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# A Study of Ancient Nalanda University and Modern University System: Similarities and Differences.

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## Introduction

"In Nalanda, the gates were guarded by learned monks, and entry was permitted only after testing the merit of those who wished to study."— Xuanzang (7th century Chinese monk and traveler). Nalanda university was the most renowned centers of learning in the ancient world offering profound knowledge across various disciplines that people from all over the world come to get access of that knowledge

.Education system in india has seen a great transition from ancient Gurukul systems to a modern, technology-driven approach . The ancient Nalanda University, established in the 5th century CE, stands as a testament to India's rich intellectual heritage. On the other hand , modern universities have evolved into diverse institutions catering to various academic and vocational needs. This paper delves into a comparative analysis of these two educational models, aiming to uncover both their similarities and differences.

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## Nalanda University: A Historical Overview

The first residential university of the world founded at Nalanda by the magnanimity of Emperor Kumaragupta in 427CE and sustained by the conscientiousness of the learned monks and teachers, flourished for over 800 years till the end in 12th century CE. It is believed to possess 2,000 teachers and 10,000 students. Nalanda had attracted scholars to its campus from places as distant as China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and South East Asia. Those scholars have left records about the ambience, architecture, and learning at Nalanda, as well as, about the profound knowledge of Nalanda teachers. The most detailed accounts have come from Chinese scholars and the best known of these is Xuan Zang, who carried back many hundred scriptures which were later translated into Chinese. <https://nalandauniv.edu.in/about-nalanda/history-and-revival/>.

The ancient Indian medical system of Ayurveda, which is rooted in nature-based healing methods, was widely taught at Nalanda and then migrated to other parts of India via alumni. Other Buddhist institutions drew inspiration from the campus' design of open courtyards enclosed by prayer halls and lecture rooms. And the stucco produced here influenced ecclesiastical art in Thailand, and metal art migrated from here to Tibet and the Malayan peninsula. The university complex spanned over 16 square kilometers and housed approximately 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers from across Asia . Nalanda's pedagogical approach emphasized oral transmission of knowledge, with a strong focus on memorization, debate, and discourse. The method encouraged active participation and critical analysis, ensuring a deep understanding of subjects.

However, Nalanda University faced destruction in 1193 AD at the hands of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji. To revive this historic institution, the Indian government enacted the Nalanda University Act in 2010, which implemented decisions made at the East Asia Summit to establish a new Nalanda University. <https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-exam/nalanda-university/>

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## Modern University System

Modern education system was Introduced by britishers in india with aim to dominate people and more have more people learning English system of education which in future will help to them to use these Indians in achieving their success which led to the close of Sanskrit school. The modern university system in India is a structured, formalized, and expansive network of higher education institutions that cater to millions of students across the country. It includes central, state, private, and deemed universities offering undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programs in a wide range of disciplines such as science, technology, humanities, commerce, law, and medicine. Governed by regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the system ensures academic standards, curriculum frameworks, and quality assurance through mechanisms like NAAC accreditation and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). Education today is increasingly technology-driven, with the integration of digital platforms like SWAYAM and NPTEL for online learning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has introduced significant reforms, including a multidisciplinary approach, flexibility in course choices, and the promotion of Indian languages and vocational education. Admission processes are largely merit-based, often through national or state-level entrance exams, and efforts are made to ensure inclusivity through

reservation policies and financial support for underprivileged students. With a strong focus on skill development, innovation, and global competitiveness, the modern university system in India aims to prepare students not just for employment but also for responsible citizenship and lifelong learning.

### ***Philosophy and Purpose of Education in Nalanda University***

The historic Nalanda University, founded in the 5th century CE in today's Bihar, India, represented something more than an academic institution; it embodied the aspiration for intellectual knowledge, spiritual fulfillment, and intercultural understanding. Education in Nalanda epitomized an approach that was fundamentally rooted in the Indian and Buddhist traditions which viewed the entire person - socially, politically, morally, and intellectually - in terms of development.

### ***A Higher Purpose: Liberation Through Knowledge***

Modern systems often view education in an instrumental sense, as a means of mobility, professional or economic. Nalanda's educational framework, on the other hand, was predicated on a higher understanding of education. Its students sought to attain moksha, bodhi, and dharma. The educational experience was understood to be a means to self-realization and societal improvement.

Knowledge was pursued not as utility but as a process of revealed human consciousness. The students who attended Nalanda studied texts and philosophies not in order to obtain careers, but for the sake of gaining wisdom and sharing it for the benefit of all beings.

