Later on, Córdoba, Toledo, and Sevilla in Spain became important centers for higher scientific and intellectual study. Islamic educational systems and scholarly practices had an influence on these centers of learning. From the early eleventh century onwards, modern universities that were influenced by Christianity began to develop gradually. The University of Bologna, along with the University of Oxford

and the University of Paris, is recognized as one of the oldest academic institutions in Europe. There is a claim that the University of Oxford was established as early as the ninth century.⁴

The idea of higher educational institutions in ancient India was much older than that of Western civilization, where it gradually took shape around the second century BCE. In Taxila (Takshasila), a university was established around seventh century BCE or even before. Eminent scholar T. K. N. Menon stated, 'The universities of ancient India have a prouder history than that of their counterparts in the ancient western world. At least one of them, viz., Takshasila, flourished several centuries before the Universities of Alexandria, Athens and Constantinople. The universities of ancient India had also a more impressive teaching and research programme. The teachers who taught in the hallowed precincts of Takshila, Nalanda and Vikramaila were scholars of high eminence and repute.'⁵ (ibid.) The eminent historian V.A. Smith for describing the supremacy of Taxila as the learning centre of ancient time said, 'The sons of people of all the upper classes, chiefs, Brahmans, and merchants flocked to Taxila, as to a university town, in order to study the circle of Indian arts and sciences, especially medicine.'⁶ World renowned historian and philosopher Will Durant also hold the same view about ancient Taxila university. Professor and researcher K.S. Siddiqui, based on historical records and exposition of eminent historians make statement in the concluding note of her article on Taxila, 'Takshashila University was the oldest and most renowned institution of higher education not only of ancient South Asia but of world. Takshashila was the centre of intellectual activities in India and various other institutions of the country were also affiliated to it. Its fame rested mainly due to the presence of the eminent professors. Takshashila University gathered in it the best scholars and intellect of ancient times who were believed to be the authority over the disciplines they taught and in their respective fields. Medicines was taught and practiced. Surgeries were also performed which is endorsed by the discovery of various surgical instruments from the sites Bhirmound and Sirkap.'⁷

A list of Ancient higher learning centres of India

We are primarily familiar with Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramashila, and a few other institutions as centers of higher education in ancient India. In reality, higher education at that time was not limited to these few institutions; there were many centers of higher learning, and those were spread across the entire Indian subcontinent. A list of ancient Indian universities and higher education institutions, along with their approximate dates of origin, is presented below:

1. Taxila University (present-day Pakistan, 7th century BC or earlier)
2. Nalanda University (Rajgir, Bihar, first half of the 5th century)
3. Vallabhi University (Gujarat, 6th century)
4. Vikramashila University (Bihar, 7th century)
5. Telhara University (Bihar, 1st century)
6. Odantapuri University (Bihar, 8th century)
7. Sompur University (Bangladesh, 9th century)

8. Jagaddala University (Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 11th century)
9. Pushpagiri and Lalitagiri University (Odisha, 2nd century BCE)
10. Nagarjunakonda University / Nagarjuna Vidyapeeth (Andhra Pradesh, 8th century)
11. Sharada University (Pakistan-administered Kashmir, 7th century)
12. Ujjain Higher Education Center (from the pre-Christian era to later times, especially during the Gupta period)
13. Nadia Higher Education Center: This educational center developed based on three regions - Nabadwip, Santipur, and Gopalpura. The British, observing the depth of scholarly activity in Nabadwip, called this place the “Oxford of India” (West Bengal, 12th century).
14. Kanthalloor University (Kerala, 9th century)
15. Pandit Vihara University (Chittagong, present-day Bangladesh, 5th century)
16. Mithila University (Balirajgarh, Bihar, revered as a center of learning since the time of Takshashila or even earlier; later, especially from the 12th to 15th century, it became one of the major centers of higher education)
17. Kanchipuram (1st century, reached its peak during the Pallava dynasty)
18. Manyakheta University (Karnataka, 10th century, during the Rashtrakuta dynasty)
19. Vikrampur University (Bangladesh, 8th century)
20. Morena Golden Triangle University (Madhya Pradesh, 9th century)
21. Kanthalloor Sala University (Kerala, 10th century)
22. Salotgi University & Nagavi University (Karnataka, 9th century)
23. Devikota Vihara (Dinajpur, Pala period)
24. Bhasu Vihara (Bangladesh, Pala period)
25. Nandadirhika Vihara (Malda, West Bengal, Pala period)
26. Traikutuaka Vihara (West Bengal, Pala period)
27. Bhojshala Vagdevi Temple (11th century)
28. Kashi - Varanasi center of higher education (approximately early 7th century) ⁸

An essay entitled ‘*Vihara*’ in 'New World Encyclopedia' based on various relevant research articles states that from the first century C.E. onwards, *Viharas* developed into educational institutions, due to the increasing demands for teaching in Mahayana Buddhism. Royal patronage allowed pre-Muslim India to become a land of many *viharas* that propagated university-like learning and were repositories of sacred text.⁹ It should be noted that the Buddhist monasteries and *mahaviharas* were not merely centres for the teaching of Buddhism or Buddhist philosophy; those were also centres for the study of all branches of Indian philosophy, science, other scriptures, and various arts.

