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Knowledge without Universities? Informal Intellectual Networks Before Nalanda and Mahavira

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Abstract: *The history of education in ancient India is commonly narrated through celebrated monastic universities like Nalanda, Vikramaśīla, and Takṣaśilā. A preoccupation with these grand institutional centers can easily blind us to the past. Long before education was centralized under a dominant system, a fluid and widespread ecosystem of independent thinkers was already thriving. This paper contends that knowledge in pre-Nalanda northern India was propagated through fluid, informal networks rather than localized structures. Forest hermitages served as primary loci for radical metaphysical speculation, fostering intimate teacher-disciple dialectics detached from political mandates. In parallel, expanding merchant guilds served as critical vectors, financing intellectual agents and driving the transregional migration of ideas and doctrines across trade corridors. Furthermore, dynamic oral philosophical circles and wandering ascetic bands preserved and modified conceptual frameworks through rigorous mnemonic disciplines rather than codified curriculum frameworks. Early Buddhist and Jaina monastic configurations similarly leveraged a peripatetic ethos, utilizing structured travel as a vehicle for peer review and cross-tradition engagement. By evaluating literary, epigraphic, and historical materials across Vedic, Buddhist, and Jaina corpora, this study destabilizes the state-centric institutional paradigm of early Indian education. It demonstrates that knowledge systems were inherently relational, adaptive, and socially integrated. Consequently, the later emergence of monastic universities like Nalanda should be recontextualized not as the abrupt dawn of sophisticated learning, but as the administrative consolidation of deeply rooted, preexisting networks of informal scholarly exchange.*

Keywords: *informal learning, oral tradition, forest hermitages, merchant patronage, Buddhist scholarship, intellectual networks*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Historiographical discourses on ancient Indian pedagogy have long been dominated by the architectural remnants and institutional grandeur of monastic universities such as Nalanda, Valabhī, and Vikramaśīla. Standard textbooks and academic surveys frequently position these institutions as the foundational loci of systemic higher learning, implying that complex epistemological and metaphysical exploration required formalized corporate structures to persist. This institutional essentialism, however, risks flattening the historical topography of the first millennium BCE. Long before the celebrated foundation of Nalanda under Gupta patronage in the fifth century CE, or the institutionalization of monastic spaces post-Mahavira, the northern sectors of the Indian subcontinent possessed an extraordinary web of intellectual environments (Altekar, 1944). These networks operated across fluid spaces, cutting across geographical divisions, sectarian divides, and socio-economic strata, laying down the framework of systemic thought that would later inform classical Indian philosophy.

The historical epoch defining the mid-first millennium BCE across the middle Gangetic plains was characterized by profound structural developments. As detailed in the materialist histories of R.S. Sharma (1983) and Romila Thapar (2002), the intensification of iron-dependent agrarian production, the subsequent rise of secondary urbanization, the emergence of the major mahājanapadas, and the proliferation of transregional trade routes collectively destabilized older, clan-based social configurations. Far from being mere passive structural changes, these societal realignments served as vital catalysts for widespread intellectual ferment. Thapar (2002) notes that the weakening of rigid tribal

frameworks allowed for the blossoming of an open ideological marketplace where heterodox ascetics, non-conformist thinkers, merchant syndicates, and royal patrons engaged in permanent dialogue. Intellectual authority within this shifting paradigm was rarely static; it was continually tested, contested, and re-articulated through intense public discourse and dialectic exchanges that linked rural agrarian clusters to urban centers.

Within the orthodox Brahmanical lineage, early education was inherently decentralized and familial. The primary pedagogical unit was the guru-śiṣya-paramparā, a personal relationship in which the student integrated into the preceptor's domestic space. Here, learning was not defined by bureaucratic enrollment or specialized architecture, but by prolonged, immersive acculturation, precise mnemonic reproduction, and critical conversational exchanges. When the rigid ritual practices of the late Vedic era drew internal skepticism, isolated forest sanctuaries (*āśramas*) provided the necessary insulation for deep philosophical and speculative inquiry. It was within these forested retreats that the radical cosmological and existential equations of the early Upanishads were forged, shifting the focus from exterior sacrificial mechanics to the internal anatomy of consciousness and ultimate reality (Olivelle, 1998). Crucially, this rich pedagogy relied on a complex, rigorously structured system of oral transmission that preserved textual fidelity across generations without administrative oversight or material libraries.

