

Mithila, a Historical Seat of Education in Ancient India

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Introduction :

Mithila was a stronghold of Brahmanical culture at its best in the time of the Upanishads, under its famous philosopher-king Janaka who used to send out periodical invitations to learned Brahmans of the Kuru-Panchala country to gather at his court for purpose of philosophical discussions. Under him Eastern India was vying with North-Western India in holding the palm of learning. In those days, the name of the country was not Mithila but Videha. In the time of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and Buddhist, Mithila retained the renown of its Vedic days.

Its subsequent political history is somewhat chequered. When Vijayasen was king of Bengal, Nayadeva of the Karnataka dynasty was king of Mithila in A.D. 1097. King Vijaya defeated him, but was defeated by his SenGangadeva who recovered Mithila from him. This Karnataka Dynasty ruled Mithila for the period A.D. 1150-1395, followed by the Kamesvara Dynasty which ruled between A.D. 1350-1515. It was again followed by another dynasty of rules founded by MahesvaraThakkura in the time of Akbar, and this dynasty has continued up to the present time.

Mithila is a seat of learning flourished remarkably under these later kings. 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, Devi-mahatmya, Meghaduta, Gita-Givinda, Malati-Madhava, and the like, and original treatises on Erotics, such as Rasika-Sarvasva-Sangita-Sarvasva.

The next scholar who shed iustre on Mithila was the poet Vidyapati, the author of Mithili songs or Padavali generally. He has inspired for generations the later Vaishnavawriters of Bengal.

Description :

Mithila made conspicuous contributions in the realm of severa and scientific subjects. It developed a famous school of Nyaya which flourished from the twenty to the fifteenth century A.D., under the great masters of Logic, Gangesa, Vardhamana, Pakshadhara, and others. This school of new logic (NavyaNyaya) was founded by GangesaUpadhaya and his spoch-making

work named “Tattva-Chintamani”, a work of about 300 pages whose commentaries make up over 10,00,000 pages in three centuries of its study. Gangesa is supposed to have lived after A.D. 1093-1150, the time of AnandaSuri and AmarachandraSuri, whose opinions he has quoted.

Gangesa was followed by his son Vardhamana (A.D. 1250) who wrote eight learned works on Nyaya, and by PakshadharaMisra (A.D. 1275) who was so called because he was victorious in a debate of a for night (paksha).Pakshadhara’s nephew and pupil was the great master VasudevaMisra. Another great name in this list of masters in MahesaThakkura. His pupil, Raghunandanadasa Raya, and accomplished logician, went out on an intellectual digvijaya (conquest of all quarters) at the instance of Emperor.

Akabar who, pleased with his performance, made a gift to him of the whole tract of Mithila which, in turn, the loyal pupil transferred to his guru as his fee for teaching him (gurudhakshina). MahesaThakkura thus became the founder of the Darbhanga Raj family. SankaraMisra flourished about A.D. 1450 as the Parishad or Court-officer of the Kamasyara kings, Bhairava and Ramabhadra. He started writing on Smriti but soon drifted into Nyaya under the prevailing philosophical spirit of the age. He is known for his learned works “Nyaya-sutradhara”, “Khandana-Khandadhara”, “Anumana-Khanda-tika”, and “Nitichintamani”, a work on Ethics.

A host of scholars kept up the literary history of Mithila during the three centuries, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, though the scholars named above represents its highest level and achieved an all-Indian reputation and an permanent place in the realm of scholarship. By its scholastic activities Mithila in those days, like Nalanda of former times, 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 centre.

It is interesting to note that, corresponding to the system of admission at Nalanda and Vikramasila by difficult examination by learned Dvara-Pandits, Mithila instituted a peculiar examination for graduation or completion of study. It was called Salakapariksha, by which the candidate for graduation had to explain that page of a MS. which was pierced last by a needle run through it. This was thus a test of the capacity of the candidate to explain unprepared any part of the texts he had studied so as to demonstrate his mastery of the subject in all its parts. The diploma of the Mithila University was then conferred on the successful.

The period under review witnessed cultural attainments of a high order. The foundations of whatever is best in Indian cultural were laid during this period. It witnessed the growth of a vast and varied literature including the Upanishads- “the highest level of intellectual attainments

and spiritual progress”.

In the Vedic Age, every householder regarded the education of his children as his sacred duty. No distinction was made between boys and girls. The education of both received the same attention even during its higher stages. Girls were admitted to Vedic school or Caranas.

Majority of the boys and girls received their education at home. For this Upanayana, i.e. the ceremony of initiation was made obligatory for the dvijas. This practice is still prevalent in the same old form.

The period of studentship was usually fixed at twelve years. They spent twelve years with their preceptors and then returned home. Sometimes a period of studentship for 32 years and 101 years is also mentioned. There were certain conditions binding on them. The student had to live in the house of his teacher. He is referred to as ‘acarya-kula-vasin’ and atenvasin. He had to go begging. He had to tend the sacred fires, also the house. He must not sleep during day-time. On festive occasions he accompanied his teacher and awaited his commands. The pupil, before he was taught the highest knowledge of Brahman, must show that he was calm and unperturbed in mind. (Santa), self-restrained (Danta). Self-denying (Uparata), patient (Titiksu) and collected (Samadita).

The courses of training and subjects of study were not uniform for all castes. A ‘policy of discrimination’ was probably observed so far as the study of the non-Brahmanas was concerned. The Drona-Ekalavya (the-Niada boy) episode in the Mahabharata points to the extreme step that a jealous Brahman could take to keep down his Sudra rival.

Kastriyas also attained higher knowledge or Brahmanic philosophy. It appears however that only a few selected Kastriyas of high rank took real interest in intellectual pursuits of the time. Among them the following names are significant-Ajatasatru of Kasi, Pravahanajaivali, Asvapati of Kekaya, Janaka of Videha, who taught Yajnavalkya, Pratardana and others. In the Upanisadic Age, Mithila was the main sea of learning and culture. Brahmanas came from Kuru-Pancala to take part in philosophical deliberations. Of learned Kastriyas Janaka was the type. The great Mithila philosophers Gautama and Kapila wrote treatises also on medical science.

Conclusion :

Education was wide spread among Vaisalians. The young Lichchavis went to distant countries for higher education. Taksasila was the most famous seat of learning. It attracted scholars from all parts of India. Numerous references in the Jatakas show how thither flocked students from far off Banaras, Rajagriha, Mithila, Ujjeni and Kosala, from the “Central region”, and from the Sivi and Kuru Kingdoms in the “North-Country”.

Education of girls was also wide-spread. Some women of the Buddhist period were not

behind their male brothers in education. The religious harangue of Sukka and the philosophical discussion of Khema and Dhammadinna may be cited as instances of attainments of Indian women during the period.

The education of the ancient Indian child began in the gurukula, the teacher's house where he had to live till the completion of his studies. What were the ideals of this system of education? Stated in general terms its aims were two, imparting learning and inculcating righteousness, it was so designed as to broaden the student's outlook on life, give him enlightenment sharpen his intellect, and establish his character through the development of his personality. The system of education in ancient India took full cognizance of all these aspects of the educational process, and consequently the institutions evolved strove to create not only a successful social being but also fully cultured individual.

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