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Scholastic excellence of Nalanda and Nalanda contemporary (415 A.D. – 1200 A.D.) Al-Qarawiyyin: a comparative evaluation

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Abstract

This paper tries to make a comparative study between the two ancient pioneer Universities, Nalanda University in India and Al-Qarawiyyin University in Morocco. India was a great seat of learning in ancient period where people from the various parts of the world used to come to India to acquire knowledge. Nalanda, Taxila, Mithila, Vikramasila, Baranasi, Valabhi etc. were the popular names where systematic ways of higher education prevailed. Al-Qarawiyyin is also a popular higher learning institute in Morocco which is the symbol of Islamic tradition, culture and education. It is not too old as Nalanda but it was started its journey when Nalanda reached its highest pride. Though no record was found whether there was any connection regarding the educational transactions between these two Universities existed or not but this study helps to recognize the pattern, structure and other factors which were responsible for the development of higher education in that period. This paper highlights the academic brilliance of Nalanda system of education in the perspective of Nalanda-contemporary (415 A.D. – 1200 A.D.) global higher education with special reference to Al-Qarawiyyin. The method employed for the present study is historical and analytical in nature.

Keywords: scholastic excellence, global higher education

1. Introduction

Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin are the famous names as higher learning institutions in the ancient world. Pupils from the various parts of the world were attracted and came to these higher learning institutions to satisfy their urge of knowledge. When Al-Qarawiyyin started its journey, Nalanda had already reached in its highest pride. In the history of human civilization, it is found that the formal education was started through religious institutions. Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin were also started primarily as religious centres; Nalanda as a centre of Buddhist religion and culture whereas Al-Qarawiyyin was the leading spiritual and religious centre of the Muslim world.

This paper is an attempt to make a comparative evaluation of both the systems of education of Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin, the two significant ancient centres of higher education in order to focus the scholastic excellence of Nalanda system of higher education. The method employed for the present study is historical and analytical in nature.

2. Objectives of the Study

- i) To trace the system of education prevailed in Nalanda;
- ii) To analyze the structure of education prevailed in Al-Qarawiyyin;
- iii) To evaluate the scholastic brilliance of both the systems of education prevailed in Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin and to make a comparative estimation.

3. Nalanda: A Centre of Learning

3.1 Background History

Nalanda has a very long history and great contribution in world education. It was situated in latitude 25°30' and 25°83' North and longitude 85°16' and 85°27' east. The scattered ruins of Nalanda are situated near the village Bargaon, 11 km north of modern

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Rajgir and 85 km south-east of Patna in Bihar ^[1].

In between the period 427 A.D. & 1197 A.D. – Nalanda achieved glorious and incredible position with high status and pride in the world educational scenario though a big confusion is there regarding the time period of foundation of the University. According to the Tibetan historian *Taranatha*, Nalanda was the birth place of the venerable *Sariputra*. *Ashoka* was the first ruler who built a great Buddha temple which probably became the precursor of the later Nalanda *Vihara*. But Nalanda appeared as a learning centre near by the half of the 5th century A.D. According to Prof. Samaddar (Samaddar, “the Glories of Magadha”, P - 135, 2nd edition) – the foundation of Nalanda took place in the reign of *Sakraditya* (Kumara Gupta I, *Mohendraditya* – 415 A.D. – 455 A.D.) round 427 A.D. In his language Professor samaddar said, “We reach the year 427 as the initial year of *Sakraditya*’s reign. This date comes very near the earliest known date of *Kumara Gupta I* that is 415-16, of the Bilsad inscription, the foundation of Nalanda took place round 427 A.D.”. It is to be noted that Nalanda became flourished when a stream of scholastic pilgrimage began to flow towards the place. The final decline of the University was taken place by a barbarous adventurer, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, in approximately 1200 A.D ^[2].

3.2. Scholastic Brilliance

Though Nalanda was emerged as a centre of Buddhist tradition and education, still gradually it covered a wide range of subjects including all branches of Buddhism, other Indian philosophical systems, *Chikitsavidya* or Medicine, Astronomy, Geography, Mathematics, *Hetuvidya* or logic, *Sabdavidya* or Grammar and other arts and science subjects of the day. The wonderful event is that when the present highly economic developed countries asleep into the depth of darkness mainly in the area of literacy and civilization, the then India was mostly advanced in the field of education through the ancient educational institutions like, Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramasila *Mahavihara* etc. So, Nalanda should not be considered as only an educational institution but it should be treated as the witness of the educational history of the human civilization. Thousands of years passed over, dynasties passed, political ups and downs had been occurred – Nalanda and its pride may be de-memorised but its significance is still very much important and without it the history of Indian education system cannot be possible to analyse.

