

Higher Education Institutions in Ancient Indian History

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Abstract:

The Indian civilization and social set-up is comparable with the best ones the world has ever evolved. And the speciality in it lies in its being at once ancient and modern, ancient because history cannot peep into its hoary past, modern because of its adaptability to changing circumstances age after age. Vicissitudes not uncommon with nations have not spared India. But under all changing circumstances, this great country has not lost her individuality. This is due to her holding fast to great ideals are¹.

Education and refinement are inter-related. No civilization is ever possible without proper education. As the background to her civilization India is endowed with an ancient educational system all her own. Through ages, what India has meant by educating a man is the building of character. The history of ancient Indian education extended several centuries, and so we naturally come across different types of educational organizations in different ages. In the pre-historic period down to about 1000 B.C the family was the only educational agency both for the literary and professional education. In a few centuries, Hinduism copied the Buddhist example and organized its own temple colleges². Monastic Universities and temple colleges were however confined to some famous centres of learning. In medieval times the Mathas of the various pontiffs (*Acharyas*) used to organize small centres for higher education.

In the pre-historic period the followers of different Vedas had no doubt formed their own literary organizations like the *Parishads* (a *parishad* is said to consist of 21 scholars well versed in philosophy, theology and law)³ the *Sakhas*, and the *Charanas*, Organization of Buddhist universities from the accounts handed down to us about Nalanda and Vikramasila, which were typical of their class. The in the pre-press days, libraries were not only storehouses of books but also their publishers. Moreover, Sanskrit used to be the language of higher education at that time, a place presently occupied by English.

Keywords: *Taxila, Banares, Nalanda, Vallabhi, Vikramasila, Mithila, Odantapuri, Pushpagiri*

Educational Centres in Ancient India

Education was for a long time imparted by private teachers on their own responsibility. These were no doubt scattered all over the country, but they used to congregate in large numbers in certain places on account of the facilities they received there in their work. Such places were usually capitals of kingdoms or famous holy places (*Tirthas*). Kings and feudal chiefs were as rule patrons of learning, and so learned Brahmanas were naturally attracted to their courts. Among such places of higher education in ancient india, Taxila, Benares, Nalanda, Vikramasila, Vallabhi, Navadveepa (Nadia in Bengal), and Kanachi or Conjeevaram (in Chennai) were the best known. Of these, those at Benares, Navadveepa, and Kanchi, grew up in connection with temples, which were centres of community life in the places where they were situated. Buddhist seats of higher education, such as those at Nalanda, Vikramasila, and Valabhi, on the other hand, grew up in connection with Viharas and Sangharamas, which were originally the forest or garden retreats where Buddha stayed with his disciples during his travels through the country and where Buddhist monks rested during the rainy season when travelling was difficult.

The Brahman child began his education at the age of 8, the Kshatriya at 11, and Vaishya at 12 years of age.⁴ The period was not past till 16 for a Brahmin, 20 years for a Kshatriya, and 22 for a Vaisya. in the system of Brahmanic education was called Ahrama education as it is mostly called, remained vogue for centuries till the Buddhist and Jaina systems replaced it. Both Brahmanic and Buddhist characteristics of the system of education or the aim of education was realization of the self. However, Buddhist education was not based on vedic study and the teachers were not Brahmans. The education was open to all and not merely to the three twice born classes.⁵

Taxila

Taxila or Takshashila, in ancient India (modern-day Pakistan), was an early Hindu and Buddhist centre of learning. The most important and ancient seat of learning in Ancient India. It was the capital of important province of Gandhara and its history goes back into hoary antiquity. It was founded by Bharata and named after his son Taksha who was established there as its ruler. By the 7th century B.C. It was famous for its philosophers in the days of Alexander the Great. Taxila was conquered and occupied by Persians in the 6th century B.C. by the Indo-Bactrians in the 2nd century B.C. by Scythians in the 1st Century B.C. by the Kushanas in 1st Century A.D. by the Hunas in the 5th century A.D.

