

Institutions of higher learning and education in ancient India | New Topic 2020

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Institutions of higher learning and education in ancient India

Heads up! This topic needs your attention, as the topic is very vast and you will always find surprising question based on this unit.

Introduction to education in ancient India

The history of education in ancient India is fascinating and is recorded and can be tracked to the ancient era. Education in ancient India began around the 3rd century B.C with elements of religious training and impart of traditional knowledge.

Sages and scholars imparted education orally. Palm leaves and barks of trees were used for writing.

In ancient India, both formal and informal ways of education system existed. Indigenous education was imparted at home, in temples, pathshalas, tols, chatuspadis and gurukuls.

There were people in homes, villages and temples who guided young children in imbibing pious ways of life. Temples were also the centres of learning and took interest in the promotion of knowledge of our ancient system. Students went to viharas and universities for higher knowledge.

Teaching was largely oral and students remembered and meditated upon what was taught in the class.

Fundamentals of Ancient Indian Education

Ancient Indian Education had been evolved strictly on the foundations of Indian epistemological and philosophical traditions. The idea of the ephemerality of life and the world, the concept of ultimate death and the futility of mundane pleasures had provided them with a special angle of vision. The entire educational tradition originated in these 4 principles.

Thus, ancient Indian educational system was developed in terms of the needs of the individual and that of the society and therefore, its efflorescence was natural. It had a definite ideal and a definite mission. The ancient educational centers, situated amidst fauna and flora and beauties of nature were the perennial and inexhaustible fountainheads of Indian civilization and culture.

The Four Vedas

The Vedas regarded as the oldest among the literature's of the world, are the original sources of the philosophy of life in ancient India. A study of these Vedas will enable one to get a thorough knowledge not only of the philosophy of life but also of the whole fabric of ancient Indian culture. Consequently, the entire literature and philosophy of India,

The Upanishads, the Smritis and the Puranas, all acknowledge the superiority of Vedas.

The Vedas occupy a very important place in the Indian life. The 6 basis of Indian culture lies in the Vedas, which are four in number Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda.

Gurukula

- Education in ancient India was more identified with the Gurukula system.
- These ancient Hindu schools in India were residential in nature with the sishyas or students living in the same house with the Guru or the teacher.
- The students lived together irrespective of their social standing.

The Curriculum of Vedic Education, Methods and key aspects of Vedic era

- The Vedic knowledge was imparted by the Guru or the teacher to the pupil through regulated and prescribed pronunciation, which the pupil would commit to memory, having listened to it alternatively.
- Two methods of teaching were being practiced during the Vedic period. The first method was Oral and the second was based on Chintan i.e. thinking.

- The admission was made by the formal ceremony Upanayana or initiation by which the pupil left the home of his natural parents for that of the preceptor
- The discipline of brahmacharya or celibacy was compulsory. Though a married youth was entitled to get education, yet he was denied the right of being the residential pupil.
- Broadly there existed three types of institutions namely Gurukulas, Parishads(Academies) and Sammelans (Conferences) in that age.
- Besides these regular schools of instructions, there were special institutions for the promotion of advance study and research. These are called in the Rig Veda as Brahmana- Sangha. These Academics were called Parisads; there is a reference to the Panchala Parisad in the Upanishads, in whose proceedings even kings participated.
- These Academies were the main forums where students belonging to higher order of learning gathered and quenched their insatiable thirst for knowledge through discussions and discourses.
- During the Vedic period one could choose a particular profession as he liked and accordingly his Varna was determined. But during the later Vedic period Varna came to be determined by birth. Consequently the whole society was divided into four Varna- Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra

Education in the Sutras and Epics

- The period of the Vedic literature was followed by that of Sutra literature. It falls between 600 B.C and 200 B.C. The growth of Vedic literature had become so vast and diffused that the need was strongly felt to evolve some practicable method as may epitomize conveniently the huge mass of Vedic literature.
- In this age, the rules and regulations of education were manifested mainly in the form of Dharma-Sutras. These Dharma- Sutras embodied the principles of social conduct and a code of duties for the teachers and students.
- The entire Sutra literature consists of mainly six divisions known as Vedangas. A pre-knowledge of various subjects such as Siksha, Chhadhas, Vyakaran, Kalpa and Jyotisha was indispensable for the sake of comprehending the Vedas.
- One special feature of education of this period is specialization of students in different branches of learning.
- The educational system during the Sutra period was identical with that of Upanishad period. All the current unwritten regulations, social and religious traditions and long standing conventions, had been compiled in the sutras in a well-arranged and systematic order. This newly created literature became the proper course of study for the students.
- The period of the Sutras witnessed the consummation of its progress. In this period, the current of philosophical thought flowed out chiefly in six different channels.
- In this way developed six systems of philosophy, viz, The Samkha of Kapila, The Yoga of Patanjali, The Nyaya of Gautama, The 20 Vaisheshika of Kanada, Karma or Purva-mimansa of Jaimini and Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta of Badarayana.

