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## Research Paper

# Parallel Histories of Learning: Tracing the Evolution of Higher Education in India, Spain, and Latin America

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## ABSTRACT

The paper aims to evaluate parallels of formation and evolution of the education system in India and the Hispanic world (Spain and Latin America). How institutions and Universities performed under the changing circumstances of education pattern as per the requirements of the time, the interest of the ruling community, religious centres, i.e., temples, churches, kings, emperors, landlords, etc.? How things kept changing till the modern period? The paper discusses continuity and discontinuity of educational achievements/advancement of the populace. Following the historical comparative analysis, the main objective of the study to trace the historical roots of the formation and evolution of higher education in India, Spain, and Latin America, analysing the role of socio-religious and political influence as well as comparing the pedagogical approaches followed by the institutions of learning of the parallel world. The findings of the study also reveal how ancient models of education continue to inform and inspire contemporary educational frameworks.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

India has been a destination of learning since ancient times. Every civilization (i.e., Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Arab, Latin, Persian) of the world has some specific methods of learning, inventing, and practicing understanding. Our civilization claims the invention of zero by Brahmagupta, while Mayan civilization developed the concept of zero and a calendar system as well. Where India built magnificent temples, the Aztecs built aqueducts, artificial islands, and dikes. Ancient India had roads and connecting methods (systems), and the Incas designed roads to connect the empire. Even so, India developed a unique way of learning-teaching in Ashramas. The learned individuals practiced teaching-learning tradition as per their

capacity as guru-shishya Parampara (tradition) or gurukul system, where students from the society came to the Guru (Ashram), stayed there for years, and learned /gained knowledge. The practice of memorization technique was developed for remembering mantras (Samhitas). The oral tradition was continued for centuries; later, the Samhita took the shape of the Vedas. In this period creation and teaching of religious texts continued. This period, known as the Brahmanical period, practiced teaching religious as well as non-religious texts, i.e., Vedas (Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda), astronomy, arithmetic, grammar, fine arts, art of war, divination, snake charming, bhut vidya (Necromancy), etc. It is to be noted

that the question-answer, cross-question method was practiced under this Brahmanical system (teaching-learning method).

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To trace the historical roots and development of higher education in ancient India, Spain, and Latin America.
2. To analyse the sociocultural, religious, and political influences on the formation of educational institutions in these regions.
3. To compare the pedagogical approaches, institutional structures, and roles of higher learning in each context.
4. To explore the modern relevance of these institutions in contemporary times.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic review of literature based on the secondary data available online through different sources like Research Gate, Shodhganga, Sage journals, Semantic Scholar, RefSeek Academia search, etc. Several insights have been drawn from various sources and interpreted to investigate the historical evolution and formation of the parallel world's model of education system, i.e., India, Spain & Latin America, highlighting the divergence and similarities, political and religious influences, and contemporary relevance.

### Formation and Evolution of Universities/Institutions and Major Teachings in India

The concept of University (Taxila University) represents the centralization of Ashramic traditions of teaching and learning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Major teaching practices were Veda, philosophy, grammar, wrestling, archery, hunting/fighting, music, painting, dancing, agriculture, ayurveda, jyotish (astrology), trade and commerce, prophecy, warfare, surgery, bookkeeping, chariot driving, medicine, udyana krida (garden games), salila krida (water sports), etc. It is believed that students from Mithila, Rajgriha, Kosala, Benares, Ujjain, and Kuru came to this university around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC for study/learning. The teachers were responsible for designing syllabi as well as selecting the students. Here, teachers were assisted by senior students. The university practiced discussion and debate as a method of primary importance for teaching students. This university produced many renowned teachers as well as scholars, i.e., Chanakya, Aryabhata. The idea of polity and governance developed by Chanakya (Kautilya) shaped Bharat of the Golden Age. The University practiced the Brahmanical and Buddhist education system simultaneously. This pattern of teaching and learning continued for centuries.

