

EDUCATION IN THE INDIAN TRADITION

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1. Introduction

Unlike the ancient Greeks, the ancient Hindus did not pursue knowledge for its own sake. For them knowledge was just a means for the attainment of liberation or *mukti*. It was religion that created literature in ancient India. Since the birth of the earliest Vedic poetry (circa 1500 B.C.) we find Indian literature, for over a period of thousand years, bearing an exclusively religious stamp.¹

The most fundamental Hindu educational theory is a corollary to the central problem of Hindu spiritual anthropology, that is, the true Self is immutable, eternal and ever blissful. Pursuit of the objective world of matter causes the birth of the individual which is the beginning of one's misery. Here comes the role of learning. The scope of learning is to undo the work of individualization by a process of unlearning of secular subjects. Western mystics too have spoken of *docta ignorantia*. The Greek Christian Fathers speak of *agnosia* or unlearning as means for arriving at the knowledge of God. Such was the Apophatic theology (Negative Theology) of the Pseudo-Dionysius. However, the Hindus never totally rejected any mundane value: everything, including erotics, was included in a hierarchy of values. In the Tantric tradition sexual pleasure was employed as means of spiritual liberation following the Ayurvedic principle of 'like cures like'. Hindu axiology or theory of values postulated a hierarchy of values according to which wealth, pleasure, and social duty are subordinated to *moksa* or liberation of the spirit. Thus for the ancient Hindus, economics (*Arthashastra*) is not a secular subject: it is a *sastra* – a part of spiritual theology – theology of economics. Vatsyayana's text on sex is called *Kama Sastra* meaning theology of sex.

Vidya, the Sanskrit term for knowledge, really connotes divine wisdom, unlike its Greek counterpart *sophia* which means humanistic knowledge. In fact, there was no demarcation between

the sacred and the secular activities in ancient India. Bathing, eating, reading etc., were considered as ritual acts, sacrifices or *yajnas*.

Education became a spiritual exercise. Education was considered as a process of acquiring True knowledge. This True knowledge arises only when our personality is stripped of its psycho-physical outer crust. It involves the painful operation of the deindividualization of the person. In the West, individuality was one of the highest values but in India it was not even looked upon as a value. Therefore we must carefully distinguish between personality and individuality in order to avoid misunderstandings and wrong connotations. The person, *purusa*, is the highest Hindu value, while individuality or *ahamkara* (egoism) is the greatest enemy. This idea is parallel to what Jesus Himself had said: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”.² Liberation of the self implies acquiring True knowledge which arises at the complete control of one’s psycho-physical activities. Patanjali’s second *sutra* gives the primary aim of Hindu education: “Yoga is the restraint of mental modifications” — *Yogascittavrttinirodhah*. This topic has been elaborated by the Hindu Lawgivers in their discussion on the duties of the *Brahmachari* or student.

Right from the beginning education in India was subject-oriented, whereas the West began to think of paido-centric education only in the last century. Pestalozzi was a pioneer in this field. India was more concerned with the subject than with the object, the inner world than the outer. While the ancient Greeks pursued the study of individual arts and sciences, the Hindus aimed at omniscience or universal knowledge. According to Cardinal Newman a true University must impart universal knowledge to students. Newman laid great stress on humanities and the liberal arts and theology.³ The ancient Hindu *gurukulas* imparted such universal knowledge. The ideal was that a scholar should spend twelve years in the study of the four Vedas together with their ancillaries like phonetics, grammar, prosody, poetics, etymology, liturgy etc.

The primary purpose of the *gurukula* was not mere imparting of academic knowledge, but the formation of the pupil’s character and the acquisition of virtues. In the *gurukula* the constant

and intimate association between teacher and pupil was fully developed. This was equally applicable to technical education. The apprentice had to live with the master craftsman to learn the secrets of his trade; they lived together as father and son. There was no room for superior or inferior feelings.

India believed in the family system, both in industry and education. We find an excellent example of this family system also in the educative praxis of Don Bosco, an Italian educator priest of the nineteenth century. In Freudian terms, the Guru functions as the super-ego of the individual pupil, i.e. the embodiment of the ideals and traditions in which he is brought up. There is also another moral factor involved in this intimate relationship. The process of sharing experience with the Guru prevents the tendency to repression in the pupil. Then again, the pupil's membership in the Guru's family constitutes a constant stimulus to the ideals to which he is dedicated. This also serves as a protective sheath shutting out unwholesome influences. Again, the pupil feels that he is not lost in a crowd. He feels one in a family where he has a distinct place, and hence there grows in him a sense of personal worth and individuality.

