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The Glorious Teachers of Vikramshila

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Abstract

Vikramshila calls for resuscitation, for the past eight centuries. There had been a division of opinion regarding its correct location, but there was no difference regarding its fame and effulgence. Like a bright diamond, it shines even amidst rebels. Now the location is proven through excavations. From Taranaths's account, the greatest probability was at Colgong and not at Silao. S. C. Das and a host of others were inclined to accept it near Patharghata hills at Colgong, a few kilometres east of Bhagalpur, where the Ganges, takes a northerly turn and where Taranath's descriptions proved accurate. But history is no more sheer worship of Cleo, it is also the time endeavouring to be exact. The truth about Vikramshila lies hidden in the womb of Mother Earth: to the industrious researcher she is whirling to unveil herself, this excavation adds one more feather to the cultural heritage, of which India has an inexhaustible store, ready to reveal herself in her finest glories and glorious teachers.

Keywords: Excavation, Heritage, Languages, Mahavira, Panditas, Teachers

1. Introduction

The Tibetan chronicler Lama Taranath's well-known work. first translated by the German Schiefner Geschichte des Buddhismus is the principal source of information regarding the Royal University of Vikramshila. The credit for the establishment of this University goes to Dharmapala, according to Taranath. Dharmapala succeeded his father Gopala, the founder of the Pala Dynasty. According to the Tibetan historian, Dharmapala ruled his kingdom which extended from the Bay of Bengal to Jaiandhar and the Vindhya area in the South. for 64 years whereas Indian scholars think that he ruled for 32 years i.e. from 769 to 801 AD. The Bhagalpur grant [in copper-plate inscription issued by King Narayan Pala] mentions Dharmapala as a sagacious ruler, kind and generous, brave and forgiving who levied taxes with justice and equity and extended the Pala Empire with his valour and might[1]. It was a time of Pala affluence in the fulfilment of Lord Buddha's commandments to help in the acquisition and spread of knowledge. Dharmapala established the Royal University of Vikramshila[2].

Vikarmshila Vihara had, therefore, a regal touch both outside and inside. A temple with Mahabodhi images stood in the Centre. Within the enclosure, fifty-three smaller temples of private character and fifty-four ordinary temples were set up. Thus there were 108 temples of various sorts within the compound of the monastery. King Dharmpala had made provisions for 108 pundits to meet the requirement of teaching and also appointed a superintendent of works. a guard of pigeons and a supplier of temple servants. Their necessities were met from the royal treasure. Lama Taranath makes an interesting comment to the effect that the Board of eminent teachers at Vikramshila kept watch over the affairs of the Nalanda Vihara. possibly because King Dharmpala was the common head for Vikramshila and Nalanda[3].

Sometimes we find men like Dipamkara and Abhayankara Gupta working in both Universities and A regular exchange of teachers between these two great institutions of the East[4]. There was also a 'house assigned for the use of Tibetans in his monastery[5]. Some strangers could stay in the night if they arrived late on the University campus, after the closure of the gates.

2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive historical account of the Royal University of Vikram0shila, highlighting its establishment, educational system, notable teachers and its profound influence on the spread of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in Tibet. The article aims to shed light on Vikramshila's significant role as a center of learning, showcasing its scholars, their contributions and the challenges it faced during its existence.

- To explore Vikramshila's establishment and to investigate the historical context and the role of Dharmapala in th establishment of Vikramshila.
- To describe the architectural layout and religious significance of Vikramshila Vihara.
- To examine the eminent teachers of Vikramshila and to provide detailed biographical accounts of key teachers such as Jatari-Lama Taranatha, Dipankara Sri Jana, Vagiswara Kirti, and others.
- To analyse the educational system at Vikramshila and to explore the curriculum , focusing on subjects like logic, Tantra, Abhidharma and their relevance in the context of Buddhism
- Assess the impact of Vikramshila's teachings on the development of Buddhism in Tibet, Nepal, and China.
- To analyse the factors contributing to te decline of Vikramshila, including invasions and internal conflicts.

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1 Literature Review

Conduct an extensive review to historical texts, scholarly articles and translations related to Vikramshila, Tibetan Buddhism, and Indian history during the specified period.

