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Evolution of Educational Institutions in Mughal India

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the evolution of educational institutions in Mughal India (c. 1526–1857), highlighting continuities from earlier Indo-Islamic and Sanskrit traditions as well as innovations catalyzed by imperial patronage, urbanization, and interreligious encounters. We trace three interconnected spheres: (1) Arabic-Persian **madrasas** and **maktabs** financed by waqf and madad-i ma'āsh grants; (2) **Sanskrit tols and pathshalas** supported by temple estates, guilds, and landed elites; and (3) **Persianate scribal colleges** and courtly ateliers that professionalized revenue administration, diplomacy, and translation. Curricular consolidation—especially the eighteenth-century **Dars-i Nizāmī**—reshaped pedagogy by balancing transmitted sciences (manqūlāt) and rational sciences (ma'qūlāt). Akbar's court fostered debate (e.g., at the **Ibādat-khāna**), translations between Sanskrit and Persian, and limited engagement with Jesuit scholasticism. Regional centers such as Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Multan, Burhanpur, Benares (Varanasi), and Dhaka developed distinctive institutional ecologies. The later Mughal era reveals diversification rather than uniform “decline”: local nobles and merchant guilds sustained schools even as imperial resources thinned and British influence expanded. We argue that Mughal-era education*

Keywords:

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cultivated multilingual literacies, portable skills (juridical, scribal, and mercantile), and networks that persisted into the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

From Babur's conquest in 1526 to the formal end of the Mughal polity in 1857, education in the subcontinent operated across intertwined religious, linguistic, and administrative domains. The empire did not impose a centralized school system; rather, *education* was a layered ecosystem. **Mosque-maktabas** introduced literacy, numeracy, and Qur'anic recitation; **madrāsas** transmitted jurisprudence, hadith, exegesis, logic, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and adab; **khanqahs** doubled as spaces of moral pedagogy; **tols/pathshalas** taught vyākaraṇa, nyāya, mīmāṃsā, jyotiṣa, and kāvya; and **courtly colleges** refined Persian epistolography, accounting (*dīwānī*), and revenue survey. Imperial offices—the **Sadr** overseeing religious endowments, and the **Dīwān** managing fiscal policy—intersected with scholarly patronage.

Akbar (r. 1556–1605) energized translation projects and public disputations; **Jahangir** and **Shah Jahan** extended patronage to urban madrasas; **Aurangzeb** (r. 1658–1707) reinforced juridical learning while the eighteenth century saw curricular codification at **Firangi Mahal** (Lucknow). The period also registered **Sanskrit–Persian** intellectual traffic (e.g., translations of the Mahābhārata and Upaniṣads), Jesuit dialogues at court, and the durable prestige of Persian as administrative lingua franca. Educational institutions thus mirrored the empire's plural political culture—locally funded, city-anchored, and networked across pilgrimage, trade, and manuscript circulation.

Patronage, Finance, and Urban Ecologies

Educational institutions in Mughal India were not simply academic ventures but were deeply enmeshed within the **political economy of patronage** and the **urban social fabric**. Two key financial mechanisms stabilized and legitimized centers of learning:

Waqf Endowments

Charitable trusts (*waqf*) funded mosques, madrasas, and libraries, ensuring the continuity of stipends for teachers and allowances for students.

These endowments created institutional stability independent of immediate political fluctuations, embedding education within a framework of religious piety and social prestige.

Madad-i Ma'āsh Land Grants

The Mughal state conferred tax-free land assignments on scholars, jurists, and teachers.

Such grants allowed recipients to generate revenue from agriculture, which was reinvested into maintaining teaching posts, manuscript copying, and student sustenance.

Alongside state and elite patronage, **merchant guilds (ankās), artisan collectives, and nobles** played a vital role in sustaining educational quarters. By pooling resources, they funded schools and hostels situated near **mosques, bazaars, and caravanserais**—nodes of both economic and intellectual exchange. This integration of commerce and education meant that learning was never isolated from the rhythms of urban life.

Importantly, major cities developed **distinct educational ecologies**:

Agra and Delhi: Royal patronage supported large madrasas and translation ateliers, shaping the imperial intellectual culture.

Lahore: A hub of Persian literary production and Sufi education, linking Central Asian traditions with Indian networks.

