

VIKRAMSHILA UNIVERSITY: FORGOTTEN GLORY OF ANCIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Vikramshila, in modern day Bihar, was one of the centers of high learning in India during medieval age. It represented the great tradition of knowledge and continued the legacy of Taxila and Nalanda. Its special contribution was the propagations of Buddhism in Tibet, Pegu and Ceylon. Particularly in Tibet, Vikramshila is said to have contributed to the foundation of Tibetan culture. Vikramshila contributed to the evolution of new sect of Buddhism that dominates much of the Himalayan region. It also proved to be an important center of art, particularly the Pala School of art centered on the use of basalt. The destruction of Vikramshila at the hands of Turks, not only put an end to the bright academic journey of Vikramshila, but also terribly shattered the great Indian tradition of knowledge. The paper seeks to highlight the contribution of the university in a nutshell.

Keywords: Atisha, Bakhtiyar Khilji, Nalanda, Naropa, Pala, Pegu, Taxila, Turks.

INTRODUCTION

India, the pious land of knowledge and salvation, registered a number of achievements in various fields in ancient era, which were unmatched in the contemporary world. It was primarily in the field of knowledge and education, ancient India witnessed stupendous achievements and led the world in this domain. The original word for India is 'Bharat-Varsh' which consists of three words – 'Bha', 'rat' and 'Varsh' that means knowledge, flinging oneself into activity and the land respectively. Thus *Bharat* happens to be the land of those flinging themselves into knowledge. True to its meaning, prime significance is attached to knowledge on this land, for worldly and spiritual pursuits through it.

In ancient Indian tradition, knowledge was supposed to facilitate both spiritual liberation and perfection in worldly skills for earning livelihood.¹ True to the supposed characteristics

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of knowledge, formal and informal centres of learning kept on emerging in ancient India which underwent important changes with the passage of time according to the changing socio-economic milieu and the subsequent changes in the parameters of education. Earlier, education centered on the teacher's home, known as *Gurukul*, where the Vedas constituted the main subject of study, in addition to the arithmetic, grammar and prosody. Throughout the Vedic period, education was mainly based on *Shrutis* and *Smritis* and imparted orally.² But since the Sixth century B.C., which is an important landmark in ancient Indian history for expansion of agriculture, trade, commerce, proper taxation and introduction of coins, socio-economic landscape changed rapidly leading to the emergence of Mahajanpadas on the one hand and several heretical sects on the other. With this rapid change in the society, the method of education also underwent great changes.³ Now onwards Buddhist sangha and later on the Buddhist monastery emerged as the prime centers of learning. Each monastery *might* give training to postulants, but quite early in the history of Buddhism, certain establishment acquired a special reputation as the centers of learning. In the course of time, some developed into true universities such as Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramshila.⁴

ANCIENT WORLD UNIVERSITIES

As far as the history of University in the world is concerned, the ancient world certainly saw the flourishing of the centers of higher learning. Such institutions existed during 200 B.C. in Alexandria, Athens and Constantinople and later at Beirut, Bordeaux, Lyons, etc. But the growth of Christian supernaturalism and mysticism, and the inroads of the barbarians from the north and south had mostly put an end to these before 800 A.D. After that the Eastern Muslims founded universities in Baghdad, Basra, Cairo and other places, but most of these centres of learning came to an end early in the twelfth century. Then arose in Spain at Cordova, Toledo, Seville, the universities of the Western Muslims which after lasting for about a century were suppressed by orthodox fanaticism about 1200 A.D. The Muslim universities had taken a broad sweep including in their curriculum not only the liberal arts, but also medicine, philosophy and theology. When they were closed, Christian Europe felt the need for universities of their own and established them during the middle ages. The oldest among them which received official recognition were the Universities of Paris and Bologna founded in the twelfth century. It is, however, claimed that the University of Oxford dates back to the ninth century and its foundation has been attributed to King Alfred. This is not unlikely though the claim is not substantiated by sufficient documentary evidence. The majority of the present universities in Europe and America are the offsprings of the medieval universities of Europe. The universities of ancient India have a prouder history than that of their counterparts in the ancient western world. At least one of them, viz., Taxila, flourished several centuries before the Universities of Alexandria, Athens and Constantinople. The universities of ancient India had also a more impressive teaching and research programme. The teachers who taught in the hallowed precincts of Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramshila were scholars of high eminence and repute. This is not all. The cordial relationship that existed between them and their students was indeed sublime. Such ideal teacher-student relationship has no parallel in the long history of educational thought and practice.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF VIKRAMSHILA UNIVERSITY

