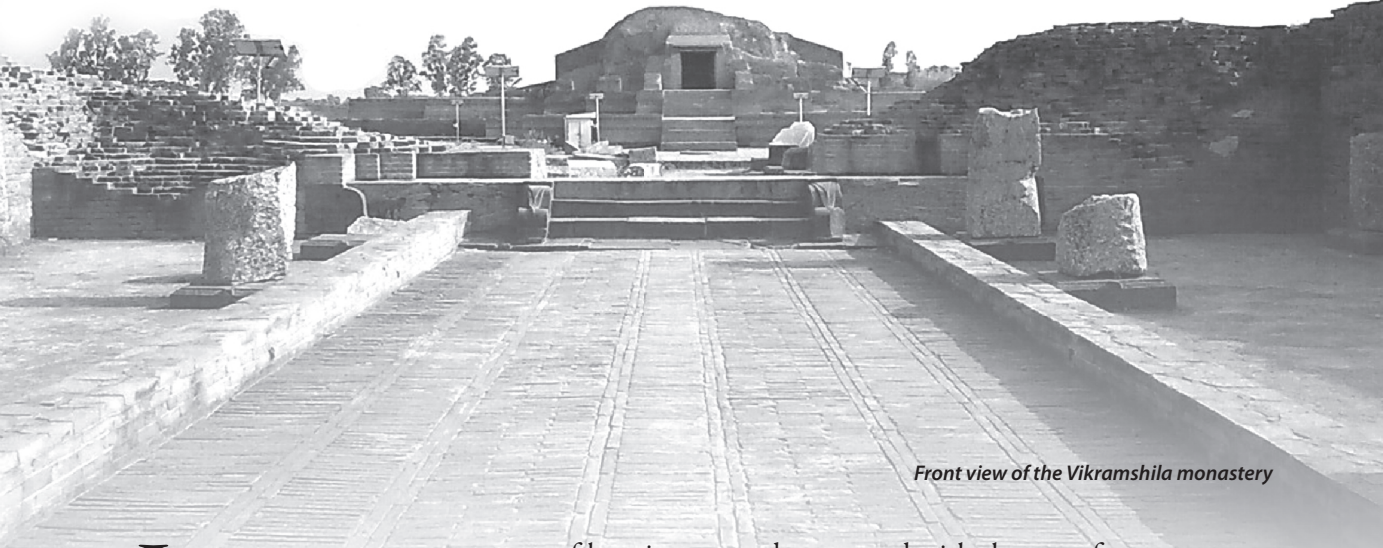


# Vikramshila: An Ancient Seat of Education

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Front view of the Vikramshila monastery

INDIA HAS A RICH TRADITION of learning and education that was handed over generation after generation, first orally and later through writing. Swami Vivekananda says: ‘Every boy and girl was sent to the university, where they studied until their twentieth or thirtieth year.’<sup>1</sup> Much later, apart from the scriptures, the approach to learning was generally to study logic and epistemology. The study of logic was followed by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains.<sup>2</sup>

In ancient India the main subject was the Vedas. The Vedangas, subjects auxiliary to the Vedas, as well as the performance of elaborate yajnas had also to be mastered. The teacher would instruct a handful of seated students for many hours daily in the *gurukula*, house of the guru. They first had to memorize and repeat the Vedic mantras and then were taught their esoteric meanings. To ensure correctness of memory the hymns were taught in more than one way. Students would attain mastery of at least one of the four Vedas. In the *gurukulas* the young

students stayed with the guru for many years, helping him in his daily chores. The guru’s wife became their surrogate mother. There is mention of many *gurukulas* in the Upanishads—famous among them were those of Yajnavalkya and Varuni. A well-known discourse on Brahman found in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* is said to have taken place in Varuni’s *gurukula*. *Gurukulas* were supported by royal as well as public donations. After the *upanayana*, initiation into the study of the Vedas, children between the ages of five to twelve, became *brahmacharis*. These students remained unmarried till they were about twenty-five, or even later. In pre-Buddhist India students generally belonged to the three upper castes—brahmana, kshatriya, and vaishya.

