

The Ancient University of Vikramshila (Part-1)

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Introduction

Vikramshila, in modern day Bihar, was one of the centres of high learning in India during medieval age. It represented the great tradition of knowledge and continued the legacy of *Taxila* and *Nalanda*. Its special contribution was the propagations of Buddhism in *Tibet, Pegu and Ceylon*. Particularly in Tibet, *Vikramshila* is said to have contributed to the foundation of Tibetan culture. *Vikramshila* contributed to the evolution of new sect of Buddhism that dominates much of the Himalayan region. It also proved to be an important centre of art, particularly the Pala School of art centered on the use of basalt. The destruction of *Vikramshila* at the hands of Turks, not only put an end to the bright academic journey of *Vikramshila*, but also terribly shattered the great Indian tradition of knowledge.

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Taxila became the first and foremost educational centre of ancient India. The *Jatakas* also mention Banaras as a great centre of learning which was established mostly by the students of Taxila. Later, Nalanda, situated in the Magadha region, the power centre of India, grew to be the foremost Buddhist monastery and educational Centre. The account left by the Chinese pilgrims, Hieun Tsang and I-tsing through important light on the Nalanda University . Later, Magadha lost the glory as the power centre of India after the demise of *Harshvaradhana* in 646 A.D., giving way to the rise of Pala dynasty that ruled over Bengal and Bihar for a substantial Period. The Pala rulers kept on patronizing Nalanda University, but they also felt the necessity to set up

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another sister institution of the Nalanda University near Bhagalpur in the eastern Bihar. The Vikramshila University came into being and was founded by a monk called *Kampala*, under the patronage of the king Dharmapala (770-810 A.D.). The king granted land grants for its upkeep. Other Pala rulers also continued the patronage to the institution. Meanwhile, Buddhism itself was undergoing important changes and a new sect, within the Mahayana School, emerged. It was known as *Vajrayana*. It was the Tantric form of Buddhism, which cantered on worshipping Goddess Tara and followed religious doctrines teaching magical and mystical formularies for the worship of deities or the attainment of supreme power. It is to be stressed upon that the worship of mother goddess had become

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prominent all over India by the 7th Century A.D. , and various sects of *Tantrism* arose all over India, which gave importance to special and secret method of worship based on *Tantra, Mantra and Yantra*. Buddhism also got influenced by the emergence of Tantrism which gave way to the rise of *Vajrayanism* within it. Vikramshila developed as an important and exclusive centre of this 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 a number of scholars and students and it soon outshined the Nalanda University and established itself as the premier centre of higher learning in India in the early medieval period. It remained in the leading position till it was destroyed by *Bakhtiyar Khalji* in 1203 A.D.

Archaeological Explorations

Tibetan scholar *Taranath* first recorded its existence, calling it Vikramshila Mahavihara. After its destruction, the site was abandoned and it remained hidden for centuries. As per Tibetan mythology, a yaksha called Vikramshil was suppressed here, thus giving the place its name. The exact location of the Vihara could not be ascertained for long time. *Dr. S.C. Vidyabhushana* identified it with the Sultanganj in Bhagalpur district and *Alexander Cunningham*, with the village Silao near Badagaon. However the original location was discovered when once *Laxmikanta Mishra* found a mound at Antichak village near Kahalgoan in Bhagalpur district. He collected bricks from the debris and sent them to the History Department of Patna University.

Archaeological Explorations

Thereafter, some students of the university started excavating the site, but nothing substantial was found. In 1962, the Archaeological Department of Patna University, along with the Archaeological Survey of India, under the leadership of *D.C Varma*, undertook the project to explore the place. Excavation continued till 1969. The ASI again conducted excavation between 1972 and 1982. From these two big projects a huge square monastery with cruciform stupa at its centre, a library, various small stupas and plethora of Hindu and Tibetan temple sculptures were unearthed. It was one of biggest the archaeological excavations in independent India.

Building And Infrastructure

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 beautiful Mahabodhi temple in the centre with its six gates leading to the six colleges. This central stupa had been the main attraction of the site. Like many other Buddhist sites of worship, here the central stupa is supplemented by several miniature stupas. The central stupa, probably constructed on the remains of Buddha, is made of bricks and solid mud. The two-storied stupa is 15m high. Each level is around 2.5m high and the two terraces are decorated with circumambulatory path that can take one around the structure.

Building And Infrastructure

Walls of both the terraces are embellished with terracotta panels, although many of them are now defaced. Then there was a residential block meant for monks. This section, which was once a huge structure, now exists in ruins in a shape of a square plot measuring 330m on each side. It has a majestic entrance from north with each flank containing four large chambers. The roof, which is now gone, was once supported by huge pillars. Many of them are still scattered on the ground. The monastery has a total of 208 cells, 52 on each side, for students as well as teachers. A common Varandah connects all cells and steps are descending down from the centre to a courtyard. Every cell has three beds. Also, each block has a planned drainage system.

Building And Infrastructure

The ruins of the library building give the testimony of Vikramshila's paramount importance as a centre of Buddhist learning. South of the main monastery, the library is a huge complex. A big reservoir with water, aimed at conditioning the back wall of the building, is also an engineering marvel. This was mainly designed to preserve priceless manuscripts.

(To be continued)