

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF KASHI: FROM VEDIC PERIOD TO THE BEGINNING OF MODERN ERA

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ABSTRACT

Varanasi, also known as Benaras or Kashi is a magnificent city on the bank of Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, 320 kilometres (200 mi) South-east of the state capital Lucknow. It is the holiest of the seven sacred cities in Hinduism and Jainism and played an important role in the development of Buddhism. Some Hindus believe that death at Varanasi brings salvation. During his journey around world Mark Twain has observed about antiquity of Varanasi and writes that "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together". This sacred city is reckoned amongst the most primitive cities founded by the Aryan people. It is regarded, by all the Hindus as coeval with the birth of Hinduism. In present paper we have tried to understand of the history of educational system of this cultural city Kashi.

KEYWORDS: Kashi, Varanasi, BHU, Varuna, Assi,

According to legend, Varanasi was founded by the god Shiva. The name Varanasi possibly originates from the name of two rivers from north and south : Varuna, still flowing in Varansi, and Assi, a small stream near Assi Ghat. (Julian, p354) Another speculation is that the city derives its name from the river Varuna, which was called Varanasi in olden times. In the Rigveda the city is referred to as Kasi or Kashi, the luminous city as an eminent seat of learning. The name kashi is also mentioned in the Skanda Purana. (Ministry of Tourism, Govt of India, March 2007) Archaeological evidences suggest that settlement around Varanasi began in the 11th or 12th century B.C. (bhu.ac.in retrieved on 23 May 2013) It was populated by Vedic people. According to Atharvaveda it was populated by indigenous tribe. Varanasi was also home to Parshvanath, the 23rd Jain Tirthankara and other earliest Tirthankaras.

Varanasi grew as an important centre of learning, literature and industry. It was famous for its muslin and silk fabrics, perfumes, ivory works and sculpture. (Jaiswal, 2009, p206) Before the time of Buddha it was an important political division of Northern India. It is mentioned in Anguttar Nikaya in the list of Shodasa Mahajanpada. Varanasi was the capital of Mahajanpada Kashi. The Buddha (born circa 500 B.C.E) is believed to have founded Buddhism here around 528 B.C. when he gave his first sermon. (Dennison, 1986 p121) "The setting in motion of the "wheel of Dharma" at nearby Sarnath". when Zaunzang, also known as Hiuen-Tsiang visited

Varanasi in 635 A.D. attested that the city was a centre of religious, literary and artistic activities, and that it extended for about 5 kilometre (3.1 mi) along the western bank of the Ganga. (Watters, 1904 p48) The city's religious importance continued to grow in the 8th century, when Adi Shankar established worship of Shiva an official sect of Varanasi. (Twain, p482)

In the Atharvaveda, Mahabharata and Pali texts such as Anguttaranikaya several Jatakas and Jaina texts we find references to Varanasi. In Buddhist period the city was known as Kashi. The main texts of Brahmanical and Jaina traditions referring to Varanasi as tirthas (centre of Pilgrimage) and also as place of various cultural activities and learning including those on Ganga-Ghat are Matsya Purana. It seems that during vedic period Varanasi was not famous as a centre of learning.¹² In earliest time vedic culture spread in Sapt Sandhava region with its centre around Kurukshetra. (altekhar, 1948, p114) Infact, vedic religion reached Varanasi many centuries later.

In the beginning people of Varanasi did not accept this religion easily. They were not in favour of it for a long period of time. (Ibid, p115) From Shatpath Brahman it is evident that Dhritrastra the king of Benaras refused vedic religion because Shatnik Bharata's king kidnapped his horse of Ashvamedha. (Satpath Brahman, 13-5) It seems that Taxila and Varanasi attained importance after Mahabharata.

