

## The ancient Indian System of education

The centre of the ancient system of education was the Guru, the preceptor. The ancient schools were largely located far away from the din and bustle of cities in sylvan retreats in an atmosphere of solitude and serenity conducive to mental concentration as the main appliance of education.

From these sylvan schools and hermitage flowed the highest thought of India. In fact, Indian civilization through the ages has been very largely the product of her woods and forests.

In this sylvan atmosphere the first lesson imparted by the Guru was: Om iti Brahma'

There is only one Supreme Reality

Then he would say:

'Anandam Brahmano vidvan na vibhati kadachana'

The one who realizes the blissfulness of The Supreme Reality fears none

And lastly his words would be:

Yastu sarvanibhutani atmanyevanupashyati  
Sarva bhuteshu chatmanam tato na vijigupsate

The person who sees all beings in his own self  
And his own self in all does not hate any one

He is not talking about the knowledge of worldly affairs but that knowledge which shows you the way to salvation. This is also to point out that a student should realize that he has within him a higher self beyond his little personal ego or lower self and ultimate aim of education is to explore the inner/higher self. Hence the objective of education is summarized in a triple formula which informs the students about their higher self:

*Asato ma sadgamaya*

Lead me from falsehood to truth;

*Tamosorma jyotirgamaya*

Lead me from darkness to light;

*Mriturma amrit gamaya*

Lead me from death to immortality

Evidently the life long effort for self-realization and salvation is the ancient objective of education.

But the ancients were not averse to the performance of worldly duties, because the worldly life as ordained by the Supreme was purposeful.

The Supreme might be attained only after a meaningful journey across the stretch of temporal life.

Hence they recognized

*Adhyayana, Siksha and Vinaya*

*i.e.* instruction, training and social motivation as the integral part of education. The recognition of social duties led to the acceptance of political and military science, laws, medicine and vocational preparation as curricular subjects.

Moral living was more valued than inert knowledge. Morality and self-purification came through Brahmacharya *i.e.* dwelling in knowledge or celibacy.

‘Education for salvation’ and ‘education for worldly knowledge’ led to the bifurcation of curricular organizations.

Knowledge for salvation was *para vidya* and

Knowledge of worldly affairs was *apara vidya*.

*Para vidya* and *apara vidya* together make complete education.

Apart from the influence of the environment, the real creative force in education came from the teacher (*guru*) as the master mind directing its entire course.

There is no doubt that ancient learning placed supreme importance on the *Guru*. But then it was *guru* who equipped his disciples with self-sufficiency, the most important survival skill.

*Guru*’s role is directive but at the same time it is interactive rooted in negotiation. In other words a teacher helps a student to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce. Teachers provide tools so that students go for

i) a problem solving and ii) Inquiry -based learning activities.

It becomes possible when a student is not a passive but active participant in the learning process. The spirit of enquiry, questioning and requestioning was a dominant part of the ancient system: *prasnena*, *pariprasnena* and *pratiprasnena* *i.e.* straight questioning (*prasnena*), when the student is not satisfied he asks again (*pariprasnena*) and then a situation may arrive when the student may say, I accept your answer but can there be another answer to the query(*pratiprasnena*).

But any kind of questioning or requestioning should not display the student's false ego or insolence. Hence it is said; learn by humble reverence, by enquiry and by service:

*tad viddhi pranipatena, pariprasnena sevaya*

Acquisition of knowledge through experiences and reflection which conducts a student to go beyond

“knowing about” to

“knowing how” and

“being able to do”.

When Lord Buddha said “atmodipo bhava” “be a lamp to yourself.” It does not mean that the teacher will provide you the lamp. The teacher will just teach you the process of how to make a lamp—he will not hand you over the lamp. The lamp will have to be made by the student.

The cottage of each guru became a residential school- the gurukul. The teacher's admission of the pupil was a solemn and sacred ceremony known as *upanayana* or initiation *ceremony*. The ceremony took three days, during which the teacher held the pupil within him to impart to him a new birth, whence the pupil emerged as a *dvija* or twice-born. His first birth he owes to his parents and second birth is spiritual: it unfolds his mind and soul.

