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The Buddhist educational centres of ancient India: A pan Indian phenomenon

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Abstract

The beauty of Indian system of thought process lies in the ethical, moral and scientific value addition to the human race. It is not difficult to ascertain the fact that these values altogether created the base of ancient educational system. The many philosophical traditions of India reflects more or less same aspects with differences due to time and space. One can even consider these developments as a form of critically analytical viewpoints which took every attempt in their own capacity to remove the element of orthodoxy.

The emergence of Buddhism revolutionized the concept of education in ancient India when Buddha opened the door for every human being irrespective of his/her social roots. It opened the opportunity for everyone to receive and understand even the minute point of philosophies which were guiding the society from time limitless. The Buddhist sangha gradually developed into the mature seats of learning known as Mahavihara.

This paper is an attempt to cover the major Mahaviharas of ancient India from Kashmir to Bengal. The main aim of this paper to underline their history with whatever sources available and their relevance during that period of time.

Keywords: Buddhism, educational centers, Ancient India, monasteries

Introduction

Prior to starting any discussion on the subject, it seems appropriate to define the term "Vihara" as Buddhist monasteries which played a significant part in Indian religious life and philosophy throughout the ancient and early medieval times. The writings of famous indologists as well as Buddhist literature too have numerous definitions of it. It is noteworthy to notice that each one of them addresses a distinct component of Buddhist Vihar. According to F. Edgerton, Vihar appears to be founded on residence, particularly of monastic communities of monks. Its equivalent in Tibetan is Gstug leg Khar, which means Kutagara vihara, a monastery, a temple, and Vihara, hence a place of residence. A home in the woods (Arannas) or a cottage serving as a Bhikshu's lodge are more conveniently used as a residence for Buddhist healers. For monks and nuns who are committed to the monastic life, it is a convent. On the other hand, as Buddhism spread throughout India, a number of previously unheard-of centers of study appeared. Buddhist monks had the option of choosing between a life of contemplation in the forests or a life of teaching, preaching, and Dharma propagation. As a result of the actions of the teaching monks, centers of learning emerged.

Indian ascetics used to lead the life of mendicant (Paribbajaka), they had no fixed dwellings, hence they moved from one place to another. But during the rainy season, it was quite difficult for them to wander, so they had to depend on the alms of the householders. This condition totally changed during the life time of Buddha, who realized that fixed abode should be arranged for the monks especially during the rainy season, where they could meditate and think at peace and could perform their religious communal ceremonies. In spite of serving the purpose of residences, the significant monasteries in course of time, developed into large academic educational institutions and Buddhist centres of learning, which somehow like our residential Universities of modern times, attracted tutors and students from various parts of India and abroad. In these monasteries, the monks were provided with every ease for continuing their quest for higher education.

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They were provided with necessary religious endowments by the royal benefactors and chief householders, in the form of land grants and other donations.

These monastic universities (Pirivenas) grew over time, with some of them eventually becoming full-fledged institutions of higher study. The few famous of them which also will be the part of the discussion of this paper are, Nalanda Mahavihara, Vikramasila, Odantapuri, Jagadalala, Somapura, Vallabhi, and Jayendra vihara of Kashmir.

Nalanda Mahavihara

It is difficult to ascertain when the Mahavihar of Nalanda was first started, Taranath a Tibetan historian traces it back to the days of Asoka. According to this observation, Nalanda is the birthplace of venerable Sariputta and it is also the place where he with his 80000 Arhats attained nirvana. He again says, the Asoka erected a Buddhist temple around the caitya of Sariputta and made great offerings and from this point in history the initial essence of Vihara came into existence. However, the records of Fa-hsien did not mention any such temple or Vihara on that place so it is bit problematic to accept this as a historical fact ^[1]. The initial source from which we learn about presence of any Mahavihara was the records of Huien tsang. Emperor Asoka, according to Huien tsang, is credited with founding this monastery. The word "Nalanda" in Sanskrit is used for "Lotus," which is a symbol of learning. According to the Huien tsang the ground on which it was built was originally a mango garden belonged to a Sreshthin (merchant prince) it was purchased by 500 Merchant who donated it to the Sangha ^[2]. The eight buildings that made up the Nalanda University were renowned for their superior educational standards as well as their outside beauty. Nalanda had 11000 cells and three libraries with the names Ratnadadhi, Ratnasagara, and Ratnarajaka, because of rich libraries I-tsing acquired copies of 400 Sanskrit books amounting 500, 000 verses ^[3]. This university had about 10,000 student's enrolled. I-tsing, who spent nearly ten years (A.D.) studying at Nalanda, comes in second to Xuan Zang in importance.

