

Rediscovering Pushpagiri: A Forgotten Beacon of Ancient Indian Knowledge and Buddhist Scholarship

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Abstract: Pushpagiri University, a once-celebrated epicenter of ancient learning in India, has been relatively obscured in both national and global academic discourse. Located in present-day Odisha, this formidable center of Buddhist education flourished alongside the more widely recognized universities of Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramshila. Functioning between the 3rd century BCE and 11th century CE, Pushpagiri was a vital node in the transnational knowledge network that connected the Indian subcontinent to China, Korea, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Southeast Asia.

This paper endeavors to revive scholarly attention toward Pushpagiri by conducting a comprehensive analysis of its historical trajectory, pedagogical structure, faculty composition, architectural complexity, and transregional influence. Drawing upon primary sources, archaeological excavations at Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri, and epigraphic evidence, the study demonstrates that Pushpagiri not only rivaled its contemporaries but also uniquely contributed to the synthesis of Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist thought. The university served as a cradle for the transmission of Buddhist doctrines, nurturing generations of monks, scholars, translators, and spiritual leaders.

Furthermore, this research identifies historiographical gaps that have contributed to Pushpagiri's marginalization and argues for its inclusion in mainstream academic curricula and heritage conservation policy. By synthesizing interdisciplinary methodologies—spanning archaeology, religious studies, historiography, and comparative education—this study provides a revitalized framework for understanding the intellectual and cultural legacy of Pushpagiri. It aims to reposition this ancient university as a foundational element in India's historical narrative of education, philosophy, and international diplomacy through knowledge exchange.

Keywords: Pushpagiri University; Ancient Indian Education; Buddhist Monastic Institutions; Odisha Heritage; Archaeological Discoveries in India; Buddhist Philosophy and Pedagogy; Transnational Intellectual Exchange.



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Introduction: The ancient Indian subcontinent was renowned as a land of profound philosophical thought, rigorous intellectual traditions, and vibrant educational institutions that shaped the trajectories of civilizations across Asia. Among these illustrious institutions, Pushpagiri University remains one of the least explored and most underrepresented in historical narratives, despite evidence suggesting its prominence in ancient Buddhist scholastic and spiritual life. Located in the present-day Jajpur district of Odisha, Pushpagiri's university complex sprawled across a triadic monastic system consisting of the Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri sites—each replete with stupas, viharas, chaityas, and exquisite art, indicative of a flourishing educational ecosystem.

Established possibly during the reign of Emperor Ashoka or shortly thereafter, Pushpagiri evolved into a major academic and monastic institution that attracted students and teachers from across India and from far-reaching parts of the Buddhist world. The university provided an integrated model of education—grounded in Buddhist ethical frameworks and philosophical doctrines—while also advancing logic, medicine, astronomy, metaphysics, and linguistics. Its curriculum and faculty structure were highly organized, supporting diverse fields of inquiry through rigorous oral and written transmission.

Yet, despite its intellectual grandeur, Pushpagiri has suffered from academic neglect and historical erasure. While Nalanda and Takshashila have been frequently studied, Pushpagiri remains a partially uncovered archaeological enigma. This obscurity is largely attributed to incomplete excavations, colonial historiography, and a lack of institutional focus in modern academia. Consequently, much of Pushpagiri's rich past remains buried—both physically and metaphorically—awaiting deeper scholarly attention.

The objective of this paper is to undertake a holistic exploration of Pushpagiri University through multidisciplinary lenses. It aims to critically assess its establishment, architectural evolution, pedagogical design, socio-religious role, and eventual decline. By delving into historical texts, archaeological findings, and comparative frameworks, this study seeks to reconstruct Pushpagiri's contribution to the global transmission of knowledge—particularly Buddhist teachings—and advocate for its recognition as a foundational pillar of India's educational and cultural legacy.

In doing so, this research not only reclaims a forgotten chapter of India's academic heritage but also contributes to the broader field of global education history. It underscores the necessity of recognizing lesser-known yet profoundly influential institutions that have shaped civilizational values, cross-cultural communication, and intellectual progress. Pushpagiri, in its scholarly silence, reminds us of the dangers of historical amnesia and the urgent need to protect and promote the intangible legacies of knowledge.