Simultaneously, the revitalization of trans-regional trade networks served as an ideological conveyor belt across northern India. The merchant classes did not limit their historical role to the accumulation and distribution of material capital; they acted as critical conduits for intellectual capital. As trade caravans navigated the vast routes linking the northwestern frontiers of Takṣaśilā to the eastern ports of Campā, they carried along wandering philosophers, esoteric manuscripts, and diverse cosmological ideas. Merchant guilds, seeking ethical frameworks aligned with urban commercial realities, stepped forward as profound patrons of early Śramaṇa movements, including emerging Buddhist and proto-Jaina communities (Ray, 1986). This financial and logistical insulation allowed intellectual groups to flourish independently of direct monarchical oversight or state-sanctioned religious orthodoxies, creating an expansive, non-institutional infrastructure for intellectual cross-pollination.

Central to this dynamic landscape was a highly sophisticated culture of public debate and performative dialectic. Competing intellectual factions—ranging from conservative Vedic scholars and radical Lokāyata materialists to early Jaina practitioners and Buddhist logicians—met frequently in designated civic spaces, public assemblies, and royal courts to contest doctrines concerning ontology, ethics, and epistemology. In these competitive contexts, philosophical authority was entirely performance-based; it was claimed through logical coherence, rhetorical skill, and the capacity to dismantle an adversary’s position before an expert audience, rather than being granted by institutional diplomas or corporate credentials (Bronkhorst, 2007).

This widespread reliance on competitive argumentation drove scholars to systematize their logic, leading to the creation of advanced formal dialectic frameworks long before the establishment of specialized university faculties.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevailing historiography of education in ancient India frequently centres on the emergence of large-scale, institutionalized monastic universities (mahaviharas), most notably Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Valabhi. Standard historical narratives often treat these grand institutions as the primary, if not exclusive, hubs of advanced knowledge production and intellectual rigor. However, this centralized focus risks inheriting Eurocentric biases that equate intellectual legitimacy strictly with formal, physical infrastructure and bureaucratic institutionality.

Recent revisionist scholarship has begun to decenter this narrative by investigating the deeply rooted, decentralized systems that preceded and coexisted with these universities. Scholars of ancient Indian education, such as A.S. Altekar and Radha Kumud Mookerji, historically documented the vitality of the Gurukula system and forest hermitages (ashramas) as primary sites of foundational learning. Yet, contemporary critiques suggest that these accounts often underemphasize the highly sophisticated, interconnected nature of these informal networks, treating them as isolated or primitive precursors rather than dynamic frameworks of advanced research and debate.

A significant gap remains in the literature regarding the exact mechanisms through which high-level philosophical, mathematical, and linguistic discourses were peer-reviewed, preserved, and disseminated before the physical concentration of scholars at Nalanda. While existing studies extensively cover the oral transmission of the Vedas, they frequently overlook the fluid, cross-regional networks formed by wandering scholars (parivrajakas), early Buddhist travel scholarship, and the crucial economic role played by merchant-sponsored intellectual assemblies. This review establishes the need to conceptualize these decentralized structures not merely as informal learning centres, but as highly

organized "invisible universities" that successfully sustained rigorous academic standards through mobility, oral mnemonic techniques, and competitive public debate.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historical, and hermeneutic research design to investigate the structures and operational dynamics of decentralized intellectual networks in pre-Nalanda ancient India. Because the primary objective is to reconstruct and analyze "invisible" institutional frameworks rather than physical ruins, the methodology relies on a critical synthesis of textual analysis and historical contextualization across five distinct informal dimensions: forest hermitages, merchant-sponsored assemblies, oral philosophical circles, wandering scholar networks, and early Buddhist travel paths.

The primary data corpus consists of purposively selected textual fragments from ancient Indian literature that explicitly document intellectual transmission, debates, and scholastic mobility. The primary sources are categorized as follows:

Vedic and Upanishadic Texts: Specifically the Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads, evaluated for accounts of royal debates, philosophical circles, and forest-based discourses.

Buddhist Canonical Literature: Portions of the Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka that detail the early movement of wandering monks, the geographic distribution of rainy-season retreats (vassavasa), and travel scholarship.

Epigraphic and Secondary Historical Accounts: Inscriptions detailing merchant guild donations to non-monastic scholars and assemblies, alongside classical secondary historiographies of ancient Indian education.

