

Vikramshila: An International University of the Past



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Abstract

Ancient India had registered a number of achievements in the field of knowledge and education. Centuries before the European mediaeval universities, there existed centres of higher learning in India. Takshashila, a centre of Hindu learning, was the oldest among them. In the later period, Buddhist 'Sangharamas' and 'Viharas' emerged as the centres of learning. Including Nalanda, Vikramshila, Somapura, Odantapuri and Jagaddala were great Mahaviharas. Vikramshila university or Mahavihara was founded by King Dharmapal in 8th century A.D. It has now been identified with the village Antichak in Bhagalpur district, Bihar. Vikramshila was an international university. It had one hundred eight temples and six college buildings. The Pala rulers entrusted the administrative management to a Board of six members presided over by the Chief abbot. Six Dvarapanditas (scholarly gate keepers) were responsible for academic administration. The university was known as the centre of Tantras. The text-books of both the branches of Buddhism- Mahayana and Hinayana and along with them some important Hindu scriptures were taught. Upadhyaya Atisha was the most distinguished among monk professors. He played a great role in the reformation of Buddhism in Tibet. There had been continuous communication between Tibet and Vikramshila for four centuries. The university met its tragic end in 1203 by the Mohammadan invaders.

Data collection was done through library study and internet access. The content was analysed by using methods of content analysis.

Keywords: Ancient Period, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Higher Learning, Buddhist Monastery, Viharas.

Introduction

In Indian history, ancient period was a glorious and proud period in many ways. Ancient India had registered a number of achievements in the field of knowledge and education. Centuries before the European mediaeval universities, there existed centres of higher learning in India. Some of them were international universities. Takshashila was the oldest among them which existed between 10th century B.C. and 6th century A.D. Scholarly teachers having authority in their subjects established various *Gurukulas* at this place. The students aspiring for higher level knowledge flocked from various parts of the country. The *Gurukulas* were the institutes of Brahminic learning. The Vedas were the main subject of study. Throughout the Vedic era, the oral education imparted by the private teachers was based on 'Shrutis' and 'Smritis'. Takshashila was a centre of Hindu learning. In the later period, Buddhist 'Sangharamas' and 'Viharas' emerged as the centres of learning. With the effect and influence of Buddhism, society also underwent great changes. The Buddha strongly advised the need for education of Bhikshus and Bhikshunis who joined Buddhism from all ranks of society. Thus, the establishment and organization of Sangharamas or Viharas became an essential part of Buddhism. These Sangharamas and Viharas were assemblies of Buddhist monks and nuns which were used by them for the purpose of meditation and study. They gradually developed in to the centres of learning. Nalanda Mahavihara (425-1205 A.D.) was the most famous of all seats of Buddhist learning. Nalanda was the biggest centre which handled almost all branches of knowledge and provided residence to approximately 10,000 monks; out of them 1510 were the scholarly teachers. Nalanda university functioned with great energy and enthusiasm up to 1100 A.D. Including Nalanda, Vikramshila, Somapura, Odantapuri and Jagaddala were great Mahaviharas. Nalanda and Vikramshila universities were under the control of King Dharmapal (775-800 A.D.).

Vikramshila University was founded by King Dharmapal in 8th century A.D. in response to a supposed decline in the quality of scholarship at Nalanda. Along with Nalanda, it was one of the two most important centres of higher learning in India during Pala Empire. These universities were international universities as they attracted scholars from neighbouring countries. Vikramshila university continued and prospered for nearly four centuries until it was destroyed about the same time as Nalanda by the Muslim invaders.

Vikramshila Vihara, a Buddhist monastery, was situated on the bank of the Ganga in Northern Magadha (Bihar). The place was not very far away from Nalanda. The exact location of this Vihara could not be ascertained until 1970s. Dr S.C. Vidyabhushana identified it with Sultanganj in Bhagalpur district and Cunningham, with the village Silao near Badagaon. The excavation work was done by the Archaeological Department of Patna University along with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1962 which continued till 1969. The ASI once again conducted excavation between 1972 and 1982 and it was considered as one of the biggest archaeological excavations in free India. Vikramshila has been identified with the village Antichak in Bhagalpur district, Bihar. It is located at about 50 kms east of Bhagalpur and about 13 kms north-east of Kalhalgaon, a railway station on Bhagalpur-Sahebganj section of Eastern Railways.