Ahmedabad: Merchant-financed maktabas and madrasas flourished alongside Hindu pathshalas, reflecting the city's commercial cosmopolitanism.

Multan: Known for its Sufi khanqahs, it integrated mystical pedagogy with juridical and linguistic training.

Benares (Varanasi): The foremost Sanskrit center, where tols sustained Hindu scholastic traditions that intersected indirectly with Mughal intellectual projects.

Patna and Dhaka: Thriving regional capitals, supported by both Mughal officials and local elites, became centers of madrasa learning and Persianate scribal training.

Thus, Mughal India's educational landscape was **plural, decentralized, and urban-centered**. Patronage structures allowed continuity, while cities themselves acted as crucibles where different intellectual and social traditions mingled.

Curricula and Pedagogy

The intellectual vibrancy of Mughal India was sustained through diverse curricula that reflected both inherited traditions and evolving needs of administration, jurisprudence, and cross-cultural engagement.

Early Madrasa Syllabi

The syllabi of Mughal-era **madrasas** balanced the *revealed sciences* (*manqūlāt*) with the *rational sciences* (*ma'qūlāt*). Core texts included:

Qur'an (with tafsīr and recitation methodologies)

Fiqh (jurisprudence), focusing on Hanafi law

Hadith (collections of Bukhari, Muslim, and others)

Adab (literary refinement, poetry, rhetoric)

Mantiq (logic), **hisab** (arithmetic), **hay'at** (astronomy), and **tibb** (medicine)
This balance ensured that scholars were not only jurists but also literati and physicians, integrating religious learning with broader sciences.

Dars-i Nizāmī and Rationalization

By the eighteenth century, the **Dars-i Nizāmī** system, codified at **Firangi Mahal in Lucknow**, brought a rationalized order to madrasa instruction. Its hallmark was:

Emphasis on **logic (mantiq)** and philosophy as preparatory tools for jurisprudence

Strong grounding in **Arabic grammar, rhetoric, and jurisprudence**

Retention of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, but with reduced centrality compared to legal and linguistic sciences

Standardization of texts, such as *Hidayah* (fiqh), *Mirqat* (logic), and *Sharh al-'Aqā'id* (theology)

This syllabus created uniformity across madrasas, shaping generations of scholars in both North India and beyond.

Sanskrit Tols and Pathshalas

Parallel to Islamic institutions, **Sanskrit tols** and **pathshalas** cultivated Hindu scholastic traditions:

Vyākaraṇa (grammar) and **Nyāya** (logic) were central, often studied through Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and commentaries.

Disciplines like **Mīmāṃsā** (hermeneutics), **Jyotiṣa** (astronomy/astrology), and **Kāvya** (poetics) ensured continuity of classical Hindu learning.

Patronage from temple endowments and local elites maintained these institutions, often linked to pilgrimage centers such as Varanasi.

Cross-Training and Intellectual Exchange

Mughal India witnessed **bilingual scholarship and translation projects**, especially during Akbar's reign.

Sanskrit texts like the *Mahābhārata* and *Upaniṣads* were rendered into Persian, allowing cross-cultural intellectual engagement.

Some Hindu scholars studied Persian and Arabic, while Muslim scholars engaged Sanskrit learning, creating a limited but significant bilingual intellectual class.

This fostered dialogues in philosophy, ethics, and astronomy, bridging otherwise separate traditions.

In sum, Mughal curricula and pedagogy reflected a **cosmopolitan intellectual ethos**, where religious sciences, rational inquiry, and literary refinement intersected. The rationalization of the Dars-i Nizāmī, the continuity of Sanskrit scholastic traditions, and the spirit of translation together ensured that Mughal India's educational institutions were both resilient and adaptive to changing socio-political contexts.

Translation, Encounter, and Intellectual Brokerage

The Mughal period represents a high point of **intellectual brokerage**, where institutions mediated knowledge across religious, linguistic, and cultural frontiers. This process was not

limited to courts but also extended into pedagogical spaces, scribal colleges, and scholarly networks.

***Akbar's* Maktab-khāna and the Sanskrit–Persian Translation Movement**

One of the most celebrated ventures was Emperor **Akbar's establishment of the Maktab-khāna** (House of Translation) at Fatehpur Sikri in the 1570s. This imperial atelier assembled teams of Sanskrit pandits and Persian scholars to render classical Sanskrit works into Persian, the language of administration and high culture. Key projects included:

The Rāzmnāmah, a Persian translation of the *Mahābhārata*, which framed the epic as an ethical and political guide for rulers.

