

# A Valuable Heritage of Bihar “Vikramshila University”

Dr. Meera Kumari,

*Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty), Department of History*

*S.N.S.R.K.S College, Saharsa, Bihar, Bhupendra Narayan Mandal University (B. N. Mandal University),  
Madhepura*

**Abstract**—Our country India has gained its fame globally in the field of knowledge of science since ancient times, and has worked to guide the whole world.

In this, if we look at the background of Bihar, then it is found that Nalanda University was established in the Gupta period in the sixth century, which enlightened the whole world with the light of its knowledge and in this sequence, the Pala Kings, who ruled Bengal and Bihar region in the eighth century, established famous universities like Udantapuri, Sompuri, Vikramshila etc. In which Vikramshila was a very important university. It was established by Pala's King, Dharampal in a village called *Antichak* on the Pathar Ghat hill, 24 miles east of Bhagalpur in Bihar,<sup>1</sup> at some distance from which the river Ganga flowed. You can gather an insight of this from many important sources, for instance, the ruins and relics, many sculptures found there, architecture, writings of Palas kings and Pragma Paramita, which is the main book of Mahayana and Indian and Tibetan texts etc., especially the writings of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan Lama *Taranath*, which was fully capable of explaining their actual situation. On the basis of this, it can be said that Vikramshila University was a Buddhist Mahavihara. The institution had a great reputation world wide attracting scholars from abroad to get education here.

It is said this Buddhist Mahavihara or University is said to have gotten the name from, Vikram which means superior and was the Panch sheel of Buddhism or five moral precepts, that are: *practice of nonviolence, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie, and not to take drugs etc.* The second belief is that Pala King Dharampal, who was the founder of Vikramshila University, had the title Vikramsheel, hence the name of this university was Vikramshila. This university was first seen by Cunningham<sup>2</sup> in 1918 AD. Hamilton historically inspected the remains found in the Antichak village<sup>3</sup>. The Old Man was the first person to link the remains found in Antichak in 1930 to Vikramshila Bihar. Many scholars tried to know its history, but it remained unexplored for many years. However, between 1960 and 1969, with the efforts of Professor B.P. Singh of Patna University, the work of excavation of Antichak started, after that

between 1972 and 1982, the work was carried forward by the Archaeological Survey of India and this work is still in progress, but it is still not fully disclosed yet, but on the basis of the excavation that has been done, its outline can be explained.

**Index Terms**—*Pala, Vikramshila, Antichak, Buddhist, Viharas, Stupa, Terracotta, Dwarpanditas, Vajrayana.*

## I. ART OR TECHNIQUE OF HOUSE BUILDING

It was spread over about 100 acres; there was a Buddhist stupa in the center of this university. The monastery<sup>4</sup> or residence for the Buddhist monks, is a huge square structure, each side measuring 330 metres having a series of 208 cells, 52 on each of the four sides opening into a common verandah. A few bricks arched underground chambers beneath some of the cells have also been noticed which were probably meant for confined meditation by the monks.

The main stupa built for the purpose of worship is a brick structure laid in mud mortar which stands in the centre of the square monastery. This two-terraced stupa is cruciform on plan and about 15 metres high from the ground level accessible through a flight of steps on the north side. On each of the four cardinal directions there is a protruding chamber with a pillared antechamber and a separate pillared mandapa in front. In the four chambers of the stupa were placed colossal stucco images of seated Buddha of which three were found in situ but the remaining one on north side was possibly replaced by a stone image after the clay image was somehow damaged. About 32 metres south of the monastery on its south west corner and attached with the main monastery through a narrow corridor is a rectangular structure identified as a library building. It was air-conditioned by cooled water of the adjoining reservoir through a range of vents in the back wall. The

system was perhaps meant for preserving delicate manuscripts.

A large number of antiquities of different materials, unearthed from this place in the course of excavation, are displayed in the site museum maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India.

The Stupa is a sacred solid structure raised over the body remains or belongings of Buddha or a distinguished monk; or to commemorate any event associated with them. But some stupas are merely symbolic made for worship by the monks. A votive stupa is a miniature stupa erected by a devotee in gratitude of fulfilment of his desire.