2.1.2 Primary Source Analysis

Analyse primary sources including inscriptions, manuscripts, and chronicles from the relevant era to gain insights into Vikramshila's history and its teachers.

2.1.3 Biographical Research

Conduct in-depth biographical research on key figures associated with Vikramshila, focusing on their contributions, writings, and impact on Buddhist philosophy and practice.

2.1.4 Comparative Analysis

Compare the educational system and teachings of Vikramshila with other contemporary Buuddhist universities like nalanda to provide a comprehensive understanding of their similarities and differences.

2.1.5 Interviews and Consultations

Engage with experts in Buddhist studies, history and archaeology for insights and interpretations regarding Vikramshila's significance and its impact on the spread of Buddhism.

2.1.6 Archaeological Exploration

Explore archaeological findings and excavations related to Vikramshila to gather tangible evidence supporting historical accounts and architectural descriptions.

By employing a combination of these research methods, this article aims to present a nuanced and detailed account of Vikramshila, its remarkable teachers and its enduring influence on the development of Buddhism in Asia.

3. Details and Process of Study Area

The University had six colleges, each with a strength of 108 teachers[6]. There was a Central Hall with six gates opening towards the six Colleges. The Hall was used for the study of Prajnaparamita scriptures. There were six 'Dwara Panditas' at the six gates who were used to examine the candidates seeking admission into Vikramshila[7].

1. Ratnakarasanti	East Gate
2. Vagiswarakirti	West Gate
3. Naropa	North Gate
4. Prajakarmiti	South Gate
5. Ratnavajra	First Central Gate
6. Jnana Sreemitra	Second Gate[8]

These eminent teachers came from different parts of India, e.g. Vagisvarakriti from Banaras, Ratnavajra from Kashmir and Janasrimitra from Gauda Pradesh, which goes to show the high esteem in which this University

was held, and also its metropolitan character. The high priest, or the President of the Vihara was always the most learned and religious sage. During Dharmapala's reign, it was Buddha Jana-pada as in AD 1034-1038, Dipankara or Sri Jana Atisa was the head under whom Sthavira Ratnakara acted as the superior of the Monastery[9].

No account of Vikramshila can be complete without referring to the galaxy of teachers and their vast contribution towards the manifestation of Indian genius and the spread of Mahayana Buddhism especially in and across the Himalayan Kingdoms. Nepal, Tibet and China received immense enlightenment from the monastic University of Vikramshila, of which Tibet had the largest share. The development of the art of reading and writing was recent in Tibet, but it attained full maturity in contact with this University. One is wonder-struck to see how many teachers of Vikramshila, and Nalanda, knew the Tibetan language, and how a great number of the Tibetans learnt Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages at Vikramshila alone. It will be a real contribution to historical studies to discover the lure of the Tibetans which compelled them to flock to Vikramshila despite manifold and insurmountable hazards of travels, and similarly to bring to light the impulse behind the deep concern of the Indian pundits to shed the lustre of the Holy one in the land of snow. Behind the inspiration of the two-way traffic, the only probable answer seems to be the missionary zeal of the Indian scholars and the compelling devotion of the Tibetans. Why otherwise the Indian teachers should have learnt and mastered the Tibetan language and offered the Tibetans numerous volumes of Buddhist epistemology and eschatology in their language and not in Sanskrit alone? Buddhism had her heyday once long before. Right from Ashoka's time, it shed its effulgence in Ceylon and the Far East: - Malaya, Sumatra, Java, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma. During the supremacy of Vikramshila [from the 08" to 12" Centuries AD] it turned to the north and made a niche for itself ousting the influence of Confucianism and Laoteism. Buddhism had its crisis in India being in constant conflict with Brahmanism, yet Vikramshila preserved what was the noblest ray, pure and serene. Like a lighthouse, it's not its beckoning streaks to the misty regions of the snow-capped mountains who took them as their guide beams which would bear them to safety and prosperity.