Translations of the Rāmāyaṇa, Bhagavad Gītā, and Upaniṣads.

Works on astronomy, medicine, and philosophy, bridging Indic sciences with the Persianate world.

These translations not only **opened Sanskritic traditions to Muslim and Persian-reading elites** but also reshaped curricula in both madrasas and tols, where Persian commentaries circulated alongside classical texts.

Jesuit Scholastics at Fatehpur Sikri

Akbar also invited **Jesuit missionaries from Goa** to his court, initiating a dialogue between European scholasticism and Indo-Islamic intellectual traditions.

Jesuit scholars brought Latin and Portuguese texts on Aristotelian logic, Christian theology, and Thomistic philosophy.

While their influence on madrasa curricula was limited, their presence **introduced Aristotelian categories** and Christian theological arguments into court debates.

The **Ibādat-khāna (House of Worship)** became a forum where Muslim 'ulama, Hindu pandits, Jain monks, and Jesuits engaged in structured disputation, reflecting the Mughal court's ambition to **mediate competing epistemologies**.

This encounter broadened the horizons of Mughal intellectual life, even if its institutional impact remained constrained.

Scribal Colleges and Administrative Pedagogy

Parallel to religious and philosophical institutions, **scribal colleges (maktab-i dīwānī)** trained generations of officials in administrative sciences. Their curricula included:

Inshā' (epistolary style and chancery protocol), ensuring uniformity in imperial documentation.

Hisāb (revenue mathematics and accounting techniques), critical for tax collection and land survey.

Tarjama (translation and bilingual training), as Persian scribes often mediated between local vernaculars, Sanskrit, and Persian.

Cartography and survey methods, which gained importance in land revenue reforms under Akbar's minister **Todar Mal**.

Such colleges institutionalized a **bureaucratic literacy** that was both technical and humanistic, producing scribes who were also poets, historians, and administrators.

Synthesis

The Mughal educational sphere was thus not confined to the transmission of fixed religious canons. Instead, it operated as a **brokerage system of knowledge**, where Sanskrit epics were reimagined in Persian, Aristotelian thought entered court debates, and scribal pedagogy professionalized the state apparatus. These encounters generated a **layered intellectual culture**—at once Islamic, Indic, and cosmopolitan—that shaped South Asia's transition from early modernity to colonial modernity.

Regional and Social Access

The diffusion of education in Mughal India cannot be understood without attention to its **regional diversity** and the **social groups** who participated in or were excluded from institutional learning. Educational access was never universal, but it extended across caste, class, and gender lines in differentiated ways.

Maktabs and Basic Literacy

At the foundation of the educational system stood the **maktabs**, small-scale schools often attached to mosques or run by local teachers.

These provided **basic literacy and numeracy** to children of artisans, shopkeepers, and petty traders.

Instruction typically focused on Qur'anic recitation, elementary Persian, arithmetic, and sometimes commercial account-keeping.

Because maktabs were inexpensive and community-supported, they became a **gateway to functional literacy**, enabling upward mobility for non-elite groups within the urban economy.

Tols and Pathshalas for Hindu Communities

For Hindu learners, **tols (collegiate Sanskrit schools)** and **pathshalas (primary schools)** catered largely to Brahmin and mercantile castes.

Tols specialized in advanced subjects like vyākaraṇa (grammar), nyāya (logic), and mīmāṃsā (hermeneutics), sustaining the classical Sanskrit scholastic order.

Pathshalas offered vernacular instruction, basic numeracy, and elementary religious training, integrating young learners into caste and occupational networks.

These institutions thrived particularly in centers like **Benares, Nadia, and Mithila**, demonstrating strong regional resilience.

Madrasas and Sufi Networks

Madrasas linked education to both **judicial authority** and **Sufi traditions**.

Jurists trained in fiqh and hadith often served as qadis, teachers, or muftis.

Sufi lodges (*khanqahs*) provided instruction in Qur'anic ethics, adab, and mystical literature, extending education beyond formal madrasas.

This dual function reinforced connections between scholarship, religious authority, and spiritual charisma.