Nalanda *Mahavihara* being a seat of higher studies had a system of specialization. I-tsing wrote, “In the Nalanda monastery, the number of priests is immense and exceeds three thousand; it is difficult to assemble so many together in one place. There are eight halls and three hundred apartments in this monastery. The worship can only take place separately, as most convenient to each number. Thus it is customary to send out, every day, one preceptor to go round from place to place chanting hymns being preceded by monastic lay servants and children carrying with them incense and flowers. He goes from one hall to another and in each time he chants the service, every time three or five slokas in a high tone and the sound is heard all round. At twilight he finishes this duty. This preceptor generally is

presented by the Monstary with some special gift (Puga). In addition, there are some who, sitting alone, facing the shrine (Gandhakuti), praise the Buddha in their hearts. There are others, who going to the temple, (in a small party) kneel side by side with their bodies upright and putting their hands on the ground, touch it with their heads and thus perform the three fold salutation” ^[3].

The subjects taught at Nalanda cover almost every aspect of education which could be classified broadly into religious and secular groups laying more emphasis on the former. The subjects can be given as follows-

- Buddhist – Tripitika, Jatakamala poems, Abhidharmakosa of vasubandhu, Yogasastra, Nyayanusara sastra, Tantras, Buddha-charita-kavya etc.
- Brahmanical – *Vedas*, *Samkhya*, other old and modern learning of Brahmanical works.
- Secular – *Hetuvidya*, *Sabdavidya*, *Chikitsavidya* and Miscellaneous works, *Vyakarana*, Sanskrit language, Sculpture, Paintings, Metallurgy, *Sarpavidya* etc.

According to Hiuen-Tsang students of Nalanda were regulated strictly according to proper time schedule. The teachers made the gift of the sacred law to the students which excelled all other gifts as it aimed at extinction of craving and suffering. They unfolded the meaningful knots in the texts. According to I-tsing – “Monks generally assemble at a place in the vihara where they take seats. Then a lecturer ascends the simhasana and recites a short sutra. After the lecture, the assembled monks say “sadhhu-sadhu”. Then the lecturer comes down and the monks bow down to the simhasana respectively”. The type of teaching was mainly professional in nature.

In the course of studies the *yogi* learnt preaching, discussions, heard lectures, memorized them and grasped the *Abhidhamma*, *Vinaya*, Gatha etc. The aim was to become a man of letters (*Vidya-purusha*). Students were under the strict discipline. For offences the brethren has a gradation of penalties. According to Hiuen-Tsang there were nearly 10,000 students but I-Tsing’s time the number of the students supported at the monastery exceeded 3000 [other view 5000 and in his (I-Tsing) memoirs, as 3500]. So, there was a confusion regarding the number of students studied at Nalanda. But it is no doubt that huge number of students from the various parts of the world studied there. The admission of a student possessed a complex procedure. The entrance examination was very strict so that its standard might be in keeping with that of its studies. *Dwar-pandita* asked various questions, which were connected with difficult problems. Most of the students were failure in giving answers. Only about twenty to thirty percent students could be able to success. Nalanda Mahavihara possessed a very large and rich library which comprised three monumental edifices, called Ratna Sagara, Ratna Dadhi and Ratna Ranjaka, of which Ratna Sagara that was a nine-storeyed building, was specialized in the collection of rare and sacred works.

Nalanda was noted for its specialization in the last stages of a University education. At that time Nalanda was particularly a research institute for advanced students. The stamp of its approval was necessary for any opinion to gain currency in the country. The highest academic degree of distinction of the times was a fellowship of Nalanda.

¹ Background History of Nalanda University. Available in... <file:///F:/Banglapedia.htm>. retrieved on May,15, 2015.

² Saletore, R.N., (1984), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Culture*, Volume III, New Delhi, Sterling Publisher Pvt. Ltd. p. 1044.

³ Takakusu, J., (1896, reprint 2005), *I-Tsing, A Record of the Buddhist Religion: As practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695)*, Translated work, New Delhi, 154-155

Nalanda also had a department of secondary education for regular internal students for whom the above tests of admission did not apply. It admitted youngsters, the *Brahmacharis* and *Manavakas*. The University provided for all alumni free of cost there four requisite of clothes, food, bedding and medicine. The students could give themselves whole heartedly to their studies and self-culture.