It is interesting to note that the study of Sanskrit was continued in Buddhist monasteries. At the Pataliputra monastery Fa-Hien stayed for three years "learning Sanskrit books and the Sanskrit speech and writing out the Vinaya rules." Archery is found mentioned in the Jataka stories. The Bhimsena Jataka tells that Boddhisatva learnt archery at Takshila.⁶ Wrestling was popular and descriptions of such breath-holding bouts in wrestling are available in the Jataka stories. Two kinds of games called Udyana Krida or garden games and Salila Krida or water sports are also mentioned. Archery was also popular among the women during this period, as can be seen from the Ahicchatra images. Hunting, elephant fighting, Ram fighting, and Partridge

fighting were the other important games of this period. Takshashila, the most ancient Hindu University, was destroyed by the barbarian White Huns in 455 A.D. Sir John Marshall, Director General of Archaeology in India, has given a most interesting account on Takshashila.

The Persian and Greek occupation must have affected the curricula epigraphical testimony shows conclusively that the Persian occupation resulted in the replacement of the national Brahmi script by the foreign Kharosthi alphabet. The Scythian and Khushana conquerors had no culture or civilization of their own, but Indo-Bactrian rulers were the inheritors of the rich Greek civilization.

As a centre of learning, the fame of the city was unrivalled in the 6th century B.C. and yet we find students flocking to Taxila from far off cities like Benares, Rajagriha, Mithila and Ujjayini. Kuru and Kosala countries sent their own quota of students. Generally, a student entered Takshashila at the age of sixteen. One of the Archery schools at Taxila had on its roll call, as we have seen already, 103 princes from different parts of India. King Prasenajit of Kosala, a contemporary of the Buddha, was educated in the Gandhara capital. Prince Jivaka, an illegitimate son of Bimbisara, spent seven years at Taxila in learning medicine and surgery. As Panini hailed from Salatura near Attok, he also must have been an alumni of Taxila University. The same was the case with Kautilya, the author of the *Arthasasthra*.

Taxila provided only higher education and students went there for specialization only. Jivaka and two youths from Benares had repaired there for studying archery and elephant lore. The three Vedas, grammar, philosophy and eighteen arts were the principal subjects selected for specialization at Taxila. Eighteen Arts⁷ were Ayurveda, Surgery, Archery, Warfare, Jyotish, Prophecy, Book-keeping, Trade and Commerce, Agriculture, Chariot-driving, Mesmerism, Snake-charming, Hidden treasure investigation, Music, Dancing and Painting. There were no caste restrictions on the choice of subject, Kshatriyas used to study the Vedas along with Brahmanas and the latter used to specialize in archery.

Benares

As a seat of learning, came into existence later than Takshashila, after the Aryans had advanced eastwards from the Indus basin to the Ganges basin and had settled there. Its fame, as a stronghold of religion and learning was so great in ancient times that every religious leader who desired to propagate his doctrine felt compelled to preach it first to its renowned pundits and shastris. Gautama Buddha had to there to preach his first sermon on his new religion (Buddhism as it has since been known after him) in 528 B.C. at Saranath it had 1500 monk-students. It is noteworthy that in spite of all the political upheavals and changes in Government. In the Upanishadic period, however Benares became a centre of Aryan religion culture. Benares maintaining schools for the teaching of the three Vedas and 18 Sippas and Akitta Jataka describes how students used to flock to Benares for higher education, when they were about 16 years of age.

Saranath developed after Buddha's time into a great seat of Buddhist religion and learning. It was liberally patronized by Emperor Asoka and appears to have been in a flourishing condition in the 7th century

A.D. It is the holiest of the seven sacred cities (*Sapta Puri*) in Hinduism and Jainism, and played an important role in the development of Buddhism. In ancient education, an important place was given to discussion and debate particularly in higher studies and man's ability was best judged by his power to vanquish opponents in debate or discussion. This very trend prevailed in Brahmanic as well as Jain-Buddha system of education.⁸ From Hindu to Mussalman, from Mussalman to Mogul, and from Mugul to British, during the last more than two thousand years, Benares has maintained its fame as the greatest stronghold of Hindu religion and culture. And its importance as a great seat of learning has been enhanced by the foundation of the Benares Hindu University which imparts not only ancient but also modern learning.