Women's Education

Women's access to formal institutions remained limited, but **domestic and manuscript-centered education** played a significant role.

Elite households hired private tutors for daughters, teaching them Qur'an, Persian poetry, calligraphy, and sometimes arithmetic.

Manuscript collections preserved in women's quarters testify to female engagement with literature, devotion, and poetry.

Regional variation is notable: in **Lucknow and Hyderabad**, elite women of noble families cultivated literary salons, while in smaller towns women's learning was confined to oral recitation and household piety.

Though restricted, women's education fostered **continuities of cultural transmission**, particularly in poetry, religious instruction, and letter-writing.

Regional Diversity and Urban-Rural Divide

Educational institutions were most concentrated in **urban centers**—Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Patna, Ahmedabad, and Benares—where patronage, markets, and manuscript culture converged.

Rural education was less institutionalized, relying on village maktabas or pathshalas often funded by local landlords.

Regional identities shaped curricula: Bengali pathshalas emphasized vernacular prose and arithmetic for trade; North Indian madrasas prioritized jurisprudence; South Asian tols maintained classical philosophical traditions.

Synthesis

In Mughal India, access to education was **plural, stratified, and localized**. Maktabas served as a bridge for non-elites into literate society; tols and pathshalas upheld Brahminical and mercantile traditions; madrasas connected law with mysticism; and women, though

marginalized institutionally, maintained intellectual agency through domestic and manuscript cultures. Education thus reflected the empire's **social hierarchies and regional variations**, while also providing entry points for new groups into South Asia's evolving literate and bureaucratic order.

Continuities into the Nineteenth Century

The decline of centralized Mughal authority after the death of **Aurangzeb in 1707** did not result in the collapse of educational institutions. Instead, it produced a **pluralized landscape of regional resilience**, where urban centers, local elites, and new patronage systems ensured the continuation of scholarly and pedagogical traditions well into the nineteenth century.

Regional Intellectual Nodes

As the Mughal court at Delhi weakened, other cities rose as autonomous **intellectual hubs**:

Lucknow: Under the Nawabs of Awadh, Lucknow became a center for the **Dars-i Nizāmī curriculum**, with the scholars of **Firangi Mahal** standardizing texts and producing generations of jurists and theologians.

Hyderabad: The Asaf Jahi rulers cultivated a strong Persianate culture, supporting both madrasas and Persian manuscript production, alongside increasing engagement with vernacular Urdu.

Patna: Its mercantile networks supported Sufi-linked madrasas and literary circles, maintaining traditions of jurisprudence, logic, and adab.

Benares (Varanasi): Sanskrit tols continued to thrive, producing pandits who were drawn into both Mughal and later British-sponsored scholarly projects.

These centers illustrate how **regional courts and urban economies** stepped in where imperial resources had receded, sustaining the continuity of learning.

Colonial Interventions and Mughal Expertise

The expansion of **British colonial power** in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries disrupted older forms of patronage but simultaneously **relied heavily on Mughal scribal expertise**.

Persian remained the **official language of administration** until 1837, ensuring that skills in inshā', revenue math, and chancery protocol remained in demand.

Many Mughal-trained scholars entered colonial service as translators, record-keepers, and revenue officers, demonstrating the adaptability of Mughal pedagogical traditions.

The British introduction of **English education** and the gradual **Anglicization of administration** challenged these traditions, but the transition was gradual rather than abrupt.

The Rise of Print Culture

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of **printing presses** in Calcutta, Lucknow, Delhi, and other cities, which transformed the dissemination of knowledge:

Traditional **madrasa canons** such as *Hidayah* (fiqh), *Sharh al-'Aqa'id* (theology), and *Mirqat* (logic) were printed in large quantities, extending their reach beyond manuscript culture.

Sanskrit classics, Persian poetry, and Urdu works also circulated in printed editions, broadening accessibility.

Curricula were reshaped by new textual economies, but the **core Mughal-era syllabi remained authoritative**, even as colonial education policy began to privilege English and “useful sciences.”