3.3 Eminent Teachers and Scholars

Nalanda was too much enriched with its high degree of teachers. Actually so much fame of Nalanda as a centre of learning was mainly due to the fame of its teachers. Among them Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dinnaga, Sthiramati, Gunamati, Chandragomin, Chandrakirti, Dharmapala, Dharmakirti, Silabhadra, Pravakara Mitra, Rahulabhadra, Nagarjuna II, Aryadeva, Santideva, Santarakshita, Kamalasila and many of others.

According to Hiuen-Tsang, the ranking of monks led to the institutions of academic titles indicative of the different degrees of status, standing and grade to which they belonged. The highest title was *Kulapati*. Next title of distinction was *Pandita*, *Maha-pandita* etc. The rooms of the monks were distributed according to their ranks. Better rooms were allotted for highest ranks and gradually to the lowest.

The great university demise was result of waning enthusiasm for Buddhism in India, declining financial support from successive Indian monarchs and corruption among university officials and a huge straw may be called as final straw was the burning of the building by Muslim invader Bakhtiyar Khalji.

4. Al-Qarawiyyin: A Centre of Learning

4.1 Background History

Al-Qarawiyyin is a University located in Fez, Morocco. Al-Qarawiyyin situated in latitude 34°02'13" North and longitude 4°59'59" west. It was founded by Fatima al-Fihri in 859 A.D. with an associated school or madrasa. In contrast according to UNESCO and a number of other sources, Al-Qarawiyyin is considered to have been a University since its founding that it is the oldest existing University in the world^[4]. According to the Guinness Book of World Record- the Al-Qarawiyyin institution is the oldest continuously operating academic degree-granting University in the world. However, the matter is still in a debate regarding its oldest stand. The mosque of Al-Qarawiyyin now is largest in Africa with a capacity of 22000 worshipers^[5]. The design of the mosque is austere, the columns and arches are plain white, and the floors are covered in mats. The present form of the mosque has come in- forth through a long historical evolution of more than thousand years. In the beginning, the mosque was about 30 meters long. Umayyad Caliph of Cordoba, Abd-ar-Rahman III, first expanded the mosque in 956 A. D. The most extensive re-construction was taken place under the patronage of the Almoravid ruler Sultan Ali Ibn Yusuf in 1135 A. D. and the structure in this period was expanded to more than 3000 square meters. In the 16th century, the mosque was restored by the Saadis with the addition of two patios to the northern and southern ends of the court-yard.

4.2 Structure and System of Education

Al-Qarawiyyin Madrasa took a vital role which may be called as leading role in developing culture and academic prosperity in the Islamic world in the middle ages. Mohammad al- Idrisi, a famous cartographer said that European exploration in the Renaissance have lived in Fez, Morocco for some time. The Al-Qarawiyyin Madrasa and its glorious pattern of education has produced a number of numerous scholars who have a significant role in the intellectual and academic realms of the Muslim world.

The pattern of education was mainly concentrated on the Islam and its associated matters with a heavy emphasis on classical Arabic grammar and Maliki law, though some of the non-Islamic subjects were also taught like English, French, Medicine, Mathematics and even History, Geography and Music. The quality of education was so high that the students from all-over the Muslim world were attracted. There were a large number of applicants who tried to take admission in the University but the University had to introduce a selection system that the student must have the knowledge of whole Quran, knowledge of Arabic language and of general sciences and belong to the Muslim community. The method of teaching was traditional in nature. Mainly lecture method was followed there. Generally, 13 to 30 age groups of students were studied there. The high school level Diplomas and University level Bachelor's degrees were awarded for the students.

4.3 Eminent Teachers and Scholars

Al-Qarawiyyin Madrasa has produced a number of eminent scholars who have influenced significantly in the intellectual and cultural history of the Muslim world as well as Jewish world. The famous theorist of the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence, Abu Imran al-Fasi, the famous writer Leo Africanus, Ibn Maimun, Al-Idrissi, Ibn al-Arabi, Ibn Khaldun and many others were all connected with Al-Qarawiyyin as students or scholars or lecturers. There were some of the famous Christian scholars also like Belgian Nicolas Cleynaerts and Dutchman Golius who enriched the educational system of Al-Qarawiyyin.

