

An Observation on Learning and Libraries in Ancient India

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One of the oldest civilizations of the world India has a kaleidoscopic variety of people and a rich cultural heritage. Excellency reached in most of the branches of knowledge in ancient India, great religious systems were created and developed independent schools of philosophy. Literature and learning flourished undoubtedly since the remote past and the history of our cultural heritage extends far back. Education was a lifelong process in ancient India. Knowledge was regarded to be the best eye of man. The ancient Indian tradition lays great importance on activating the spirit in man to enrich the profession and illumine and educate the whole community. Thus, India attracted the attention of the East as an important centre of knowledge and wisdom. Culture, civilisation and society were very much reflected by education in ancient India. Regarding the discussion on education system in ancient India, two factors were most significant. Such as, system of learning and another was libraries. Generally, the term learning is described as the modification of behaviour through experience and knowledge and another component library is the most essential issue regarding learning.

Indian history clearly demonstrates that libraries were closely associated with the contemporary education system. In this paper the authors intend to analyse the learning and libraries attached to important centres of education in eastern and central India like *Nalanda, Odantipura, Vikramsila, Somapuri, Jagaddal, Mithila, Nadia*.

Keywords: Learning in India, Education centres in Ancient India, Libraries in Ancient India.

Introduction

Indian civilisation happens to be one of the most ancient civilisations of the world and it has not only enriched the stock of human knowledge but has also provided guidance to entire human society. Indian civilisation, which has structured Indian culture, is based mainly on the philosophy of spirituality. Indian culture has laid stress on spirituality to the utter neglect of materialism. In wider sense education started from the very beginning of civilisation. Human acquired knowledge to solve their problems and fulfil their needs in daily life through their indigenous education. (Nai, 2019) Many scholars have defined education from the different point of view. According to Swami Vivekananda, "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man". Education was much significant in the entire history of Indian civilisation. Starting from the Vedic period a teacher was considered a sole custodian of the entire educational system. He was a scholar of the highest order, well versed in all branches of knowledge and led an austere and disciplined life in the Asrama. Formation of character, building up of personality, preservation of ancient culture and the training of the rising generation in the performance of the social and religious duties – these were the main aims of the ancient Indian education system. (Khanna, 1994) Thus, she attracted the attention of the East as an important centre of knowledge and wisdom. It was not possible in one day or one generation, rather it an intellectual fall out and accumulation of experiences of centuries. Racial memory or social history of a civilisation is preserved by books and manuscript. In fact, books had enlightened the mankind throughout its history. Even in the past libraries had served as an important aid to education and acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, there increased a number of varied and vast storehouse of knowledge all over the country. We must, therefore a new meaning and thought of the Vedic and post-Vedic academic activities so as to function successfully in the present- day library as well as education system.

Vedic System of Education

Originally the Vedic hymns were not committed to writing but to human memory carefully cultivated for the purpose and were handed down from generation to generation without the loss of even a single syllable. A wonderful mnemonic system was developed to aid the memory in its responsible task of preserving the nation's sacred literature. The education was aimed at building the entire personality of the students. The teacher was expected to sharpen their intellect as well as to purify their soul and spirit. Hence, education was also considered sacred. (Raja, 1950) In the beginning of the period, the great seers and sages were actually "living book".

They chanted Vedic hymns and handed down the wisdom and learning of the Vedas to their disciples who lived with them in the Gurukulas or Ashramas and acquired knowledge from them by means of hearing and memorising. Thus the first book in the world "The Rigveda" was not like a book of today which could lie on a shelf but was "human book" with hands and feet that could talk and even sing. "Rig Veda has been selected as 'Memory of the World' by UNESCO Register 2007.

It is the fountain source of the so called Aryan culture in all its manifestations that spread beyond the Indian subcontinent to large parts of South and South East Asia as well as some parts of Central Asia." (www.hinduism.about.com) All knowledge was stored up in the memory and the learned men were like travelling libraries of those days. It was a long time before these talks or "living book" was finally written down by hand and took the shape of a book in manuscript form to be read and preserved in libraries. (Mookerji, Rep. 2003) Now we discuss the Brahmanical mode of education in which was significantly influenced by the Vedas. Vedic Sanskrit regarded as the spoken language. The science of exegesis and grammar were developed. Accordingly the art of writing became known to people in specific time. Therefore, the memorising of Vedic hymns required some previous elementary education. In this respect the term *vidyarambha* indicates some rituals from the beginning of education, may mention about "*upanayana*".

In the later period the Arthashastras has stated on the education of the prince or to commerce at the time of the *Chaula* rituals. In the *Raghubansha* we have got the reference of prince Raghu who was learning his alphabet after his *Chaula* karma. According to Uttar-Rama-charit Balmiki comments the education of Kusa and Lava after their *Chaula* karma, thereafter these two brothers had mastered a no of sciences when they began their Vedic studies after their *upanaya* at the age of eleven. Therefore one fact is more relevant regarding this discussion, i.e. *Samaskara* should be the occasion of the commencement of primary education. (Altekar, Rep. 2009) After above discussion we can evaluate the importance of rituals for completing Brahmanical education as well as Vedic system of education.

