

Taxila: An Ancient Indian University

By
Dr S. Srikanta Sastri, M.A., D. Litt. Mysore

The ancient system of education from the Vedic times had as its main goal the development of personality in all its aspects, secular as well as spiritual. It was considered to be a Samskara-& process of refinement. According to the ancient conception, the inherited and acquired characteristics of an individual had to be properly disciplined and canalised so as to serve the four ends of Man, or Purushartha-ethics and morality or Dharma, the economic and political obligation-Artha, the sublimation of desire and the sex instinct-Kama, and finally salvation-Moksha.

Education therefore meant a proper conditioning of the body and the mind of the individual. To "educate" or bring out the inherent potentiality and help the individual to adjust himself to the changing condition, the educational system aimed at the transformation of the individual even from the mother's womb by proper Samskara or ceremonies. The elementary education was imparted up to the eighth year and after the initiation ceremony, the higher education was imparted according to the capacity and needs of the individual. The student was expected to lead a life of strict celibacy or Brahmacharya until his course of study was completed. Then he had to travel and acquire a knowledge of the world and become a Snataka or a graduate.

Teacher-Pupil Relationship

The relations between the teacher and the pupil were never impersonal or based on monetary considerations in the Vedic times. The Dharma Sastras expressly condemn the teacher who imparts education for a stipulated fee and say such education benefits neither the pupil nor the teacher. After the teacher has given permission to the pupil to go back to his home and set up a family, the student may show his gratitude by making an offering to the teacher according to his capacity.

In the age of the later Vedic literature, there were Forest Universities associated with the descendants of the Rishis. The epic poems like the Ramayana and Maha Bharatha give descriptions of Asramas under a Kulapati. In the Naimisha Forest University, Saunaka was the Principal or Kulapati under whom there were ten thousand pupils studying in eight different departments, named after the Gods. The common hall for prayer and religious ceremonies was named Agni Sthana. The department of Vedic study was the Brahma Sthana. The Vishnu Sthana taught the art of Government and economics. The departments named after Mahendra and Kartikeya were concerned with military matters. The Vaivasvata Sthana taught law and jurisprudence. Medicine, Botany, Chemistry and other sciences were taught in the Soma Sthana and the Garuda Sthana was devoted to transport and communications. Kanva, the foster father of Sakuntala, presided over another such University, which contained many professors in specialised subjects. In the Ramayana, we are told, that Ayodhya was a great educational centre. The students there had formed a Student Federation called Mekhalinam Sangha which could approach the King to express their grievances and also their opinions on public matters. There were also hostels or Avasathas for students and several associations like Vadhu Sangha for lady students, Nataka Sangha for enacting dramas, etc. The biggest Asrama of the Ramayana times was that of Bharadvaja at Prayaga.

Earliest Universities

With the growth of cosmopolitan cities and towns Universities came into exist, throughout India. In the succeeding ages Taxila, Banaras, Nalanda, Pataliputra, Valabhi, Dasapura in North-India; Kanchi, Behr, Belagami in South India became famous Ghatika-Sthanas or Universities. The earliest of such Universities was Taxila, which for more than five centuries held the pride of place in the North-West. Takshasila or Taxila was

associated with Takshaka, a Naga Chieftain who was ousted from that place by Janamajeya as related in the Mahabharatha. It was an important city in Gandhara, near to Purushapura or Peshawar. The ancient highway from Persia and Afghanistan lay near the city and hence Greek, Persian, Scythian and other cultural influences were to be found there. As the capital of Gandhara Janapada, it was a great centre of the trade with the West and also a seat of learning in Pre-Buddhist times. In the 6th Century B. C. it was ruled by Pushkarasari, a contemporary of Buddha. In 326 B. C., Alexander was joined by the King of Taxila, Ambhi whose rival was Paurava or Porus. Though the ruler of Taxila submitted to the foreign invader, the seed of the resistance was being sown by another native of Taxila, Chanakya or Kautilya who was living in obscurity and took Chandragupta to Taxila for political training.

The excavations at Taxila conducted by Sir John Marshall and more recently by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Ghosh show the existence of five or six layers. The Bhir Mound at Taxila goes back to pre-Buddhist times. At Sirsukh and Sirkap, in the city area, there is evidence of the growth of the city from about 190 B. C. to 2nd century A. D. The city wall was 21 1/2 feet thick, rising to a height of 12 feet. This fort wall was protected by corner bastions, 20 feet thick and 14 feet high. Under the Greek rule (190 to 80 B.C.) the city was on the plain near the river, protected by a wall of mud or brick. In the first century B.C., the Sakas seem to have shifted the city to a higher site to avoid inundations. Taxila was transformed for the first time into a city on the Greek model with an Acropolis in the centre on a high mound, and a lower city. Down to the third century A.D., the city continued to be under Sassanian or Parthian influence.

System of Education

The system of education at Takshasila has been graphically described in the Buddhist Jatakas. The Jatakas profess to give the stories of the earlier births of the Buddha and generally represent the conditions before Buddha. The Buddhists had accepted the ancient system of Vedic education and relationship between the teacher and the pupil was regulated by the rules of the Dharma Shastras. The curriculum of studies followed the Brahminical system as in the Upanishad times. But whereas in the Vedic times the Upadhyaya who taught for a prescribed fee only a few subjects, the Buddhist texts give the Upadhyaya a higher status. The Upadhyaya was considered to be inferior to an Acharya who taught the Vedas. Upadhyaya must have been a monk of ten years standing and the Acharya of only six years. The Upadhyaya taught the scriptures and the Karmacharya supervised the student's conduct and activities.