Nalanda

Nalanda is an ancient center of higher learning in Bihar, India from 427 to 1197.A.D. The history of Nalanda university "falls into two main divisions first, one of growth, development and fruition from the sixth century to the ninth, when it was dominated by the liberal cultural traditions inherited from the Gupta age; the second, one of gradual decline and final dissolution from the ninth century to the thirteen a period when the tantric developments of Buddhism became most pronounced in eastern India."⁹ The Chinese monk Yijing wrote that matters of discussion and administration at Nalanda would require assembly and consensus on decisions by all those at the assembly, as well as resident monks.¹⁰

Nalanda however, was not a mere monastery it had obtained so wide a fame primarily because it was a very famous centre of learning. Hence, foreign students came to the nalanda to put an end to their doubts and then became celebrated, and those who stole the name (of Nalanda) were all treated with respect wherever they went. The head abbots of Nalanda used to be as much celebrated for piety as for scholarship. Amongst them were Dharmapala and Chandrapala, who gave a fragrance to the Buddha's teachings, Gunamati and Sthiramati of excellent reputation among contemporaries, Prabhamitra of clear argument, Jinamitra of elevated conversation, Jinamitra of model character and perspicacious intellect and Siilabhadra whose perfect excellence was buried in obscurity. These scholars were not, however, content merely to teach and expound, they were authors of several treatises, widely studied and highly valued by their contemporaries.

The University was maintaining a splendid library called *Dharmaranjana*,¹¹ accommodated in three huge buildings, one of which was nine stories high. One of the reasons why Chinese scholars used to spend months together at Nalanda was to get true copies of the sacred texts and other works of Buddhism. I-tsing got copied at Nalanda 400 Sanskrit works amounting to 5,00,000 verses.

Buddhists themselves inform us that the three Vedas, Vedanta, Samkhya and philosophy were taught at the University along with miscellaneous works. The latter expression probably included the study of subjects like Dharmasastra (sacred law), Puranas, Astronomy, Astrology, etc which were very important for the lay Hindu and Buddhist students. The study of medicine *chikitsasastra*, which is referred to in the sacred canon, was also prosecuted at the place. It is noteworthy, that even today cannot claim to possess a university so great and renowned as Nalanda.

Valabhi

Valabhi (modern Vala in Kathiawad) was also a great seat of Brahmanic as well as Buddhistic learning. It flourished about the same time as Nalanda in the 4 to 7th centuries A.D. Vallabhi has been a famous Jain center. It was here in 453 or 466 AD, the Vallabhi council of the Jains produced in writing the religious canon under the head of the shraman Devardhigani. But when the Chinese traveller Xuanzang visited Vallabhi during the second quarter of 7th century, he found its ruler to be a Buddhist follower. When Itsing, another Chinese traveller visited Vallabhi in the last quarter of 7th century, he found the city as a great center of learning including Buddhism. The great Buddhist teachers, Sthiramati and Gunamati, of Nalanda, were for some time in charge of Buddhistic teaching at Valabhi. *Kathasaritsagara*, the well-known Sanskrit work, makes mention of a Brahman of the Gangetic plain sending his son to Valabhi for higher education. This shows the widespread reputation which Valabhi enjoyed as a seat of learning.

It was the capital of Maithraka kingdom and a port of international trade with numerous warehouses full of rarest merchandise. The first two Maitraka rulers Bhatarka and Dharasena-I used only the title of *Senapati* (general). The third ruler Dronasimha declared himself as *The Maharaja*.¹² The last known ruler of this dynasty was Siladitya VII.¹³ Maitraka rule ended with the sacking of Vallabhi by the barbarians in 524, according to James Tod and in second or third quarter of the 8th century A.D. by various other scholars.¹⁴ There is no agreement among the scholars as to who these barbarians were. This continued to be the case till 775 A.D.