Taxila became the first and foremost educational center of ancient India. The *Jatakas* also mention Banaras as a great center of learning which was established mostly by the students of Taxila. Later, Nalanda, situated in the Magadha region, the power centre of India, grew to be the foremost Buddhist monastery and educational Centre. Most of what we know of Nalanda University during sixth and seventh century A.D. is due to the account left by the Chinese pilgrims, Xuanzang and Yijing. Later, Magadha lost the glory as the power center of India after the demise of Harshvaradhana in 646 A.D., giving way to the rise of Pala dynasty that ruled over Bengal and Bihar for a substantial Period. The Pala rulers kept on patronizing the Nalanda University, but they also felt the necessity to set up another sister institution of the Nalanda University near Bhagalpur in the eastern Bihar. The Vikramshila University came into being and was founded by a monk called Kampala, under the patronage of the king Dharpala (r.770-810 A.D.). The king granted land endorsement for its upkeep. Other Pala rulers also continued the patronage to the institution.

Meanwhile, Buddhism itself was undergoing important changes and a new sect, within the Mahayana School, emerged. It was known as Vajrayana. It was the Tantric form of Buddhism, which centered on worshipping Goddess Tara and followed religious doctrines teaching magical and mystical formularies for the worship of deities or the attainment of supreme power. It is to be stressed upon that the worship of mother goddess had become prominent all over India by the 7th century A.D. and various sects of tantrism arose all over India, which gave importance to special and secret method of worship based on Tantra, Mantra and Yantra.⁵ Buddhism also got influenced by the emergence of Tantrism which gave way to the rise of Vajrayanism within it.

Vikramshila developed as an important and exclusive center of this new sect. Thus under the continued enthusiastic patronage of the Pala rulers and the emerging center of the new form of learning within Buddhism, Vikramshila attracted a number of scholars and students and it soon outshined the Nalanda University and established itself as the premier center of higher learning in India in the early medieval period. It remained in the leading position till it was destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1203 A.D.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

Tibetan scholar Taranath first recorded its existence, calling it Vikramshila Mahavihara. After its destruction, the site was abandoned and it remained hidden for centuries. As per Tibetan mythology, a *yaksha* called Vikramshil was suppressed here, thus giving the place its name.⁶ The exact location of the Vihara could not be ascertained for long time. Dr. S.C. Vidyabhushana identified it with the Sultanganj in Bhagalpur district and Alexander Cunningham, with the village Silao near Badagaon. However the original location was discovered when once Laxmikanta Mishra found a mound at Antichak village near Kahalgaon in Bhagalpur district. He collected bricks from the debris and sent them to the History Department of Patna University. Thereafter, some students of the university started excavating the site, but nothing substantial was found. In 1962, the Archeological Department of Patna

University, along with the Archeological Survey of India, under the leadership of D.C Varma, undertook the project to explore the place. Excavation continued till 1969. The ASI again conducted excavation between 1972 and 1982.⁷ From these two big projects a huge square monastery with cruciform *stupa* at its centre, a library, various small *stupas* and plethora of Hindu and Tibetan temple sculptures were unearthed. It was one of biggest the archeological excavations in independent India.

BUILDINGS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The buildings at Vikramshila were well planned and accommodative. There were one hundred and eight temples and six college buildings, spread-out like Lotus petals, with beautiful Mahabodhi temple in the center with its six gates leading to the six colleges. This central *stupa* had been the main attraction of the site. Like many other Buddhist sites of worship, here the central *stupa* is supplemented by several miniature *stupas*. The central *stupa*, probably constructed on the remains of Buddha, is made of bricks and solid mud. The two-storied *stupa* is 15m high. Each level is around 2.5m high and the two terraces are decorated with circumambulatory path that can take one around the structure. Walls of both the terraces are embellished with terracotta panels, although many of them are now defaced.

