



HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA

Mahavir Singh Chhonkar, Ph. D.

Associate Professor & Principal, K.R. T.T. College, Mathura

Abstract

For the rapidly changing Indian society, higher education, it is widely recognized, must contribute to the initiation and strengthening of the process of development with equity, justice, solidarity and liberty as the key elements. To attain this objective, the time tested core mission of higher education - to educate, to train, to undertake research and to provide service to the community - must be preserved, reinforced and further expanded. This requires higher education to enjoy autonomy and freedom exercised with responsibility. It is necessary to know the ancient Higher Education System in India, For sustainable development and upliftment in Higher Education. It is only possible by the spiritual relationship between teacher and the student. The aim of education was at the manifestation of the divinity in men, it touches the highest point of knowledge. In order to attain the goal the whole educational method is based on plain living and high thinking pursued through eternity.

Keywords: Ancient higher education, Educational influence, Spiritual possession, university education.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Methodology: A combination of Exploratory and Historical research Methodology is opted , according to the nature of the study and the secondary data is used for analysis.

Discussion: The Hindu civilization in India was molded by religion over time and all major aspects were connected to religion be it political, economic or any other influence. The total configuration of ideals, practices, and conduct is called Dharma (Religion, Virtue or Duty) in this ancient tradition. From the very start of teaching they were made to conceive of their country as less a geographical and material entity than a cultural or a spiritual possession. The Country was their Culture and the Culture their Country. Thus, from the very dawn of its history this Country had the aura of cultural & educational wisdom expanding to cover circles such as Brahmarshi desha, Brahmavarta, Aryavarta, Bharatvarsha, or Jambudvipa, Suvarnabhumi and even a Greater India beyond its geographical boundaries. Throughout the ages learning in India had been prized and pursued not for its own sake, but for being a part, of religion, for it was though and believed that it was a means of selfrealization and a means for *Moksh*. India is the only country in the world where knowledge imparting was systematic- even at the highest level, in remote times. Whatever the discipline of learning, whether it

was chemistry, medicine, surgery, art of war or of painting or sculpture, it was systematically passed on from generation to generation.

University education -on almost modern lines existed in India as early as 800 B.C. or even earlier. The learning or culture of ancient India was chiefly the product of hermitages in the solitude of the forests. It was not of the cities. The learning of the forests was embodied in the books specially designated as Aranyakas "belonging to the forests."

The ideal of education has been very grand, noble and high in ancient India. Its aim according to Herbert Spencer is the 'training for completeness of life' and 'the molding of character of men and women for the battle of life'. The history of the educational institutions in ancient India shows a glorious dateline of her cultural history. It points to a long history altogether. In the early stage it was rural, not urban. It is an intimate relationship between the teacher and the pupil. The relationship is inaugurated by a religious ceremony called *Upanayana*. It is not like the admission of a pupil to the register of a school on his payment of the prescribed fee. The spiritual meaning of *Upanayana*, and its details inspired by that meaning, are elaborated in many texts and explained below in the proper place. By *Upanayana*, the teacher, "holding the pupil within him as in a womb, impregnates him with his spirit and delivers him a new birth."

The pupil is then known as *Dvija*, "born afresh" in a new existence- "*twice born*" (*Satapatha Brahmana*). The education that is thus begun is called by the significant term *Brahmacharya*, indicating that it is a mode of life, a system of practices. This conception of education molds its external form. The pupil must find the teacher. He must live with him as a member of his family and is to be treated by him in every way as his son. The school is a natural formation, not artificially constituted. It is the home of the teacher. It is a hermitage, amid sylvan surrounding, beyond the distractions of urban life, functioning in solitude and silence. The constant and intimate association between teacher and taught is vital to education as conceived in this system. The pupil is to imbibe the inward method of the teacher, the secrets of his efficiency, the spirit of his life and work, and these things are too subtle to be taught. It seems in the early Vedic or Upanishadic times that the education was esoteric. The word *Upanishad* itself suggests that it is learning got by sitting at the feet of the master. The knowledge was to be got, as the *Bhagavad-Gita* says, by obeisance, by questioning and serving the teacher.