The Vikramashila stupa built for the purpose of worship is a brick structure laid in mud mortar and stands in the centre of the square monastery. These two terraced stupas are cruciform on plan and about 15 metres high from the ground level. The lower terrace is about 2.25 metres high from the ground level and the upper terrace is at a similar height from the lower side. At both terraces there is a circumambulatory path, the lower about 4.5 metres wide and the upper about 3 metres wide<sup>5</sup>.

The main stupa placed over the upper terrace is accessible through a flight of steps on the north side on each of the four cardinal directions. There is a protruding chamber with a pillared antechamber and a separate pillared mandapa in front, placed beyond the circumambulatory passage. In the four chambers of stupa were placed colossal stucco images of seated Buddha of which three were found in situ, but the remaining of the north side was possibly replaced by a stone image after the clay image was somehow damaged. All the stucco images are unfortunately broken above the waist. The images are placed over a brick pedestal having traces of painting in red and black pigments. The walls and floors of the chamber and antechamber were plastered with lime.

The walls of both the terraces are decorated with mouldings and terracotta plaques which testify the high excellence of terracotta art flourishing in the region during Pal period (8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries). The plaques depict many Buddhist deities like Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, Manjusri, Maitreya, Jambala, Marichi, and Tara, scenes related to Buddhism, some social and hunting scenes, and a few other Indian deities like Vishnu, Parvati, Ardhanarisvara and Hanuman<sup>6</sup>. Many human figures, like those of ascetics, yogis,

preachers, drummers, warriors, archers, snake charmers, etc., and animal figures like monkeys, elephants, horses, deer, boar, panthers, lions, wolves, and birds, are also depicted.

The architecture of the stupa and the terracotta plaques bear great resemblance to the Somapura Mahavihara, Paharpur (Bangladesh) which, too, was founded by the same king Dharmapala. In plan both are very much alike with the significant difference that Somapura is centred on a central temple rather than a stupa. Vikramashila monastery is also larger and has fort-like projections on its outer wall.

## II. WORKING METHODOLOGY:

This university was established in the eighth century when the importance of Nalanda University started decreasing a bit. There were six colleges in Vikramshila University. According to Radha Krishna Chaudhary the superiority of Vikramshila can be gauged from the fact that while there was one entrance in Nalanda, Vikramshila had 6 entrances, and here more foreign students came for education than Nalanda. The university was spread over an area of more than 100 acres. There were about 160 Viharas and there were many lecture halls. All these institutions were surrounded by strong boundary walls. Here a group of 108 teachers taught 1000 students, many of which were foreigners. Vikramshila was the best Vihar of its time. It was a pre-planned residential university. It had six colleges or institutes similar to today's institutions, each with a central hall. The doors of all these 6 colleges were connected to their central hall. This central hall was called Vigyan Bhawan.

There were *Dwarpanditas* for the entrance in all 6 colleges<sup>7</sup>, after being tested by the Dwarpanditas for admission in this university, the qualified students used to get admission in the college. The exams were very difficult.

During the reign of Kanak, reference of the names of the Dwarpanditas were as follows -

East Gate By-Acharya Ratnakar Shanti

Western Gate-Bageshwar Kriti

North Gate -Narop

Southern Gate-Pragya Karamati

First Central or the Middle Gate – Ratnawraj(Kashmiri)

Second Central Gate -Gyan Shri Mitra

In this way, only the students declared passed by the Dwarpanditas were admitted.

### III. SUBJECT OF STUDY

The subjects of study of the university were grammar, logic, Mimamsa, Tantraism, Mahayana etc. Here subjects apart from those involving Buddhism; Hinduism, Jainism were also taught. Scholars from far and wide used to gather here and discuss academic and philosophical topics. The medium of instruction was Sanskrit. The courses here were not as elaborate as those of Nalanda University. Both private classes and group classes were prevalent here. After getting admission here, initially every student was kept under the care of the monk one by one. Here, according to Buddhist tradition, the disciple was like a son to the guru. *Vajrayana* emerged as the main subject in this university. Romila Thapar said, "In the seventh century, a new branch Vajrayana was born, whose center was in India."