The unforgettable personalities, divided into several groups, were, more or less, contemporaneous with each other and it was their united and comprehensive efforts, suitably patronized by the state, that won them an immortal place in the history of civilization. We may begin with Acharya Budha Janapada, Royal priest of Dharmapala who was contemporary with the Tibetan king Khri Sron lde Btsan. The Acharya was the disciple of Simhabhadra and an ardent follower of the cult of Vajracharya in Vikramshila University. In the catalogue of Tibetan Tripitaka, nine books, mostly on Tantrism are ascribed to him, of which the Tibetan copies exist and the Sanskrit originals are lost. Vairocana Rakshita and his guru Padmasambhava both went to Tibet, one after another, Pandit Vairocana was honoured as Mahapandita in Tibet. Two of his books 'Mantra VIvartaprajne-hridays-vritti' and 'Ratna-vada-cakra' were composed mainly for the Tibetan King kri-sron-lde Btsan. He composed eight books in Sanskrit which were rendered into Tibetan by various scholars[10]. Being a profound Tibetan scholar, he translated nine Sanskrit books into the Tibetan language.

4. The Glorious Teachers of Vikramshila

Jatari-Lama Taranatha has preserved for posterity the detailed life of this great teacher. He hailed from Varendra, Northern Bengal and his father Garbhapada lived in the court of King Sanatan, a vassal of the Pala rulers. Jatari graduated from Vikramshila and during the reign of King Mahipala [899-940 AD], he received the royal diploma of Mahapandila from the king himself.

He distinguished himself as the preceptor of Ratnakara Santi and Sri Atisa and the compiler of numerous books on Tantra and Sutras. At least fourteen such books are available through Tibetan sources.

Prajnakarmati - A dwarapandita of the southern Gate of Vikramshila was an eminent logician of his time. Two of his books are in Tibetan[11].

Ratnakarsanti - Guardian of the Eastern Gate in Vikramshila, he was an accomplished writer on Buddhism. His books reached Tibet in translation. The Tibetans mentioned him as Santi Pa. He visited Ceylon to preach Buddhism. Thirteen books written by him in Sanskrit have been listed in the Catalog de Fond Tibtain[12].

Jnana Sri Mitra is often confused with Jnana Sri. He learnt the Tibetan language and translated one of his books, Pramana-Viniscayatika' into Tibetan. Four of his books are Extant. Ratna Vajra - a Kashmiri, was another Dwarapandita of Vikramshila. He returned to Kashmir, then to Tibet where he translated numerous books in Tibetan. Fourteen books in Sanskrit are ascribed to him, and four translations in Tibetan.

Vagiswara Kirti an inhabitant of Banaras a devotee of Tara under whose inspiration he wrote only one book: Mrityubancanopadesa a treatise on Tantra. Dipankara Sri Jana or Jana Sri Atisa. The greatest Buddhist missionary and the most prolific writer on Buddhism, Tantra and devotional literature. He was the doyen of scholars and the greatest and lasting glory of Vikramshila.

Dipankara Sri Jana or Jana Sri Atisa[13] who belong to Sabour, Bhagalpur, we have already discussed him in detail. The greatest Buddhist missionary and the most prolific writer on Buddhism, Tantra[14]. and devotional literature, he was the doyen of scholars and the greatest and lasting glory of Vikramshila. Atisa reviewed the Mahayana cult and resided in the different parts of Tibet, for 13 years, teaching and preaching wherever he lived. He died at Nethan near Lhasa at the age of 73 in the year 1053 AD, having completed in his sojourn twenty-one religious original compositions and annotations of existing Buddhist scriptures. All told, he wrote about 200 books original and translations, among which 83 are Tantric books in Sanskrit[15].

Viryasimha - Contemporary of Sri Atisa, he was associated with him in translating the latter's books. His translations were a great source of propagating Buddhism in Tibet. Abhayankara Gupta - Another associate of Sri Atisa in translating his books and spreading Buddhism in Tibet. He translated seven books into Tibetan and composed 26 more in Sanskrit.

Tathagata Rakshita - a native of Orissa, an eminent tantric scholar, was the author of 7 books all translated into Tibetan. Some of his compositions are in Sanskrit. Ratnakirti - Author of three books, all translated in Tibetan.

Manjusri - Another devotee of Tara, a tantric deity, he did a lot of writing and translating during his stay at Vikramshila Vihara.

