



# The Ancient Universities of Bihar: Nalanda and Vikramshila

Gourav Kumar<sup>1</sup> Nitish Kumar Choudhary<sup>2</sup> & Mirza Md Ali<sup>3</sup>

T.M.B.U., Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

[anandvarsha003@gmail.com](mailto:anandvarsha003@gmail.com) [atulsamiran@gmail.com](mailto:atulsamiran@gmail.com) [drashokthakur1963@gmail.com](mailto:drashokthakur1963@gmail.com)

**Abstract :** Bihar, known as a cradle of ancient learning, was home to two of the most renowned universities in the world: Nalanda and Vikramshila. Established during the early medieval period, these institutions attracted scholars from various regions, contributing significantly to the fields of philosophy, theology, mathematics, and medicine. This paper explores the historical significance, academic curricula, and cultural impact of Nalanda and Vikramshila, examining their roles in shaping education in ancient India and their legacy in contemporary society. The research highlights the decline of these universities due to various socio-political factors, as well as the modern efforts toward their revival and preservation. Through comparative analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these ancient centers of learning and their enduring influence on education in India and beyond.

**Keywords:-** Nalanda, Vikramshila, ancient universities, education, Bihar, history

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## INTRODUCTION

The ancient universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila stand as monumental pillars in the history of education in India. Founded during the Gupta period, they became leading centers for higher learning and attracted scholars from across Asia, including China, Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia. The universities offered a comprehensive curriculum that encompassed various disciplines, fostering a rich intellectual tradition that influenced generations of thinkers.

### Nalanda University

Nalanda University, founded in the 5th century CE, was not only the first residential university in the world but also one of the largest, accommodating thousands of students and faculty members. It gained prominence for its advanced studies in Buddhism, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine (Chakravarti, 2013). Nalanda's educational framework emphasized critical thinking, debate, and intellectual rigor, providing an environment conducive to scholarly pursuits.

### Vikramshila University

Vikramshila University, established in the 8th century CE by King Dharmapala, emerged as a rival to Nalanda, specializing in Buddhist studies and tantric practices. This institution was characterized by its systematic approach to teaching and was instrumental in the spread of Buddhism in Tibet and Central Asia (Basham, 2000). Vikramshila's curriculum included grammar, logic, and metaphysics, attracting students who sought a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

### Historical Context

#### Political and Cultural Environment

The rise of Nalanda and Vikramshila coincided with a flourishing period in Indian history marked by the Gupta Empire's patronage of arts and sciences. The emperors recognized the importance of education in promoting cultural and political stability, leading to the establishment of these universities (Ray, 2017). The support of Buddhist kings facilitated the growth of both institutions, enabling them to attract scholars and resources.

Curriculum and Methodology

Both Nalanda and Vikramshila employed a unique pedagogical approach, emphasizing interactive learning. Students engaged in debates, discussions, and practical demonstrations, promoting a hands-on understanding of subjects. The universities offered a diverse curriculum, covering:

- Philosophy and Logic
- Buddhism and Tantric Studies
- Mathematics and Astronomy
- Medicine and Surgery

Table 1 Summarizes the key features of the curricula offered at Nalanda and Vikramshila.

Curriculum Area	Nalanda	Vikramshila
Philosophy	Emphasis on Buddhist philosophy	Focus on logic and metaphysics
Religion	Studies in Mahayana Buddhism	Tantric practices and rituals
Mathematics	Geometry, arithmetic	Advanced mathematics
Astronomy	Celestial navigation	Astrological studies
Medicine	Ayurvedic texts and practices	Surgical techniques and practices

Decline and Destruction

The decline of Nalanda and Vikramshila began in the late 12th century due to a combination of factors, including political instability, foreign invasions, and changing socio-economic conditions. The catastrophic invasion by Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193 led to the destruction of Nalanda, marking a significant loss of knowledge and culture (Singh, 2009). Vikramshila faced similar fates, gradually losing its prominence until it fell into obscurity.

Legacy and Revival

Despite their decline, the legacies of Nalanda and Vikramshila have endured. The universities not only shaped educational paradigms in ancient India but also left an indelible mark on the cultures of neighboring countries (Kumar, 2015). In recent years, efforts have been made to revive these ancient institutions. Nalanda University was reestablished in 2010 as a modern institution, drawing inspiration from its historical predecessor and focusing on multidisciplinary studies (Sinha, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The ancient universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila were instrumental in shaping the educational landscape of India and Asia. Their innovative teaching methods and diverse curricula fostered a rich intellectual tradition that influenced countless scholars. Understanding their historical significance provides valuable insights into the development of education and culture in ancient India. As contemporary society grapples with the challenges of modern education, revisiting the legacies of Nalanda and Vikramshila offers a roadmap for nurturing intellectual curiosity and fostering academic excellence.

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