Cultural Persistence and Adaptation

Despite political fragmentation and colonial encroachment, Mughal educational legacies endured through:

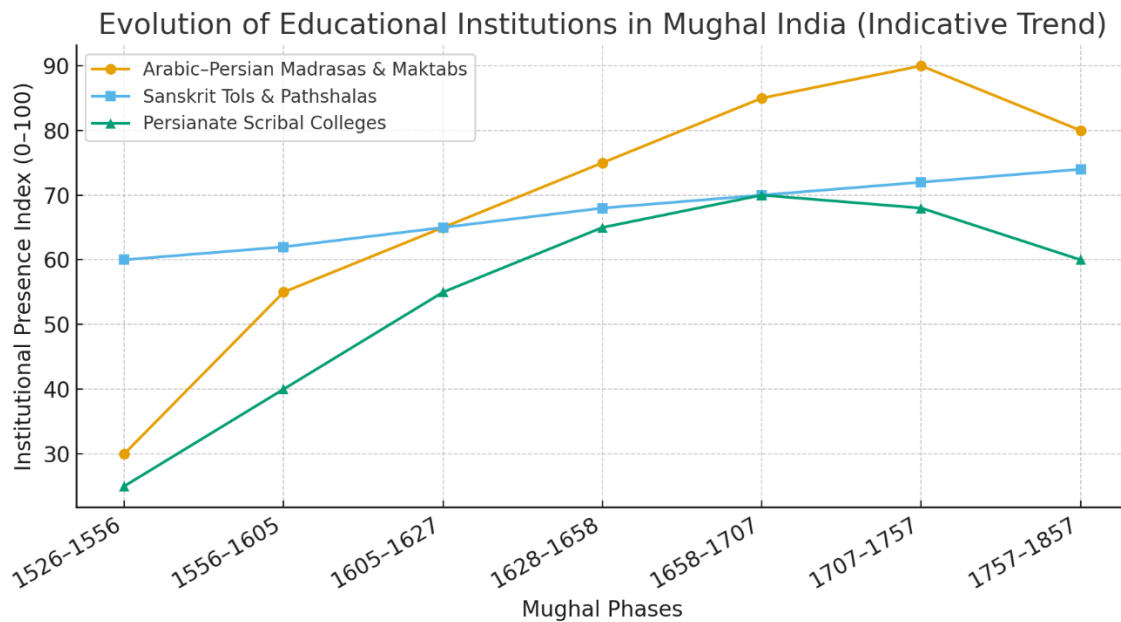
Textual continuity, with core works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries still studied across madrasas.

Institutional resilience, as local nobles, merchant guilds, and religious endowments continued to sponsor schools.

Intellectual hybridity, as scholars negotiated between traditional learning and colonial modernity, producing reformist currents that later shaped figures such as **Shah Waliullah of Delhi**, and in the nineteenth century, **Sayyid Ahmad Khan**.

Synthesis

The story of Mughal education in the nineteenth century is not one of sudden decline but of **continuity amid transformation**. Regional centers like Lucknow, Hyderabad, Patna, and Benares thrived as intellectual nodes, even as Delhi's centrality waned. Colonial policies disrupted older structures but also relied on Mughal-trained expertise, ensuring that Persian and scholastic traditions retained relevance until the mid-nineteenth century. The advent of print culture further **reconfigured the material basis of learning**, but far from erasing Mughal legacies, it enshrined them in new forms. The nineteenth century, therefore, stands as a bridge where Mughal-era intellectual lineages were both preserved and reimagined in the crucible of colonial modernity.



Summary

Educational institutions in Mughal India formed a **plural, networked ecosystem** rather than a monolithic system. **Maktabas** disseminated literacy and numeracy; **madrasas** cultivated juridical-philosophical expertise and a cosmopolitan adab; **Sanskrit tols/pathshalas** sustained classical sciences; and **scribal colleges** translated this learning into administrative practice. Patronage flowed through *waqf*, land grants, guilds, and courts; curricula evolved toward **Dars-i Nizāmī** and other canonical sequences; and metropolitan centers developed specialized niches. Interfaith encounters and translation programs expanded the intellectual commons without erasing distinct traditions. Even amid eighteenth-century political fragmentation, **local endowments and urban markets** buffered institutions, allowing pedagogical canons, multilingual literacies, and scholarly lineages to endure into the early colonial period. The Mughal educational landscape thus exemplifies **institutional diversification, curricular consolidation, and regional resilience**—key dynamics for understanding South Asia’s transition from early modern to modern knowledge regimes

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