Buddhist System of Education

The Buddhist Sangha not only played a pivotal role in organising the religion, but it was also a

centre of learning where formal education was imparted to children. Initially the method of education was the same as followed in the Brahmanical Gurukulas. The duties of teacher and pupil follow the same lines in Buddhist and Brahmanical system. The main difference between them lies in the character of the educational institution. In the Brahmanical system, it was the Guru-kula or hermitage, based upon individual relationship between the teacher and the pupil. (Altekar, Rep. 2009) In the Buddhist system, education was imparted in the Vihāra or Monastery, giving among the many resident monks, who came under a common discipline and instruction. The aim of education was mainly to make the disciple an ideal monk. For this purpose the disciple was taught the main principle of Buddhism and the rules of conduct laid down by the Buddha for monks. The chief aim of Buddhist education was to develop in the monks the Buddhist point of view so that they might be able to refute the arguments of the exponents of other sects. In course of time the Buddhist monks realised the importance of writing in the field of education. (Keay, 1954) With utmost caution they seemed to have introduced writing in their method of education. Both Buddhist and Jain Educational system started appreciating the significance of the art of writing and from 4th century onwards writing and reading of manuscript became a regular practice in monasteries. The evidence from Buddhist Jatakas clearly indicates that the education was also imparted through manuscripts.

Ancient Indian Educational Institutions and their Libraries

Archaeological as well as literary evidences clearly indicate that the manuscript writing and reading were regularly practised in ancient India since the 4th century B.C. and it can be assumed that collection of manuscript was developed in the important centres of learning. India in fact owes to the Buddhist monks and their social philosophy for the establishment of centre of higher learning. It appears that some of the educational institutions attached to vihāras grew in size in the course of time and were called Mahāvihāras. These institutions not only engaged themselves in teaching but also in writing and translating manuscript as well as propagating in Indian culture in far off countries. All these institutions maintained suitable libraries to facilitate the studies of thousands of students both Indian and foreign. (Marshall, 1983) Now we will discuss the important centre of education and their libraries in eastern India like Nalanda, Vikramsila, Udantapuri, Somapuri, Jagaddala, Mithila and Nadia in ancient India.

Nalanda

Among the advanced centre of learning in Eastern India, Nalanda was a unique place and played a pivotal role in ancient Indian education. Sankalia has made an attempt to reconstruct the various stages of development of small monasteries into great centres of higher learning, which can be termed as University in the present day terminology. (Sankalia, 1972) The great learning centre of Nalanda was based on a sound literary heritage which may be classified into two parts – Buddhist and Non-Buddhist.

Buddhist part included Vinaya Pitaka, Dhammapada, Abhidhamma Pitaka, Suttapitaka etc. whereas non-Buddhist included Vedas, Vedanta, Samkhya, Vaisesika etc. Apart from these, commentaries on Prajnaparamita by Nagarjuna, Maitreya, Asanga, and Vasubandhu also constituted the curriculum. (Mookerji, Rep. 2003)

The glorious history of Nalanda is known to us mainly based upon the accounts of two Chinese travellers Hiuen-Tsang and I-tsing records of the Tibetan historian Taranath and the archaeological remains of the site. Among them the most important source of information remains the description of Nalanda left by Hiuen-Tsang. When Hiuen-Tsang visited Nalanda it was in its full glory and there were about 5000 students studying there. During the time of I-tsing it was also a reputed centre of learning and there were more than 3000 monks residing in the establishment. According to I-tsing, "These eminent and accomplished men assemble in crowds, discuss possible and impossible doctrines and having been assured of the excellence of their opinion by wise men become far famed for their wisdom" (Mookerji, Rep. 2003) Its name and fame not only reached the entire subcontinent but also spread in various neighbouring countries. Many students from outside India like China, Tibet, Korea, Thailand, Mongolia, Tokhara and others came here for advanced studies and removed their doubts on particular problems and to become well-versed in various fields of learning. (Upasak, 1977)

The Nalanda University possessed a well-equipped library. According to Tibetan accounts, the library was situated in a special area known by the poetical name of Dharmaganja (Mart of Religion) and comprised three huge buildings, called Ratnasagar, Ratnadadhi and Ratnarajaka. Ratnasagar, which was nine-storeyed building, specialised in the collection of rare sacred works like Prajanparamita Sutra and Tantrik books like Samajasuhya and the like. (Vidyabhusana, 1977) It may be assumed that one of the remaining two might have been used for preserving non-Buddhist manuscript. It is interesting to note that there was the regular practice of copying manuscript as a portion of the gift was made reserved for copying manuscripts of the university library. When in the twelfth century the library of this place was destroyed, many of the manuscripts found their way to Nepal and Tibet.

