

International Study Exchange: Glimpses from Indian History

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Abstract

The education has always been given great prominence in Indian society, since ancient times with gurukul and ashrams being the centers of learning. A variety of ancient higher-learning institutions were developed in many cultures to provide institutional frameworks for scholarly activities of which, Takshashila and Nalanda are the most famous ones known for their excellence in education even today. The quality of education imparted in ancient India was unparalleled. Hence, in spite of various hardships and hurdles students from different parts of world flocked to these Indian universities. The students from foreign lands such as: Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Sumatra, Java and Sri Lanka used to visit India for their studies. Although, it was not a proper exchange as we see in contemporary education system, wherein study exchange means two educational institutes or varsities exchange students with a certain terms and conditions. This paper is an attempt to highlight the excellence of ancient Indian education system, which attracted students from all over the world.

Keywords: Education, Knowledge, Exchange, Tradition, University.

Introduction

India is the land of educational excellence through imparting education in a systematic manner, since ancient times. It is not only the spiritual guru for rest of the world but also a country, wherein knowledge has been imparted in a systematic manner. Moreover, enough provisions for the education has been exclusively designed for its effective delivery at the highest level regardless of disciplines so as to pass on to future generations in a brief and of education, each thing was designed in a systematic manner to pass it on to the future generations in a brief and detailed manner. The university education on almost modern lines in India has been into existence before 800 B.C. or even earlier. The types of educational streams have been very grand, noble and high in ancient India, while compared to other countries. Its primary aim was to intuit and train scholars for living a complete life and for manifestation of divinity in humans. The genesis of educational varsities and institutions in ancient India shows our cultural history over many ages. The education imparting method has been based on simple living and higher thinking such that it was pursued through eternity in order to attain the ultimate goal of learning and maintain its sanctity.

Visits of Scholars

The Chinese scholars Xuan Zang (Hiuen Tsang) and Yi Jing (I-Tsing) arrived in Indian institutions of learning to survey Buddhist texts.¹ Yi Jing additionally noted the arrival of 56 scholars from India, Japan, and Korea.² The scholars from India also visited to China to translate Buddhist texts. It was during the 10th century a monk named Dharmadeva from Nalanda journeyed to China and translated a number of texts. Yet another centre at Vikramshila maintained close relations with Tibet, wherein the Buddhist teacher Atisa and head monk of Vikramshila travelled to Tibet.³ It has been proved with evidence that much before the time of arrival of Islamic scholar Al Biruni, India possessed an established system of science and technology in place.⁴ Also, the students from Bukhara and Afghanistan visited India to study humanities and sciences.⁵

Standard of Education

The quality of education imparted in ancient India was unparalleled. Hence, despite of various hardships and tedious hurdles students from different parts of the world travelled to Indian universities. It has been quite evidential through citations by Amir Khusrau (1252-1325 A.D.) wherein, he mentioned that scholars have come from different parts of the world to study in India but no Indian scholar have found it necessary to visit abroad to acquire such knowledge. Furthermore, Indian scholars were in great demand abroad. The caliphs like Al Mansur and Harun Al Rashid (754-809 A.D.) have sent embassies to India to procure Indian scholars. In furtherance, astronomical treatises like *Brahmasiddhanta* and *Khanda Khadyaka* of Brahmagupta and medical books of Charaka, Susruta and Vagbhatta were translated to Arabic. The ancient India being a home of knowledge and wisdom produced scores of few eminent scholars on various subjects like: Buddha and Shankara (Philosophy), Kautilya (Political Science and Administration), Sushruta (Surgery), Charaka (Medicine), Kanada (Physicist-Propounder of

¹ Scharfe, Hartmut (2002). Education in Ancient India, Brill Academic Publishers, pp.144-145, ISBN: 978-90-04-12556-8.

² Ibid

³ Scharfe, Hartmut (2002). Education in Ancient India, Brill Academic Publishers, p.161, ISBN: 978-90-04-12556-8.