India has expressed its belief in domestic / customized system in both Industry and Education, and not in the mechanical methods of large production in institutions and factories turning out standardized articles.

These are the sylvan schools and hermitages that have built up the thought and civilization of India. The education system in ancient India was mainly focused to the upper three castes and primarily to the Brahmans through the Guru-Shishya mode.

THE RIG VEDA AS THE SOURCE OF HINDU CIVILIZATION

The Rig Veda is established as the earliest work not merely of the Hindus, but of all Indo-European languages and humanity. It lays the foundation upon which Hindu Civilization has built up through ages. Life was simple but though high and of farthest reach, wandering through eternity. Some of the prayers of the Rig Veda, like the widely known *Gayatri mantram* also found in *Sama Veda* and *Yajur Veda* touch the highest point of knowledge and sustain human souls to this day. In the Rig Veda, education was a transfer of knowledge from Guru to the Shishya through oral transmission. The Rig Veda, in the form in which we have it now, is a compilation, collection and selection of 1,017 hymns out of the vast literature of hymns, which have been accumulated for a long period. Rishis were chosen and their works were utilized to constitute six different Mandalas. These Rishis are Gritsamada, Visvamitra, Vamadeva, Atril, Kanva, Bharadvaja, and Vasistha. Every Rishi was a teacher who would start by imparting to his son the texts of the knowledge he had personally acquired and such texts were considered to be the special property of his family. Each family of Rishis was thus functioning like a Vedic school

admitting pupils for instruction in the literature or texts in its possession. The relations between teacher and taught was well established in the Rig Veda. The methods of education naturally varied with the capacity of pupils.

WOMEN AS RISHIS

History shows that- except Hindu civilization; the general position of women was mostly unsatisfactory in the society. There is ample and convincing evidence to show that women were regarded perfectly eligible for the privilege of studying the Vedic literature and performing the sacrifices enjoined in it down to about 200 B.C. Women were also admitted to fulfill religious rites and consequently to complete educational facilities.

Women-sages were called Rishikas and Brahmavadinis. The Rig Veda talks about the following Rishikas: 1.Romasa, 2.Lopamudra, 3.Apala, 4. Kadru, 5.Visvavara, 6. Ghosha, 7.

Juhu, 8. Vagambhrini, 9. Paulomi, 10 Jarita, 11. Sraddha-Kamayani, 12. Urvasi, 13. Sarnga, 14. Yami, 15. Indrani, 18. Savitri, 19. Devajami, 20. Nodha, 21 Akrishtabhasha, 22. Sikatanivavari, 23. Gaupayana.

The Brahmavadinis were the products of the educational discipline of brahmacharaya for which women also were eligible. Rig Veda refers to young maidens completing their education as brahmacharinis and then gaining husbands in whom they are merged like rivers in oceans. Yajur-Veda similarly states that a daughter, who has completed her brahmacharya, should be married to one who is learned like her.

HERMITAGES

The Mahabharata tells of numerous hermitages where pupils from distant parts gathered for instruction round some far-famed teachers. A full-fledged Asrama is described as consisting of several Departments which are enumerated as following:

1. Agni-sthana, the place for fire-worship and prayers
2. Brahma-sthana, the Department of Veda
3. Vishnu-sthana, the Department for teaching Raja-Niti, Arthaniti, and Vartta
4. Mahendra-sthana, Military Section
5. Vivasvata-sthana, Department of Astronomy
6. Soma-sthana, Department of Botany
7. Garuda-sthana, Section dealing with Transport and Conveyances
8. Kartikeya-sthana, Section teaching military organization, how to form patrols, battalions, and army.