Vikramasila

An International University - Vikramasila monastery, founded by king Dharmapala in the 8th century (775 – 800 A.D.), was a famous centre of international learning for more than four centuries. A number of monasteries grew up during the Pala period in ancient Bengal and Magadha. According to Tibetan sources, five great Mahaviharas stood out: Vikramasila, the premier university of the era; Nalanda, past its prime but still illustrious, Somapura, Odantapura, and Jaggadala. The five monasteries formed a network; "all of them were under state supervision" and there existed "a system of co-ordination among them . . . it seems from the evidence that the different seats of Buddhist learning that functioned in eastern India under the Pāla were regarded together as forming a network, an interlinked group of institutions," and it was common for great scholars to move easily from position to position among them.¹⁵

Vikramasila was one of the largest Buddhist universities, with more than one hundred teachers and about one thousand students. It produced eminent scholars who were often invited by foreign countries to spread Buddhist learning, culture and religion. The most distinguished and eminent among all was Atisa Dipankara, a founder of the Sarma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Subjects like philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, Indian logic etc., were taught here, but the most important branch of learning was tantrism.

The Vikramasila University had six colleges each with a staff of the standard strength of 108. The President or Kulapati of the University was always the most learned and religious saint. The gates of the university were guarded by the eminent scholars called *Dvara Panditas* so that admission to it was controlled by a good standard of scholarship. During the reign of king Kanaka the following were the *Dvara Panditas* of the establishment.

1. Eastern Gate ; Acharya Ratnakara santi
2. Western ” ; Vagisvara kirti of Benares
3. Northern ” ; Naropa
4. Southern ” ; Prajnakara mati
5. First Central Gate ; Ratna vajra of Kashmir
6. Second Central Gate ; Jnan sri mitra of Gauda. ¹⁶

The distinguished foreign travelers Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing had given firsthand experience about real functioning of the university. Another scholar of great distinction was Tathagata Rakshita who is supposed to have hailed from a Kayashtha caste of Orissa, a well-known family of physicians. He was an ex-student of Vikramasila and won the titles “Moha Pundit” and “Upadyayas”. He was also an eminent Professor of Tantra and an author of many good works. In 1203 A.D. the Vikramasila monastery was destroyed by the Mohamadens under Bakhtyar Khilji, who seem to have mistaken it for a fort. The account of the destruction of the monastery has been preserved by the author of *Tabakat-i-nasiri*

Mithila

Mithila was the stronghold of Vedic and Brahmanical culture from the time of Upanishads under its renowned philosopher-king Janaka. In the ancient time it was also known as Videha. As in Ramayana, and Mahabharata in Buddhist literature also, Mithila has been mentioned as a country of unique culture and great distinction. As a seat of higher learning it flourished under the royal patronage not only in the field of education, but also in the arena of art, crafts and literature.

The legend of Mithila extends over many centuries. Both Gauthama Buddha and Vardamana Mahavira are said to have lived in Mithila. It also formed the center of Indian history during the first millennium, and has contributed to various literary and scriptural works. The most famous scholars of Mithila were Jagaddhara, Vidyapati and others. Jagaddhara wrote comments on Gita, Meghaduta, Gita gobinda, Malati Madhava, Devi-Mahatmya and the like. Vidyapati was a very talented poet who composed Padavali and inspired the Vaishnava poets later on in the Eastern India. the special School of Nyaya made outstanding contributions to the field of Logic.¹⁷ Smriti, and other scriptures. Many teachers were not only great scholars but also had achieved all-India reputation.

Odantapuri

Odantapuri was considered the second oldest of India's universities. This was situated in Maghada, about 6 miles away from Nalanda. Acharya Sri Ganga of Vikramasila had been a student here. Later he joined Odantapuri King Gopala (660-705) was the patron who helped to found this university. According to the Tibetan records there were about 12,000 students at Odantapuri. Our knowledge of this seat of learning is obscure, and we are not in a position to give more details. This too perished at the hands of the Muslim invaders. It is said they mistook the universities with their high walls for fortresses. They thought the Buddhist monks were "Shaven headed Brahmins" who were idolaters. A number of monasteries grew up during the Pala period in ancient Bengal and Magadha. According to Tibetan sources, five great Mahaviharas stood out: Vikramashila, the premier university of the era; Nalanda, past its prime but still illustrious, Somapura Mahavihara, Odantapuri,¹⁸ and Jaggadala

Pushpagiri

Pusphagiri (*Puspagiri Mahavihara*) was one of the earliest buddhist mahavihara spread across Cuttack and Jajpur district, Odisha (ancient Kalinga) in 3rd century A.D.¹⁹ It was established in 3rd century and flourished for the next 800 years till 11th century. The university campus was spread across three adjoining hills – Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri. This was one of the most prominent centers of higher education in ancient India along with the universities of Takshashila, Nalanda and Vikramashila. The Chinese traveler Xuanzang (Huien Tsang) visited this university in 639 CE. Lalitgiri is said to have been commissioned by early 2nd century B.C.E itself and is the oldest Buddhist establishments in the world. Recently a few images of Emperor Ashoka have been discovered here, and it has been suggested that the Pushpagiri University was established by Emperor Ashoka himself.