4. Analytical Framework

The collected textual data is subjected to thematic analysis and historical-critical interpretation. Rather than evaluating these texts through a Eurocentric framework of institutional centralization, the analysis applies a decentralized network model. Textual references to debates, mentorship lineages, and geographic travel are mapped conceptually to determine how rigor, validation, and continuity of knowledge were achieved without centralized bureaucratic oversight. Potential limitations regarding the chronological ambiguity of certain ancient texts are mitigated by corroborating internal textual evidence with cross-referenced epigraphic data and regional historical timelines.

5. Forest Hermitages as Intellectual Communities

The historiographical tendency to equate early Indian forest asceticism with complete world-denial and isolated quietism has frequently overshadowed the vital function of forest hermitages (āśramas) as dynamic centers of higher learning. Close readings of late Vedic and early Upanishadic literatures indicate that these wilderness retreats were far from being lonely dwellings of hermits; instead, they operated as sophisticated, structured spaces for radical intellectual experimentation and philosophical refinement. Lacking centralized administrative staff, standardized exams, or stone classrooms, the forest hermitage developed an alternative model of academic organization, where intellectual progress was driven by personal trust, deep ethical discipline, and sustained dialogic confrontation (Olivelle, 1998). These spaces show that advanced philosophical production did not require urban institutional complexes to achieve depth and continuity.

The major conceptual transition from the external, ritualistic focus of the early Brāhmaṇas to the internalized, speculative philosophy of the Upanishads was natively tethered to the unique environment of the forest. Away from the immediate social pressures, domestic expectations, and ritual supervision of agrarian settlements, thinkers within these forest communities could freely question foundational tenets of existence. Critical issues regarding the correlation between the individual self (ātman) and the ultimate ground of being (brahman), the mechanics of rebirth, and the path toward liberation were worked out through personal conversations between preceptors and advanced students. Texts like the Bṛhadāraṇyaka and Chāndogya Upanishads actively preserve these exploratory dialogues, showing a pedagogical methodology wherein knowledge is not handed down as a fixed, unchallengeable dogma, but is instead co-created through structured questioning and persistent intellectual search (Olivelle, 1998).

At the heart of this decentralized pedagogical framework was the deeply customized guru-śiṣya relationship. Admission to these forest academies was not determined by bureaucratic entry tests or financial capital, but by an evaluation of the seeker's character, psychological readiness, and commitment to truth. The educational experience within the hermitage was total and immersive; students lived alongside their teacher, helping maintain the physical environment, gathering firewood, and tending to the hermitage cattle while absorbing the teacher's lived ethics. This daily rhythm ensured that

intellectual training was deeply tied to character development, preventing a split between theoretical knowledge and ethical living (Altekar, 1944). Instruction occurred not during fixed lecture hours, but spontaneously throughout the day—during walks, tasks, or evening fire gatherings—turning the entire physical environment into an interactive classroom.

Furthermore, these forest hermitages were not isolated units; they formed an interconnected regional network of learning. Scholars, wandering ascetics, and celebrated teachers moved regularly between different hermitages, carrying new analytical interpretations and critical questions across vast distances. When a particular teacher gained a reputation for deep insight into an esoteric problem, their hermitage would rapidly transform into a magnet for advanced students and visiting masters from across northern India, creating a temporary yet highly influential hub of intellectual activity. This fluid movement challenges the long-held assumption that stable, permanent structures are an absolute prerequisite for high-level research and debate; in the ancient context, the relational network linking these living teachers proved far more important than any architectural infrastructure (Thapar, 2002).

The sociological composition of these forest dialogues also reveals a surprising degree of open social engagement, drawing in political rulers and wealthy householders alike. Upanishadic literature frequently documents instances where powerful kings left their urban palaces to travel to these remote hermitages, seeking out sages for philosophical instruction or to test their own theories. For instance, the famous textual accounts of King Janaka of Videha interacting with the sage Yājñavalkya reveal an intellectual arena where royal authority was secondary to philosophical insight. In these spaces, arguments were judged entirely on their logical validity, and kings frequently submitted themselves as disciples to low-status thinkers or forest ascetics who possessed deeper knowledge (Olivelle, 1998). This indicates that the forest hermitage maintained a healthy relationship with urban centers, functioning as an independent space for critical thought that was respected by the political elite.