Ancient Hindu education upheld the nobility of manual labour. The *Upanishads* frequently speak of pupils approaching their Guru with fuel in hand ready to serve the teacher and tend his domestic fire. That ancient Indian education was not exclusively theoretical and academic but was related to craft may be seen from the training the pupils received in dairy-farming. The *Chandogya Upanisad* tells us that the great sage Satyakama Jabala tended 1000 cattle in his boyhood. "We different men have different aptitudes and pursuits. The carpenter seeks something that is broken; the physician a patient, the priest someone who will perform sacrifice. I am a poet, my father is a physician and my mother a grinder of corn",⁴ says a Vedic *rishi*.

In the Indian pattern of instruction mere study occupies only a very subsidiary place. The *Upanishads* speak of three steps in instruction: (1) *sravana*, (2) *manana*, (3) *nididhyasana*.⁵ *Sravana* is listening to the sacred text uttered by the Guru. The system called *guruparampara* or *sampradaya* which Udyottakara (in his *Nyaya-*

Varttika) defines as “the uninterrupted ideal succession of pupils and teachers by which knowledge is conserved and transmitted” (*Sampradayo nama sisypadhyaya sambandhasya avicchedena sastrapraptih*). Sankara defines *Sravana* as listening to the instruction of the Guru and knowing from him the primary truth that the self is to be differentiated from the non-self appearing in various forms.

Hearing of the text is followed by *manana*, deliberation or reflection. This is a purely intellectual exercise. *Nididhyasana* is the third and the final step by which one realizes one’s real self.⁶ From the dialogue between Narada and the sage Sanatkumara we learn that mere academic knowledge will not lead one beyond the realm of sorrows. The *Mantravit* and the *Atmavit* (mystic) are poles apart. Similarly the scholar Svetaketu, after spending twelve years in a thorough study of all the *Vedas*, is found by his father Rishi Uddalaka Aruni “only full of conceit and confidence in his study and wisdom without the knowledge of the One through whom anything is known”.⁷ The *Kathopanishad* points out, “Not by the *Veda* is the *Atman* attained nor by intellect nor by much knowledge of books.”⁸

1.1 Subject Matter of Vedic Education

God and morality (*Brahman* and *dharma*) were the twin subjects of ancient Hindu study. This was also the idea of St. Augustine, as expressed in his *Confessions*. Jaimini Says, *Dharmabrahmani Vedaikavedye*.⁹ This noble knowledge cannot be obtained by means of perception, reasoning, etc., but only through the *Veda*, Revelation.

The *Veda* consisted of two sections: the *Mantras* or hymns addressed to the gods and the *Brahmanas* or sacrificial formulae. The *Brahmanas* contained (1) *Vidhi* and (2) *Arthavada*. The former is an injunction to perform sacrifices and the latter provides the stimulus to offer sacrifices pointing out their merits, *prasastya*.

Those pupils who never entered the state of matrimony but lived in the forests were known as *Aranas*. They observed lifelong celibacy. The texts exclusively meant for them are known

as *Aranyakas*, or forest books. They were guide books for meditation and asceticism. Finally come the *Upanishads*, theological texts meant for the *Sannyasis*, who had totally renounced the world to lead a life of perpetual wandering, meditation and silence, awaiting the day of their final release from the bodily frame.

2. The Guru

The educator was held in the highest esteem in ancient India. According to one text, the Brahmins who have studied and recited the sacred lore are 'the human gods'.¹⁰ The term used for a learned man was *susruvan*, i.e., one who has heard (the Veda). The knowledge acquired from a preceptor (*acaryat*) leads more successfully to the goal.¹¹ The teacher or Guru is indispensable for the acquisition of knowledge (*ananyaprokte gatih atra nasti*).¹²

Even god Indra was obliged to live with his teacher Prajapati in order to attain perfect instruction. Without tuition the members of the first order (*Brahmins*) were *Brahmins* by birth only.¹³ The *Apastamba Dharma Sastra* says that the student should wait upon the *acarya* as if he were a god.¹⁴

The divine character of the teacher was a basic doctrine in ancient India. Even in ancient Greece we find traces of the divine nature of the teacher. The philosopher Empedocles crowned as god, allowed himself to be worshipped. Some mystical relation seems to be established between the teacher and the pupil. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* explicitly states that the teacher is a god: *acarya devobhava*.¹⁵ The term *Guru* (literally = heavy) itself signifies that the teacher possesses uncommon authority. In the earliest texts, however, the term *Guru* does not imply the notion of a spiritual guide. It meant just an elderly person like, father, mother, etc. Devala, an authority on *Dharma*, taught that among *gurus*, five deserve special honour: father, mother, teacher, eldest brother and one's husband.