Vikramsila

Another famous Buddhist monastery was at Vikramsila which was founded by king Dharmapala in the 8th century A.D. This reputed centre of learning continued to be patronised by the successors of king Dharmapala down to the 13th century. This vihara was designed artistically with ample space for teaching and other academic activities. Taranath informs that the university had as many as six colleges and a central hall with its gates opening on the colleges and each college had a staff of 108 teacher. (Taranath, Rep. 1990) According to Tibetan accounts given by the Tibetan monk Nag-Istno in the 12th century there were 8000 monk scholars residing at the place and the college possessed a rich and extensive library.

The most famous scholar of Vikramsila Dipankar Sri Jnana wrote nearly 200 volumes and went to Tibet on the invitation of Tibetan king Chan Chub to reform Buddhism of that country. (Das, 1992)

Like many other libraries and educational centres of India Vikramsila university and library was destroyed by Muslim ruler Bakhtyar Khilji who seemed to have mistaken it for a fort. According to "Tabakat-i-Nasiri", the great number of the inhabitants of the place was Buddhist Bhikshoos and all of them were slain. (Bhat, 2009)

Odantapuri

Another reputed centre of learning existed at Odantapuri where 1000 monks resided at the time of Abhayakaragupta. When the Pala kings came out first in Magadha they expanded the University of Brahminical and Buddhist works. This monastery was taken as the model after which the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery was built in 749 A.D. under king Khri-syon Den-tsan on the advice of his Guru Sanatarakhita. (Vidyabhusana, 1977)

A rich library with Brahmanical and Buddhist works was endowed by the Pala kings towards the development of this great university. (Mookerji, Rep. 2003) Mohammad Bathiyar Khilji destroyed this monastic university along with its library.

Somapuri

Somapuri Vihara was situated near Paharpur in North Bengal. It flourished as a reputed centre of Buddhist learning during the period of Dharmapala (729-827 A.D.) The institution was housed in a quadrangle measuring more than 900 feet externally on each side, having high boundary walls. It consisted about 177 cells inside. (Barua, 1969) Eminent scholar Atisa Dipankar lived here for a good many days and was engaged in writing original works and translation of famous texts. Somapuri monastery also had its own library. There are reference to handling of several manuscripts by numerous scholar and teacher in this monastic university it may be assumed that there was a good library. (Marshall) It was declared by UNESCO 'World Heritage Site' in 1985. Its present location is in Bangaladesh. (Chopra, 2017)

Jagaddala

King Rampala of Bengal founded a Vihara named Jagaddala. It was situated on the bank of the rivers Ganga and Karotoya in the city of Ramavati of the land of Varendra in North Bengal. The contribution of this institution in the field of education was remarkable though it continued very short time. It had produced a good number of scholars who by their writings made it famous all over the world. (Mookerji, Rep. 2003) Great Vibhutiichandra was associated with this institution. He was a Tibetan scholar and translated many Sanskrit works into Tibetan. Dansila was another famous teacher as was author of Tantrik Buddhism. Besides teaching there were departments for writing, editing and translating of manuscripts etc. So it may be concluded that there was a standard library attached to this institution. (Ray, 1950)

Mithila

Mithila was reputed centre of learning of Brahmanical culture. It developed as a famous school

of Nyaya which flourished from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. There were many remarkable scholars Jagaddhara, Gangesha, Vardhamana, Sankara Mishra, Vachaspati Misra etc. Jagadhara wrote commentaries on different texts, the Gita, Devi Mahatya, Meghduta, Gita Govinda, Malati Madhavi etc. Like other institutions it also maintained a good library and a collection of manuscripts. It maintained the manuscripts with great love. After completion of their study the students were not allowed to take back their copies of manuscript. It appears from the fact that how passionate were they about the manuscripts. (Dutta, 1970)

Nadia

The last famous seat of learning in Eastern India was Nadia in Bengal. Education in Nadia University was imparted in three centres. These centres were situated in Navadweep, Shantipur and Gopalpara. It reached its heights of glory 1083 to 1106 A.D. as a centre of intellectual excellence as well as its library facilities, when Lakshman Sen, a King of Gouda, made it his Capital. Several renowned person like Jayadeva (author of "Gitagovinda"), Dhoyi (author of "Pavanaduta") built up the reputation of Nadia as a seat of learning. (Munshi, 1998)

Conclusion

The famous educational institutes of ancient India played a pivotal role for the cultivation, preservation and propagation of Indian culture and education not only throughout the country but also abroad. Social, cultural and educational life of ancient India is praiseworthy. The educational system helped the development of personality by cultivating self-respect, self-reliance and self-restraint. It sought to build up the whole being of the individual and enable him to lead the highest and best kind of life possible for him in the circumstances in which he was placed. The type of culture thus evolved was not merely theoretical, but penetrated to the heart of the people, and pervaded every important aspect of individual and social life. Library is an essential ingredient of a civilised society, since besides experience; books are the main source of acquiring knowledge. The study of the subject of learning, libraries and organisation of knowledge in ancient India is an essential chapter in the history of intellectual development of the country.

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