As one might say, "Nalanda was more than a university; it was a symbol of the spirit of learning and openness,"

### ***Emphasis on Critical Thinking and Debate***

Central to Nalanda's philosophy was the dialectical stance or vād-vivād (i.e. philosophical debate) of Nalanda's teaching practice. Students were taught to question, refute, and refine ideas through debate - they learned through authoritative argument and whilst this honed their intellectual skills, it also facilitated intellectual humility and the ability to hold different views. The related learning environment included:

- Respect for dissenting opinions.
- Rigorous mental discipline.
- Satisfaction of academic freedom.

This made Nalanda among the earliest to adopt an open and pluralistic academic mode.

### ***Education as a Tool for Global Harmony***

Nalanda's philosophy did not stop at personal or localized purposes; it was a place of intellectual interchange that embraced students and scholars from China, Korea, Tibet, Sri Lanka and other parts of central Asia. Nalanda embodied the cosmopolitan ideal of a global intellectual community - that knowledge knows no boundaries and that it is to be used to achieve universal peace and understanding. Through internationally known scholars like Xuanzang and Yijing, Nalanda's philosophies were studied, assimilated and brought back to their own lands, reaffirming the notion that education serves as a bridge between civilizations.

### ***Moral and Ethical Education***

Equally important was the integration of ethics with education. Monastic discipline played a crucial role in the daily lives of students. The aim was to nurture scholars who were not only intellectually brilliant but also morally grounded and socially responsible. Compassion, self-discipline, and humility were as essential as academic excellence. In essence, Nalanda teaches us that the highest purpose of education is not just to make a living, but to make a life worth living.

### ***Philosophy and Purpose of Education in Modern Universities***

Over the years, the philosophy and purpose of education in contemporary universities has changed dramatically, shaped by factors such as industrialization, greater connectivity and globalization, science and technology, and shifting societal needs. While individuals in older institutions like Nalanda focused on personal enlightenment through the cultivation of ethics and individual relationships, contemporary universities often function primarily as engines of economic growth, innovation, and social mobility for many employees.

### ***From Self-Realization to Career Preparation***

Unlike Nalanda's spiritually oriented paradigm, modern education is primarily focused on outcomes. The first point of focus is to prepare students with the information and capabilities for labour for work, entrepreneurial activities and participation in the economy. In this equation, Education has shifted,

with the ability to train for professional competence, as societies converged into ever more complex forms and economies of increasing specialisation. Today, Universities concentrate on:

- Technical skills.
- Critical judgment.
- Creativity and problem-solving.
- Preparing students for global labour markets.

As American philosopher John Dewey noted, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." This reflects a more pragmatic and integrated view of learning in today's world.

### ***Emphasis on Research, Technology, and Innovation***

A defining feature of higher education today is its commitment to research and innovation. Universities are not just teaching institutions anymore; they are also research institutions, developing technologies, shaping policy, and creating solutions to real-world problems.

- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) education is prioritized.
- University grants and university-industry partnerships are on the rise.
- Data, evidence, and experimental methods are prioritized over sacred writing and oral tradition. This represents a transition away from seeking wisdom to producing knowledge.

### ***Democratization and Accessibility***

Contemporary universities, and more recently public universities, are intended to be inclusive and accessible to constituents from different backgrounds, genders, and geographical areas.

- Online learning and open access (e.g. the MOOC movement) have also widened access.
- Equity and diversity are values shared with many global academic systems.
- The admission based on merit, test scores/non-standardized standardized testing, or affirmative action.

Long ago, when Nalanda existed, it was selective and not inclusive, but today, universities seek to reach mass higher education without sacrificing quality!

### ***Ethics and Values in a Changing World***

While modern universities are often labeled as being more 'instrumental' than ethical, they continue to try to promote ethical thinking, civic engagement and global citizenship.

- Courses in ethics, social responsibility and sustainability are now fully integrated into many curricula.
- Student activism and social awareness, in practice, manifest a student body still tied to values.

In this manner, at least the moral dimension of education—so critical to Nalanda—has not disappeared but it has evolved to more modern circumstances

### ***Democratization and Inclusiveness***

Modern university systems in general, public universities in particular, are driven by equity, diversity, and inclusion. The older institutions of universities did, at times, explode the exclusivity of the elite and monastic class but there are still issues of access and equity but contemporary universities attempt to:

- Offer need-based scholarships and affirmative action.
- Encourage participation of women, minorities, and differently-abled students.
- Promote social justice and inclusion through curriculum and policy.

Open universities, and online universities have also extended access and made education a right over a privilege. If Nalanda taught us that education enlightens the soul, modern universities remind us that education empowers the individual and transforms the world

### ***Pedagogical Methods and Learning Styles***

The teaching strategies used at Nalanda University and those used at modern day universities are fundamentally linked to different educational philosophies that reflect historical and cultural constructions. Both types of universities (or systems of knowledge) were/are engaged in acquiring knowledge and developing minds; nevertheless, the methods of teaching and learning objectives were/are different. To the philosophies and methodologies of engaged learning, story-telling, manipulation of objects, or, activity based learning, is so significantly different than engaging with students to develop minds and provide them understandings and knowledge.