Around 500 BCE Buddhism spread in India and with it a new educational system. Buddhism was a protest against the orthodox Vedic religion. Swami Vivekananda said: ‘Without the Buddhist revolution what would have delivered the suffering millions of the lower classes from the violent

tyrannies of the influential higher castes?’<sup>3</sup> However, Swamiji did not put aside Vedic thought, as for him ‘the essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanishads; even the ethics, the so-called great and wonderful ethics of Buddhism, were there word for word, in some one or other of the Upanishads’ (3.230).

In Buddhist India monasteries became the centres of learning and education. During the classical period of Indian history the Palas, who were Buddhists, ruled from Bengal between 750 to 1174 CE. This dynasty supported art and education and the universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila. The students in these universities had to follow monastic rules along with their syllabus, and they were classified according to merit. The period of education was twelve years. The teachers were the guardians of the students. They were responsible for the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual development of the students. Initially, stress was given on the study of various scriptures. In a later period, and according to the demands of society, professional education—art, sculpture, architecture, medicine—were also

included in the syllabus. The student’s mother tongue was the original medium of teaching; later Pali and Prakrit were introduced, and much later Sanskrit as well. In fact, Vedic topics were also added to the syllabus.

The monasteries that served as centres of education later developed into colleges and universities. Nalanda, Vikramshila, Somapura, Salban, and Takshashila, or Taxila, became unparalleled universities with highly qualified teachers. The aim of Buddhist education was to make a human being wise, intelligent, moral, and non-violent. Students became judicious, humanists, logical, and free from superstitions, as well as free from greed, lust, and ignorance—an integral education that can ultimately lead a person to nirvana. Buddhist education was open and available to people of all walks of life. Although a small number of students studied under a single teacher, students from China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Gandhara in Afghanistan came here to study. Later these universities were preferred by students and scholars from all over the known world. Ancient Indian education contributed a lot to the growth

*A Buddhist monk teaching novices*



of education in medieval times. The stress was now on the elements of innovation and an incentive to improve traditional knowledge.

Famous men connected with Taxila were Panini, the grammarian of the fifth or fourth century BCE; Kautilya, the brahmana minister of Chandragupta Maurya; and Charaka, one of the two leading authorities on Indian medical sciences.<sup>4</sup> Taxila was famous for the teaching of grammar, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Nalanda and Vikramshila, the two other great universities that grew up during the Pala dynasty, were called Maha Viharas, 'Great Monasteries'. Vikramshila was the premier university of the era and one of the two most important centres of Buddhist learning in India, along with Nalanda.

#### *Vikramshila ruins*

#### **Origins and Structure**

The Vikramshila university was established by King Dharmapala in the eighth century AD and grew to become the intellectual centre for tantric Buddhism. In the beginning of the eleventh century AD, during the reign of King Ramapala, India was passing through a transitory phase called the early medieval period. The great dynasties were gradually giving way to the invaders from the West. The age was no longer the Golden Age. Political and social values were crumbling, as was the hold of the central political authority. This was the political setting when Dharmapala established Vikramshila university on the banks of the river Ganga in Magadha—now near Bhagalpur. The university was governed by a joint board of scholars.<sup>5</sup>





*Ruins of Vikramshila's  
bathing place*

Atisha Dipankara Srijnan (982–1052 CE), the renowned pundit, played a pivotal role in establishing it as a centre of education. He was later responsible for spreading Buddhism in Tibet.

Vikramshila is known to us mainly through Tibetan sources, especially the writings of Taranatha, the Tibetan historian-monk of the sixteenth–seventeenth century AD. The entire campus was circular in structure, spread out within a radius of nearly 150 miles. There were 53 rooms meant for Tantric practices, another 54 for general use, and 17 monastic cells opening onto the verandas. Vikramshila got to have more than one hundred teachers and about one thousand students. Highly qualified teachers were called *dvarapalas*, who used to sit at the gates to conduct the entrance test of the students seeking admission. The university had four such gates on the east, west, north, and south. Four eminent teachers of four different subjects were posted at the gates and they interviewed the students seeking admission. Subjects like philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, Indian logic, among others, were taught there.

The centre of the university once had a huge temple, adorned with a life-size copy of

the Mahabodhi Tree. It is said that approximately one hundred and eight temples were constructed around it. Out of these, almost fifty-three were dedicated to the study of the Guhyasamaja Tantra. The entrance of the main temple stood guarded by two life-size statues of Nagarjuna and Atisha Dipankara. The university produced many eminent scholars who were often invited to foreign countries to spread Buddhist learning, culture, and religion. Vikramshila prospered for about four centuries and then was destroyed, along with other major centres, by Bakhtiyar Khilji during the wars with the Sena dynasty.