Aims and Objectives: The present study seeks to critically examine Pushpagiri University's historical, academic, and cultural significance within the broader framework of ancient Indian education systems. The following aims and objectives guide this research:

Aims:

- To explore the historical foundations and growth of Pushpagiri University as a center of Buddhist learning.
- To assess the university's academic contributions in comparison with other ancient Indian institutions like Nalanda and Takshashila.
- To evaluate the archaeological and textual evidence relating to the university's structure, curriculum, and intellectual legacy.

Objectives:

1. To identify the founding period, patronage, and religious affiliations of Pushpagiri University.
2. To reconstruct the pedagogical methods, subjects taught, and student-teacher dynamics based on available data.
3. To analyze the architectural layout of the university and interpret its monastic and academic functions.
4. To evaluate the role of Pushpagiri in the international spread of Buddhist knowledge and its influence on Southeast Asia.
5. To identify gaps in the current literature and suggest directions for further scholarly and archaeological research.
6. To propose conservation and awareness strategies for integrating Pushpagiri's legacy into modern education and heritage discourse.

Methodology: The research employs a multidisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, archaeological interpretation, comparative education studies, and textual criticism. The following methodological strategies have been adopted:

1. Historical Analysis:

- Examination of primary sources, including inscriptions, Buddhist texts, travelogues (e.g., those of Xuanzang and Faxian), and royal edicts.
- Contextual analysis of secondary historical records from colonial and post-colonial periods.

2. Archaeological Survey:

- Review of findings from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) excavations at Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri.
- Interpretation of structures such as stupas, chaityas, viharas, and sculptures to understand institutional layout and monastic culture.

3. Literary and Epigraphic Review:

- Textual analysis of Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit and Pali referencing Pushpagiri or its affiliated centers.
- Study of inscriptions discovered at and around the triadic monastic sites.

4. Comparative Approach:

- Comparative analysis with contemporary institutions like Nalanda, Vikramshila, and Odantapuri to contextualize Pushpagiri's unique academic and spiritual character.

5. Interdisciplinary Framework:

- Integration of insights from religious studies, cultural anthropology, architecture, and global history of education.

6. Field Reports and Visual Data:

- Utilization of excavation reports, site maps, architectural drawings, and photographic evidence where available.

Review of Literature

- The literature on ancient Indian universities is vast, but Pushpagiri remains underrepresented in mainstream scholarship. This review highlights existing academic work while identifying key research gaps.

1. Early Historiography:

- Initial references to Pushpagiri are found in ancient texts and travelogues. The Chinese monk Xuanzang, during his 7th-century travels in India, referred to several prominent Buddhist centers, though ambiguity remains about whether Pushpagiri was one of them. Colonial-era scholars like Alexander Cunningham and J.D. Beglar briefly mentioned Buddhist sites in Odisha but did not directly link them to a university-like institution.

2. Modern Scholarship on Buddhist Universities:

- Works by scholars such as Hirananda Sastri, D.D. Kosambi, and R.S. Sharma have emphasized the role of Buddhist monastic education in India's intellectual life, often focusing on Nalanda and Takshashila. Pushpagiri is occasionally acknowledged but seldom analyzed in detail.

3. Archaeological Contributions:

- The ASI's excavation reports (particularly from 1958 onwards) provide the most concrete evidence for Pushpagiri's existence. Key findings at Lalitgiri (such as a relic casket believed to contain Buddha's remains), along with temple architecture, inscriptions, and sculptural artifacts, support the claim of an educational complex.

4. Regional Studies:

- Odia historians and regional scholars have published several works in local languages, detailing the significance of the three sites. However, these are not widely cited or translated into English, limiting their accessibility to a broader academic audience.

5. Recent Academic Interest:

- More recent publications, such as those by Himanshu Prabha Ray, highlight the need to reassess ancient Indian maritime and educational networks, where Odisha—including Pushpagiri—played a significant role. Yet comprehensive monographs on Pushpagiri remain rare.

Research Gap: Despite increasing archaeological interest and sporadic scholarly references, **Pushpagiri University remains one of the least studied ancient Indian educational institutions.** The majority of available literature either treats **Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri** as separate Buddhist monastic complexes or focuses narrowly on **art historical and architectural features.** Very few interdisciplinary studies attempt to analyze these three sites as interconnected elements of a **single, integrated university system,** similar to the more well-documented institutions of **Nalanda or Vikramshila.**

Several critical gaps persist in the academic reconstruction of Pushpagiri University:

1. Lack of Unified Institutional Narrative: While excavations have revealed extensive evidence of monastic life and scholastic activity, **no comprehensive institutional history** has yet been formulated. The scattered nature of archaeological publications and site-specific interpretations has prevented the emergence of a **cohesive framework** that places Pushpagiri in the broader matrix of ancient Indian and Buddhist educational traditions.