### ***Nalanda University: Dialogic and Experiential Learning***

At Nalanda, the pedagogy was based on orality, memorization and debate (vād-vivād). Teachers and students learned, at different levels, through rigorous exchanges of dialectical dialogue and inquiry where knowledge was not simply expected to be received, but constructed within students through the asking of questions and debating new forms of knowledge. A range of dialectical processes were expected to support students' learning, including listening, careful questioning, and reasoning/defending their emerging ideas and claims. Monks and scholars would go on for days arguing over complex metaphysical and ethical questions, developing intellectual acuity as well as moral humility. Nalanda's

learning environment was residential, where students lived on campus while immersively learning under the auspices of teacher-scholars. The guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) relationships permitted students a type of mentorship as well as moral development, ensuring education was comprised of academic achievement and character industry.

### ***The Role of the Library in Pedagogy***

Dharmaganja, the legendary library complex, was one of the cornerstones of Nalanda's learning model. Dharmaganja consisted of three great buildings: Ratnasagara, Ocean of Jewels; Ratnodadhi, Sea of Jewels; and Ratnaranjaka, Delight of Jewels. The library housed an enormous collection of manuscripts on Buddhist scriptures, logic, medicine, astronomy, grammar, metaphysics, and others. The library served a central pedagogical purpose as a foundation for self-directed learning that featured deep study of texts. Students engaged with the texts not simply through rote memory, but rather by engaging in interpretation, juxtaposing, and commenting on them. Scholar visitors from areas such as China and Tibet utilized the library to translate Indian texts into their native speaking languages - so that Nalanda became known as a global intellectual center. Such an environment stimulated asking inquiry independently and developing bilingual and multicultural studies.

### ***Modern Universities: Structured, Technological, and Outcome-Oriented***

On the other hand, in modern day universities, pedagogy is framed around standardized curricula, the obligations of formal assessments, and an increasing reliance on technology-based delivery. The primary method of education is often lecture-based, and is later consolidated with tutorials, labs, and media platforms such as Learning Management Systems or LMS, SWAYAM and MOOCs, among others. The pedagogical emphasis is largely on adherence to credit-based education; meaning the dependability in promotion is based on written examinations, assessments, and some project work and presentations. In terms of the approach, again unlike Nalanda's immersive tradition of learning fused with community, modern institution's (particularly when it comes to higher education) student cohorts are often very large and this can make engaging students through an offered mentorship style more challenging.

However, technology has democratized educational access, while it's very scalable. In addition, the learning and conditions of study are now more capable of occurring in remote or online flexible structures with digital and hybrid courses for example, than before. Previous tangible tradition resources including Dharmaganja, have been superseded by media library resources and e-resources that have made relative, extreme convenience to be able to access enormous amounts of information almost instantly.

### ***Curriculum and Subject Diversity***

The curriculum of Nalanda University and modern universities showcase the differing intellectual priorities, cultural context, and social requirements of their respective periods. Both education institutions had regional scope in academic disciplines, but in terms of its variety, configuration, and priority of focus they differed greatly.

### ***Nalanda University: Interdisciplinary and Philosophically Oriented Curriculum***

The curriculum at Nalanda was incredibly interdisciplinary, encompassing a spectrum of fields, including not only the monastic disciplines of study and forms of learning but also those associated with philosophy, logic, grammar, medicine (Ayurveda), mathematics, astronomy, and political science. The modern curriculum at Nalanda was based on Buddhist and Indian intellectual traditions, focused on students achieving a holistic understanding of knowledge, and bringing disciplines together. All subjects were taught through classical texts and extensive commentaries, giving students the ability to learn about foundational principles—and how to apply them. Philosophical inquiry and the ethical dimensions of learning was an over-arching concern in all fields of knowledge, which reflected an ancient Indian view of the indivisibility of knowledge and knowledge-based responsibility. The presence

of individual faculties; especially medicine, where Ayurveda was an integral part, shows Nalanda was committed to the importance of practical-studying practices, albeit within disciplines on a broader spiritual and theoretical level. Nalanda's role as a unique point of intellectual assembly facilitated and facilitated by its growing international stature in higher education, attracted local not only students from East Asia but also students from outside of the region, like Senegal. All of these influences to the curriculum also included; values of an international /cross-cultural base of perspectives regarding the acquisitions of more academic knowledge.