Dharmakirti - A popular figure among the Buddhists. A logician, it is reported that he was a Tibetan, called a Lotsaba, i.e., a Tibetan scholar well-versed in Sanskrit. Translated 16 books into Tibetan from Sanskrit.

Sakya Sri Bhadra - A Mahapandita at Vikramshila was the last to visit Tibet. He was an eye-witness to the destruction of the Vikramsila Vihar at the hands of the Turks. It was this tragedy that sent him to Tibet for shelter.

5. Progress of the Educational System at Vikramshila Mahavihara

The courses of study at Vikramshila were less comprehensive than at Nalanda or the earlier Taxila where even technological teaching was in vogue. But Vikramshila excelled in the teaching of logic which was essential to combat heretics that sprung in large numbers then, and also those who disputed the claims of Buddhism. In addition to logic, Tantra was the most popular subject. It did not mean the debased worship of ogres, as it means today or the practices of the Charvakas; It had useful and dignified components. Tantric philosophy was not hedonism. S. K. Das in his famous book:

"The Educational System of the Ancient Hindus" refers to Dr. P. C. Roy's history of Hindu Chemistry where he said that the Tantras were the repositories of chemical knowledge. "From the fifth to the eleventh Century AD the colleges in connection with the monasteries of Patliputra, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Odantpuri etc, were great seats of learning as the temples attached to the pyramids in ancient Egypt, and alchemy was included in the curricula of studies[1]. Law, Mathematics and Astronomy were not so much patronized as in the Hindu Pathshalas, but grammar. Abhidharma (Metaphysics), Agams and Nikyas, Sabdavidya, Chekitsavidya, Magic and Samakhya were taught.

Both the teachers and the teacher kept themselves occupied with copying manuscripts which helped in the development of calligraphy, as well as, added to the number of copies of texts, thus enriching libraries at different centres – the best and most well-equipped being at Vikramshila itself[16].

The success of the work of Vikramshila as a seat of learning lies in the "Quality and Quantity of its output, the prodigies of piety and learning it produced, and the profound 2 contributions they made to knowledge and religion by their numerous writings which practically built up the culture and civilization of another country, Tibet[17]. Tibet shall ever remain indebted to Vikramshila

for Buddhistic learning and India shall equally remain grateful to Tibet for the preservation of the accounts on Vikramshila, which are nowhere available now except in the scriptural test, translation and chronicles in Tibet. Atisa, the venerated scholar went to Tibet and was accorded a royal reception in Tibet. The King of Tibet addressed him as Jovo Je which means prabhu, swami. Atisa reviewed the Mahayana cult and resided in the different parts of Tibet, for 13 years, teaching and preaching wherever he lived. He died at Nethan near Lhasa at the age of 73 in the year 1053 AD, having completed in his sojourn twenty-one religious original compositions and annotations of existing Buddhist scriptures. All told, he wrote about 200 books – both originals and translations, among which 83 are Tantric books in Sanskrit[18].

6. Conclusion

India was invaded by the Pathans. After having secured their footholds in Delhi, they fanned out in several directions wherever a military installation came in sight or a rich hoard of treasure was expected. The Pala sun was on the decline in the latter half of the 12th Century. The Senas encroached upon the Pala territory, but could not hold it together in the face of the Muslim onslaught. The second battle of Taroin (1192 AD) had been fought by the divided Hindu Kings against an organized barbarous horde and was therefore lost by the former. One of the Muslim invaders named Malik Hasan – Ud – Din Aghul Bak carved out a principality in Oudh, Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhamad Ibn Bakhtyar, a Turk belonging to the Khalif tribe of Ghur, held the fiefs Bhakwat and Bhawali, between the Ganges and Karmanasa, eastward of and adjoining Chunargarh. This Turkish chief, ungainly in build, and dastard in fight, made regular incursions in Bihar. Maulana - Minhaz - I- Siraj Abu Umar - I - Usman, in his Tabaqat- I- Nasiri, informed us that this chief, Bakthyar invaded Vikramshila, rifled its treasury, burnt all books and mistaking bhikhchhus for soldiers put them all to the sward[19] nothing was left there to tell the tale of the glory that was Vikramshila and the glorious teachers.

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