A teacher acts as a cognitive guide and creates environments in which the learner interacts meaningfully with academic material and adopts a method to impart and imbibe education that can balance

Mind and heart

Body and spirit.

During residential pupilage the student had to live a controlled life determined by the institution of *brahmacharya*. Education was a mode of life characterized by self-control.

A student's duty was to walk to the woods and collect fuel.

His second duty was to tend the teacher's house and cattle and live with his teacher as his *antevasin (companion)*. A teacher is a guru as well as an *acharya* which means the one who teaches good conduct and behaviour. An *acharya* is like a drill master, demonstrating the values in their lives before asking the students to follow and practice whatever they profess.

It is ( i) his own thinking, (ii) his discipline of mind and (iii) refinement of taste that he is able to pass on to his students

Tending the house was training for him in self-help, in dignity of labour.

Another duty of the brahmachari was to go out on a daily round of begging. It was not the selfish begging for his own benefit, but for the academic corporation to which he belonged. It meant to produce in the pupil a spirit of humility and renunciation.

Thus all these external practices operate as aids to knowledge by strengthening the potency of the mind as an instrument for acquiring knowledge, by making it less and less objective and less and less open to contamination by contact with matter. The aim of education thus *chitta-britti-nirodha* control of the mental waves by which the individual soul merges in the universal or over soul. It is the discovery of the Infinite within the cave of heart here and now.

Hence India honours knowledge established in generations of practice and in ancient Indian tradition knowledge is the training of mind itself- the expanding of consciousness.

In the West knowledge is invention in India it is discovery.

Hence Plato compares a creative person with a carpenter, who measures,contifies, plans and then a chair or a table is made

In India a creative person is compared with a potter in whose self the Universal Self resides. When he starts making an earthen pot he takes a lump of clay and then through his fingers the universal self moves in the lump where also the Universal Self resides both meet together and the creation takes place.

The methods of learning were:

*Sravana*- knowledge heard: listening to words or texts as they are uttered by the teacher.

*Manana*-assimilation: deliberation-reflection on the topic taught: intellectual apprehension of its meaning.

*Nidhidhyasana*- meditating on what was taught: complete comprehension of the truth: the realization of the intrinsic unity underlying all diversity: realization of the Self. In other words it is exploring the inner self by the power of meditation and that is education.

Since knowledge has to be delivered by the mouth, received by the ear and preserved in memory, the art of recitation with proper accent, sound and pronunciation was perfected. Yet it was not simply learning by rote in the ordinary sense of the term. Learning by heart without conceptual understanding was considered worthless. The truth had to be realized. This required concentrated thinking and meditation leading to revelation.

A student had to live in the gurukul for 12 years which was generally the period of formal student hood. Of course informal student hood was a life long process. Hence it is said:

*Swaddhyaya pravachane cha*

Education is a continuous activity in life (self study) and discourse and conversation.

Among the various aims of education *sattva* (light) and *rijuta* (straightforwardness) are extremely important. Light means expansion. All expansion is life and all contraction is death. Contraction comes when you loose *rijuta* straightforwardness.

From the stories of many women scholars and philosophers of great height like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopa, Kadru, Devjani, Viswambara etc one can realize that during Vedic period (3000BC-2000BC) women had the freedom to receive education, write treatises and participate in debates on philosophical speculation.

The gurukul education of 12 years ended with *samavartana*- the convocation ceremony which was the last day of a student's life in the ashrama or the gurukul.