The '*sthana*' can be connoted here as a place, a department, a section or a like having specialization in a specific subject. The most important of such hermitages was that of the Naimisha, a forest that was like a university. The presiding personality of the place was Saunaka, to whom was applied the designation of Kulapati, sometimes defined as the preceptor of 10,000 disciples. Benares seems to have specialized. There are evidences of an expert who used to be "the chief of his kind in all India."

HERMITAGES AS CENTERS OF HIGHEST LEARNING

It is to be noted that the educational system of the times produced men of affairs as well as men who renounced the world in the pursuit of Truth. In the sylvan and solitary retreats away from the haunts of men, the hermitages served as schools of higher philosophical speculation and religious training where the culture previously acquired would attain its fruitage.

Taxila, the most ancient Hindu University, was destroyed by the barbarian White Huns in 455 A.D. Sir John Marshall, Director General of Archaeology in India, has given a most interesting account, although regrettably⁶²: "The monuments of Taxila were wantonly and ruthlessly devastated in the course of the same (fifth) century. This work of destruction is almost certainly to be attributed to the hordes of barbarian white Huns, who after the year 455 A.D. swept down into India in ever increasing numbers carrying sword and fire wherever they went, and not only possessed themselves of the kingdom of the Kinshans, but eventually overthrew the great empire of the Guptas. From this calamity Taxila never again recovered."

UNIVERSITIES OF ANCIENT INDIA

Taxila was the most famous seat of learning of ancient India. It was the oldest seat of learning and was also the capital of Gandhara. It was founded by Bharata and named after his son Taksha- who was established there as its ruler. Scholars from all parts of India went for their education to this university. They were invariably sent at the age of sixteen or when they "come of age". The students are said to be going to Takshasila to "complete their education and not to begin it." This shows that Takshasila was a seat of higher learning, of colleges or a university. Students had to pay their fee in cash or kind or by service to the teachers. Admission was open to a wide range

of courses. "The Jatakas contain 105 references to Takshasila." The fame of Takshasila as a seat of learning was, of course, due to that of its teachers. They are always spoken of as being 'world-renowned,' being authorities, specialists and experts in the subjects they professed. Thus various centers of learning in the different parts of the country became affiliated, as it were, to the educational center or to the central University of Taxila, which exercised a kind of intellectual suzerainty over the world of letters in India."

Democratic principle and spirit were prevalent in the education environment – in learning, in discipline, in organisation and management. Birds were also used for reciting Vedic mantras and helping students to get them by heart. Writing was developing at that time and assuming a place of importance in education. Mithila - Mithila was a stronghold of Brahminical culture from the time of the Upanishads, under its famous Philosopher-king Janaka who used to periodically invite learned Brahmins of the Kuru-Panchala country to gather to his court for purpose of philosophical discussions. Under him Eastern India was vying with Northwestern India in holding the palm of learning. In those days, it was known as Videha. In the time of

the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and Buddhist literature; Mithila retained its recognition similar to that of Vedic days.

The Kamesvara period was made famous in the literary world by the erudite and versatile scholar, Jagaddhara, who wrote commentaries on a variety of texts, the Gita, Devimahatmya, Meghaduta, Gita-Govinda, Malati-Madhava, and the like, and original treatises on Erotics, such as Rasika-Sarvasva-Sangita-Sarvasva. Vidyapati, was another talent and poet who composed Padavali and inspired the Vaishnava writers of Bengal. By its scholastic activities Mithila in those days- like Nalanda, used to draw students from different parts of India for advanced and specialized studies in *Nyaya* or Logic, of which it was then the chief center. Important writers of logic were Ganeshan, Vardhamana, Pakshadhara.

Nalanda

The earliest mention of the place is that in the Buddhist scriptures which refer to a Nalanda village near Rajagriha with a Pavarika Mango Park in Buddha's time. The Jain texts carry the history earlier than the Buddhist. It was the place where Mahavira had met Gosala and was counted as a bahira or suburb of Rajagriha where Mahavira had spent as many as fourteen rainy seasons.