During Sutra and Epic periods Vedic religion and culture spread in Northern India . Taxila Varanasi and Mithila developed as important centres of learning and philosophy.(Mookherji, 1957,p333) Varanasi became a famous centre of Vedic civilization during Upanishada period . Ajatshatru was patron of learning and Literature. Taxila was the most famous seat of learning which attracted scholars from almost all parts of India . Jatakas mention that because of cultural contact of Varanasi with Taxila students from far off places came there for learning.(Fausball, p263) According to Maha –Dhamm-Pala Jataka Kumara Dhamma-Pala was sent to Taxila from kingdom of kashi for learning.(Ibid p263) Kosiya and Tittiri Jataka state that famous acharyas of Benaras taught three Vedas and eighteen Shilpas .(Ibid)

According to Buddhist and Jaina literature during 6th century B.C. Benaras was probably the most famous centre of Buddhist education in eastern India . Buddha at first promulgated his gospel here.(Cowell, Nos 123,150) Sarnath monastery on the outskirts of Benaras became a famous centre of learning under the patronage of Magadha king Ashoka . During seventh century it possessed resplendent and beautiful buildings with tiers of balconies and row of hall.(Altekar, 1948, p114) It had 1500 monk students. Archaeological evidences show that it continued to be the flourishing centre of Buddhist learning down to the 12th century A.D. Buddhist Durjana Jataka informs that teachers of Benaras had world wide fame providing education to about 500 young brahmanas.(Walters, p48) Foreign scholars used to come Varanasi to study under the reputed acharyas of Varanasi.

During Mauryan period Sarnath in Varanasi occupied singular importance .The great Mauryan ruler Ashoka after visiting the place to pay homage to Buddha as a sacred place of his preaching constructed Lion capital pillar and vihara to inhabit the monks .During Shunga Kushana period from 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D. literary , cultural and artistic activities were going on in the city of Varanasi and Sarnath too. Archaeological evidences of Gupta period reveal that Varanasi was an important center of art and culture.(Chattopadhyay, 1986, p36) During the reign of Harshvardhana (c 606-648 ce) of Kannauj Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsiang visited Varanasi and referred to several important cultural features and sites of Varanasi and Sarnath. He noticed that people had earnest desire to study and acquire knowledge of Buddhist and Brahmanical culture.(Beal, Vol II, p44-45)

By the 8th century A.D. wide spread clearing of the forest took place and Varanasi started expanding south of the present Dashaswamedh road . This area was first settled by the Hindu sages who were engaged in scholastic pursuits and who founded several small Ashramas . These Ashramas grew as centre of Brahmanic learning .Acharya Shankara was enlightened here.(Pandey, 1979,p155-156) In 9th & 10th century CE Varanasi was under the rule of Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty .Rulers of such dynasty also were the patron of education and culture. There are no evidences to show that Banaras was a Hindu seat of learning during tenth century A.D.(Altekar, p87-88) In Bhavishya Purana it is only mentioned that Kashi will be a famous centre of Hindu learning.(Bhavishya Puran, 51,2,3) Seals discovered in the Rajghat excavation at Benaras show the existence of a learning centre of four Vedas called Chaturvidya.(sukul, p90) All the educational centres of Varanasi were running by individual Acharyas and perhaps there were no organized institutions (schools) where a large number of students could study.(Ibid, p90-91) The individual teachers were carrying on their sacred duty of teaching by themselves. In Varanasi there was no mass production of pandits. They were to stand on their personal contact and individual attention . Possibly the number of students under one teacher was restricted to five hundred only.(Altekar, p88) In this way Acharyas of Benaras used to teach students at their home.

Al-Biruni an Arab traveller of early 11th century CE , also writes that Kashi was the most important centre of education in whole of North India. 11th and 12th century CE is considered to be the olden period of Varanasi in terms of educational and cultural activities under Gahadwal dynasty rule. Rulers of the Gahadwala dynasty constructed huge temples , Ganga Ghats and Buddhist Viharas at Sarnath.(Rana, 2005,p22-29) Gahadwala king Govindchandra (C-1114-54CE) and his queen Kumaradevi are credited with proper development of city as important centre of pilgrimage and learning. He was great patron of brahmanical religion, art and education.(Sharma, 2010,p1-10) Kumaradevi was most inclined towards Buddhism who caused restoration of several monuments at Sarnath and also built new Baudh Vihara (Sangharama for monks).

During eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. Sanskrit education at Varanasi was divided into two sections. In traditional Vedic pathashala special knowledge of Vedas , sahitya , vyakaran, philosophy, Nyaya, Mimansa, Sankhya, Yoga, Vedanta Vaisheshika, and Astronomy and Astrology or Ayurveda was given. In other

pathshalas students were taught eighteen sippas or arts.(Sukul, p94) These pathshalas were connected with famous temples and monasteries providing knowledge of six shastras. Along with education, acharyas of Varanasi provided their students food and other necessities of life. They treated them as a family member. Gahadwala kings granted village to learned persons living at Varanasi. The father of Indian medicine Dhanvantari was born as Kashiraj in this city who taught science to Sushrut who became specialist of Rasa-Prakriya and surgery too.(Altekar,p116)

In 1194, the city succumbed to Turkish (Muslim) Qutub-Ud-din Aibak, who ordered the destruction of many temples in the city. The city went into decline over some three centuries of Muslim occupation.(singh, p453) Due to it many Brahman families were bound to migrate in South India . But Sanskrit education remained alive here . The Vedas were perhaps recited in the seclusion of rooms in a loud voice After the destruction of Rajghat fort the inhabitants of the area had to shift towards the west and south east by clearing forest.(Sukul,p94) During the reign of Mohammad Bin Tughlaq(1325 -1351 A.D) Varanasi once again flourished as a centre of Sanskrit learning . The court poet of the sovereign informs that there were numbers of specialist scholars in Grammar ,Linguistics ,Ayurveda , Astrology , Astronomy and Dhatuvidya. Kullabhata wrote his commentary on Manusmriti at Varanasi during this period.(Pandey, 1974,p116-117)

Feroz Shah Tughlaq ordered further destruction of Hindu temples in Varanasi area in 1376.The Afghan ruler Sikander Lodi continued the suppression of Hinduism in the city and destroyed most of the remaining older temple in 1496 . The educational institutions connected them suffered the same fate . Individual teachers were thus the only source of education left . They also suffered considerable persecution at the hands of their new sovereign.(Ibid) Despite the Muslim rule Varanasi remained the centre of intellectuals and theologians during the Middle Ages , which further contributed to its reputation as cultural centre of religion and education . Several major figures of Bhakti Movement were born in Varanasi including Kabir and Ravidas who worked for socio – economic reforms and literary development . Numerous eminent scholars and preachers visited the city from across India and South Asia . Guru Nanak founder of Sikhism visited Varanasi and spread his teachings.(Mitra, 2002,p182)

During the earlier years of his reign Mughal Emperor Akbar conquered Varanasi in 1567 A.D and ordered to plunder it . The reconstruction of Varanasi took place after 1584 when the fort of Allahabad became the headquarter of the Suba . Akbar became the patron of Hinduism and built again several monuments . After that many learned families from Maharashtra and Karnataka came to Varanasi and permanently settled down here. They promoted scholarship in Varanasi. Contribution of Benaras to Sanskrit scholarship and literature during the period 500 -1800 A.D is much more greater than other . With the course of time Shah-Jahan and Darashikoh became patrons of famous scholars of Varanasi . Describing the system of education in 1660 A.D Bernier writes that there were no organised institution in Varanasi. Teachers were spread all over the city and teaching was done at their residences. Some teachers had four to six pupils but most famous teachers had twelve to fourteen students learning Vyakaran, Puranas , philosophy , medicine astronomy etc. (Bernier, p341)

For centuries, Varanasi also known as “Sarva Vidya ki Rajdhani (capital of knowledge)” is reputed as a great centre of education and learning . It is because since the ancient times people from all parts of the world have been coming to Varanasi to learn Philosophy , Sanskrit ,Astrology, Modern Science and Social Science. The first step in establishing a regular educational institution was taken by Maharaja Jai Singh of Ambar in Kangan wali Haveli near Bindu Mahadev temple built by him in 1585 A.D. It provided education to the sons of social high ups only. The real step in this direction of establishing formal educational institution in Varanasi was however taken in 1791 when Jonathan Duncan the agent of East India Company founded the Sanskrit Pathashala which later became the Government Sanskrit College and since 1958 has been raised to the status of Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya.(Sukul, 1974,p 99)

In 1910 , the British made Varanasi a new Indian state , with Ramnagar as its headquarter . In 1904 the great reformer Pt. Madan Mohan ,Malviya began campaigning for modern Hindu University to preserve classical cultural tradition and Modern Science . Annie Besant , the founder of the Theosophical Society in India started a Central Hindu Collage in 1898 . This School later formed the core of the prestigious Banaras Hindu University in 1916 which at present is among the leading universities of the world. Other educational institutions of repute in Varanasi are

Sampurnanand Sanskrit University , Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth and Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies at Sarnath. In this way Varanasi has been a significant and famous centre of buddhist and Brahmanic learning from the beginning of Aryan civilization and culture.

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