

**PG HISTORY SEM-2 PAPER CC-7: HISTORY OF BIHAR,  
UNIT-1**

**DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION IN BIHAR  
DURING ANCIENT PERIOD**

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Reputation of the Indians for higher knowledge and learning goes back to days of remote antiquity. It has always been given great prominence in Indian society since the times of the Vedic civilization. Indeed, as Mr. Thomas observed, “There is no country where the love of learning had so early an origin or has exercised so lasting and powerful an influence.”<sup>1</sup> The historic region of Bihar occupied an important position in this respect. Ancient Bihar was noted for learning and scholarship.

Education in ancient Bihar was imparted by a teacher to the pupils who gathered around him and came to live in his house as members of his family. The family functioned as a domestic school, an Ashrama or a hermitage. This is the *Gurukula*

**System** which imparted the highest quality of education. The usual period of stay in Ashrama was 12 years. Probably the Gurukula System of education could be a contribution of Bihar to the Vedic system.<sup>2</sup>

Hindu *sastras* recommend that the student should begin to live under the supervision of his teacher (in *Gurukula*) after his *Upanayana*. The *Gurukula* system which necessitated the stay of student away from his home at the house of a teacher or in a boarding-house of established reputation was one of the most important features of ancient Indian education. The basic ideals of the institution of the *Gurukulas* and *Asramas* are to afford opportunity for the intimate contact of teacher and their taught, 'a contact of mind with mind and spirit with spirit' which no other agency can serve as a substitute or equivalent. In *Gurukula*, during the pliable period of childhood and adolescence, direct personal and continuous contact with a teacher of noble character naturally produces great effect on the mind of the students.

Dr. A.S.Altkar remarks the significance of the *Gurukula* system of education thus: "The close association with elderly scholars, who had made progress in education and won the applause of their teachers, naturally induces the new entrants to emulate their example. The invisible yet all-pervading influence of established traditions of the institution naturally spurs the student to identify himself with them".<sup>3</sup>

The teacher is thus the vital factor in education and in one of the Upanisads (*Chandogya*, VI 14.2) it is stated, "he knows who has a teacher". The *Yoga sutras* defined God as the Prime Teacher. The following three verses on the Guru generally precede all recitals reveal the status of Guru in Ancient days: The Guru

is *Brahma*, the Guru is *Vishnu*, the Guru is *Siva*, and the Guru is the supreme Godhead itself in the visible form, obeisance to that Guru.

The teacher is called *Acarya* and the word is explained through three etymologies as one who collects the precepts, puts the students in the proper path and he practises what he preaches. The Educational system in ancient India was based on the concept of *Brahmacarya*, which laid greater emphasis on *carya* than mere learning. The system was established on the tie of constant association between the teachers and taught.

The Sanskrit word for the pupil was *Antevasin* while *acarya* stood for the preceptor. A student was known by the word *Brahmacari*. The religious student belonging to the cast of *Brahmana*, *Ksatriya* or *Vaisya* was known by the term *Varnin*.

A student was known as *chatra* because his duty was always to be at his teacher's service and to protect him from harm like an umbrella. The *Antevasin* has to lead the life of a regular *Brahmacari* in the house of his teacher. Special hostels for female students had also come into existence (*Chatra Sala* i.e. Lady's hostel). The pupil was-under certain obligations towards the teacher. In the first place, he has to remain with the teacher so long as his course lasts and not to dwell with anybody else. (Gautama iii-5)

Certain menial services had to be performed by the pupil. The conduct of pupils regulated by rigid rules. These included hygienic, moral, and religious precepts and the regulation of good manners. It was his duty to live according to these rules by

avoiding material comfort for a simple living. The pupil also accompanied his teacher and awaited his commands 'In the leisure time 'Simple living and high thinking' was the order of the day. The teacher-taught relationship was just like father-son relationship. The students used to stay at the hermitages like the members of the family of the preceptor. Thus, they were influenced by the grand personalities of the preceptor. This very Impact of guru went a long way in shaping their personality in future life. This very impact or influence is lacking very much today. In these days teachers do impart knowledge but they are not able to influence the pupils under their charge. This was not the case in the ancient system of education in India. During the later Vedic period the same ashramite education prevailed.

Besides Gurukula system of instruction, there were special institutions for promotion of advanced study and research. These are called and ***Brahmana-Sanghas***, Academics of learned men, whose discussions hammered into, shape the very language of the country, the refined language of Sanskrit as the vehicle of highest thought. Learning was also promoted by discussions at public meetings which were a regular feature of rural life, and were addressed by wandering scholars known as charakas. These scholars toured the country to deliver public discourses and invite discussion. The Upanishad refers to the scholars from east travelling towards the far north in order to contact learned men. A great fillip was given to the spread of knowledge and extension of education by the occasional gathering of distinguished scholars in conferences.