Aim of the Study

"The aim of reaserch paper entitled Vikramshila: An International University of the past is to trace the history of higher education in ancient India and find out features of Vikramshila University, one of the famous Buddhist Universities".

Features of the University

Vikramshila was an international university. It had widespread fame. There had been continuous communication between Tibet and Vikramshila for four centuries. The university had following features:

Building and Infrastructure

The Mahavihara was built after a good design. King Dharmapal constructed temples and monasteries. He provided generous endowment and the same was continued by his successors down to the 13th century. Vikramshila had one hundred eight temples and six college buildings. Beautiful Mahabodhi temple adorned with Mahabodhi images stood at the centre. The university had a central hall (The House of Science) with six gates opening on the six colleges. Each of these six buildings had spacious halls for lecturing work. The university possessed rich libraries. It had a rich collection of texts in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tibetan languages. Vikramshila had an excellent collection of books on religion of Hindus (Buddhists). The whole monastery (the university) was surrounded by a strong wall which was decorated with artistic work. A portrait of Nagarjuna was on the right of the main entrance and that of Atisha on the left. The portrait of eminent Pandits were painted on the walls of the university.

Administration (General & Academic)

The Pala rulers entrusted the administrative management to a Board of six members, the eminent teachers of the university. The Chief abbot, the most learned and religious sage, was the President of this Board. Different members of the Board were in charge of different duties connected with day to day working of the university. Monk professors lived simple life. The cost of maintaining one of them was equal to the cost of supporting four ordinary monks. There was complete autonomy. Six Dvarapanditas, scholarly gate keepers, were responsible for academic administration. The function of these most erudite scholars was to test the knowledge of those seeking admission to the university. The aspirants had to satisfy these Dvarapanditas. The objective was to maintain the standard of scholarship. These scholarly gate keepers were the 'custodians of Vikramshila university's scholarship'. During the reign of Chanaka (955 A.D.-983 A.D.), the six logicians acting as Gate Keepers were: Ratnakarashanti- East Gate, Vagishvarakirti of Benaras- West Gate, Naropa- North Gate, Prajnakaramati- South Gate, Ratnavajra of Kashmira- First Central Gate and Jnanashrimitra- Second Central Gate. It is stated that above mentioned Board was also responsible for the administrative affairs of Nalanda university. Possibly, this co-ordination of work and management between two universities was because of King Dharmapal was their mutual boss. It is found that some teachers were working in both universities and also, the exchange of teachers between them.

Ideology and its Propagation

Vikramshila represented the Mahayana form of Buddhism. Vajrayana or Tantrayana, which refers to the various Buddhist traditions of 'Tantra' and 'Secret Mantra' is classified as a part of Mahayana Buddhism. As the goal of Buddhist monks was to preach gospel of the Buddha in distant lands, these institutions were meant for future Bhikshus and Bhikshunis. These monks were kept away from such a knowledge which creates shackles for human beings. The university was known as the centre of Tantras which consist of religious doctrines teaching magical and mystical formularies for the worship of deities or attainment of supreme power. Vikramshila contributed outstandingly by spreading Buddhism in Tibet. It developed literary and cultural communication with Tibet. Its scholars translated scores of Sanskrit books in Tibetan. Upadhyaya Atisha went to Tibet at the invitation of its King Chan Chub and played important role in the reformation of the Buddhism in the country.

Studies and Degrees

The text-books of both the branches of Buddhism- Mahayana and Hinayana, were taught at the university. Besides these, all important branches of Hindu learning were also taught, but not in Buddhist nature. The curriculum was not so wide as that of Nalanda University. Vikramshila University was specialized in Grammar, Logic, Metaphysics, Tantras and Ritualism. The information regarding the course duration is not available but it was organized and systematic. Unlike any other college of that period, the

students of Vikramshila University were given diplomas and titles (i.e. Pandit title) at the end of the course by the then kings. The honour was shown to distinguished alumni by putting their pictures on the wall of college halls. Nagarjuna and Atisha got this honour.