On the scheduled date, the snatakas, the graduates had to confine themselves indoors till midday, lest the morning sun should feel inferior to the lustre and brilliance of the students. Then the students after renouncing their gurukul dress bathed in scented water. Richly dressed, the student offered guru-dakshina and prayed that he be liked by all. The teacher after performing the usual rituals defined the responsibilities of the student in the subsequent phases of life. Thereafter the teacher gave the convocation address in the form of commandments:

Speak the truth and practice righteousness: *satyamvada, dharmam chara;*

Don't neglect your self study:

*Swadhyayan ma pramadh;*

Don't resist from doing your work in a dexterous way: *Kushlan na pramaditavyam*

Worship mother, father, teacher and guest as God:

*Matridevobhava, pitridevobhava, acharyadevo bhava, athitidevobhava*

There are many others, but I would like to confine myself into these to prove that i) morality, ii) codes of conduct, iii) modesty, iv) duty, v) wisdom and reason, vi) worldly knowledge for a profession/vocation as well as higher goals of life were goals of education.

It will be interesting to have a comparative analysis of ancient Indian system of education and ideals and modern/ Indian/Western system of education and ideals to realize that there are many aspects of the ancient system which can be incorporated in the modern system to make education

- i) a dynamic agent of social change and human development and
- ii) and to make people follow the path of equity in education.

One) Ancient system followed the immersion technique (away from family one is totally immersed in education in a gurukul.

In modern system many techniques are employed — mostly dictated by economic status of family.

Second) Usually one guru takes charge of both secular and non-secular education (para and apara vidya) in ancient system. In modern system there are many gurus- implying flexibility and utilization of expertise. Parents/family are in charge.

Third) In the ancient system Guru decides the course and duration- depending upon his assessment of students' needs and abilities. In the modern system family/student decides the course and duration (dictated mostly by economic benefit of education rather than natural talent/inclination).

(Fourth) Moral education, good manners, self-sufficiency, participation in the work load of the gurukul are inherent to the ancient system employed. In modern system all items indicated above are usually the responsibility of the parents/family.

(Fifth) In ancient system focus is on paravidya or true knowledge. Spiritual life begins in early teen. system focus In modern is on profession/career/vocational education. ( little or no emphasis on spiritual/moral education).

(Sixth) In ancient system education is for life. In Modern system education is for living. Similarly

Ancient system

Modern system

7) Focus on selflessness

Focus on individual achievements  
(Selfish)

8) Focus on thee and thine

Focus on me and mine

9) Focus on spirit based education

Focus on mind based  
education

10) Para vidya followed by education  
of other life skills

Only life skills

11) Students trained to seek "direct  
Experience" not always "provable"  
or "repeatable"

Students trained to seek  
proof/repeatability as the  
criteria for authenticity

12) Education designed to seek  
higher ground

Education designed to seek  
common ground

13) Encourages "self sacrifice"

Encourages "self satisfaction"

14) Core teaching in the ancient system are

a) About creation/life "causeless"

b) creative life is a "continuum"

c) death does not mark an absolute end- only the end of a cycle

d) seeks "pramana"/proof only up to a point- recognizes an entire body of knowledge beyond "pramana"

e) Even "shunya" or "nothingness" has stages

f) Duty, discipline, devotion

Core teaching in the modern system

- a) life is “cause and effect”
- b) life has a “beginning and an end”
- c) Death is the end ( not interested in what lies beyond death)
- d) “proof” is the touchstone for establishing authority/legitimacy
- e) Not interested in these concepts
- f) Duty, discipline

15) Value based education      “Cost/Benefit” based education/  
system/goals/ideals (satya,      goals/ideals values less  
dharma,shanti, prema, ahimsa)

16) “Character building” was the      character building is secondary  
the “number one” task in the gurukul      to building “skill” and  
“expertise”(value given  
to skill and expertise)

17) Character defined broadly neither  
“hard” nor “soft” neither “tough” nor      Character defined more  
“pliable” neither “strong” nor “weak” narrowly> hard, tough,  
“sama-drishti” equal mindedness      strong,resolute,compete  
Is the goal “giving all –expecting nothing” -tive,uncompromising  
(giving based upon means)

These are certain attributes only-generalization is dangerous

The main objective of ancient system of education