Nalanda University, established in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., focused more on Buddhist teaching than Brahmanical one. Subjects like the Vedas, the puranas, Vedanta, dharma sastra, samkhya, astrology, philosophy, astronomy, etc., were taught. It is believed that people from many countries used to come to Nalanda to clear their doubts. And after gaining knowledge at this place, they became famous, respected, and celebrated scholars. Some known personalities of these institutions are Dharmapala, Chandrapala, Jivamitra, Prabha Mitra, Gunamati,

Athramati, Siilbhadra; having a splendid library, the institution gradually strengthened till the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., with the practice of liberal cultural tradition inherited from the Gupta period.

Sharda Peeth emerged as a specific centre of advanced teaching and learning of Brahmanical and Buddhist education systems. Better known as the centre of cultural learning in ancient India, which shaped a specific standard of philosophy and literature in northern India. The eminent scholars and splendid library, having created an innovative paradigm in arts and science with a combination of text quality and creative ideas practiced in the Gurukul system, later known as the golden age of art and culture. Shankaracharya entered this temple university by passing a test of opening doors through debates, as Vikramshila University also practiced. It is believed that Shankaracharya created slokas and mantras for Hindu spiritual practices, propagated Advait philosophy, which was considered the pinnacle of Indian philosophy, thus he worked for the revival of Hinduism. From the 8<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century, this institution was the major centre of Sanskrit learning as well as Madhyamika philosophy and tantric works. For almost 600 years, this was a full-grown university with almost 5,000 students. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, this institution began the translation of Buddhist texts into Tibetan. Thus, it is believed that the combination of Brahmanical and Buddhist education systems shaped the culture and civilization of South and Central Asia. Major subjects taught were Sanskrit grammar, Vedic scriptures, logic, poetry, fine arts, astronomy, ayurveda, surgery, and weaponry. It emerged as a multi-disciplinary academic with teaching of law, medicine, and statecraft. Known scholars of this institution are: Guru Govind Bhagavadpada, Anand Vardhan, Santorakshita, Padmsambhav, etc.

The Mithila region of Bihar practiced Brahmanical culture, having been mentioned as a unique culture and distinction. The Nyaya school, art, literature, crafts, smriti, and scriptures were specific to this tradition. This tradition produced legends like Jagaddhara, Vidyapati, etc. Another important center of Brahmanical practices was Benares. Some intellectuals argue that it emerged as the Centre of practices of Aryan culture. It is believed that this place managed the teaching of the Vedas, Jatakas, and Sippas. It is observed that Benares practices a unique pattern of education system with the co-existence of brahmanic, Buddhist, and Jain systems of education for higher learning/education till date. Valabhi developed as a Brahmanic as well as Buddhist learning centre during 4-7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Earlier, Valabhi produced Jain literature. Gunamati and Sthirmati contributed to Buddhist teaching. King Dharmapala founded Vikramshila monastery (later known as a university) and became one of the largest Buddhist universities having hundred teachers and a thousand students in number. Tantrism was the attraction of this place, besides grammar, philosophy, Indian logic, metaphysics, etc., were taught. The scholars of the Vikramshila were invited for talks on Buddhist culture and religion in foreign countries. Some known scholars are: Atisa Dipankara, Tathagata Rakshita (known as Moha Pundit/Upadhayaya). One of the important features of this university was; it had eminent scholars as Dwara Panditas, with

the idea that good scholars should control the admission process of the students. It is observed that here, a system of college and the President (Kulpati) of the University was practiced.

Odantpuri, Pushpagiri universities were centres of learning for Buddhist education patterns. The Tibetan records confirmed that Odantpuri had about 12,000 students. Pushpagiri was situated on Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri hills near Cuttack, Jajpur, Odisha. These two institutions were prominent centres of higher education in ancient India. Pushpagiri declined in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Somapura University was an important centre of learning of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism from 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal, established by Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty. Besides this, Jagaddala was an important centre of learning. We find a good number of female intellectuals in both Brahmanical and Buddhist education systems, i.e., Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosha, Visvavara, and Therigatha have descriptions of many female Buddhist scholars.