4.4 Al-Qarawiyyin at Present

In 1963 the Madrasa of Al-Qarawiyyin was finally declared and transformed into a University under the ministry of education of Morocco government. The old mosque school was shut down. Four renounced departments were founded in and outside of the city. Department of Islamic law in Fez, department of Arabic studies in Marrakech, department of theology in Tetouan and a general department in Agadir^[6]. The old building is now reformed as the office of Dean of the University. Modern curriculum and international standard of text-books has been introduced. Well trained teachers of various subjects who are specialized in their respective field are now engaged for teaching; not only the students of the Muslim community, but also the students of various culture and religion who possess sufficient quality can also take admission in the University.

5. Comparative Evaluation

From the above discussion a comparison between the two

⁴ "Medina of Fez". UNESCO. Retrieved on July 31, 2015

⁵ Fauzi, M. Najjar (April 1958), *The Karaouine at Fez*, The Muslim World: Vol. 48, issue 2, Wiley. Retrieved Aug, 9, 2014.

⁶ Lulat, Y. G. M. (2005), *A History of African Higher Education from Antiquity to the Present: A Critical Synthesis*, Greenwood Publishing Group, PP. 154 – 157, ISBN 978-0-313-32061-3.

systems of education of Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin has been drawn.

- **Nature of Institution**

Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin both were fully institutional with definite location and fully furnished buildings. Other facilities of higher educational system like students' hostel, library, specialized teacher etc. were present there.

- **Religious Factors**

Nalanda was initially emerged as a centre of Buddhist tradition and education but gradually covered a wide range of secular subjects like Logic, Medicine and Grammar etc.

On the other hand, Al-Qarawiyyin was fully a centre of education following Islamic tradition, culture and education with a greater emphasis on Classical Arabic Grammar, Linguistics and Maliki law. Though in the later period especially after 1963 A.D. many secular subjects like Medicine, Astronomy, Foreign languages (English, French) History, Geography etc. have been included.

- **Method of Instruction**

In Al-Qarawiyyin mainly lecture method that is traditional method of teaching was followed. Students were seated in a semi-circle (Halqa) around a sheikh (teacher). The sheikh used to prompt the students to read sections of a particular text and ask them questions on particular points of grammar, law and also explain the difficult portions.

Whereas in Nalanda Lecture method was the leading method but other methods like discussion, education by work experience etc. were used side by side. It can be said that the activity of the students, that is the child – centric education was taken place in the institution. Seminar was considered as one of the important criteria of Nalanda education system. Hence, it was more up-to-date.

- **Admission Procedure**

A large number of students devoted their efforts to take admission in Al-Qarawiyyin but all of them did not get the scope to take admission. The administration of the Al-Qarawiyyin University had to introduce a selection procedure following that the candidate had sufficient knowledge of whole Quran, Arabic language, General Sciences and must belong to the Muslim community.

In Nalanda only those students were admitted who had the necessary background to follow higher studies. Students came from the various parts of the world like Mongolia, China, Korea, Tibet etc. According to Hiuen-Tsang that only 20% of those who came seeking for admission came out successful at the entrance test and the remaining had to go back in disappointment. Those who examined the candidates seeking admission were experts in religious controversies and were always ready with difficult problems to try the competence of aspirants for admission. The probable age of admission was not less than 20. Four experts popularly known as Dwar-Pandita asked them various questions. If the answers were satisfied then the students should be given permission for admission. So, student's quality was only the condition of eligibility for admission.

- **Medium of Instruction**

In Nalanda, 'Pali' was the main medium of instruction but the knowledge of Sanskrit language was also very essential. In Al-Qarawiyyin 'Arabic' was only the medium.

- **National and Global Appeals**

Nalanda had international appeal; it was an organized learning centre. It drew students from all over the world like China, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, Japan and Turkey etc.

Al-Qarawiyyin always maintained a prestigious and colourful position in respect of Islamic culture and tradition. The Muslim students of all over Morocco gathered for seeking admission in Al-Qarawiyyin as it was the symbol of high pride and prestige. In the later period, a large number of students from South-Africa, outside of Morocco, and even from East-Asia of the Muslim community came here for study so, in the initial stage, Al-Qarawiyyin had no international appeal but gradually it was developed in the later period but it is never comparable with Nalanda as Nalanda occupied a unique stand in the-then international level of education.

6. Concluding Remarks

Nalanda and Al-Qarawiyyin- both had a significant role in the history of education. Actually, Nalanda was the symbol and the starting point of modern concept of higher education. Nalanda system of education is still very much relevant and it has a great impact on the modern concept of University level education. Nalanda had been dilapidated by the devouring time but Al-Qarawiyyin still exists. Al-Qarawiyyin at present is the oldest existing and continually operating educational institution in the world according to UNESCO and Guinness World Record.

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