The copper plate of Devapala and Ghosrawa stone inscription of the Buddhist monk throws welcome light on the role of Devapala as a patron of Buddhism. During Devapala's rule, Nalanda achieved its pinnacle. It attracted students from different regions of India as well as other Asian nations like China, Japan, Sumatra, Simhala, Indonesia, Kamboja, Borneo, Korea, etc. and had deeply influenced the Pundravardhana's entire educational system. We know that King Balaputradeva of Sailendra dynasty built a Monastery at Nalanda. The king of Java requested Devapala through messenger to make donation for the maintaince of the monastery which he built at nalanda, the pala king Devapala accepted the request and issue grant which discloses that he grant five villages for the purpose of welfare of his parents and the world ^[4].

People all around the world respected the Pala kings for their royal patronage. Devapala paid tribute to Viradeva, the administration of Nalanda University, according to the Ghosrawa stone slab inscription of Devapala. It is possible to assume that King Devapala was involved in the management of the monastery. Otherwise, he would not have been able to offer Viradeva that position. Even while Nalanda University served as the primary institution for Buddhist religious study, other subjects like grammar, veda, ayurveda, history, tantra, science, logic, and medicine were

also studied and taught there. Pali and Sanskrit were the two languages taught at school. It was a residential university that didn't charge any sort of fee. Nagarjuna, a Buddhist philosopher, rose to become the university's dean.

An outstanding scholar named Shilabhadra held the position of Nalanda University's principal for a considerable amount of time. The Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zung lived at Nalanda for five years and studied Yogacharabhumisastra Nyayanusasasatra, Hetuvidyasastra, Sabdavidya and Ashtyadhayai of Panini ^[5]. The acharya of Uryana, Lilavajra, spent ten years at Nalanda University during the reign of Devapala. He "delivered many sermons on the Tantra-yana and composed the commentary on the Namasamgiti." Jinamitra, Dharmapala, Vasubandhu, and Aryadeva were among the 15 scholars who held the position of Nalanda University's principal. Ramapala appointed Abhayakaragupta as an Upadhyaya of the Nalanda and Vikramasila Universities. This renowned University was also supported by Gopala-ii who was also a royal patron of this university. Nalanda once again gained notoriety with Mahipala-i's restoration of the Pala Empire. Building new monasteries was something the Pala kings were enthusiastic about. Odantapuri, Vikramasila, and Somapura were three of the monasteries built by the first three Pala rulers. The unity of Nalanda as a center of learning was hampered by the emergence of many sects among the Brahmins and Buddhists.

Vikramasila Mahavihara

Vikramashila was one of the three most important Buddhist monasteries in India during the Pala Empire, along with Nalanda and Odantapuri. Its location is now the site of Antichak village near Kahalgaoon, Bhagalpur district in Bihar. Vikramasila Mahavihara was another Buddhist monastery of the Pala period constructed under Dharmapala's patronage in the final decades of the eighth century. Since Dharma Pala also known by the name "Vikramshila," historians believe he constructed this monastery. In Bihar, 24 miles east of Champa, close to Bhagalpur, was the location of Vikramasila Mahavihara. From the middle of the eighth century to the end of the 12th century AD, this illustrious monastery was active for about four centuries. It is also a popular view that Nalanda was replaced as the foremost center of Buddhist culture by Vikramasila. It appears from the legends that the concept of *Dwarpandita* was also true in the case of Vikramshila. The gate keeper of the universities was supposedly a learned monk of high status is designated as Men-che in the Chinese records and the Vikramshila as go-srun in the Tibetan. The chineses and Tibetan expressions are synonymous. Nalanda had a one gate, while Vikramshila had six gates each kept by go-srun, equivalent to Sanskrit Dvara-pala keeper of the gate. We have a list from Taranatha of six such gate keepers who functioned in the reign of Canaka, Canaka is not known to pala history ^[6]. The gate keeper in this period were 1 acharya Ratnakarasanati (of eastern gate) 2 Vagisvarakirti (of the western gates) 3 Naropa (of the northern gate) 4 Prajnakaramati (of the southern gate) 5 Ratnavajra (of the central gate) 6 Jnanasrimitra (of the second central gate). They were all scholars of eminence whose works are extant in the Tibetan Tanjur and Kanjur ^[7]. After the six gate keeper scholars, there is no continuity in the succession of upadhayas for some years ^[8].