Students and Teachers

It has been mentioned earlier that a student could get admission only after he satisfied Dwarpandita with his scholarship. The monk professors were famous not only in India but even beyond her frontiers. We do not have much knowledge about the functioning of this university and studies as compared to Nalanda. We came to know the history of Vikramshila University through the biographies of its scholars who were invited by foreign countries, mainly Tibet. Tibetan scholars were especially interested in Tantras. A special guest house was maintained for the use of these Tibetan scholars coming for learning. The first patron, King Dharmapala, appointed one hundred eight teachers and other specialists, in total one hundred fourteen teachers. According to ASI, there were one thousand students at the university. Teaching was controlled by the Board of eminent scholars. Dipamkara Shrijnana, known as Upadhyaya Atisha, was most distinguished among the Vikramshila scholars. He wrote about 200 books. Through the Tibetan account, we come to know about a list of Vikramshila scholars who influenced Tibetan culture- Acharya Buddha Jnanapada, Vairochana Rakshita, Jetari, Prajnakaramati, Ratnakarashanti, Jnana Shri, Ratnavajra, Vagishvarakirti, Dipamkara Shrijnana alias Acharya Atisha, Viryasimha, Abhayakaragupta, Tathagata Rakshita, Ratnakirti, Manjushri, Dharmakirti and Shakyashri Bhadra. If we talk of the total strength of monks, it is mentioned that there were 3000 monk scholars living at the university in 12th century.

Seminars and Conferences

Vikramshila fulfilled the needs of advanced level students. Through the mutual discussions and debates with learned scholars, these students developed their knowledge. Sometimes, a king would summon the scholars from various viharas to a gathering for debates and exchange of views.

Tea Drinking

It is very interesting to mention here that Atisha was offered the national drink of Tibet which was 'Tea'. It appears that the use of Tea as a drink spread from Tibet to India after Atisha's visit.

Architecture of the Monastery

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) revealed a huge square Vihara. This Vihara or monastery, which was the residence for the Buddhist monks, is a huge square structure, each side of 330 metres having a series of 208 cells, 52 on each of the four sides opening into a common varandah. The main stupa, which stands in the centre of the monastery for the purpose of worship, is in the shape of cross. This two-terraced stupa is about 15 metres high from the ground level accessible through a flight of steps on the north side. It has been further described by ASI about the main stupa, "On each of the four cardinal directions there is a protruding

chamber with a pillared antechamber and a separate pillared mandapa in front. In the four chambers of the stupa were placed colossal stucco images of seated Buddha of which three were found in situ but the remaining one on north side was possibly replaced by a stone image after the clay image was somehow damaged."

"The walls of both the terraces are decorated with mouldings and terracotta plaques which testify the high excellence of terracotta art flourishing in the region during Pala period (8th to 12th Century A.D.)"

Tragic End of the University

This great university was destroyed by the ruthless Mohammadan invader Bakhtyar Khilji. All resident Brahmanas (Buddhist monks) had their heads shaven and they were all slain. It seems that Bakhtyar mistook the Mahavihara for a fort. Shakyas Shri Bhadra was in charge of the monastery at that time. He was one of the eye-witnesses of this tragic destruction and slaughter. After the destruction of the university, he repaired the University of Jagaddala and from there he proceeded to Tibet with many other monks and settled there as a Buddhist preacher.

Conclusion

The word 'University' is developed from the mediaeval Latin word 'Universitas' which means any community of people or corporation. A university is described as a community of people of superior intellect engaged in examining all aspects of human life and activity critically and holistically. This examination includes discourse, discussion and debate. The principal factors are teachers and students and the function of a university is to preserve, transmit and generate knowledge. Due to these features of a university, Vikramshila University can also be claimed as one of the earliest designs of a university.

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