Crucially, the complex preservation of these extensive philosophical corpuses was achieved without a system of writing, relying instead on highly refined techniques of oral transmission. While modern scholars sometimes view non-literate periods as structurally limited, the ancient Indian context presents an incredibly sophisticated framework of oral curation. As detailed by Frits Staal (1986), the orthodox traditions designed intricate mnemonic systems—including *padapāṭha* (word-by-word recitation), *krama-pāṭha* (step-by-step pairing), and highly complex combinatorial permutations like *jaṭāpāṭha* (interwoven recitation) and *ghanapāṭha* —which cross-checked textual data with mathematical precision and effectively eliminated

phonetic or textual errors across millennia. These rigorous practices, requiring decades of intense training, cultivated a sharp cognitive capacity for focused listening, analytical memory, and precise audio production. The lack of written records did not limit intellectual sophistication; rather, it intensified the human mind's role as a living archive, ensuring that knowledge remained an active, communal performance.

6. Merchant Patronage and the Mobility of Knowledge

The rapid expansion of commercial networks across northern India during the mid-first millennium BCE did far more than reshape the region's material economy; it fundamentally altered how ideas and knowledge circulated. Conventional historiography has often limited the role of the merchant class to that of passive financial donors who funded religious monuments. However, an examination of the socio-economic dynamics of the era shows that merchant guilds (śreṇīs) and wealthy traders (śreṣṭhīs) were central actors in ancient Indian intellectual history. By building and protecting trade routes, providing transport for wandering scholars, and funding open spaces for discussion, commercial networks became the primary material infrastructure that sustained knowledge systems outside formal academic institutions (Ray, 1986).

The socio-economic transition characterizing the rise of the mahājanapadas led to the creation of the Uttarāpatha, a vast northern trade highway linking the urban centers of the northwest, like Takṣaśilā, through the middle Gangetic plains down to the deltaic ports of Bengal. Long-distance trade caravans regularly traveled these roads, navigating through thick forests, independent republics, and highly competitive monarchies. These caravans did not just carry material goods like textiles, iron implements, and spices; they also transported scholars, books, and ideas. Physicians, astronomers, logicians, and religious reformers traveled alongside these merchant networks, finding safety from bandits and access to clean water and shelter. This interaction allowed intellectual developments in one urban center to be quickly carried to distant regions, preventing the emergence of localized, isolated knowledge systems (Thapar, 2002).

In contrast to royal patronage, which was often tied to territorial ambitions and the need to validate political power through elaborate public rituals, merchant patronage was decentralized, practical, and highly flexible. Wealthy merchant

syndicates frequently distributed resources across a wide variety of independent thinkers, wandering teachers, and monastic communities without demanding the construction of massive, permanent school buildings. This form of financial support focused on providing the basic necessities of life —food, clothing, medicine, and simple rest houses— which allowed teachers to focus fully on their research and pedagogical duties. This pattern of funding shows that the long-term survival of early learning networks depended upon everyday relationships with civil society, rather than a reliance on permanent royal land grants or state-run institutions (Sharma, 1983).

Early Buddhist and Jaina canonical literatures offer rich evidence of this close relationship between commercial wealth and intellectual production. Figures such as Anāthapiṇḍika, a wealthy merchant banker of Śrāvastī, are celebrated in the Pali Canon not just for their open charity, but for purchasing spaces like the Jetavana grove to serve as centers for teaching, debate, and community interaction (Gombrich, 2006). Crucially, during this pre-university era, these spaces did not operate as closed academic campuses; instead, they were open, flexible retreats designed to support a mobile community of scholars. Wandering

intellectuals could reside there during the difficult rainy season, exchange perspectives with colleagues from other regions, and then journey onward, spreading refined concepts across the broader trade network.

As argued in the economic histories of Himanshu Prabha Ray (1986) and R.S. Sharma (1983), this deep merchant interest in ethical and philosophical innovation was firmly grounded in practical economic realities. The growth of urban commerce, complex contract enforcement, and cross-regional credit systems required an atmosphere of social stability, mutual trust, and individual accountability. The older Vedic models, with their heavy focus on ritual status and localized clan identity, were often ill-suited to the needs of a mobile merchant class. Consequently, commercial guilds actively supported philosophical movements that emphasized universal ethics, individual moral responsibility, non-violence, and honesty. Supporting these new ideas was both a matter of personal piety and a strategic investment in an ethical system that reduced transaction costs and improved commercial confidence across cultural and regional boundaries.

