



ANCIENT SEAT OF LEARNING IN BIHAR : VIKRAMSILA

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Vikramsila University was one of the most important centres of Buddhist learning in India during Pala Dynasty. We owe its history from writings of Taranath, the Tibetan monk historian of 16th — 17th century A.D. It was' founded by King Dharmapala (783 to 820 A.D.) on a suitable site, a hillock on the bank of the Ganges in Northern Magadh. It is located at about 50 km east of Bhagalpur and about 13 km of Kahalgaon.

The University was surrounded by a strong wall. At the centre was erected the temple adorned with Mahabodhi images. These were also created within the enclosure fifty-three smaller temples of private character and fifty four ordinary temples, totaling 108 temples. The King, Dharmapala made provision for teaching by appointment of 108 teachers and other staff. While establishment used to be in charge of a famous abbot (bhikshu). He was usually elected by the members of the Samgha. Character, scholarship and seniority were the factors usually taken into consideration in the appointment. Sometimes the head of the institution was nominated by the king of the country. In the ninth century A.D. a monk scholar from Jahanabad (Nagarahara) who was on a pilgrimage to Bihar, was appointed Principal of the University of Nalanda by King Devapala. This shows that there existed cultural co-operation.¹

The head of the University used to be assisted by two councils, one academic and the other administrative. The academic council/ board consisting of eminent teachers used to regulate admission, determine courses and assign work to different teachers. In the description of Taranath,² it is stated that this board of Vikramsila also administered the affairs of Nalanda. This kind of co-ordination of work and management between the two universities was perhaps due to king Dharmapala being their common head. Accordingly, we find teachers like Dipamkara and Abhayakara Gupta working at both the universities or exchanges of teachers between them.³

The university had six colleges, each with a staff of the standard strength of 108 teachers, and a central hall called the House of Science with its six gates opening on the six colleges. The outer wall, surrounding the whole monastery was decorated with artistic work, a portrait in painting of Nagarjuna adorning the right of the principal entrance and that of

Atisa on the left. On the walls of the university were also painted portraits of Pandits eminent for their learning and character.⁴

The gates of the university were guarded by the most erudite of its scholars called Dvara-Panditas, so that admission to it might not be cheap and its standard of scholarship lowered. There were six such redoubtable 'gate keepers'. During the reign of Chanaka (A.D. 955-983). Following eminent logicians were acted as 'Gate-keepers', 'Custodians of its scholarship'.

1. Ratnakarasanti, East Gate
2. Vagisvarakirti of Banaras, West Gate
3. Naropa, North Gate
4. Prajnakarmati, South Gate
5. Ratnavajra of Kashmir, First Central Gate
6. Jnanasrimitra of Gauda, Second Gate⁵

According to scholar Sukumar Dutta, Vikramsila university appears to have had a more clearly delineated hierarchy than other Mahavihars which are as following:

- Abbot (Adhyaksha)
- Six gate protectors or gate scholars (Dvarpala or Dvarpandita)
- Great scholars (Maha pandits)
- Scholar Pandits
- Professor or Teachers (Upadhyaya or Acharya), roughly 160 in number including Pandits.
- Resident Monks (bhiksw, roughly 1000 in numbers).⁶

At the time of its founder, Dharmapala, it was Buddha-Jnana-Pada. During 1034-8 Dipankara or Srijnana Atisa was the Head under whom Sthavira Ratnakara acted as the superior of the monastery.⁷

Grammar, logic and meta physics, tantra were the main subjects specialized in at this institution. The most important branch of learning taught there was the Tantra. The curriculum at Vikramsila university was not as comprehensive as that of Nalanda. The gradation of the courses however, was more systematic than that of any other centre of ancient Indian education.⁸

Unfortunately, Vikramsila is not as fortunate as Nalanda in the matter of conservation of its history. But its history is written large in the biography of the great men, it has produced, the scholars, who were invited by foreign countries, chiefly Tibet, to spread its learning, culture and religion. From the foreign accounts of some of these scholars we glean something of the history of their Alma Mater. Indeed, the success of the work of Vikramsila as a seat of learning is amply demonstrated by the quality and quantity of its output, the prodigies of piety and learning it produced, and the profound contribution they made to knowledge and religion by their numerous writing which practically built up the culture and civilization of another country, Tibet. Tibet has gratefully treasured up the memories of some of these graduates of vikramsila, a few of whom it has canonised as its patron-saints.⁹

Vikramsila scholar and teachers are mentioned in Tibetan accounts, some of the eminent teachers among them are as follows —

Jnurepada- Acharya Jnanapada was appointed as the royal priest of Dharmapala, who later appointed him as the Acharya or Ordination of Vikramsila. There he developed his study of Mantra-Vajracharya and became the founder of a new cult of which vikramsila was the only centre in those days. About nine of his Sanskrit works on Tantra which are lost are preserved in Tibet.

Vairochara: Vairochara Rakshita was a pupil of Padmasambhava, on whose departure to Tibet he came to Vikramsila, where he wrote several works in Sanskrit. He won the titles of Mahapandita and Mahacharya.

Jetari: After completion of study at Vikramsila the title of Pandita was conferred to him by king Mahipala (899-940 A.D.), then he worked as a professor there. He was the teacher of the distinguished scholars, Ratnakarsanti who learnt from him sutra and tantra and become 'gate keeper' of the Vihara in about 983 A.D.

Prajnakarmati — He was one of gate keepers' of the Vihara, who wrote several works, two of which are in Tibetan.

Ratnakara — Ratnakarsasanti, another 'gate keeper' was first at Odantapur University, where he received ordination in the sarvastivada school. Later joined Vikramsila as a pupil of 'Jetari'. He went to ceylon to preach Buddhism at the invitation of its. He wrote about thirteen works in Sanskrit.

Janana Sri Mitra a gate keeper wrote several works in Sanskrit. He learn Tibetan into which lie translate many books.

Ratnavajra — Ratnavajra was another gate keeper was a native of Kasmir, joined Vikramsila for further studies and won the title of 'Pandita' and the position of a 'gate keeper'.

He came to Tibet where he learnt Tibetan into which he translated many Buddhist works.

Vagisvara — Vagiswarakirti, another 'gate-keeper' was a native of Banaras. He wrote a Sanskrit work 'Mrityubanchanopadesa' which was introduced to Tibet by Dipamkara.

Dipamkara— Dipamkara, also known as Acharya Atisa, was the greatest of Indian scholars who worked as missionaries in foreign countries. Viryasimha — He is principally known as an associate of Atisa whom he helped in translating into Tibetan at Vikramsila.

We got interesting details regarding the Vikramsila Monastery in Tibetan account of the visit of the Tibetan monk Nag-tsho who was deputed by the Tibetan King to Vikramsila for the purpose of inducing its great scholar, Atisa, to come to Tibet-and take charge of Buddhist propoganda in that country.

Vikramsila prospered for about four centuries, before it was destroyed by Bukhtiyar Khilji during fighting with Sena dynasty along with other major centres of Buddhism in India around 1200 C.E.¹⁰

Vikramsila University was neglected for years which contributed to extensive damages to the monument. Archaeological survey of India is planning to develop excavated site of Vikramsila. From the year 2009, there has been considerable work in maintaining and beautifying the place to attract tourism. There has been inflow of Western tourist as well, during their river cruises on the Ganges river.

References:

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5. Ibid.
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9. Radha Kumud Mukherjee, 'op. cit' p. 589.
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