As reported by Fa-Hien in the 4th century, it was called Nala and was known as the place "where Sariputta was born, and to which also he returned, and attained here his parinirvana".^[1] Nalanda was not a sectarian or a religious university in the narrow sense of the term, imparting only Buddhist thought. Subjects other than Buddhism were taught as fervently. Almost all sciences, including the science of medicine were taught. So were the Upanishads and the Vedas. Panini's grammar- the science of pronunciation (Phonetics), etymology, and Yoga were all included in the curricula. Surprisingly, even archery was taught at Nalanda. Hiuen Tsang himself learnt Yogasastra from Jayasena here.

According to Hiuen Tsang only about 20% of the aspirants succeeded to obtain admissions by passing the entrance test and yet the university was never short of candidates whose strength were almost 10,000 at that time. Nalanda was an example of the Guru-Shishya *parampara*, a great Indian tradition. The authority of the Guru (teacher) over the Shishya (student) was absolute, and yet, dissent was permitted in academic matters.^[2]

At Nalanda, studies included the Vedas, the Upanishads, cosmology (Sankhya), realist or scientific philosophy (Vaisheshika), logic (Nyaya), to which great importance was attached, and also Jain and Buddhist philosophy. Studies also included grammar, mechanics, medicine,

and physics. Medicine was highly effective and surgery was quite developed. The pharmacopoeia was enormous, and astronomy was very advanced. The earth's diameter had been calculated very precisely. In physics, Brahmagupta had discovered the law of gravity."^[3]

Vallabi

Valabhi in Kathiawad was also a great seat of Hindu and Buddhist learning. It was established by the Princess Dudda and subsequently given rich grants by King Guhasena and Dharmasenai in 580 AD. During the 7th century, however, it was more famous as a seat of learning. I-Tsing writes that its fame rivaled with that of Nalanda in Eastern India. There were occasional discussions on Buddhist doctrine and once an opinion was approved by the master of Valabhi, the scholar was recognized as a great pandit in the subject. Students of Valabhi on graduation had to present themselves at the court of Kings to prove their proficiency and talent in administration.

Vikramasila

Like Nalanda and Vallabhi, the University of Vikramsila was also the result of royal benefactions. Vikramsila, founded by king Dharmapala in the 8th century, was a famous center of international learning for more than four centuries. The University had six colleges; each with a staff of the standard strength of 108 teachers, and a Central Hall called the House of Science with its six gates opening on to the six Colleges. It is also stated that the outer walls surrounding the whole University was decorated with artistic works, a portrait in painting of Nagarjuna adorning the right of the principal entrance and that of Atisa on the left. On the walls of the University were also the painted portraits of 'Pandits' eminent for their learning and character, Grammar, logic, metaphysics, ritualism were the main subjects specialized at the institution. A Board of eminent teachers controlled the teaching and this Board of Vikramsila also administered the affairs at Nalanda. The President or Kulapati of the university was always the most learned and religious saint.^[4]

Jagaddala

According to the historical Epic Ramacharita, King Ram Pala, of Bengal and Magadha, who reigned from A.D. 1084- A.D.1130, founded a new city which he called Ramavation the banks of the rivers Ganga and Karatoya in Varendra and equipped the city with a Vihara called Jagadala. Unfortunately the University could barely work for a hundred years, till the time of Muslim invasion sweeping it away in A.D. 1203. However, in its short life it has made substantial contributions to learning through its scholars who made it famous by their

writings. Noted scholars from the university were Vibhuti Chandra, Danasila, Subhakara, Mokshakar Gupta.