7. Oral Philosophical Circles and Public Debate

Long before the construction of permanent university classrooms, the intellectual life of ancient India was defined by the vibrancy of its oral culture and public debating arenas. In this environment, knowledge was not stored in isolated libraries or distributed via written syllabus materials; instead, it was continuously produced, evaluated, and refined through live conversations, structured debate, and public recitation. Far from being a primitive stage of learning, this oral framework was a highly sophisticated, rigorous method of peer review and knowledge curation. It demonstrates that advanced intellectual production can remain stable and highly accurate through shared dialectic practices rather than permanent institutional bureaucracies (Staal, 1986).

The central role of oral discourse is preserved in the literary forms of early Indian texts. The early Upanishads, the Buddhist Nikāyas, and the Jaina Āgamas are uniformly written as active dialogues rather than static treatises. These texts rarely present philosophical insights as dogmatic statements handed down by a single authority. Instead, they depict learning as a live, interactive process involving sharp questioning, critical disagreement, counter-arguments, and gradual consensus. This dialogic structure proves that these foundational philosophical insights did not emerge within isolated study rooms; they were hammered out within active debating communities before being committed to memory or writing (Olivelle, 1998).

This dynamic ecosystem of competitive public dialogue is effectively illuminated by Johannes Bronkhorst's (2007) historical framework of "Greater Magadha." During the centuries before the rise of Nalanda, northern India experienced an explosion of competing ideas, driven by the co-existence and fierce confrontation of Brahmanical scholars and various heterodox Śramaṇa movements, such as Buddhism, Jainism, the materialist Lokāyata school, and the fatalist Ājīvikas. Bronkhorst demonstrates that these groups competed openly for intellectual dominance and patronage, relying not on political force, but on public argumentation. Celebrated masters traveled from town to town with their disciples, setting up open forums in public spaces to challenge local thinkers on issues of ontology, logic, and ethics. A scholar's reputation and

social standing depended entirely on their performance in these public arenas; they had to defend their ideas against intense scrutiny from rival logicians without the backing of university credentials (Bronkhorst, 2007).

Unlike modern universities, which strictly separate formal classrooms from public life, ancient Indian intellectual exchanges took place within the heart of daily society. Public parks, city gates, assembly halls, royal courtrooms, and monastery gardens all served as open classrooms. This accessibility kept philosophy from becoming an isolated,

academic game. Householders, merchants, politicians, and travelers could actively listen and contribute, ensuring that discussions about ethics and ultimate reality remained deeply connected to the practical concerns of the community (Thapar, 2002). This broad participation prevented the formation of an isolated scholarly elite, keeping knowledge grounded in the language and realities of the culture.

The development of complex logical systems, such as early Buddhist epistemology and the Jaina theory of multifaceted reality (*anekāntavāda*), was a direct product of this open, competitive intellectual landscape (Dundas, 2002). Crucially, these oral philosophical networks were sustained by personal ties rather than top-down administration. Preceptors attracted followers because of their brilliant logic, ethical clarity, or teaching skill, not because they held chairs at a recognized university. Students frequently migrated between different masters in search of deeper answers, carrying ideas across sectarian lines. This freedom of movement prevented schools from becoming isolated and dogmatic, fostering an academic culture defined by openness, adaptation, and intellectual vitality.

8. Buddhist Travel Scholarship Before Institutional Universities

The early Buddhist tradition offers a clear historical example of how an advanced intellectual system can flourish through human mobility rather than fixed institutions. Before the creation of large monastic universities like Nalanda or Vikramaśīla, Buddhist scholarship was defined by the constant movement of monks who traveled across different kingdoms, exchanging ideas with other scholars, local communities, and rival thinkers. In this peripatetic model, travel was not just a tool for spreading a faith; it was an active educational method for gathering, testing, and refining knowledge. Intellectual authority was earned through open debate, real-world experience, and engagement with diverse communities, rather than years spent inside a single school campus (Gombrich, 2006).

From the early days of the Saṅgha, mobility was a core duty of monastic life. Early regulatory texts show that monks were expected to travel constantly through the Gangetic plains for most of the year, stopping only during the heavy rains of the monsoon season (*vassa*). These journeys brought them into close contact with a wide variety of local customs, languages, and competing philosophical ideas. Every stop along the way offered a fresh opportunity for discussion and formal debate, allowing early Buddhist thought to grow and sharpen through constant interaction with the world. The collective movements of these monks created a dynamic, responsive intellectual network that connected distant regions without needing any centralized campus bureaucracy (*Vinaya Piṭaka* , trans. Horner, 1938–1966).