Other forms of higher learning centres in ancient India

In ancient Indian society, temples, monasteries, and *gurukuls* were among the principal institutions of higher education. Dr. S. Srikanta Sastri discussed the significance of ancient Indian temples in relation to the education of that time. He stated, ‘...temples occupied a prominent place from the perspective of education, fine arts, economic condition and social service...There were also lecture halls for imparting higher education in Veda, Vedanga, Medicine and other subjects by teachers and scholars employed by the temple.’¹⁰

G. Girija in his article entitled 'Education Centers under the Later Cholas' has shed light, with reference to various inscriptions and relevant information, on how *gathikas*, Shaiva and Vaishnava monasteries, and temples in ancient Indian society were connected with higher education and its dissemination. He said, ‘According to the inscription, *ghatikas* were educational institutions that existed in south India during the ancient and medieval period... In the year 1058 CE, the *ghatikasalai* at Nagai functioned just like the college... The temples and the *mathas* were the two great gifts of medieval Hinduism to south India. *Maths* were organised religious educational institutions. The functions of the *mathas* were to impart education and to do social services. The *maths* were established throughout the country in almost all the temples or in its vicinity.’¹¹ (emphasis mine)

Brammapuris and *Ghatikas* are like colleges at present where a number of students come from different places to learn higher education. During that period, it was a common practice to offer lands and houses as incentives for Brahmins to relocate to the desired area. In various locations, they were established as corporate colleges known as *brammapuris* and *ghatikas*, such as the *bhahmapuri* in Belgaum or the *ghatika* in Kanchi.¹² Ancient inscriptions and records reveal the presence of a *Vaishnava matha* along with its scholars, as well as thriving colleges in various locations across South India, including Bahor (close to Pondicherry), Salatgi, Nagai, and Ennayiram, all of which were established by the kings of different dynasty.¹³ We are able to make a list of a few higher education centers or learning institutions of ancient India. The list shows just a minor part of the extensive array of higher education institutions that were once present across the Indian subcontinent. There are many truths that remain beyond our knowledge. Archaeologists and researchers work tirelessly to uncover newer and deeper truths.

Subjects Taught

In those learning centres sometimes only four and sometimes as many as fourteen or eighteen subjects of study were enumerated. The four subjects were Philosophy (*anvikshiki*), Veda (*trayi*), economics (*vartha*) and politics (*dandaniti*) – a group which particularly suited to kings and which in fact first occurs in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*. The fourteen *vidyas* were : the four *vedas*, six *angas* (auxiliaries) – phonetics, prosody, grammar, entomology (of difficult words), astronomy and ritual, *purana*, logic (*tarka*), exegesis (*mimamsad*) and law (*dharmashastra*) to these were added *Ayurveda* (medicine), *dhanurveda* (archery), *gandharvaveda* (music) and *arthashatra* (politics) to make up the tale of eighteen.¹⁴

Conclusion

The extent of intellectual and scientific exploration in ancient India suggests that the educational system of that era was both practical and highly advanced. Numerous *gurukuls* were spread across the whole of India. After completing their education in the *gurukuls*, students would go to universities or higher educational institutions for higher studies according to their abilities. Temples were not merely places of worship for God; they were also centers of *Vedic* and *Vedanga* education along with various forms of artistic training. The architectural styles and cave paintings found in India's ancient temples and sites clearly suggest that a sophisticated education in the arts and technological sciences was conducted in the centers of higher learning during that time; otherwise, the creation of the Ajanta-Ellora or the Kailasa Temple would not have been feasible. And it would not have been possible to build countless magnificent temples adorned with towering and exquisite architecture. The development of the *Gandhara* School of architecture, the *Mathura* School of architecture, and the *Amaravati* School of architecture are worthy to mention in this regard. India has endured many hardships and hardships throughout history, traversing several millennia, but throughout its long journey, it has never forgotten the eternal history of learning. Even during the challenging period of the medieval era, Kerala stood out as a prominent hub for mathematical and astronomical studies. The timeless stream of Indian intellectual pursuit continues even today.

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