- The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the main Epics of ancient India. These epics give us glimpses into the creed of militarism of that age;
- Students approached the learned souls for the acquisition of knowledge. Parents too encouraged it and sent their boys to the institutions. When their number began to increase the institutions formed with these students began to grow gradually.
- With the lapse of time these institutions turned into Universities and were maintained with the gift of the public and the state.
- In this way many institutions were formed of which Taxila, Ujjain, Nalanda, Benares, Ballavi, Ajanta, Madura and Vikramsila were very famous. Taxila was famous for medicine and Ujjain for Astronomy.

Education in Buddhist Era

- In the Vedic age the student was given education up to 25 years of age and after that he was permitted to go home and lead the life, in the Buddhist system after having received education the student never came back to his parent's place for leading the life of a householder. He remained a monk for good and cut off his worldly relationships forever.
- The chief aim of education was to attain salvation. Study of religious books was most important. Suttanta, Vinaya and Dhamma were the main subjects prescribed for the study. Besides these, spinning, weaving, printing of the cloth, sketching, medicine, surgery and coinage were the other subjects of Buddhist education.
- The main aim of education in Buddhist period was the purity of character. Therefore, like Vedic educational system, they also emphasized much on the practice and training for pure character instead of psychological development of the students.
- Also the main aim was to propagate Buddhism, some Acharya gave importance to tours for educating the students. After the completion of education, the students were encouraged to gain the practical and real form of the theoretical knowledge gained by them undertaking long trips. Thus, their knowledge became solid and evident.
- On the beginning (Pratipada) and close (Purnima) of each month learned people used to assemble together. This type of assembling together was a very important part of Buddhist education.
- In the higher education, religion, philosophy, military science, medicine and other difficult subjects were taught. The Vedas were also studied for acquiring comparative knowledge; nevertheless, the Atharvaveda was not included in the curriculum up to the Jataka period.
- Many monasteries/viharas were set up for monks and nuns to meditate, debate and discuss with the learned for their quest for knowledge during this period. Around these viharas, other educational centers of higher learning developed, which attracted (monastery a place where monks live and worship) students from China, Korea, Tibet, Burma, Ceylon, Java, Nepal and other distant countries.

- In Buddhist period, there were many such centers where foreign students used to come for higher education. Among such centers, Takshila was notable. It might be called the spiritual capital of India of the time.

Main Educational Centers and Universities in Ancient India

- The study of the Education system in Vedic period and Brahmanical Educational system makes it clear that in those days the residence of the teachers (Gurus) were the educational institutions called Gurukulas.
- In those days, some monasteries and huge sacred places had been established. It is said that the learned persons from different places used to assemble there and debates and discussions took place.
- Inspired by the Buddhist system, in Hindu temples and monasteries too, the educational institutions were started.
- Lord Buddha was the person who had realized the necessity of education for devotees at large and so he established the monasteries and Vihars, where education was also imparted. Later on, these monasteries were turned into full-fledged centers of education; where Bhikshus, Bhikshunis and even common people were given chance to acquire education. Besides, the foreigners also came here to study Buddhist religion.



[[Image Source](#)]

Now we shall describe some important centers of learning of the Buddhist period. Of these institutions, Taxila, Nalanda, Valabhi, Vikramshila, Odantapuri, Nadia, Mithila and Jagaddala require special mention.

#1 TAKSHASHILA OR TAXILA

In ancient times, Takshashila was a noted centre of learning, including religious teachings of Buddhism, for several centuries. It continued to attract students from around the world until its destruction in the 5th century CE.

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- Being situated at the distance of 20 miles in the West of Rawalpindi, Taxila was the capital of Gandhar Kingdom. According to Valmiki Ramayana, Prince 36 Bharat founded this city and appointed his son Taksha as the ruler of the territory.
- Takshashila was an ancient Indian city, which is now in north-western Pakistan. It is an important archaeological site and the UNESCO declared it to be a World Heritage Site in 1980.

Its fame rested on the University, where Chanakya is said to have composed his Arthashastra. Archaeologist Alexander Cunningham discovered its ruins in the mid-19th century.

It was an early Buddhist centre of learning. Well known graduates of this university include Chanakya, Panini, Charaka, Vishnu Sharma, Jivaka etc. This is the world's oldest university.

#2 Nalanda

In the province of Bihar, situated at a distance of 40 miles southwest of modern Patna and seven miles north of Rajgriha, Nalanda was a famous cultural and educational center of Northern India. –

Nalanda was an ancient center of higher learning in Bihar from 427 BCE to 1197 CE. The university was established in the 5th century CE.

- It was dedicated to Buddhist studies, but it also taught fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics and the art of war. Nalanda's importance comes from its Buddhist roots as a center of learning.
- Nalanda reached its zenith of progress at the hands of the kings of Gupta dynasty. Kumaragupta I (414-445 A.D.) built a monastery there. A big and strong enclosing wall having only one gateway marked off the entire university area.