Vikramshila has already mentioned had considerable cultural intercourse with Tibet. It was frequently visited by academics from Tibet. Many scholars of vikramshila since its foundation are named in the Tibetan legends as having visited Tibetan. The Kanjur and Tanjur hold good amount of evidence regarding this relation. On the grounds of this monastic university, there were 58 samsthas with space for 108 instructors. Everything they needed, including food and clothing, was given to them. A total of 160 residential monks were added over time, bringing the total to 1000. Eminent academics, known for their scholarship and character, were depicted in pictures that adorned the university's walls. On the exterior of the University, there were 107 temples. At the monastery's main temple, a statue of Mahabodhi in human scale was built. Tathagata-Rakshita, Buddhajnanapada, Dipankarabhadra, Jayabhadra, Sridhara, Bhavabha, Bhabyakirti, Lilavajra, Durjayacandra, Krsna-samayavajra, Kamalarakshita, etc. were among the professors who belonged to the Tantra school, according to Taranath. In the University, there were a lot of Upadhyayas as well. When Dipankara was in charge of the Odantapuri vihara as well, he was named the Upadhyaya of Vikramasila. Similar to Vikramasila and Nalanda, Abhayakara Gupta was appointed as their Upadhyaya. This Mahavihara was made up of six Gatekeepers, including: 1. Ratnakarasanti Naropa, Vagisvarakirti, and 4. Prajna Karmati 5 S Ratnavajra of Kashmir 6. The Gauda Jnanasrimitra. The primary Guardian of the Gates among them was Ratnakarasanti. In accordance with the Taranath, Dipankara briefly held the position of Upadhyaya under Mahavajrasana before being superseded by Kamalakulisa, Narendrasrijnana, and Danarakshita. Sakyasri was the final Upadhyaya of Vikramasila. Despite this, the great scholar Sthirapala was the one who gave the monastery's explanation of Prajnaparamita. Lankajayabhadra, Rahulbhadra, Ratnarakshita, Buddhajnanapada, Jetari, Ratnavajra, and Yamasiri were a few of the Acharyas that decorated Vikramasila. In addition, there were the praishtana, homo, and kapat pala acharyas of Bali.

Buddhasri of Nepal was the sthavira of the Mahasanghikas. Nag-tsho Lotsava and Gya-tson were Tibetan intellectuals who had received their education in this monastery. There were accommodations for the Tibetan academics. Son of Sanatana and Head of Varendri in the first century AD, Jetari was also an outstanding student at this university and was awarded a Diploma. Hetutattvapodesa, Dharmadharmavinischay, and Valavataratarka are the titles of three of his writings on Buddhist Nyaya. He also wrote two works on sutras in addition to these. Grammar, Metaphysics, Ritual, and Logic were among the specialized courses offered at this university, but Tantra was the main course. In this university, Vajrayanism and Brahmanical culture were both practiced. Pala University was directly governed by the Pala kings, in contrast to Nalanda University. Vikramasila was also pillaged by Turkish invaders like other renowned monastic universities.

Odantapuri Mahavihara

It's unclear which Pala ruler, Gopala or Dharmapala, founded Odantapuri Mahavihara. Biharsarif, Bihar, was where it was located. It served as an excellent hub for philosophical and Buddhist studies. Atisa Dipankara and Abhayakaragupta are two well-known philosophers who

were affiliated with the university. Atisha Dipankara, who served as Vikramasila's Upadhyaya, allegedly took care of Odantapuri, according to Lama Taranath. Despite the lack of evidence available regarding the monastery's magnificence, it was unquestionably a sizable and affluent monastery that thrived right up until the end of the ancient era. During the reign of the son of Mahi pala who was called Pala the great Maha pala there were 1000 Monks of the earlier school of Buddhism called Theravada, and 5000 monks of Mahayana school at Odantapuri. The well renowned Sakya monastery of Tibet which is about that time became the seat of learning under the royal patronage of Tartar kings of China was built after model of the Odantapuri. Sakya monastery followed Odantapuri in the detail of monastic discipline and education^[9] Odantapuri too experienced defeat, much like Somapura, Vikramasila, and other cities.