#### **Establishment and Evolution of Universities/Institutions/ Education Systems in Spain and Latin America**

In the Hispanic world, Spain has its first university, Salamanca University, established in 1218 (13<sup>th</sup> century). The universities of Hispanic America were shaped by Salamanca University. Many scholars argue that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the quest for knowledge by the scholars and the limitations of monastic and cathedral schools demanded a permanent centre/institution of teaching-learning as a form of Study or University. With this purpose, at first, Alfonso VIII of Castile experimented by founding the General Study of Palencia in 1212. Following in the footsteps, Alfonso IX of Leon initiated the foundation of the University of Salamanca, followed by the University of Valladolid in 1260. In 1293, General Studies in Alcala de Henares were opened by King Don Sancho IV. King Don Pedro initiated a failed attempt to establish the University of Perpignan (1350) and the University of Huesca (1354). It is believed that failing these universities increased the number of enrolments in Salamanca up to 7,000 students. In the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, the financing authority of these universities/institutions shifted from the monarchy to the church. The catholic church founded colleges of San Bartolome, Santa Cruz, San Ildefonso de Alcala, Cuenca, and San Salvador (Oviedo). One of the important institutions of continental Hispanic America (northern and antillian regions) University of Mexico, was established in 1551. It was founded by Philip II (Crown Funding) and worked under the mentorship of Salamanca University. Later, it was known as Universidad Nacional de Autónoma de México (UNAM), followed by Charcas en La Plata o Chuquisaca, Bolivia (1552), Santiago de la Paz, Dominican Republic (1558), Tomista de Santa Fé de Bogotá, Colombia (1580), San Fulgencio de Quito, Ecuador (1586), Nuestra Señora de Rosario, Santiago de Chile, Chile (1619), Javeriana de Santa Fé de Bogotá, Colombia (1621), Córdoba- Argentina (1621).

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION: BASED ON OBJECTIVES 1,2, AND 3**

### **Key Comparative Insights: Indian, Spanish, and Latin American Education Systems**

#### **1. Strengths and Limitations:**

The ancient centres of Indian higher education institutions, i.e., Gurukulas, Takshashila, Nalanda, and Sharda Peeth characterized by personalised and residential learning. These institutions emphasized oral traditions, spiritual growth, and holistic learning (Sharma, 2009) [40]. The pedagogical approach of teaching and learning was based on oral transmission, practical hands-on experience learning with creative ideas, where religious monasteries work as hubs for scholarship. The strength of multidisciplinary approaches and specialization in subjects like philosophy, grammar, logic, medicine, etc. attracted pan-Asian students coming from China, Tibet, and other countries. However, the accessibility of imparting education was based on merit through entrance exams, restricted social access primarily given to upper strata of the society, male, largely supported by royal or religious patronage.

Whereas, in the case of late Spain, civic schools to Visigothic cathedral schools, culminating in Madrasas and universities in Al-Andalus. These higher institutions of learning also exhibit the religious as well as political influence, as a fusion of Greco-Roman and Islamic knowledge. Although limited pedagogical subjects like law, philosophy, mathematics, and medicine are designed for early degree structures. But multiple subjects have been taught later for training and posting officials in government services. The fragmented schools resulted from political shifts (Reconquista), and access was often tied to church institutions.

The ancient Latin American schools of learning transformed from Mayan, Aztec traditions to colonial influences. They are characterized by the Indigenous “Calmécac” and “Telpochcalli” schools preached moral, military, and priestly instruction, later overlaid by Catholic colleges. The major strength of these institutions lies in the holistic civic and spiritual education embedded in community life. Whereas the limitation exhibits the prioritization of more clerical training by the colonial colleges/universities/institutions, suppressing the indigenous education system of Latin America.

