



ANCIENT INDIAN LIBRARIES: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Ancient Indian libraries played a significant role in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) by preserving, cataloging, and disseminating vast repositories of knowledge in various fields, such as philosophy, science, medicine, astronomy, and art. These libraries were often located in temples, monasteries, and universities and served as vibrant centers of learning, research and cultural exchange. Some notable ancient libraries their contributions and how they influenced the Indian Knowledge System are detailed below:

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge System, Ancient Libraries, Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramashila.*

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1. Nalanda University Library (Bihar)

- **Overview:** Founded in the 5th century CE, Nalanda was one of the world's earliest residential universities, attracting scholars from India, China, Korea, Japan, and other parts of Asia. Its library, known as the *Dharmaganja*, was one of the largest and most celebrated in ancient India.
- **Library Structure:** The library had three buildings named Ratnasagara (Sea of Jewels), Ratnadadhi (Ocean of Jewels), and Ratnaranjaka (Delight of Jewels). It housed tens of thousands of manuscripts on a wide range of subjects, from Buddhist scriptures to secular knowledge, including philosophy, logic, astronomy, medicine, and linguistics.
- **Contributions to IKS:** Nalanda's library

preserved and promoted a diverse body of knowledge that integrated both Buddhist and non-Buddhist thought. The scholars at Nalanda developed commentaries, translations, and treatises, which influenced Tibetan, Chinese, and Southeast Asian education systems.

- **Destruction:** The library was reportedly burned down by invaders in the 12th century, leading to a significant loss of ancient knowledge. Despite this, remnants of its teachings survived through the scholars who traveled abroad.

2. Takshashila University Library (Modern-day Pakistan)

- **Overview:** Founded around the 6th century BCE, Takshashila was a prominent center of learning in ancient India, renowned for its diverse curriculum and scholarly pursuits. It



attracted students interested in various fields, such as Vedic literature, medicine, law, mathematics, and military sciences.

- **Library and Text Preservation:** Takshashila housed numerous manuscripts that included Vedic texts, political treatises, medical texts like Charaka Samhita, and teachings on law and administration. It's said that Kautilya (Chanakya), the author of the *Arthashastra*, taught here, contributing to governance and economic thought.
- **Contributions to IKS:** Takshashila's library supported interdisciplinary studies, fostering advancements in linguistics, astronomy, and medicine. Its comprehensive texts influenced later academic and practical fields within Indian and neighboring cultures.

3. Vikramashila University Library (Bihar)

- **Overview:** Established in the 8th century CE, Vikramashila was another major Buddhist learning center alongside Nalanda, renowned for its specialized study in Tantra and Vajrayana Buddhism.
- **Library Structure and Collections:** The library at Vikramashila contained a rich collection of Buddhist texts, philosophical treatises, and scientific works. It was a repository for advanced studies in Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and meditative practices, along with secular knowledge.
- **Contributions to IKS:** Vikramashila scholars authored important texts and commentaries, especially within Buddhist metaphysics and logic. The manuscripts housed here contributed significantly to the growth of Indian logic, philosophy, and meditation practices. The library also served as a transmission hub for Buddhist teachings to Tibet and other parts of Asia.

4. Jagaddala University Library (Bengal)

- **Overview:** Founded in the 11th century CE in Bengal, Jagaddala was part of the ancient Indian educational network and was associated with Vajrayana Buddhism.
- **Library and Knowledge Preservation:** The library at Jagaddala was known for housing extensive Buddhist literature, including manuscripts on tantra, philosophy, and ethics. Many notable scholars from Tibet are believed to have studied here, taking manuscripts back to their homeland.
- **Contributions to IKS:** As with other monastic libraries, Jagaddala helped preserve Indian Buddhist teachings and played a role in transmitting knowledge beyond India. The monastic education and documentation system here contributed to the scholastic richness of Indian Buddhism.

5. Temples and Monastic Libraries

- **Temple Libraries:** Libraries associated with major Hindu temples like those at Madurai, Tanjore (Thanjavur), and Kanchipuram also held manuscripts on religion, architecture, medicine, and ethics.
- **Monastic Libraries:** Monasteries across India, from Kashmir to South India, maintained collections of sacred texts, medical manuals, and philosophical treatises. The *Tanjore Sarasvati Mahal Library*, which dates back to the 16th century but is based on earlier temple libraries, is a surviving example containing ancient manuscripts on multiple subjects, including art, mathematics, and literature.
- **Contributions to IKS:** These temple and monastic libraries not only preserved the spiritual and religious heritage of India but also served as centers of knowledge transmission where scholars could copy, study, and distribute



texts. They reinforced the holistic approach of IKS by integrating religious study with secular knowledge.

6. Brahminical and Jain Libraries

- **Brahminical Manuscript Libraries:** Many Brahminical centers maintained extensive collections of Vedic literature, commentaries, astrology, and grammar. The Nambudiri Brahmin libraries in Kerala, for example, preserved and transmitted the knowledge of the Vedas and mathematics.
- **Jain Libraries:** Jain temples and monastic libraries, such as those in Gujarat and Rajasthan, preserved manuscripts on Jain philosophy, logic, medicine, and cosmology. These libraries are notable for preserving ancient Prakrit and Sanskrit texts.
- **Contributions to IKS:** Jain and Brahminical libraries contributed significantly to the preservation of linguistic diversity and philosophical thought, particularly in areas like logic, ethics, and ritual practice. Many of these manuscripts provide insight into the cultural and intellectual landscape of ancient India.

7. Ujjain Library

- Located in Ujjain, a key center for astronomy and mathematics.
- Associated with the famous astronomer Varahamihira and mathematician Brahmagupta.
- Contained texts on astrology, planetary motions, and mathematics.

Key Contributions and Impact on Indian Knowledge System:

- **Preservation and Transmission:** These ancient libraries preserved thousands of manuscripts on

multiple disciplines, ensuring the continuity of India's intellectual heritage even through periods of political instability.

- **Interdisciplinary Knowledge:** Libraries supported a holistic understanding of the world by collecting texts across fields, thereby enriching multiple disciplines within the Indian Knowledge System.
- **Cultural Exchange:** Many libraries were centers for international scholars and students, contributing to a cross-cultural exchange that enriched both Indian and foreign knowledge systems.
- **Influence on Asian Learning:** Libraries like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Takshashila were instrumental in spreading Indian knowledge to countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet, shaping educational systems and philosophies in those cultures.

Conclusion:

These ancient libraries are pillars of the Indian Knowledge System, reflecting the culture's deep commitment to knowledge, learning, and preservation across generations. Their intellectual heritage continues to inspire and shape the understanding of India's contributions to global knowledge.

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Cite This Article: Dr. Gaikwad S.D. & Humbare A. (2025) *Ancient Indian Libraries: A Study*. In *Electronic International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*: Vol. XIV (Number II, pp. 173–175).