- The center had a nine-story library and dormitories for students, housing 10,000 students in the and providing accommodations for 2,000 professors.
- Hsuan Tsang, the famous pilgrim from China studied and taught for 5 years in the 7th century CE.
- The admittance examination in Nalanada was not easy and according to Hieun-Tsang only about 20 percent of the students 38 succeeded in this examination. The minimum age limit was twenty years for admission into the university. Education, board and lodging were provided to the students free of cost by the university.
- For around 700 years, between the 5th and 12th centuries, Nalanda was a center of Buddhist studies in the ancient world. It is said that a great fire wiped out the library of over 9 million manuscripts and at the beginning of the 12th century.
- Nalanda, the unique symbol of Indian philosophy, arts and civilization after a glorious career of 700+ years, fell a prey to barbarism of the Mohammedan conqueror named Bakhtiar Khilzi towards the end of the 12th century A.D. He destroyed the University and put the library on fire and the innocent monks and students were ruthlessly massacred.

A historian writes, ***“The University of Nalanda was the educational center of international moral comparable in the universalism of its thought, the wide range of its studies, the international character of its community to the greatest universities of modern time like Oxford, Cambridge, Paris and Harvard.”***

#3 Valabhi

- Another important education center of Buddhist period was Valabhi, capital seat of the Maitraka Kings between 475 and 775 A.D. It can aptly be regarded as the rival of Nalanda in fame and educational importance
- Hiuen-Tsang, I-Tsing too had found Valabhi in the western side of India as glorious as Nalanda and students from every part of India would flock there for education
- This University was known for its training in secular subjects and had students from all over the. Owing to its high quality of education, graduates of this university were generally offered higher posts.

#4 Vikramshila

The Vihara of Vikramshila was established by the famous Emperor Dharampala of Pal dynasty in the 8th century in Northern Magadh at a beautiful hill on the bank of the river Ganges.

- In Vikramshila 108 scholars were appointed as the incharge and Acharyas of the various temples. Six additional Pandits were also appointed for general management. In all there were 144 permanent scholars in the University.

- The university was later organized into six colleges. In the center there was the central big building having six gates connected with each other.
- The main subjects of study were vyakaran, Logic, Philosophy, Tantra Shastra and Karamkanda. Later on Tantra Shastra gained prominence.
- Degrees were conferred on the graduates and post-graduates at the time of Samavartana (Convocation) by the rulers of Bengal.
- Vikramshila University was destroyed by Bhaktiyar Khilji in 1203 A.D. It is said that the Muslims took the Vihar as a fort and they killed most of the monks.

#5 Mithila

In the Upanishadic age Mithila became a prominent seat of Brahmanical system of education. It was named as Videha. Raja Janak used to hold religious conferences, wherein learned Rishis and pandits took part in religious discussions.

- From 12th century to 15th century, Mithila had been an important center of learning and culture; and besides literature and fine arts, scientific subjects were also taught there. There was a Nyaya Shastra too. Gangesha Upadhyaya founded a school of New Logic (Navya-Nyaya).
- Even upto the period of Mughal Emperor Akbar, it continued to flourish as an important center of education and culture credited with country-wide repute. It was famous especially for its Nyaya (jurisprudence) and TarkaShastra (Logic)

#6 Odantapuri

- Odantpuri could not attain that level of fame and repute which either Nalanda or Vikramshila had accomplished. Still nearly 1000 monks and students resided and received education there.
- This was established by Dharmapala of Pala dynasty during late 8th century in Magadha.
- According to the ancient Tibetan records there were about 12,000 students studying at this university.

#7 Somapura

- This again was established by Dharmapala of Pala dynasty during late 8th century in Bengal. The University spread over 27 acres of land of which the main complex was one of the largest of its kind.
- It was a major center of learning for Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Ornamental terracotta on its outer walls depicts the influence of these three traditions

#7 Nadia

Nadia was formerly called Navadweep. It is situated at the confluence of Ganga and Jalangi rivers in Bengal. It was the center of trade and commerce as well as learning and culture.

- The importance of Nadia grew still more as a result of the downfall of Nalanda and Vikramshila and it began to be regarded as an eminent center of Hindu culture and education.
- Education in Nadia University was imparted at three centers namely- Navadweep, Shantipur and Gopaalpara. Sometimes students studied here for 20 years

Conclusions

The study of the Education system in Vedic period and Brahmanical Educational system makes it clear that in those days the residence of the teachers (Gurus) were the educational institutions called Gurukulas. There the teacher and the taught lived together as the members of the single family.

In Ancient India, in Vedic and Buddhist periods, well organized educational institutions like that of modern age had not come into being. In those days, some monasteries and huge sacred places had been established. It is said that the learned persons from different places used to assemble there and debates.

Most of the universities are seen to have ended around 12th century. The destruction of these centers and other places across northern India was responsible for the loss of ancient Indian knowledge.

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