The subjects taught in the Takshasila University included all the arts and sciences. Even the Buddhists could learn the Veda. Even the Greeks like Menander or Milinda learnt the Sruti and Smriti, the systems of philosophy like Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika and Sankya. He was well versed in nineteen arts and sciences. The Brahmanas learnt the Vedas, Dharma Sastras, history, literature, astronomy and geography, mathematics, etc. The Kshatriyas learnt the arts of government and war besides economics and literature. The Vaisyas preferred to study commerce, banking, animal husbandry and other castes could learn their specialised occupations.

The student life of the times has been described in the Jataka stories. The students could choose any subject and were not debarred from sacred subjects on the score of caste. Princes were treated in the same way as poorest student and kings made it a principle to send the princes away from their own country, to learn like an ordinary student. King Brahmadatta of Banaras, when his son was 16 years old, gave him a pair of sandals, an umbrella made of leaves and a thousand coins and asked him to go to Taxila. The boy journeyed to Takshasila which was 2,000 leagues from Banaras and stood respectfully front of the teacher's house. The teacher who had finished his lectures was perambulating in the verandah and noticed him. The prince was invited into the house and given food. Then the teacher asked him about his parentage and whether he could study as a day-scholar paying the Guru Dakshina or do service in the teacher's house in return for instruction at night. Thus we learn that some well-to-do students could reside elsewhere in the town and attend the classes in the day or reside in the teacher's house and serve him.

Facilities for Higher Studies

Even elderly scholars after acquiring general proficiency came for higher studies from distant countries like Greece. The Greek philosopher Apollonius of Tyana is said to have so studied under Gaudapada, the teacher of Advaita philosophy at Takshasila. There were not only celibates or Brahmacharies but married students who resided in their own homes and attended lectures. The Jatakas give humorous descriptions of the plight of the married student at examination time. He studied in the night, burning the midnight oil, the wife would snatch away his books and put out the light. If he was preparing to attend an important lecture, the wife would pretend to have a headache and detain him. The resident pupils in the teacher's house had to leave their warm beds early in the morning at cock-crow. The cock was the alarm clock and sometimes the students would get rid of the unfortunate cock. The professors at Takshasila were famous throughout the ancient world. The students came to learn the Vedas and also the eighteen shilpas or arts and sciences. There were special colleges for medicine, law and military science. The medical education extended over seven years and the Jatakas specially mention Jivaka as a famous medical graduate of Takshasila. He was the son of a prostitute of Rajagriha and had been abandoned. The prince Abhaya rescued the infant and brought it up and later sent the boy named Jivaka to learn medicine at Takshasila. The boy studied under a world-renowned doctor for the full term of seven years and the teacher at the end put him to a practical test. Jivaka was asked to go around Takshasila and see if he could find any herb which was useless in medicine.

Jivaka could not find any plant or herb which could not be of use. Jivaka became the royal physician of the king of Magadha whom he cured of a fistula. When Buddha was suffering from constipation, Jivaka gave him relief by administering a Ghrta or medicated ghee. He was also an expert surgeon. He removed a diseased eye-ball and substituted another healthy one. The son of a rich Sethi or merchant of Banaras had strangulation of the intestines after performing gymnastic exercises. Jivaka operated on the stomach, took out the intestines, arranged them properly and stitched up the skin. He cured King Pradyota of Ujjaini of jaundice by administering medicated ghee.

Taxila – the oldest university

Takshasila was thus the oldest University centre and even Banaras seems to have acquired its importance when the graduates of Taxila settled in that city as teachers. Due to the invasions of foreigners – Yavanas, Hunas, Shakas, Parthians and others, Taxila seems to have declined in the early centuries of the - Christian era. The torch of learning was handed on however to the universities of Vallabhi in Gujarat, Banaras and Ujjaini in Central India, Pataliputra, Nalanda and Vikramasila in Eastern India, Kanchi Bahur, Belagami in South India, until the Mathas or monasteries established by Sankara and other religious leaders took up the responsibility for higher education.

Takshasila's contribution to Indian art is by no means negligible. The influence of the Gandhara school of sculpture, with Hellenistic motives and inspired by Mahayana Buddhism can be seen in the later Gupta art. The Indian craftsmen absorbed foreign techniques but transformed it so that except in certain external features it is thoroughly Indian. The gold and silver jewellery found at Taxila shows the skill of the Indian craftsmen. Some Greek and Roman as well as Mithraic motives were reproduced. But generally the ornaments, gold and silver vessels, were manufactured by native craftsmen and exported to Greece and Rome as the recently discovered image of Lakshmi or Yakshini at Pompeii testifies. The Indian ivory carvers - Dantakaras were famous throughout the ancient world.

*“One ignorant of the land asks of one who knows it;
He travels forward instructed by the knowing guide,
this, indeed is the blessing of instruction;
One finds the path that leads straight onward”*

RG. VEDA X. 32 – 7.