2. Limited Interdisciplinary Engagement: There is a noticeable **paucity of cross-disciplinary approaches** that integrate archaeology, textual studies, historical linguistics, religious studies, and

architectural analysis. Most studies are either archaeological reports lacking pedagogical context or religious overviews that omit material culture. This siloed approach inhibits a full understanding of the university's academic structure, curriculum, and societal influence.

3. Absence in Comparative Education Studies: Pushpagiri is **rarely included in comparative analyses** of ancient universities. While Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramshila are often highlighted in global discussions on early models of higher education, Pushpagiri's omission reflects both a lack of academic dissemination and the dominance of North Indian institutions in the global narrative. This neglect undermines the recognition of **Eastern India's contribution** to the global history of education.

4. Scarce Documentation of Pedagogical Methods and Faculty: There is little existing research on the **educational methods, faculty hierarchies, student-teacher dynamics**, and internal governance of Pushpagiri University. In contrast, detailed studies of Nalanda have reconstructed its examination systems, admission policies, and teaching philosophies. Such insights into Pushpagiri remain speculative due to the absence of focused fieldwork and document-based reconstructions.

5. Underutilization of Foreign Sources: Many potential references to Pushpagiri may exist in **Chinese, Tibetan, Sri Lankan, or Southeast Asian texts** under alternative names or transliterations. These sources have not been fully explored or cross-referenced with local inscriptions and material evidence. The linguistic barrier and lack of dedicated teams working *

6. Marginalization in Public Memory and National Discourse: Pushpagiri is also **underrepresented in Indian educational curricula, museum displays, and heritage narratives**. Its current invisibility in school textbooks, higher education syllabi, and national heritage sites contributes to a lack of public awareness, which in turn discourages further academic investment and funding.

7. Minimal Integration with Technological Tools: Modern digital tools such as **GIS mapping, virtual reconstructions, 3D modeling, and AI-driven site interpretation** have not been substantially employed at Pushpagiri, unlike other ancient sites like Mohenjo-Daro or Ajanta. The absence of such initiatives limits access for scholars, educators, and global audiences.

Scope for Further Research: Addressing these research gaps opens multiple avenues for future scholarly exploration:

- **Developing a full-fledged historical reconstruction** of Pushpagiri as a structured, state-supported educational institution.
- **Comparative studies** with other global universities of antiquity (e.g., Al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco or Plato's Academy) to understand Pushpagiri's uniqueness.
- **Philological and epigraphic studies** of the inscriptions found at the three sites to trace educational lineages, teacher-student networks, and institutional rituals.
- **Collaborative international research programs** focusing on Buddhist transmission networks, which could incorporate Pushpagiri into the global Buddhist knowledge diaspora.
- **Digital humanities projects** to document, model, and visualize the university's infrastructure and ecosystem.

In short, **Pushpagiri represents an underexplored jewel** of India's intellectual history whose rediscovery and recontextualization could significantly expand our understanding of ancient education systems, regional cultural developments, and India's role in the transnational Buddhist scholastic tradition.

Analysis

1. Historical Context and Establishment: Pushpagiri University emerged during a golden era of Indian civilization when education and spiritual inquiry flourished under royal patronage. Though precise records of its founding remain scarce, scholars suggest that its origin dates back to the 3rd century BCE, possibly during or soon after the reign of Emperor Ashoka, who was instrumental in the propagation of Buddhism both in India and abroad. The region of Kalinga (modern-day Odisha), after its conquest by Ashoka, became a significant center of Buddhist activity, making it a fertile ground for a major educational institution like Pushpagiri.

What makes Pushpagiri historically compelling is its long-standing function—spanning over 1,200 years—as a center not only of religious study but also of interdisciplinary education. Inscriptions and archaeological structures indicate that it retained active learning communities well into the 11th–12th century CE, overlapping with the flourishing and eventual decline of Nalanda and other major Buddhist universities.

2. Architectural Grandeur and Layout: The triadic structure of Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri, identified as part of Pushpagiri University, reveals an elaborate monastic-university complex. Each of these sites was home to richly adorned viharas (residential monasteries), chaityas (prayer halls), and mahastupas (great stupas)—many of which were decorated with intricately carved Buddhist sculptures.