### ***Ruins and Restoration***

At present only ruins of the ancient Vikramshila can be seen at the village Antichak, about 50 km east of Bhagalpur, Bihar, and about 13 km north-east of Kahalgaon—a railway station on the Bhagalpur-Sahebganj section of the Eastern Railway. It is approachable through a 11 km long motorable road diverting from NH 80 at Anadipur, about 2 km from Kahalgaon. Vikramshila also lies very close to Champanagar, another famous Buddhist destination in Bihar.



*Main stupa in the centre of the square monastery*

The remains of the ancient university have been partially excavated, and the process is still underway. Meticulous excavation at the site was conducted initially by Patna University during 1960–69 and subsequently by the Archaeological Survey of India during 1972–82. It has revealed a huge square monastery with a cruciform stupa in its centre, a library building, and cluster of stupas. To the north of the monastery a number of scattered structures including a Tibetan and a Hindu temple have been found. The entire ruins are spread over an area of more than one hundred acres.

The monastery, or residence for the Buddhist monks, is a huge square structure, each side measuring 330 metres and having a series of 208 cells, 52 on each of the four sides opening onto a common veranda. A few brick-arched underground chambers beneath some of the cells have

also been noticed, which were probably meant for solitary meditation by the monks.


The main stupa, built for the purpose of worship, is a brick structure laid in mud mortar that stands in the centre of the square monastery. This two-terraced stupa is cruciform on plan and about 15 meters high from the ground level, accessible through a flight of steps on the north side. On each of the four cardinal directions there is a protruding chamber with a pillared antechamber and a separate pillared mandapa in front. In the four chambers of the stupa were placed colossal stuccoed images of the seated Buddha, of which three were found in situ and the remaining one, on the north side, was possibly replaced by a stone image after the clay image was somehow damaged.

The walls of both the terraces were decorated with mouldings and terracotta plaques, which testify the high excellence of terracotta art that

flourished in the region during the Pala period. Over the plaques are depicted many Buddhist deities like Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Maitreya, Marichi, Tara and scenes related to Buddhism, in addition to some social scenes and a few Hindu deities like Vishnu, Parvati, Ardhanarishvara, and Hanuman.

About 32 meters south of the monastery on its south-west corner and attached to the main monastery through a narrow corridor is a rectangular structure identified as a library building. It was air-conditioned by cooled water from the adjoining reservoir through a range of vents in the back wall. The system was perhaps meant for preserving delicate manuscripts.

A large number of antiquities of different materials, unearthed from this place in the course of excavation, are displayed in the site museum maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India.<sup>6</sup>

Vikramshila was neglected for years, which contributed to extensive damages to the monument. The Archaeological Survey of India is now planning to develop the excavated site of this ancient university. From the year 2009 there has been considerable work in maintaining and beautifying the place to attract tourism. 

## Notes and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.505.
2. The information for this section was taken from: Shanmuga Sundaram V, 'Ancient Indian Education System', <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/52329573/ANCIENT-INDIAN-EDUCATION-SYSTEM>>; Dr Pranab Kumar Baruya, 'Early Buddhist Education and Its Modern Implication', <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/78335893/PO20090329550007506444>>; Dr V K Maheshwari, 'Education in Buddhist Period in India', <<http://www.vkmaheshwari.com/WP/?p=522>>; 'Theories of Ethics, Natural Law, Utilitarianism, Kantian Virtue', <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/57699297/Theories-of-Ethics-Kautilyan-Philosophy-Education-System-in-India>>.
3. *Complete Works*, 4.462.
4. See Sachindra Kumar Maity, *Cultural Heritage of Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1983), 61–2.
5. See Puja Garg, 'Historical Learning Center of Medieval India—Vikramshila University', <<http://www.shvoong.com/humanities/history/255801-historical-learning-center-medieval-india/>>.
6. See Archaeological Survey of India, 'Excavated Site Vikramshila, Antichak', <[http://asi.nic.in/asi\\_monu\\_tktd\\_bihar\\_vikramshila.asp](http://asi.nic.in/asi_monu_tktd_bihar_vikramshila.asp)>.

Wall carvings of  
Vikramshila's terraces

