

Origin and History of ancient Vikramashila University

Vikramashila was one of the two most important centres of learning in India during the Pala Empire, along with Nalanda. Its location is now the site of Antichak village, Bhagalpur district in Bihar.

Vikramashila was established by the Pala emperor Dharmapala (783 to 820) in response to a supposed decline in the quality of scholarship at Nalanda. Atiśa, the renowned pandita, is sometimes listed as a notable abbot. It was allegedly destroyed by the forces of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji around 1193.

History & Origin

A number of monasteries grew up during the Pāla period in ancient Bengal and Magadha. According to Tibetan sources, five great Mahaviharas stood out: Vikramashila, the premier university of the era; Nalanda, past its prime but still illustrious, Somapura, Odantapura, and Jagaddala. The five monasteries formed a network; "all of them were under state supervision" and there existed "a system of co-ordination among them. It seems from the evidence that the different seats of Buddhist learning that functioned in eastern India under the Pāla were regarded together as forming a network, an interlinked group of institutions," and it was common for great scholars to move easily from position to position among them.

Vikramashila was founded by Pāla king Dharmapala in the late 8th or early 9th century. It prospered for about four centuries before it was destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khilji along with the other major centres of Buddhism in India around 1193.

Vikramashila is known to us mainly through Tibetan sources, especially the writings of Tāranātha, the Tibetan monk historian of the 16th–17th centuries.

Vikramashila was one of the largest Buddhist universities, with more than one hundred teachers and about one thousand students. It produced eminent scholars who were often invited by foreign countries to spread Buddhist learning, culture and religion. The most distinguished and eminent among all was Atisha Dipankara, a founder of the Sarma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Subjects like philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, Indian logic etc. were taught here, but the most important branch of learning was Buddhist tantra.

In ancient Indian tradition, knowledge was supposed to facilitate both spiritual liberation and perfection in worldly skills for earning a livelihood. During the Vedic period our education system was based on Shrutis and Smritis and imparted orally but since 6th century B.C. socio-economic landscape changed rapidly leading to the emergence of Mahajanpadas on the one hand and several heretical sects on the other. With this rapid change in society, the method of education also underwent a great change. Now onwards Buddhist Sangha and later on the Buddhist monastery emerged as the prime centres of learning. With time, some developed into true Universities such as Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramshila. History of Vikramshila University:- The Vikramshila University came into being and was founded by King Dharmapala of Pala dynasty. The king granted land endorsement for its upkeep. Other Pala rulers also continued the patronage to the institution. Vikramshila developed as an important and exclusive centre of a new sect. Thus under the continued enthusiastic patronage of the Pala rulers and the emerging centre of the new form of learning within Buddhism, Vikramshila attracted many scholars and students and it soon outshined the Nalanda University and established itself as the premier centre of higher learning in India during the early

medieval period. It remained in the leading position till it was destroyed by BakhtiyarKhilji. The buildings at Vikramshila were well planned and accommodative. There were one hundred and eight temples and six college buildings, spread-out like Lotus petals, with beautifulMahabodhi temple in the centre. This was also a residential University. The monastery has a total of 208 cells, 52 on each side, for students as well as teachers. Like the other Universities, this University also provided specialized instruction in various subjects. Buddhist textbooks belonging to both branches ofBuddhism- Mahayanism and Hinyanism were taught. Along with these, all the important branches of Hindu learning were also taught and a special significance was attached to the study of Tantras. The University had developed literacy and cultural contacts with Tibet. Scholars from Tibet were particularly interested in the Tantras, for the teaching of which special arrangements were made at the University throughout the four hundred years of its existence. Its special contribution was the propagations of Buddhism in Tibet, Pegu and Ceylon. To ensure a high standard of learning students were admitted to the University only if they satisfied the test given by eminent authorities in the change of various subjects.Tibetan sources chronicle that at one time, there were six eminent logicians posted for the work. Ratnakarasanti was placed at the east gate, Vagisvarakirti at the west, Naropa at the north, Prajnakaramati at the south,Ratnavajra at the first central gate and Jnana Srimitra at the second gate. As the leading learning centre of the period, Vikramshila University attracted many scholars from other parts of India as well as from other countries. It has been mentioned that in the twelfth century 3,000 monk scholars were studying at this university. Acharya Buddha Jnanapada was the founder of the new cult, Vajrayanism, of which Vikramshila was the centre of those days. He was appointed first as the priest of King Dharmapala (774-806 AD) and later as the Acharya for ordination at Vikramshila. VairocharaRakshita, Jetari, Prajnakaramati, Ratnakarasanti, Jnana Sri, and Dharmakirtietc. were important scholars attached with the Vikramshila University.

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