#### **2. Philosophical Foundation of Learning**

Since ancient times, the philosophical aim of higher learning in India has been self-realisation, attaining moksha, following the pedagogical tool of debate (vāda). Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions promoted moral education, self-realization, and dialogical learning (Chakrabarti, 1997) [10]. The Buddhist monastic universities cultivated rigorous logic and debate (Bronkhorst, 2007) [9]. While the Medieval scholasticism in Spain, shaped by Christian and Islamic interaction, emphasized logic, dialectics, and synthesis of faith and reason (Leff, 1999; Gutas, 2001) [26, 18]. Whereas the Latin American indigenous education emphasized harmony with nature and spiritual

training, later displaced by the Catholic Church's structured curriculum (Mignolo, 2000; Gruzinski, 2002) [33, 17].

### 3. Structure and Curriculum:

Theology, grammar, logic, and astronomy were mainstream subjects across all systems. Instruction in India was personalized; in Spain, it followed lecture and disputation models; Latin America fused ritual with literacy training (Altbach, 1989; Verger, 1992) [1, 46]. Since ancient times, the role of religion was prominent—temples in India, churches in Spain, and colonial missions in Latin America—demonstrating how education was used to reinforce dominant ideologies (Illich, 1971; Apple, 2004) [21, 5].

### 4. Institutional Models and Educational Access

In all three regions, monastic and royal institutions or financed by royalties were prevalent, but access remained limited by caste in India, class in Spain, and colonized identity in Latin America (Basu, 2008; Fernández-Armesto, 1997) [7, 14]. Women's participation was generally excluded or confined to convents (Gálvez, 2014) [16]. Whereas, in ancient India, we find a good number of female intellectuals.

### 5. Colonial Impact and Educational Transformation

After the decline of ancient universities/institutions in India, the British introduced a Western-style education system with formal exams, marginalizing traditional systems (Viswanathan, 1989) [47]. While in Spain, the Reconquista replaced Islamic institutions with Christian ones, later influenced by Enlightenment reforms (Kamen, 1997) [23]. Latin America shows Spanish colonization imposed Catholic schooling and suppressed indigenous systems, with Jesuits standardizing education through the *Ratio Studiorum* (Helg, 2004) [20].

### 6. Parallel and Divergence in India, Spain & Latin America's Education System

Some educationists and social scientists argue that ancient and medieval India, Spain, as well as Latin America all featured elite-controlled education, religious involvement, and philosophical instruction through debate and dialogue. Yet, India's oral traditions contrast with Spain's manuscript and text-based systems; Latin America uniquely shows a fusion of colonizer and indigenous epistemologies (Mignolo, 2000) [33].

## 5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION: BASED ON OBJECTIVE 4

### Contemporary Legacy and Relevance

The legacies of ancient higher education systems in India, Spain, and Latin America are not relics of the past—they continue to shape the epistemological, institutional, and cultural frameworks of modern universities. While the forms and functions of contemporary higher education have evolved under global, neoliberal, and digital transformations, the philosophical roots, structural models, and sociocultural implications of ancient systems persist and inform today's educational reforms and multicultural policies.

### India: Reclaiming Indigenous Models of Knowledge

In India, the legacy of ancient centers of learning like Nalanda and Vikramshila is being consciously revived in both academic vision and institutional form. The new Nalanda University, established in Bihar in 2010 as an international, interdisciplinary university, reflects a modern reinterpretation of the ancient university's ethos of global learning, intercultural dialogue, and intellectual pluralism (Amartya Sen, 2014) [39]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also draws on the ancient Indian educational tradition of holistic development, advocating for liberal education, multidisciplinary studies, and the integration of ethics and values in curricula (MHRD, 2020) [32].

Additionally, several Indian universities are exploring ways to reintegrate indigenous knowledge systems—Ayurveda, Sanskrit logic (Nyaya), Vedic mathematics, and tribal epistemologies—into mainstream academia (Kumar & Pattanayak, 2021) [25]. This revival is part of a broader decolonial effort to address the marginalization of native knowledge under colonial and postcolonial academic hegemony (Sundar, 2004; Visvanathan, 2006) [42, 48].