⁴ Blackwell, Fritz (2004). India: A Global Studies Handbook, ABC-CLIO Inc., pp.88-89, ISBN: 1-57607-348-3.

⁵ Sen, Bimal (1989). Development of Technical Education in India and State Policy - A Historical Perspective, Indian Journal of History of Science, Vol. 24, No.2, pp. 224-248.

Atomic Theory), Nagarjuna (Chemistry), Aryabhatta and Varahamihira (Astronomy), Baudhayana and Brahmagupta (Mathematics) and Patanjali (Yoga).

The knowledge of ancient Indians in the field of metallurgy has been extraordinary, as it was evidenced by the existence of rust-free Iron pillar at Delhi, since 2250 years ago. It is still a mystery and challenge to many scientists on its type of huge column, which has been casted in ancient times. The lofty temples found in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Khajuraho exemplifies the expertise of ancient Indians in structural engineering. Moreover, historically the whole world have evidentially accepted that concept of zero was an intellectual contribution of Indians.⁶

Major Centers of Learning

The major centers of learning in ancient India were Pushpgiri in Orissa, Odantapuri in Bihar, Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, Vikramashila in Bihar (Circa 800-1040), Valabhi, in Gujarat, Somapura in Bangladesh, Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, Kanchipuram and Madurai in Tamil Nadu, Manyakheta in Karnataka and many more. The examples of few universities are as follows:

Nalanda

The Nalanda in India was a great platform of educational excellence. The scholars and graduates of this great ancient centre of learning were looked up to as models by all over India. Furthermore, foreign students visited this educational establishment to clear-off their doubts, which was one of the famous centers for higher learning.⁷ Also, Nalanda was the name of an ancient village identified with modern Baragaon, which was 7 miles north of Rajgir in Bihar. The earliest mention of this place is found in Buddhist scriptures, which refers to Nalanda village near Rajagriha with a Pavarika Mango Park in Buddha's time. The Jain texts mentioned about Nalanda much before Buddhist scriptures, which cited it as the place where Mahavira met Gosala and counted it as a bahira or suburb of Rajagriha, wherein he had spent as many as fourteen rainy seasons. It was called as Nala where Sariputta was born and attained his parinirvana. Nalanda was neither sectarian and nor a religious university in the narrow sense of term, wherein imparting only Buddhist thoughts in its educational establishments. It has been secular in imparting subjects other than Buddhism, which were taught fervently. Almost, all sciences, including science of medicine were taught to students across the globe. Nalanda has been a

⁶ Ancient Indian Education System (From the Beginning to 10th A.D.), Ithas Kaleidoscope of Indian Civilization, <https://ithas.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/ancient-indian-education-system-from-the-beginning-to-10th-c-a-d/>

⁷ Chaurasia, R. S., History of Ancient India: Earliest Times to 1000 A.D., Altantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., p. 276.

centre for excellence for teaching Upanishads and Vedas. Also, Panini's grammar, the science of pronunciation (Phonetics), etymology, Indology and Yoga were all included in the mainstream curricula. Surprisingly, archery was taught at Nalanda. The evidences of such teaching have been cited by Hiuen Tsang himself, wherein he learnt Yogasastra from Jayasena.

The knowledge of Sanskrit was indispensable for all entrants in spite of the fact that Sakyamuni delivered his sermons in Pali. In furtherance, knowledge of Sanskrit meant complete mastery of Sanskrit grammar, literature and correct pronunciation, which has been made compulsory to enter the portals of Nalanda University. This is proved on the authority of Hiuen Tsang, which indicated that entrants to Nalanda were supposed to be well-versed in "Beda" i.e. Veda, Vedanta, Samakhya, Nyaya and Vaisesika. Nalanda was an example of Guru-Shishya parampara, a great Indian tradition followed over years. The authority of Guru (teacher) over the shishya (student) is absolute and yet, dissent has been permitted in academic matters.