Odantapuri

Though very little is known of this University, but it is known that at the time of Abhayakaragupta there were 1,000 monks in residence here besides thousands of pupils. It appears that this University had existed long before the Pala kings came into power in Magadha. These kings expanded the University by endowing it with a good Library of Brahmanical and Buddhist works. This Monastery was taken as the model for establishment of the first Tibetan Buddhist Monastery built in 749 A.D. under King Khrigron-deu-tsan on the advice of his guru Santa Rakshita.

Nadia

Nadia is the popular name of Nabadvipa on the banks of Bhagirathi at its confluence with Jalangi. King Laxman Sena made it his capital from 1106 AD and his court was renowned as a center of learning. Naida was a great center of education and literature. Although the dynasty of Laxman Sena came to an end in 1197 AD, Nadia continued its traditions of learning under Muslim rule. Consequent upon the destruction of Nalanda, Vikramasila etc, Nadia became a famous center of learning.

Banaras or Kashi – Banaras has always been a culture center of all India fame and even in the Buddha's day it was already old. Largely the ex-students and teachers of Taxila created it and hence the method of instruction as also the curriculum there in early times was adopted from Taxila. Banaras University was famous for Hindu culture. Sankaracharya as a student was acquainted with this university. Banaras is the only city in India, which has its schools representing every branch of Hindu thought. And there is no spiritual path, which has not its center in Banaras with resident adherents. Every religious sect of the Hindus has its pilgrimage there. There were also special schools of study and some very distinguished teachers particularly in Music. Both teachers and students were after the pursuit of Truth and were leading the life of renunciation. These schools were mostly established on the banks of the river Ganges amid the solitary and sylvan surrounding.

Kachipuram

Kachipuram was another such institution of learning in South India. It came to be known as Dakshina Kasi, Southern Kashi. Huien Tsang visited it about 642 A.D. and found Vaishnavite and Shaivite Hindus, Digambara Jain and Mahayan Buddhists studying together.

Though it was an important seat of higher education it reached its peak during the times of the Pallavas. The ghatika of Kanchipuram was the most important among the various educational centers and it had students from all corners of the country. The members and the scholars of the ghatikas devoted themselves to the study of the sacred lore, which was broadly called pravachanam. The study of the four Vedas and Vedangas was specially instated upon in the curriculum. The ghatikas also played a political role.

In 1867, Edward B Cowell (1826-1903) professor of Sanskrit in Cambridge and author of *The aphorisms of Sandilya or The Hindu doctrine of faith*, recorded his opinion in these words: "I could not help looking at these unpretending lecture-halls with a deep interest, as I thought of the 'pundits' lecturing there to generation after generation of eager, inquisitive minds. Seated on the floor with his 'corona' of listening pupils round him, the teacher expiates on those refinements of infinitesimal logic which makes a European's brain dizzy to think of, but whose labyrinth a trained Nadia student will thread with unfaltering precision."^[5]

Findings:

*These are the sylvan schools and hermitages that have built up the thought and civilization of India. The education system in ancient India was mainly focused to the upper three castes and primarily to the Brahmans through the Guru-Shishya mode.

* The aim of education was at the manifestation of the divinity in men, it touches the highest point of knowledge. In order to attain the goal the whole educational method is based on plain living and high thinking pursued through eternity.

* The Vedic Indian philosophy considers education somehow sacred; unlike the form it has taken these days. It assumes an individual the chief concern and at the center of this Education- considering education also necessarily individual.

REFERENCES:

Verma, D. (2001) : *Education in Ancient India* . Jaipur, India: Rawat Publications.p-84

Singh N. (2005): *Gurukul System of Education*. New York: Praeger Publishers. P-07

Kalra, L. (2012).*The Prod of Indian Eucation* . *The New Review of Academic Librarianship* vol.1, 161-73.

Reddy C. (2013). *Ancient School Planning and Management*, 39(10),28-30

Srivastav S. (2014). *Quality as Fashion. Exploring the Translation of A Management Idea into Higher Education. Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Higher Education Dynamics* vol. 20, 99-118.