### Spain: Continuity Through Structure and Language

Spain's educational system reflects deep structural continuities with its medieval predecessors. The Bologna Process, which standardizes higher education qualifications across Europe, owes much to the Spanish and broader Iberian medieval university model, where structured degrees (bachelor's, master's, doctorate) and faculty divisions (arts, theology, medicine, law) were first codified (Teichler, 2010; Verger, 1992) [43, 46]. The University of Salamanca, founded in 1218, remains a symbol of this continuity and has actively shaped legal, philosophical, and linguistic studies in Europe and Latin America (Compagnon, 2006) [12].

Further, modern Spain has embraced regional multiculturalism in education by integrating Catalan, Basque, and Galician languages and histories into university curricula. This parallels earlier eras of cultural plurality in the Iberian Peninsula, particularly under Islamic rule in Al-Andalus, where Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin coexisted in centers of learning (Menocal, 2002; Fletcher, 2006) [31, 15]. Today, Spain's educational policy reflects this heritage through support for linguistic and cultural autonomy, fostering inclusive and diverse learning environments (Ortega & del Barrio, 2014) [37].

### Latin America: Intercultural and Decolonial Horizons

In Latin America, the colonial imposition of Spanish and Portuguese educational models significantly disrupted indigenous systems. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a resurgence of intercultural universities, particularly in countries like Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala, aimed at integrating indigenous languages, worldviews, and governance systems into formal education (Walsh, 2009; Mato, 2009) [49, 30]. These institutions challenge the Eurocentric legacy of colonial education by advocating for epistemic plurality, or the coexistence of multiple ways of knowing (De Sousa Santos, 2007) [13]. For example, Mexico's Universidad Veracruzana



Intercultural and Bolivia's Universidad Indígena Boliviana Aymara offer bilingual education, community-based curricula, and participatory governance structures. Such institutions reflect the ancient traditions of collective learning and moral instruction found in the Calmécac and Telpochcalli of the Aztec and Mayan worlds (López & Küper, 2000; Hamel, 2013) [27, 19].

These initiatives also respond to wider demands for social justice, cultural rights, and postcolonial restitution, illustrating how historical legacies are actively shaping present-day efforts to build educational systems rooted in equality and relevance for marginalized communities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Comparing these two regions of the world, India and the Hispanic World, it is found that the first institutionalized system of teaching-learning, the Brahmanical way of living with teaching & learning, evolved in ashramas and gurukulas before the establishment of the first university in Taxila. The practice of the Buddhist education system, learning and teaching, was institutionalized as a university in the 5<sup>th</sup> century known as Nalanda University. Many intellectuals of the world were attracted towards our educational achievements and spent years for gaining/sharing knowledge in ancient universities/institutions/monarchy of India i.e., Megasthenes (302-298), Fa-Hien (405-411 AD), Hiuen Tsang (630-645 AD), Al Masudi (957 AD), Al Beruni (1024-1030), Marco Polo (1292-1294), Ibn Battuta (1333-1347), Ptolemy, etc.

In the Hispanic world, the Salamanca and Valladolid universities of Spain were under the monarchy, taught many subjects, and trained officials for empire postings. Later, catholic church-controlled institutions/universities; from here, the idea of college-universities, convent-universities, and seminary universities took shape for fulfilling the colonization ambitions of the crown and the church. With this purpose, the first university was established in the Dominican Republic, the University of Santo Domingo, followed by the University of Lima, the University of Mexico, Bolivia in 1552, Colombia in 1580, Ecuador in 1586, Chile in 1619, and Argentina in 1621.

The comparative historical analysis of higher education in ancient India and the Hispanic world—encompassing Spain and Latin America—reveals the profound influence of sociocultural, religious, and political forces on the formation, structure, and evolution of academic institutions. Despite temporal and geographic differences, all three regions share historical traits of elite-controlled, religiously influenced systems that prioritized moral, spiritual, and civic training. Their legacies not only enrich academic heritage but also offer critical pathways for building equitable, ethical, and epistemically diverse systems of higher learning in the 21st century.

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