

Ancient Universities



of Vedic & Buddhist India

Taxila · Nalanda · Vikramshila · Varanasi

Centers of Knowledge | 500 BCE – 1200 CE

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Overview: Ancient Centers of Learning

Taxila

500 BCE – 5th C CE

First great university; 68 subjects

Nalanda

427 – 1193 CE

First residential university; 10,000 students

Vikramshila

8th – 13th C CE

Pala dynasty; tantric studies

Varanasi

~7th C BCE onward

Eternal city of knowledge; Vedic learning

All four institutions shaped the intellectual heritage of Asia for over a millennium.

01

Taxila

(Takshashila)

- Founded ~500 BCE in present-day Pakistan
- One of the world's earliest universities
- Offered 68 subjects; minimum age 16
- Famous alumni: Panini, Chanakya, Jivaka
- Declared UNESCO World Heritage Site (1980)
- Destroyed by Huns in the 5th century CE

Key Subjects

Vedas

Philosophy

Medicine & Surgery

Mathematics

Astronomy

Grammar

Archery & Warfare

Statecraft

Arts & Music

800+

Years Active

10,000

Students

2,000

Teachers

9

Stories – Library

About Nalanda

- Founded in 427 CE by Emperor Kumaragupta in Bihar
- First residential university with dorms for students & teachers
- Scholars from China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia & SE Asia
- Library 'Dharmaganj' housed 3 multi-storey buildings
- Destroyed 1193 CE by Bakhtiyar Khilji
- UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2016

The Great Library

Dharmaganj — 'Mountain of Truth'

Ratnasagar: Ocean of Jewels

Ratnodadhi: Sea of Jewels (9 stories, most sacred texts)

Ratnaranjaka: Jewel Adorned

03 Vikramshila University

Founded by King Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty in the late 8th century CE.

Located on the banks of the Ganga in Bihar, Vikramshila flourished for 400 years as a leading center of Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism.

The great scholar Atisa Deepankar, who revived Buddhism in Tibet, was one of its most celebrated alumni.

Key Features

Subjects

Buddhist theology, Tantra, Grammar, Logic, Philosophy, Ethics

Students

Over 1,000 students; 108 scholars for temple oversight

Governance

Led by Kulpati (elected head); 6 Acharyas for departments

Structure

6 colleges, central Vigyan Bhawan, fortified campus with gates

Notable

Dwar Pandit guarded the main gate as academic gatekeeper

Destroyed

Attacked by Bakhtiyar Khilji in early 13th century CE

04 · Varanasi (Kashi) — Eternal City of Knowledge

"Sarva Vidya Ki Rajdhani" — Capital of All Knowledge

Historical Significance

- Also known as Kashi; one of the oldest living cities
- Mentioned in Anguttara Nikaya as capital of Mahajanpada Kashi
- Buddha gave his first sermon at nearby Sarnath
- Hiuen Tsang visited in 635 CE — attested as center of learning

Centers of Learning

- Gurukuls, Ashrams and Pathshalas throughout the city
- Sarnath: Buddhist center until 12th century CE
- Temples connected to 6 Shastras of Vedic knowledge
- Taught: Vedas, Astrology, Yoga, Vedanta, 18 Shilpas

Famous Scholars

- Panini — author of Ashtadhyayi (Sanskrit grammar)
- Shankaracharya — Advaita Vedanta philosopher
- Tulsidas — poet and author of Ramcharitmanas
- Dhanvantri — father of Indian medicine; taught Sushruta

Comparative Overview

University	Founded	Location	Specialty	Destroyed by
Taxila	~500 BCE	Punjab, Pakistan	68 subjects; medicine, grammar, warfare	Huns (5th C CE)
Nalanda	427 CE	Bihar, India	Buddhist studies, philosophy, sciences	Bakhtiyar Khilji (1193 CE)
Vikramshila	Late 8th C CE	Bihar, India	Tantric Buddhism, logic, grammar	Bakhtiyar Khilji (13th C)
Varanasi	~7th C BCE	UP, India	Vedic learning, Sanskrit, medicine	Qutb ud-Din Aibak (1194 CE)

Legacy & Conclusion

1

India's ancient universities were millennia ahead of their time — offering residential education, multi-disciplinary curricula, and international student bodies long before Europe built its first universities.

2

Scholars from China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia & Southeast Asia traveled to India for knowledge — making these institutions truly global.

3

Their destruction erased centuries of accumulated knowledge, yet their legacy lives on in Buddhist traditions, Sanskrit scholarship, Ayurvedic medicine, and the very concept of the university.

4

Today, Nalanda has been revived as a modern international university (2014), honoring this ancient heritage.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."