The Chinese scholar and traveler Yuen Chawang (Hiuen Tsang) was a student at Nalanda, wherein he mentioned that in the establishment were some thousand brethren, all men of great learning and ability, several hundreds being highly esteemed and famous; the brethren were very strict in observing the precepts and regulations of their order; learning and discussing, they found the day too short. Moreover, day and night they admonished each other, juniors and seniors mutually helping to perfection. Hence, it has been a clear proof that foreign students came to the institution to curb their doubts and intended for higher learning at Nalanda University, wherein they became famous and treated with respect.⁸ According to Alain Danielou (1907-1994) author of numerous books on philosophy, religion, history and arts of India, indicated that "Hiuen Tsang, stayed for a period of five years at Nalanda University, where more than seven thousand monks lived. He mentioned about the existence of considerable literature in Sanskrit and other works on history, statistics, geography, whilst his visit to the varsity and unfortunately none of these literary and scientific works have survived. He has written about officials whose job was to write records of all important events in the university. The university comprised of studies on Vedas, Upanishads, Cosmology (Sankhya), Realist or Scientific Philosophy (Vaisheshika), Sramana Studies (Jainist and Buddhist Philosophies), Logic (Nyaya) to which great importance were given. The studies included grammar, mechanics, medicine, and physics. Moreover, surgery under medicinal studies has been highly effective, wherein surgical medicines were in practice. The studies on pharmacopoeia have been enormous and astronomy was very advanced. The earth's diameter has been precisely calculated. Furthermore, in the field of physics Brahmagupta discovered the law of gravity".⁹ These advanced studies in different disciplines

⁸ Thomas Watters (2006). On Yuen-Chwang's Travels in India, Hindu Wisdom: A Tribute to Hinduism, Vol. 2, p. 165. Online at http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Education_in_Ancient_India.htm

⁹ Alain Danielou (2006). Brief History of India & Hindu Wisdom: A Tribute to Hinduism, pp. 165-166. Online at: http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Education_in_Ancient_India.htm

have attracted students from foreign lands such as Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Sumatra, Java and Sri Lanka. There were lot of comprehensive account of features of Nalanda University from Hiuen Tsang the brilliant Chinese scholar who visited and resided for his studies during the reign of King Harsha-Siladitya. He went back to China and wrote the famous ‘Ta-Tang-Si-Yu-Ki’, which summarized about Buddhist travels to the western world. This has been translated into English by Samuel Beal a British scholar who was once the ambassador to Peking, China.¹⁰

Vikramshila

Vikramashila was founded by King Dharmapala (c. 775-800 A. D) in the 8th century as a center for international learning, which existed for more than four centuries. The Vihara has been constructed with a perfect architectural design. This included temples and monasteries, which have been liberally endowed for studies. Furthermore, he erected several halls for lecturing. His successors continued to patronize the University till 13th century. The teaching was administered by board of eminent teachers and it is stated that this board of Vikramshila controlled the entire affairs. The University had six colleges each with a staff of standard strength of 108 teachers, and a Central Hall called the House of Science with its six gates opening on to 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 principal entrance and Atisha to its left. Moreover, the walls of University were painted portraits of eminent scholars and pandits for their learning and character. The grammar, logic, metaphysics and ritualism were the main subjects specialized at this varsity.¹¹ The university has maintained higher learning standards, which comprised of 108 Professors who were engaged in teaching and administrative duties. The curriculum of studies was similar to that of Nalanda. In addition to that, the university has given preference to Tantric form of Buddhism.

The renowned Buddhist teacher Dipankara Sri Gnana who is also known as Atisha (Circa 960-1055) was one of the famous scholars of Vikramashila. His fame spread far and wide as the propagator of Buddhism in Tibet and Tibetans hold his name in the highest veneration. It is to be noted that when he was at Vikramashila he was invited to teach and propagate Buddhism in Tibet. However, he postponed it for some time till he completed his work at Vikramashila and then undertook the task. Moreover, Vikramashila achieved its highest water mark of prosperity and fame under him, wherein his period at the University has been marked as the golden era. In

¹⁰ Weeraratne D. Amarasiri (2003). The Six Buddhist Universities of Ancient India.