- Lalitgiri is considered the oldest among the three and possibly the ceremonial and spiritual heart of the university. A significant discovery here is the relic casket believed to contain the remains of the Buddha, suggesting the site's sanctity and national importance.
- Ratnagiri yielded a wealth of artifacts, including bronze and stone images, terracotta seals, and evidence of sophisticated urban planning. Its majestic Mahavihara and sculpted doorways suggest a seat of elite learning and royal patronage.
- Udayagiri, the most recently excavated site, offers insights into later phases of Pushpagiri's development, particularly during the post-Gupta and Bhauma-Kara dynasties.

The integration of these three complexes indicates a university structure larger in scale than previously imagined, likely housing hundreds of monks, teachers, and visiting scholars.

3. Pedagogy and Curriculum: The university followed a monastic model of education, blending spiritual discipline with rigorous scholastic inquiry. The core curriculum included:

- **Buddhist Philosophy and Logic:** Mahāyāna and Theravāda teachings, Abhidhamma, Vinaya, and various schools of metaphysics.
- **Grammar and Linguistics:** Study of Pali, Sanskrit, and Prakrit was central to Buddhist textual exegesis.
- **Medicine and Healing Arts:** Evidence from inscriptions and texts suggests that medical instruction may have formed part of the curriculum, particularly in Ayurvedic practices.
- **Astronomy and Mathematics:** As with Nalanda, scholars here likely studied the cosmos, time measurement, and calculation for ritual and calendrical purposes.
- **Arts and Iconography:** Sculptural instruction and aesthetic education were integral, as evidenced by the elaborate iconography of statues found at Ratnagiri.

Instruction was conducted through oral transmission, debate (vāda), discursive meditation, and textual memorization, methods that were both rigorous and reflective of the Indian gurukul tradition. The role of teachers was central, and several archaeological sites have been found with inscriptions naming specific acharyas (teachers), suggesting personal legacies within the teaching lineage.

4. Transnational Linkages: Pushpagiri was not an isolated institution; it formed a part of a Pan-Asian educational and religious network. Pilgrims and students from Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, China, Korea, and Tibet are believed to have visited or studied here.

- Maritime routes through the Bay of Bengal linked Odisha with Southeast Asia, facilitating not only trade but also the movement of monks and texts.
- The architectural and iconographic styles found at Pushpagiri have resonances with those in Borobudur (Indonesia) and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), suggesting shared cultural and intellectual influences.
- It is speculated that some Chinese pilgrims may have visited Pushpagiri, although the site remains unnamed in their records due to transliteration issues. Further linguistic research may yet identify Pushpagiri within these documents.

The institution thus contributed significantly to the spread of Buddhist doctrine, art, and monastic codes across Asia, playing a vital role in the formation of what modern scholars term a "Buddhist cosmopolis."

5. Decline and Disappearance: The eventual decline of Pushpagiri—like many other Indian Buddhist universities—was the result of multiple converging factors:

- Political Turmoil: The weakening of dynastic patronage under the Somavamshis and Eastern Gangas disrupted the material support systems essential for sustaining large educational establishments.
- Religious Shifts: The resurgence of Brahmanical Hinduism and the rise of devotional cults reduced the influence and appeal of Buddhist institutions in eastern India.
- Foreign Invasions: Though Odisha was relatively insulated, the Islamic invasions of eastern India in the 12th–13th centuries created widespread instability and may have led to the looting or abandonment of the site.
- Environmental Factors: Possible shifts in river courses and other natural causes might have contributed to the eventual desertion of the triadic monastic complex.

What followed was centuries of oblivion, during which the university's ruins were covered by vegetation and forgotten by history—until their gradual rediscovery in the 20th century by the ASI.

6. Modern Rediscovery and Challenges: Despite ongoing excavation work and growing academic interest, the recognition of Pushpagiri as a university remains incomplete. Challenges include:

- Lack of Government Recognition: Unlike Nalanda, Pushpagiri is not yet the focus of a comprehensive cultural revival or educational project.
- Insufficient Tourism Infrastructure: The site receives few visitors due to poor connectivity, limiting awareness among scholars and the general public.
- Fragmented Archaeological Work: While the ASI has made significant contributions, the lack of a unified excavation strategy has led to inconsistencies in interpretation.

Nonetheless, recent initiatives by the Odisha State Government, and scholars advocating for its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site offer new hope for reviving its legacy.