Then there was a residential block meant for monks. This section, which was once a huge structure, now exists in ruins in a shape of a square plot measuring 330m on each side. It has a majestic entrance from north with each flank containing four large chambers. The roof, which is now gone, was once supported by huge pillars. Many of them are still scattered on the ground. The monastery has a total of 208 cells, 52 on each side, for students as well as teachers. A common verandah connects all cells and steps are descending down from the centre to a courtyard. Every cell has three beds. Also, each block has a planned drainage system. The ruins of the library building give the testimony of Vikramshila's paramount importance as a centre of Buddhist learning. South of the main monastery, the library is a huge complex. A big reservoir with water, aimed at conditioning the back wall of the building, is also an engineering marvel. This was mainly designed to preserve priceless manuscripts.⁸

STUDENTS AND COURSES

Like the other Universities, this University also provided specialized instruction in various subjects. Buddhist textbooks belonging to both branches of Buddhism- Mahayanism and Hinyanism- were taught. Along with these all the important branches of Hindu learning were also taught, although they could not be classified as Buddhist in nature. This can be explained by the fact that Buddhism is not entirely new religion as some believe. It is merely a phase of Buddhism and in most of its social and religious aspects resembles its parent faith. Though the course didn't cover all the branches of Hindu Sciences but special stress were laid on grammar, logic, metaphysics and ritualism.⁹ A special significance was attached to study of Tantras.

In order to ensure a high standard of learning students were admitted to the University only if they satisfied the tests given by eminent authorities in charge of various subjects. Six

erudite teachers guarded the six gates leading to the university. Tibetan sources chronicle that at one time, there were six eminent logicians posted for the work. Ratnakarasanti was placed at the east gate, Vagisvarakirti at the west, Naropa at the north, Prajnakaramati at the south, Ratnavajra at the first central gate and Jnana Srimitra at the second gate.¹⁰

For smooth functioning of administration, there were boards in charge of different duties connected with the day-to-day working of the university; one chief abbot worked as the president of these various boards. There was complete academic autonomy and the teachers in charge of various departments were responsible for the academic work conducted in their departments.

SCHOLARS AND TEACHERS

As the leading learning center of the period, the Vikramshila University attracted a number of scholars who were well known not only in India but even beyond her frontiers for the depth and the width of their learning. It has been pointed out that when the university was started, King Dharpala of Bengal, its first patron, had appointed one hundred and fourteen teachers. A number of scholars came from other parts of India as well as from other countries. It has been mentioned that in the twelfth century there were 3,000 monk scholars studying at this university. Acharya Buddha Jnanapada was the founder of the new cult, Vajrayanism, of which Vikramshila was the only center in those days. He was appointed first as the priest of King Dharpala (r. 774-806) and later as the Acharya for ordination at Vikramshila. Vairochara Rakshita, Jetari, Prajnakaramati, Ratnakarasanti, Jnana Sri, Ratnavajara, Vagishvarakirti, Acharya Atisha, Abhyankargupta, Tathagatrakshita, Manjusri and Dharmakirti were important scholars attached with the Vikramshila University.¹¹

VIKRAMSHILA UNIVERSITY AND THE PROPAGATION OF BUDDHISM

The most outstanding contribution of the Vikramshila University was in the field of the propagations of Buddhism in Tibet. The University had developed literacy and cultural contacts with Tibet. Scholars from Tibet were particularly interested in the Tantras, for the teaching of which special arrangements were made at the University all throughout the four hundred years of its existence. It was Vikramshila scholars who, as the custodians of piety, knowledge and religion have practically built up the culture and civilization of Tibet. Many of these scholars wrote books on various sciences in Sanskrit and translated quite a few in Tibetan. Scholars in large numbers poured in from Tibet for whom a special arrangement for boarding and lodging was made. Vairochara Rakshita, Ratnavajra and Dipankara Sri Jnana also known as Acharya Atisha were among those who visited Tibet, translated several books into Tibetan and preached Buddhism there. The tallest among them was Acharya Atisha. Born in a royal family in 980 A.D., he took the sacred vow at nineteen. At thirty-one, he received the highest ordination. He was the master of Hinayana and Mahayana, Vaisheshika and Tantras. After completing his education he sailed to Suvarnadwipa (Pegu) and was further initiated into the mysteries of Buddhism by Acharya Dharmakirti Sri. There he studied for twelve years. On