Online at : <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha240.htm>

¹¹ Hindu Wisdom: A Tribute to Hinduism, 2006.

Online at http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Education_in_Ancient_India.htm

1038 A. D. he left Vikramshila for Tibet to organize Buddhist studies in that country. The university was managed by group of professors, which constituted the Board of Education, Board of Administration, Board of Discipline and Board Examinations respectively. The university was into existence for over four centuries, until it was demolished by Muslim invaders in the 12th century.¹²

Vallabhi

I-Tsing (Yi Jing) records that foreign students were found at Vallabhi. They came from many lands far and near from these facts by which one can understand that like Nalanda, Vallabhi has been internationally recognized. There was a large library, which has been maintained by a fund established by the King Guhasena and confirmed in an inscription by him. The precedence was given to Sammitiya doctrines at this university and the course of studies included comparative religion. Also, the six systems of Hindu philosophy and various other schools of Buddhism, Politics, Law, Agriculture and Economics have formed a part of the mainstream curriculum.

The Chinese scholar I-Tsing recorded that graduates of Vallabhi displayed their skills in the presence of royals, nobles and other eminent people. The eminent scholars like Gunamoti and Sthiramatic were alumni of Nalanda University. They served as teachers at Vallabhi for few years and are said to be the founders of Vallabhi. Since, the founders were from Nalanda University, Vallabhi also followed the Nalanda pattern in most of its teaching-learning processes. It was flourished in 600 CE and destroyed by Muslim invaders in the 12th century.¹³

Decline

The invasion of Muslim conquerors was nearly an end to all centres of higher learning, wherein varsities of Hindus and Buddhists were destroyed. Moreover, Nalanda was burnt to the ground in 1197 A.D. and all its monks were slaughtered. The ancient pilgrimage cities like Kanauj and Kashi were looted and plundered. The temples, educational institutions and libraries were put to destruction and were replaced by mosques. In spite of such merciless and extensive destruction, the Hindu educational institutions remained a living reality. They have sustained their strength from inherent vitality and vigour, which maintained the Hindu education system. It has been observed even during the reigns of terror and turmoil, merciless persecution and wanton

¹² Weeraratne D. Amarasiri , The six Buddhist universities of ancient India,2003,online at :
<http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha240.htm>

¹³ Ibid

destruction, the Hindu culture and scholarship continued to survive, though it had to migrate to more congenial regions within the country.¹⁴

Suggestions

The historians have to conscientiously conduct the sanctity of education through these scriptures and infuse the systemic practices in the contemporary education system to avoid pseudo-learning process. The researchers shall conduct a holistic research through an ex-post facto design by expediting and congregating the features of various pedagogies and education patterns including outlines of rubrics that have been followed at these varsities to understand the exhibits of excellence. The Government of India has to encourage and fund historical expeditions to foster research on ancient educational systems. This can provide the gate way for future generations to acquire quality education through ancient educational practices along with contemporary styles by infusing these methodical practices, which may improvise the teaching-learning process.

Conclusion

The international exchange program is not a new phenomenon, which the contemporary world is implementing now vehemently towards curbing global knowledge shrinking as the desire for excellence has been increasing. The epics are full of examples with Gurukul and Ashrams being the centers of learning. The fundamental objective of education is holistic understanding of self through simple living and high thinking. The unparalleled education imparted whilst the time of ancient Indian universities has attracted the scholars from foreign lands such as: Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Sumatra, Java and Sri Lanka. Although, it was not accorded as a proper exchange to that of contemporary education system, wherein educational exchange means two educational institutes or varsities exchange students or researchers or scholars with certain terms and conditions from all over the world for imparting knowledge. Thus, education being the backbone accounts for a progressive society to reach its pinnacle in all spheres for socio-economic growth.

¹⁴ Luniya, B. N. (1978). Life and Culture in Medieval India, Kamal Prakashan, Indore, p. 271.