Bihar has a brilliant tradition of learning since the days of Raja Janaka, the philosopher king of Mithila, who maintained a galaxy of learned scholars in his court, and encouraged learning by various ways.<sup>4</sup> What might count as the earliest

literary congress of the world was the Congress of philosophers which was convened by Raja Janaka at his court and helped in the codification of Brahmanical philosophy by discussing the subject under direction of the master-philosopher, *Yajnavalkya*.<sup>5</sup> In these deliberations at the highest level, a lady philosopher named *Gargi* was a prominent participant besides men like *Uddalaka Aruni*. There was equality between the sexes in the field of knowledge. Rishi Yajnavalkya was the chief of a forest university also. So during the later Vedic period, Mithila (in Bihar) became a great centre of Brahmanical learning and philosophy and attracted India's leading philosophers and Brahmvadins.

In the Sutra period, the six vedangas were very carefully studied. The Ramayana speaks of **Siddhasrama of Visvamitra** who taught Ram and Laxman in the same period. Sahasram (in the Rohtas district of Bihar) or Buxar is believed as ancient place of Siddhasrama.<sup>6</sup> Gautam-ashrama in North Bihar was known as centre of co-education.

Even in historic period, as early as 300 B.C., **Megasthenese**, the Greek Ambassador to the court of Chandragupta, found a highly cultured society in which pursuit of learning especially that of philosophy was held in great esteem. The ordinance of Hindu religion demanded that a Brahman must teach. The Varna-shrama-dharma required a considerable part of his early life to be led as Brahmachari, devoted to the acquisition of learning and to enable him to bestow his undivided attention upon the pursuit of learning. The Hindu law made it a pious work on the part of the sovereign and community to provide for his temporal wants.

We find in the time of Buddha, hundreds of ashramas under very reputed teachers engaged in the quest of Truth and nature of the Reality, spread all over Bihar-many

in Magadha (Rajgriha, Nalanda and Gaya) and Vaisali in North Bihar some of which Buddha himself joined.

During this period of early Buddhism some of the Ashramas developed into large teaching institutions. Patliputra was an all-India centre for higher learning. From Kshemendra and the authors of the Aryamanju Srimula Kalpa, and from Rajashekhar we come to know that Patliputra had become an all-India centre of learning which was known for its excellence in different branches of higher studies in the time of the Nanda King. The Kavyamimansa of Rajshekhar records a tradition of some scholars having achieved distinction after coming out successful in the tests of the scholarship held in Patliputra. These scholars are ***Varsha, Upvarsha, Panini, Pingala, Vyadi, Vararuchi and Patanjali***. It is interesting to know that the Mahabhasya of Patanjali contains the terms Chandragupta Sabha and Pushyamitra Sabha.<sup>7</sup> We hear of Patliputra again as a centre of learning in the time of Chadragupta II , Vikramaditya in the 4-5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. from the Chinese pilgrim-scholar Fahsien. Radhaswami and Manjusri were the most famous teachers of Patliputra.

Patliputra was not only a centre of Brahmanical and Buddhist learning, it was a greatest centre of astronomy and mathematics. ***Aryabhatta*** worked in Patliputra. His calculation about value of pie is still nearest to the truth; he knew the origins of eclipses and held that the earth rotated on its axis- all this in 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is quite clear that Aryabhatta in Patliputra must have found the necessary equipment, historical tradition and patronage to propound his epochmaking scientific discoveries. He is the author of many works like ***Arayabhattiyam, Dasagitika, and Aryasiddhantika***. ***Varahmihira*** developed on Aryabhatta's works and ideas, and according to a late commentator he was also a Magadha Brahmin. Patliputra

remained the imperial capital under the Nandas, the Mauryas and the Guptas. Being the imperial capital the city attracted scholars from far distant places and served as centre of learning.

By the time of the Guptas, we have positive evidence that for the first time in India rather in the world, the first University in real sense was organised in Nalanda in 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., under active state patronage. Nalanda was a post-graduate University for advanced study and research. It was also famous for its “School of Discussion.” It was centre of study for humanities, religion and philosophy and also for arts and crafts including medicine. The university attracted students from many countries in the world, particularly China, Tibet, Korea and Japan and the rest of Asia, but a few also from as far in the west as Turkey. European Universities like Oxford and Cambridge grew in 12<sup>th</sup> century while in the 7<sup>th</sup> century Nalanda was one of the largest University of Asia and Europe.<sup>8</sup> Though a centre of Buddhist Mahayana school, Vedic and Brahmanical learning was also taught here. It made unique contributions to the evolution, expansion and refinement of Indian culture.

In the beginning at Nalanda University a student has to commit to memory a large number of rules of grammar. But he has to apply them intelligently so that at the age of 13 he may completely master Panini and can independently compose Sanskrit prose and verse.