This constant travel also played a vital role in maintaining the accuracy and consistency of knowledge. As monks from different regions met during their wanderings, they compared their memorized versions of the discourses, corrected mistakes in recitation, and resolved differences in interpretation. This collaborative process prevented the text from fracturing into isolated regional dialects while preserving a healthy level of intellectual flexibility. The early Buddhist councils, called after the passing of the Buddha, show the immense value the community placed on collective recitation and open discussion to keep their traditions pure (Gethin, 1998). These councils demonstrate the belief that knowledge validity required group verification, rather than absolute reliance on a single central leader.

The transmission of Buddhist teachings relied predominantly upon oral methods during this period. Monks memorized extensive collections of discourses, disciplinary rules, and philosophical formulations, reciting them collectively to ensure accuracy across generations. The preservation of the Pali Canon before its eventual written compilation demonstrates the effectiveness of this collaborative oral tradition (Gethin, 1998). Intellectual continuity therefore depended less upon libraries than upon disciplined communities of practitioners who carried knowledge with them wherever they travelled. In this sense, the human memory of the Saṅgha functioned as a mobile archive.

By the time Nalanda grew into a world-famous university during the Gupta era, almost all of its core academic practices were already centuries old. Rigorous public debate, collective chanting, deep teacher-student relationships, geographic mobility, and cross-regional exchange had defined Buddhist scholarship for generations. Nalanda did not invent these advanced practices; it simply gathered them into a large, permanent administrative framework that boosted their scale, visibility, and legal safety. Recognizing this deep historical continuity challenges modern histories that identify corporate universities as the sole creators of systematic scholarship in ancient India (Schopen, 1997).

9. Rethinking Knowledge Beyond Institutions

The historical evidence analyzed across these diverse traditions proves that the intellectual history of ancient India cannot be reduced to the history of its corporate universities. While famous institutions like Nalanda hold a deserved place in our historical memory, they represent the final, institutional stage of a much older, decentralized process of knowledge creation. Long before permanent brick campuses were built, higher learning was sustained by an expansive

web of preceptors, disciples, merchants, forest ascetics, and traveling seekers who collectively built a dynamic world of ideas. These informal networks possessed all the vital traits of higher education: rigorous specialization, multi-generational continuity, sharp critical inquiry, and reliable peer review (Thapar, 2002).

Re-evaluating pre-Nalanda intellectual life requires us to question the modern habit of equating real education with physical institutions. Contemporary definitions of a university focus heavily on visible assets: large buildings, centralized administrations, printed curricula, and formal degrees. Applying these modern categories to the ancient past can blind us to the power of educational systems that worked on completely different principles. In early India, intellectual authority did not come from an institutional stamp; it was built on personal reputation, perfect mastery of oral text traditions, and the demonstrated ability to win arguments.

in public forums. Learning lived within human relationships and shared community practices rather than inside fixed campus walls.

This decentralized viewpoint helps explain the deep thematic continuity found across different religious and philosophical movements. The shift from early Vedic speculation to the heterodox systems of Buddhism and Jainism did not require the destruction of an old school system and the building of a new one. Instead, all of these competing movements inherited and shared the same fundamental practices: disciplined oral transmission, immersive teacher-student living, public debate, and academic mobility. Their deep disagreements were about philosophical conclusions, not the social mechanisms used to preserve and test ideas. Later corporate universities simply formalized and centralized pedagogical habits that had already matured through centuries of informal, free-flowing use (Bronkhorst, 2007).

10. Conclusion

The rich history of knowledge in ancient India cannot be contained within the history of its corporate universities. While large monastic institutions like Nalanda represent a peak of bureaucratic organization, they grew out of an intellectual landscape that had been shaped for centuries by decentralized scholarship. The evidence proves that systematic research, profound philosophical innovation, and reliable text preservation were fully active long before formal universities took center stage.

Forest hermitages operated as productive centers for deep metaphysical search, where preceptors and disciples co-created knowledge through close dialogue and shared discipline. Merchant networks kept scholars fed and protected while connecting distant cities, allowing ideas to flow freely alongside material goods. Public debating circles created an open, performance-based arena where ideas were tested by logic rather than institutional rank. Meanwhile, the peripatetic lifestyle of early Buddhist monks turned travel into a powerful educational tool that drove collective verification, doctrinal balance, and open cross-cultural engagement. These independent yet overlapping networks show that higher learning was deeply embedded in the relationships of civil society rather than locked inside corporate campuses.

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