Somapura

Somapura Mahavihara was established by Dharmapala of Pala dynasty during late 8th century in Bengal and flourished for 400 years till 12th century. The University spread over 27 acres of land of which the main complex was 21 acres was one of the largest of its kind. It was a major center of learning for Bauddha Dharma (Buddhism), Jina Dharma (Jainism) and Sanatana Dharma²⁰ (Hinduism). Even today one can find ornamental terracotta on its outer walls depicting the influence of these three traditions.

Other Ancient Universities of the Indian Subcontinent

The above-mentioned list is not a complete list of ancient Indian universities either. Dharmapala of Pala dynasty alone is said to have established 50 mega learning centers across his kingdom, and they have been as huge and as popular as the ones mentioned above. For instance, the Munshiganj Vihara discovered as recently as Marh 23, 2013 in Bengal is said to have been established in 9th century and was home to 8000 students who came from faraway places like China, Tibet, Nepal and Thailand. Sharada Peeth, in Pakistan, Jagaddala, in Bengal

(from the Pala dynasty period to the Turkic Muslim

conquest), Nagarjunakonda, in Andhra Pradesh, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, Manyakheta (Gulbarga district) Karnataka.

Women Education in Ancient India

It is not easy to determine the extent of women education during the period we are reviewing here. "An important feature of this educational system should not be missed. The part taken in intellectual life by women like Gargi who could address a Congress of philosophers on learned topics,²¹ or like Maitreyi, who had achieved the highest knowledge, that of Brahma. The Rigveda shows us some women as authors of hymns, such as Visvavara, Ghosha, and Apala."

We have already seen how this ensured a certain amount of higher education to every Aryan girl. During the period we are reviewing, however, Upanayana began to be gradually prohibited to girls. By about 500 B.C. it had already become a mere formality, not followed by any serious course of Vedic education. The *Code of Manu*, which was composed at about 200 B.C., goes a step further and declares that girls Upanayana should be performed without the recitation of Vedic mantras. Sudras, pariahs and women are generally allowed no education.²²

Conclusion

In ancient India a host of scholars from Tibet, China and some other countries came to India for higher learning in a spirit of adventure. Similarly, Indian scholars had been to other countries for propagation of Indian culture and civilization. The Buddhist civilization of China was the work of a succession of Indian scholars continued for several centuries.

the extent of Buddhism to the Chinese emperor Ming-ti (A.D. 58-75) two Indian Shramans (Monks) named Kashyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna were deputed to China who were the pioneers in this field. Buddhist texts were translated into China by a Samgha Verman, Dharmasatya, Dharmakala, Dharmapala, Lokaraksha, and others. Indian scholars travelled to China, Tibet, Burma, Ceylon and other Asian countries to propagate Buddhism.

Every religious movement that subsequently developed in India was a reaction against Brahmanic domination, the caste, and the monopoly of learning. Chief among these reactions was Buddhism, which prevailed over Northern India from the sixth century B.C., to the eighth century A.D.,²³ when it was driven out of the Indian peninsula by the persecutions of the Brahmans. Buddhism left no schools in the land, but it struck at the heart of Brahmanism by its doctrines and its recognition of secular by its doctrines and its recognition of secular teachers (Buddha and Buddhism).

The Muslim invasions and political disturbances hindered such cultural interaction and intercourse among the scholars. Otherwise the pilgrims did not care the physical risks to come and learn. It was also the great credit and achievement of the Indian Universities, which could attract the innumerable foreign scholars

and deputed a host of Buddhist and Hindu scholars and Saints to the unknown lands for en-kindling the light of learning and enriching the human culture and civilization through ages.

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