### ***Modern Universities: Specialization and Multidisciplinary Expansion***

Modern universities, on the other hand, have grown multifold in breadth and depth, mirroring the complexity of contemporary life and the rapid pace of technology. The curriculum comprises traditional disciplines—the humanities, sciences, engineering, commerce, and law—and emerging areas of inquiry, such as information technology, biotechnology, environmental science, and interdisciplinary fields.

Today's curricular structures are flexible and modular, allowing students to deeply specialize in one area of study while exploring other areas of interest and complementary subjects, through the use of electives and minors. Professional and vocational courses are integrated throughout the curriculum emphasizing the modern necessity of workforce alignment as well as innovation. Furthermore, new multidisciplinary programs and courses aim to make comprehensive sense of messy real-world problems that require knowledge at the intersections of conventional divisions—areas of inquiry such as sustainability, public health, and artificial intelligence.

### ***Infrastructure and Campus Life***

The physical environment and campus life at Nalanda University and modern universities offer insightful contrasts that reflect their distinct historical contexts and educational philosophies.

### ***Nalanda University: A Self-Contained Intellectual Hub***

Nalanda was designed to serve as a self-sufficient, residential university of almost 16 square kilometers that offered space for both learning and communal living simultaneously. The university was not limited to just numerous multi-storey lecture halls, meditation rooms, temples, and large residential accommodations for both students and faculty. The design was purposeful and conducive to learning and living conditions, which provided overall access to academic life for students and faculty, where learning and daily life were interdependent. The library complex named Dharmaganja, which supported and facilitated vast collection of manuscripts existed as the intellectual hub of the campus; it was also a very busy and lively place for students to study, make translations, and mechanics of daily work. The campus itself offered multiple open courtyards and prayer halls, which related learning in one manner but related to one another. The campus held a distinct discipline of being in community life according to monastic laws and rules related to community living, ethical behaviour, and mutual respect. Students and faculty tended to share a close proximity of community living, offering moments of continuous dialogue on a variety of ideas and scholarship. Festivals, rituals, religious ceremonies and debates enabled abundant opportunities for community life to connect learning with social and spiritual life.

### ***Modern Universities: Diverse, Functional, and Technology-Enabled***

The current university campuses are quite different, but they generally have functional space that caters to specific disciplines, activities, and student services. Campuses have all the spaces that one would expect in universities: lecture theatres, labs, libraries, places for sports, student unions, and residences all built for large and diverse populations of students. Technology as an infrastructure in campus is also important as distance education relies on digital libraries, computer labs, Wi-Fi systems, and data support online. Student services that relate to caring for students as a whole, such as services for counselling, careers, and clubs, support the holistic student experience apart from academics own two ways. Modern campuses can create an inclusive and pluralistic atmosphere unlike Nalanda's enclave of monks. This inclusivity reflects society's diversity but also supports a separate and independent student experience. Engaging in events, cultural festivals, and activism all help contribute to a positive social experience on campus and in local communities.

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## **Conclusion**

The comparison of ancient Nalanda University and today's university environments identifies a rich history of educational values, practices and forms influenced by distinctive cultural and historical dynamics. Nalanda occupied a unique niche of intellectual and spiritual development, producing an educational environment interwoven with ethical values, oral transmission of knowledge and a broad perspective of knowledge. Dialogue and debate, informal discussions, mentoring relationship all led to an educational environment depending on a systemic reliance on ethical obligations and intercultural harmony to protect its academic integrity. Conversely, today's universities advance their systems to meet the needs of an increasingly complex, automated, technology and global driven society; emphasizing specialization, research innovation, and broad access. The "university" ideal remains embedded within broad educational systems, knowledge is what students will use to occupy a variety of professional careers and roles within society. The universities current use of digital knowledge, and tools made it possible to organize their courses, curriculum, policies and entice additional populations of students, while advancing a democratic education while still providing a respectable delivery of education. Both ancient Nalanda University, and today's universities (different, yet the same) are still trying to achieve similar goals: finding knowledge, to develop thinking, improve

society. The knowledge produced by Nalanda University's experience and legacy helps remind us of how important it is to consider ethical deliberation and intercultural dialogue; that learning is not merely a pathway to economic ends, but an avenue to full human development. Even if there are differences in their expressions, both Nalanda and universities of today share common principles: knowledge, critical thinking, and social change. Nalanda's heritage reminds us of the importance of making ethical thinking and intercultural engagement part of education. Learning is not only a means to economic purposes, but also a means to complete and develop a human being. As we seek to evolve the modern education industry, we can provide medieval universities with better balance and humanity through the life and model of Nalanda. The melding of temporal periods in one scholar's life can help universities around the world work toward developing not only skilled professionals, but also enlightened citizens who can devote their lives and efforts to a collective cause in a global society.