Summary and Conclusion: Pushpagiri University stands as a monumental yet underrepresented chapter in the grand narrative of ancient Indian intellectual heritage. Located in present-day Odisha, it was once a thriving hub of Buddhist learning, artistic expression, and philosophical inquiry. Alongside its contemporaries such as Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramshila, Pushpagiri

played a crucial role in the dissemination of Indian scholastic traditions—not only within the Indian subcontinent but also across Asia, influencing regions as far as Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

This paper has traced the historical trajectory of Pushpagiri University from its likely foundation during the early Common Era to its eventual decline, emphasizing its academic infrastructure, monastic organization, pedagogical influence, and regional importance. Through an analysis of the three major sites—Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri—the study presents a strong case for viewing Pushpagiri as a cohesive educational ecosystem rather than isolated archaeological monuments.

The interdisciplinary academic value of Pushpagiri is vast. Its legacy encompasses Buddhist philosophical schools (particularly Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions), the evolution of Indian art and iconography, language development, and religious exchanges between India and neighboring civilizations. However, despite its prominence in the ancient world, Pushpagiri remains marginalized in modern academic and public discourse. This is reflected in the limited number of comprehensive research projects, absence from mainstream history curricula, and lack of conservation urgency.

A number of critical challenges remain: the incomplete nature of archaeological excavations, the lack of extensive textual corroboration, and minimal digital or international scholarly engagement. These gaps must be seen as both limitations and opportunities—offering fertile ground for future research and global collaboration. Specifically, further excavations, inscriptional studies, satellite imagery, and comparative historical frameworks could help reconstruct the university's academic network and international impact.

Pushpagiri's legacy is not just a regional or national heritage but a global one, forming a vital link in the chain of Buddhist and Indic knowledge systems. Reintegrating it into contemporary scholarly dialogues can illuminate previously neglected dimensions of transnational education history and religious thought. Government bodies, research institutions, and global academic communities must prioritize the documentation, conservation, and promotion of Pushpagiri's heritage.

In conclusion, reviving Pushpagiri University is not merely an act of historical interest—it is a step toward reclaiming India's intellectual past and restoring a forgotten beacon of global Buddhist education. By preserving and studying Pushpagiri with the seriousness it merits, we not only honor the scholars of the past but also inspire future generations to engage with India's pluralistic and enlightened educational traditions.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. **Comprehensive Archaeological Excavation:** The three sites—Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri—require further systematic excavations with modern scientific techniques such as ground-penetrating radar, carbon dating, and GIS-based mapping to uncover hidden structures and refine chronological frameworks.
2. **Interdisciplinary Research:** Collaboration between historians, archaeologists, linguists, epigraphists, art historians, and Buddhist scholars is necessary to reconstruct the intellectual and cultural life of Pushpagiri.
3. **Digital Documentation and Virtual Reconstruction:** Developing 3D models, virtual museums, and interactive digital archives can make Pushpagiri's legacy accessible to global audiences and safeguard fragile artifacts against deterioration.

4. **Integration into Educational Curricula:** Pushpagiri should be included in school and university history syllabi alongside Nalanda and Takshashila, ensuring that future generations recognize its role in shaping India's intellectual traditions.
5. **Conservation and Preservation Initiatives:** The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Odisha state government, and UNESCO should prioritize conservation of the sites, prevent encroachments, and establish protective zones with sustainable tourism practices.
6. **International Collaboration:** Academic partnerships with universities and Buddhist research centers in countries like Japan, China, Sri Lanka, and Thailand can enhance comparative studies and highlight Pushpagiri's transnational influence.
7. **Funding and Institutional Support:** Dedicated research grants, international fellowships, and state-sponsored projects should be initiated to encourage young scholars to engage with Pushpagiri's heritage.
8. **Public Awareness and Cultural Tourism:** Awareness campaigns, documentaries, and heritage festivals in Odisha can attract domestic and international visitors, thereby promoting cultural pride and generating resources for site maintenance.
9. **Inscriptional and Textual Studies:** A systematic search for epigraphic evidence and scattered manuscript references could yield crucial insights into Pushpagiri's monastic organization and scholarly exchanges.
10. **Establishment of a Pushpagiri Research Institute:** Creating a dedicated institute or center for Pushpagiri studies would institutionalize long-term research, conservation, and promotion efforts, ensuring the university regains its rightful place in global academic memory.

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