his return to India he defeated many scholars and was appointed head at Vikramshila. Later he went to Nepal at the invitation of King Lha Chanchub of Guge Kingdom, Ngari in Tibet who was anxious to purge Tibetan Buddhism of its corruptions which were many and gross. There he founded the new religion of Lamaism. He worked in Tibet for thirteen years and died at the age of seventy three. About two hundred works on Vajrayana are ascribed to him. He also translated twenty two Sanskrit works into Tibetan.¹² He was helped by Viryasinha (Tibetan Name: Lotsava-rgya-btson-senge) in translating Sanskrit works into Tibetan. Apart from Tibet, Buddhism was preached in Ceylon also. Ratnakarashanti wrote thirteen works in Sanskrit and preached Buddhism in Ceylon, where he was invited for that work. Dharmakirti was a native of Tibet itself. He learnt Sanskrit at Vikramshila and translated several Sanskrit works into Tibetan.

VIKRAMSHILA UNIVERSITY AND ART

From the archaeological excavation of the site of Vikramshila University, we find many examples of art and sculpture. An archeological museum has been set up in November 2004, which displays priceless piece of work excavated from the site. Apart from several Buddha figurines; there are statues of Lokanatha, Mahakala, Tara and others. Among Hindu statues, we find Uma, Ganesh, Kuber and Mahishasuramardini (proto-type of Durga). All these statues are carved according to the Pala School of art. Some of them are made of thick basalt with an everlasting shine. Other stuff in display is terracotta motifs, coins, household utensils, some inscriptions, iron arrowheads, ornaments, daggers etc. It was also customary in this university to exhibit on walls the portraits of leading alumni with outstanding merit. In accordance with this custom, two portraits of Nagarjuna and Atisha were exhibited on walls of the university.

DESTRUCTION OF VIKRAMSHILA

Vikramshila touched the zenith of its glory during the 12th century under the rule of Ramapala (r. 1072-1126). Later, the rule of Pala dynasty came to an end due to internal conflicts, feudal uprisings and external aggression. Bengal came under the rule of Sena Dynasty. During the reign of Lakshmana Sena (r.1178-1205A.D.), Bengal had to face the Muslim invasions under the leadership of Bakhtiyar Khilji, who occupied Lakhnauti, capital of Senas, in 1202 A.D. In the course of occupation of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khilji, the tragic end of university came. Vikramshila became just deserted debris. Sadly, it was Bakhtiyar Khilji who had destroyed the Nalanda University also. All the monks residing at the place had their heads shaved, and they were all slain. The glory of Vikramshila got vanished.

CONCLUSION

Vikramshila, one of the centers of high learning in India during medieval age. It was unique in its organization and scholarship during those distant times when, elsewhere in world very few had thought of organized education at the university level. It represented the great tradition of knowledge and continued the legacy of Taxila and Nalanda. During this period, it was the

lone centre of higher learning in India, which catered to the needs of scholars and students having aspiration of excelling in higher education. It proved to be the formidable centre where new knowledge was created and disseminated far and wide. Its special contribution was the propagations of Buddhism in Tibet, Pegu and Ceylon. Particularly in Tibet, Vikramshila is said to have contributed to the foundation of Tibetan culture. Due to Vikramshila University, India became center of attraction for her neighborhood and India remained in touch with the development around her. From the cultural point of view, Vikramshila, apart from education, contributed to the evolution of new sect of Buddhism. It also proved to be an important center of art, particularly the Pala School of art centered on the use of basalt. Sadly, the destruction of Vikramshila at the hands of Turks, not only put an end to the bright academic journey of Vikramshila, but also terribly shattered the great Indian tradition of knowledge.

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