A. L. Washam in his book "*The Wonder That was India*" stated that "In the whole of India, Vajrayana arose in the eighth century as the third branch which was established in Tibet by the master of Vikramshila". In this Vajrayana or Mantrayana, the Dharanis were used as the main mantra. These mantras were meaningless but people believed that their chanting and recitation had a miraculous effect<sup>8</sup>. Initially, Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was worshiped in the Mantrayana text, but later the glory of the worship of Tara is also described. These universities appointed tantric preaching, The first Tantric preceptors was Buddhajnanapada, followed by Dipamkarabhadra and Jayabhadra<sup>9</sup>. The first two were active during Dharmapala's reign, the third in the early to mid portion of the 9th century. Jayabhadra, a monk from Sri Lanka, was the first prominent commentator on the Cakrasamvara tantra. Śrīdhara was the next preceptor, followed by Bhavabhaṭṭa. The latter, also a prominent commentator on Cakrasamvara, may have been the mahāsiddha Bhadrāpāda. He in turn was succeeded by three more prominent Cakrasamvara commentators, Bhavyakīrti, Durjayachandra, and Tathāgatarakṣita. Durjayachandra collaborated with the renowned Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo and his commentary became particularly important for the Sakya school, and Tathāgatarakṣita collaborated with

Rin-chen grags. Apart from all these, Vibhuti Chandra, Dansheel, Moksha Kar, etc. were famous tantric scholars

If we talk about the head of scholars and teachers here, then Buddha Gupta was the chief teacher of the university during the time of Dharmapala. After that it was conducted by Shri Gyan Dipankar<sup>10</sup>, he was a scholar of Hinayana, Mahayana, Vaisheshika and Logic. Seal Rakshit of Udanta Puri gave Dipankar the title of Sridhar, he was known as Atisha. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, at the invitation of King Chunchub, Tibet went to Tibet and spread Buddhism there. He was a great writer of Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibetan sources, he is credited with the creation of 200 texts, and is worshiped as the second incarnation of Buddha.

After this, Abhyankar Gupta became the master here, he was a great scholar of Tantraism, who wrote many texts in Tibetan and Sanskrit. According to Tibetan Lama Taranath, Abhyankar Gupta was the head of Vikramshila during the time of Pala King Rampala, who ruled between 1076 CE and 1132 CE, during this period there were 108 professors and 1000 students. In some other books, the number of students is mentioned between 1000 and 10,000. This university was at its peak till the 13th century, the last acharya & master was Shakya Sri acharya. Among other masters, Gyan Pada, Virochana, Rakshita, Jaitari, Ratnakar, Shanti, Gyan Shri Mitra, Ratan Vajra, Tathagata, Dipankar Shri Gyan and Shanti Rakshit etc. were notable. Dipankar Shri Gyan and Shanti Rakshit were born in Bihar.<sup>11</sup>

After completion of education here, the titles of Pandit were given by the Pala king after graduation. After graduation, the title of Maha Pandit, Upadhyaya or Acharya was given. It is possible that convocations were held there as usual, in which the contemporary Pala rulers were present in the capacity of chancellor. (The Patriarch was called Mahasthavira there.). He enthusiastically participated in this work. Tibetan sources suggest that Jaitari and Ratanvajra received titles from the hands of the Pala kings Mahipala and Kanak. According to Tibetan scholar Taranath, Palas king used to appoint the Acharya of Vikramshila for the teaching work of Nalanda University.

This university was funded by the state, so the state used to bear its expenses, apart from this, big landlords also donated for it, Pala Naresh also donated generously to Nalanda University. Chandra Banerjee writes in his book Magadha Architects and Culture

that "the royal title was attached to this university. It was the kings who gave the titles, and appointed pandits and acharyas."