In Nalanda new comers were usually taught grammar and language. Sanskrit was taught with Pali. Hindi religious texts and works of Hindu writers in Sanskrit were taught. Subjects like grammar, logic and literature were common to both Hindus and Buddhists. Buddhists themselves inform us that the three vedas, the vedangas, the Vedanta and the Sankhya philosophy were taught there along with Hetuvidya,

Shab Davidya and Sutra literature. Nalanda University maintained a splendid library. **Itsing** says that he had copied at Nalanda 400 Sanskrit works, totalling five lac verses.

During Buddhist period the Chinese travellers who visited Bihar were highly impressed with large number of great educational institutions and scholastic attainments of the natives of the place. Among them Nalanda and Vikramshila rose to international fame.<sup>9</sup>

Other noted Universities were University of Telhara (probably older than Nalanda University), Oddantapuri (Circa 550-1040) and Vikramshila (8<sup>th</sup> Century). The University Of Telhara was situated in the Nalanda district of Bihar. Recent excavations date back its antiquity to Kushan period (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.). Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang who visited the place in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. mentioned it as Teleadaka in his account. This place is also mentioned in the Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazal as Tiladah and is shown as one of the 46 mahals (administrative units) of Sarkar Bihar.

The University of Oddantapuri (Mahavihara), identified with modern town of Bihar Sharif, the headquarter of Nalanda district, was founded by Gopala, the first Pala emperor. It developed into a centre of higher learning of international reputation. It was famous for its Tantric study. It was at the Oddantapuri monastery that Ratnakarashanti, one of the dravapanditas of the Vikramshila University got his ordination in the Sarvastivada School. Even Atisa, the high priest of Vikramshila took the sacred vows from Shila Rakshita, the Mahasanghika Acharya of the Oddantapuri monastery.



Vikramshila University was founded by Pala ruler Dharampala in 8<sup>th</sup> century. It had 160 viharas. It was a centre of Vajrayana sect of Buddhism. Just like Nalanda, this was also a residential centre and it is estimated that in its hey days Vikramshila University had over one thousand students (Bhikkhus) and over hundred teachers (Acharyas). Vikramshila seems to have specialised in logic, grammar and metaphysics. Since the days of the founder teacher Buddhajnanapada, the university had a series of eminent intellectuals, all distinguished in their own branches and well known internationally for their erudition. The great scholar Atisa Dipamkara Srijnana from here went to Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century on the invitation of King of Tibet and greatly contributed to the spread of Buddhism there.

During the Gupta period in Mithila, Brahmanical religion and philosophy maintained its position, and there is clear evidence of competitive works by Buddhist scholars of Nalanda and Brahmin Pandits of Mithila refuting the view points of one another. This scholastic rivalry between the two different philosophies enriched the total production of literary gem-pieces in Logic, Philosophy and even grammar. We are aware of the **Sastrartha of Shankaracharya with Mandan Mishra and his wife Bharati in Mahisi village in Mithila**. Even the parrots of Mandan Mishra used to recite fluently the Vedic mantras. It shows the eminence in which Mithila scholars were held by the great intellectual giant Sri Shankaracharya.

Fulahari, in the vicinity of Nalanda was another centre of higher learning where several famous Acharyas lived and Tibetan scholars came here and collaborated with Indian scholars to translate Sanskrit manuscripts into Tibetan.<sup>10</sup>

In the development of Sanskrit language Bihar played most significant part. Panini, the father of Sanskrit grammar, was according to some, in the Nanda court, and Varuchi also is associated with Patliputra. Kautilya compiled his Arthashastra in about 300 B.C at Patliputra. The great commentator Patanjali certainly lived in Patliputra and presided at the Asvamedha sacrifice of Pushyamitra Sunga. Asvaghosha, the first biographer of the Buddha, was a native of Pataliputra. The great names, like Kalidasa, Amarsimha, Sikharasvamin and Harisen etc., in Sanskrit literature were associated with Pataliputra. Banabhatta, author of Kadambari and Harshacharita, and Subandhu, author of prose romance called Vasavadatta are claimed to be sons of Bihar. Chandragomin, the author of Chandravyakarna worked in Bihar. Santideva, born at Sabour (Bhagalpur), was a great Buddhist scholar who wrote many books in Sanskrit in 8-9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

During the Gupta age the Puranas, Upa-Puranas and their supplementary works were, according to F.E.Pargiter, originally written in Magadha. The Nitisara of Kamandaka may be taken as Bihar's contributions to the literature on polity. Mallanaga Vatsyana is credited to have written a book on the science of love and sexology, i.e., Kama whose date is assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. According to Shastri he belonged to Pataliputra and wrote his treatise here.

In the light of above discussion we can say that Bihar made valuable contributions in the field of education and learning. It laid the foundation on which ancient Indian education system further developed and spread in the whole world and scholars from abroad came to India to quench their thirst for knowledge. It influenced the cultures of many Asian countries as we find reference of several

educational institutions developed on the lines of ancient Indian institutions in several Asian countries.

## References

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