Vallabhi

The other pre-eminent Mahavihara, spoken by both Yuan Chwang and I-tsing, was at Valabhi in western India. I-tsing reports Nalanda and Valabhi to be the two places in India where it was usual for scholars to reside for two or three years to complete their education. Valabhi and Nalanda both attracted students from almost every part of India to hold doctrinal discussions and achieve fame when their opinions were approved by masters of Vallabhi.

Valabhi seems to be the largest Hinayanist establishment in India which Hiuen-Tsang also endorses in his records. The Maitraka kings who ruled Western India constructed a monastery at Vallabhi, their capital. While Nalanda was the centre for Mahayana Buddhism, Vallabhi achieved fame as the centre for Hinayana Buddhism. The Maitraka kings spent lavishly to maintain their university. They gave every encouragement and assistance to Buddhist studies at this institution. In the 7th century Vallabhi was as prosperous and famous as Nalanda. HieunTsang visited Vallabhi during his pilgrimage journey to Indian sub continent named as Fa-La-Pi (Vallabhi). His mentions regarding Vallabhi are as follows—"The population of Vallabhi is very large. The country is rich and prosperous. There are over a hundred millionaire families there. Imported luxury goods are seen in this city. There are about 100 monasteries with about 6,000 Buddhist monks. Most of them belong to the lesser vehicle (Hinayana). There are several Hindu temples and a large Hindu population in this part of the country. The Buddha during his lifetime he visited this land. King Asoka built stupas all those spots where Gautam Buddha had visited^[10]. There are about 100 shrines and about 6,000 resident monks studying at Vallabhi. They do not believe that Abhidharma was the teaching of the Buddha. They believed in the Antarabhava doctrine and were exponents of Puggalavada a traditions that disregard Abhidharma teachings that are inconsistent with the Sutra-Teachings"^[11].

The I-tsing also equated the fame of Vallabhi to the Nalanda. According to a Jaina tradition, the second Jaina council was held in Valabhi in the 5th or 6th century CE; at this council the Jaina scriptures assumed their present form. The city has now vanished, but it is identified with a village, Vala, where numerous copperplate inscriptions and seals of the Maitrakas have been found.

Jagdalapora

Jagadala mahavihara seems to be the last architectural cum academic achievement of Pala dynasty^[12]. King Ramapala

(1077-1129) is said to be the founder of this University. Jagaddala University was the largest construction works undertaken by the Pala Kings. This was a centre for the study and dissemination of Tantric Buddhism. It followed the methods, practices, and traditions of Nalanda. According to Tibetan works many books were translated to the Tibetan language at Jagaddala. The Buddhist teacher Sakya Sri Bhadra was the last eminent teacher who served on the head seat of this university after which it was destroyed by the Turkish invaders. It is said that his pupil Danaseela translated ten books to Tibetan. Sakya Sri Bhadra considered to be an important contributor in the propagation of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet. He lived for seven years at Jagaddala. In 1027 C.E. the Turkish invaders sack and destroyed Jagaddala. The exact location of this Mahavihara has long been a source of debate among scholars. It has been variously linked to villages bearing the name of the Mahavihara in the districts of Bogra, Dinajpur, and Maldah in north Bengal during the pre-partition era. However, it appears to us that the site of this renowned Monastery may be 4 miles southeast of Bamangoan in the Maldah district of west Bengal [13].