To manage this university, there was a council under the supervision of the chief union president, whose members used to perform various administrative tasks such as initiating newcomers, arranging and looking after servants, supply of food and fuel, allocation of monastic works etc.<sup>12</sup>

This committee also had a chairman. Later, the Administrative Council of Vikramshila University also started looking after the work of Nalanda University. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, about 3000 students studied here, most of whom were from Tibet. A special guest house was built in the university to accommodate Tibetan students.

The university also had a thriving library which was fully air-conditioned. In which millions of texts were preserved, which were written on tree bark, palm leaves, copper leaf, leather and in limited quantities on paper etc. The manuscript was preserved in a special way, there was also the work of translator, in this university, there was a complete arrangement for the students to read with concentration.

Thus, established in the eighth century, the university became the most prosperous, well-organized and prestigious university in India by the 11th-12th century, similar to Nalanda, the main task of this university was to spread Buddhism in Tibet, Nepal and other countries. Many scholars, including Acharya Dipankar, the head of this university, went to Tibet where he spread Buddhism, Ratnakar Shanti of Udantapuri, who was a Pandit at the eastern gate, was invited by the king of Ceylon, so he went there for the propagation of Buddhism, there he wrote many books on logic. In this way, the Acharya here played an important role in establishing Indian knowledge in the international world. He spread Buddhism by sending Buddhist monks from Tibet to Japan, Malaysia, Thailand and Afghanistan.

By the 13th century, this university was at the peak of its fame, and about 3000 students were taking education here. But after destroying Nalanda in 1203, the Muslim invader Bakhtiyar Khilji (who was a soldier of Qutbuddin Aibak) and his army destroyed this Buddhist Mahavihara. This has been described in Minhaj-us-Siraj's work Tabakate-e-Nasiri. He set fire to the libraries here, the books were set on fire. Due to which a large group of manuscripts was destroyed.

Thousands of students and teachers were murdered here. At this time the Vice-Chancellor of this University was Shakya Sri Bhadra. He somehow managed to escape to Tibet with some of his followers.<sup>13</sup> Thus came to a tragic end to this glorious educational institution. This Buddhist monk safely saved some manuscripts and went to Nepal and Tibet. Due to which some manuscripts were found in Nepal and Tibet, which are capable of bringing their history to light, one of these manuscripts is also kept in the British Library.

Many manuscripts also fell victim to the natural conditions, the preservation of palm leaf manuscripts became difficult as the climate of the Indo-Gangetic plain was not conducive to it, due to which its history became bleak.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, the history of education in India is thousands of years old. Due to its multi-dimensional excellent education, India was becoming a world guru for a long time. People from all over the country and abroad kept coming here for education. During 6th century BC, Buddhism originated in the north of India and was considered to be more nurturing of humanism, compassion and morality and began to spread throughout Asia with superiority and respect. It was only when Buddhism developed that attention was paid to the creation of organized educational institutions. These organized educational institutions were born as the first Buddhist monasteries. Buddhist monks and nuns lived in these viharas. In course of time, this monastery developed into a centre of Buddhist learning and eventually resulted in a university. In which Nalanda University was prominent. After that, the Vikramshila University, founded by the Palas' king Dharmapala of Bengal and Bihar, emerged mainly in the eighth century, which continued to flourish due to the royal patronage of the Pala kings till the 13th century and this university gained international fame for more than 400 years. This university became famous not only for its knowledge or propagation of Buddhism but also for establishing India's cultural relations with other Asian countries. It also had other contributions such as the birth of a new Magadha Vang style by this university, which Taranath calls the East Indian style. In this art, sculpture was created on black stone, in addition to

this, the distinctive style of manuscripts was created in the libraries of this university. But the destructive invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji in Bihar eradicated Buddhism from here. And turned Vikramshila University into ruins.<sup>14</sup>

But no one could completely erase its existence. This university retained the pride of Bihar's background and was respected everywhere like Nalanda. Although its full history has not yet come out of the ground and the excavation work is still going on, but when the complete remains will come out, people will be fully aware of the light of knowledge spread from the land of Bihar. In this way, how Bihar has been the land of education and knowledge since ancient times, Vikramshila University is a witness to this. And it has spread the prestige of Bihar all over the world.

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