Jayendra vihar of Kashmir

Several viharas or Buddhist Monastic institution were founded by eclectic rulers of Kashmir from time to time and their number must have been pretty large at the time when Buddhism enjoyed considerable popularity in the valley. Unfortunately all these are now in ruins including the extant remains of chapel, corridors, cell courtyard bears an eloquent testimony to the great literary and education activity that was once going on there. Buddhist viharas like Uskhar, Parishaspur, Harwan and Jayendra vihar all are most famous in different field, the monastery at Parihasapur modern paraspor famous for Colossal image of Buddha was built by king Lalitaditya of Kashmir it also contain the separate cell for priest, Harwan called as Shardarhadavan which ancient seat of learning. Jayendra vihara was one of most important urban learning centre of Kashmir its fame was not confined only in India but also reached to abroad. A large number of scholars came here from Tibet, China and central Asia such famous scholars are Hiuen tsang and Kumarjiva [14].

Hiuen Tsang was a Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller, and translator who visited India in the 7th century CE. He was interested in learning more about Buddhism and collecting Buddhist scriptures. He spent two years in Kashmir, where he studied and taught at the famous Jayendra Vihar monastery. Here, he was assisted by some Kashmiri monks in the task of offering and religious discussions. In this vihara, he studied various Buddhist texts including works of Acharya Nagarjuna from venerable monks aged seventy, the most learned teacher explained him all the difficult passage in sacred texts. It did had a big library and the king provided twenty assistants to help the Hiuen tsang in copying the Buddhist scripture, besides five other men were his attendants. Jayendra Vihara was a famous Buddhist monastery in Kashmir, where many scholars and pilgrims came to study and practice Mahayana Buddhism.

Hiuen T sang described Kashmir as a beautiful and fertile land, surrounded by mountains and rivers. He praised the people of Kashmir for their intelligence, honesty, generosity, and artistic skills. He also noted that Kashmir

was a centre of learning and culture, where many famous poets, writers, philosophers, and artists lived and worked.

Jayendra Vihara was a famous Buddhist monastery in Kashmir, where many scholars and pilgrims came to study and practice Mahayana Buddhism. According to Hardy Cole's Archaeological Survey of India report, 'Illustrations of Ancient Buildings in Kashmir,' (1869), in which he wrote, 'The locality which includes the remains of a Monastery is called the 'Jayendra Vihar', and the erection is assigned by local tradition to one 'Praverasena' in A.D. 500 [15] (Whose Excavation required). Rajtarangini mentions a fully-functioning Jayendra-Vihara in Shrinagar that offered recluse to overthrown monarchs. Apart from the Buddhist Sangha, we also find reference of monarchs like Kamalavardhana, who sought help from Brahmins for formalizing his coronation. Kalhana further describes Kshemagupta as morally corrupt, addict and adulterer with no rational experience as a monarch. He also destroyed the Jayendra vihara during his tussle with a Damara named Sangram and is heavily criticized by Kalhana for it, because the Damara the take refuge in Jayendra vihara and the priests were not willing to give it into their hands, he destroyed the statue of Buddha and built a shiv temple on it. He further confiscated thirty villages which were given to Jayendra vihara by kshasa chief [16].

The library of Jayendra Vihara was visited by many scholars and pilgrims from India and abroad. The most famous visitor was the Chinese traveller Xuanzang, who came to Kashmir in the 7th century CE. He stayed at Jayendra Vihara for two years and learned from the eminent Buddhist teacher teacher "yasa" explained him all difficult passage in sacred text.

He praised the library for its richness and variety of texts. He also borrowed some manuscripts from the library and took them back to China the Chinese travellers to visit Kashmir was to collect copies of the Buddhist literature.

Conclusion

Buddhist monasteries played a significant role in the transmission of Buddhist education in the ancient era, as did the later institutions that became Buddhist universities. Without any doubt, teachers in institutions were highly qualified, serious in their approach to their responsibilities, and more goal-focused. The primary goal of Buddhist education is to produce men who are free, intellectual, smart, moral, talented, non-violent, and secular in the society since they should not be constrained by any particular religion. A humanist, logical, and superstitious-free man is produced by a Buddhist education. It is an enormous source of pride that Buddhist education crossed the Indian Subcontinent and advanced as far as China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore. Women's education also advanced sufficiently in Buddhism because, although being female, they were not subjected to prejudice and were free to pursue higher education and reside in monasteries. As a result of opening up a concept of education and its significance in life, it can be claimed that education was free and universal in the case of Buddhism.

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