Though *acarya* and *upadhyaya* are often used as synonyms, the latter is one who teaches a portion of the Veda for his livelihood. The *acarya* is one from whom the pupil 'gathers' (*acinoti*) the knowledge of his *dharma* or duty. It may also refer to the one who

teaches the *acaras* or traditionally imparted right conduct. The *Nirukta* defines *acarya* as one who makes the pupil understand traditional precepts: *acarya acaram grahayati*.¹⁶

Vedic priesthood was a ministry distinct from that of the teacher. The *Purohita* was the domestic chaplain of the king, who generally accompanied him to the battlefield.

2.1 Duties and Privileges of the Guru

If the goal of instruction was so sublime, it was but natural that the best men should be sought out for the post of *Guru*. The *Guru* should be a well-read man, of good family and character, and given over to religious exercises.¹⁷ The *Brahmin* also could be a *Guru* as is evident from the texts.¹⁸ Only by way of exception could a *Ksatriya* or a *Vaisya* be a preceptor.¹⁹

Teaching was a sacred duty for the preceptor. Thus, the *Sruti* on Medhathiti on *Manu* 2.113 says that a man who having mastered the Veda, does not teach, destroys his own good acts and shuts the door to happiness. The man who keeps back something, or speaks untruth dries up completely²⁰ or receives all the sins of his pupils.²¹

The *Guru* was not paid for his service, but there was a convention of giving him some gift called *Guru daksina* or *Veda daksina*. It was given when the student completed his studies and bathed before leaving for his home.

The *Guru* imparted knowledge not only to adolescents, but also to adults. Thus we see the sage Yajnavalkya imparting esoteric knowledge to his wife Maitreyi.

2.2 Guru-Sisya Relationship

Guruship implied a spiritual relation between the teacher and the pupil. It entailed a matrimonial impediment: one could not marry the daughter of one's *Guru*. The *Guru's* son was, moreover, for the pupils like the *Guru* himself - *Guruvad guruputra iti*, says the commentator of *Katyayana*. With the initiation rite (*Upanayana*) the pupil is said to experience a new birth. According to the *Atharva*

Veda the teacher is said to make his pupil his embryo. Manu says: “The birth which the teacher procures for his pupil through the *Savitri* (*mantra*) is real and exempt from old age and death”.²²

Vedic instruction was esoteric in character. The *Chandogya Upanishad* says: “A father may teach this doctrine of *Brahman* to his eldest son or to a worthy pupil and to no one else even if one should offer him the whole earth”. But Yajnavalkya held public theological debates in the court of king Janaka of Videha. Mutual protection was another feature of the *Gurukula* system of education. The *Mahabharata* says that the *Guru* should protect his pupils like a canopy and they in their turn, should protect him like sunshades.²³

Notes

¹ Macdonnell, *Sanskrit Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1961) 37.

² *Mt* 16:12.

³ J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 7-8.

⁴ *Rig Veda* 9, 112.

⁵ *Bhahdaranyaka Upanishad* 2, 4, 5.

⁶ *Mundaka Upanishad* 6, 1.

⁷ *Chandogya Upanishad* 6, 1.

⁸ *Katha Upanishad* 1, 2, 23.

⁹ Jaimini, *Purva mimamsa sutra*, Ganganatha Jha (tr.) (Baroda: Gaekwad Oriental Series, 1933) 1:150.

¹⁰ *Satapatha Brahmana* 2,2,2,6.

¹¹ *Chandogya Upanishad* 4, 9, 3.

¹² *Katha Upanishad* 2, 8.

¹³ *Chandogya Upanishad* 6, 1,1.

¹⁴ *Apasthamba Dharma Sastra*, cf. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute) 1:53.

¹⁵ *Taittiriya Upanisad* 1, 11.

¹⁶ Yaska, *Nirukta* 1, 4 (Bombay: Nirnayasagar Press, 1930,20).

¹⁷ *Viramitrodayasamskaraprakasa* (Benares: Chowkhamba, 1930) 1:408.

¹⁸ *Bhahdaranyaka Upanishad* 2, 1, 15.

¹⁹ *Satapatha Brahmana* 8, 1, 4, 10.

²⁰ *Prasna Upanishad* 6, 1.

²¹ *Mahabharata* 7, 50 ,21.

²² *Manusmrti* 2, 48.

²³ *Mahabharata* 4, 2, 62.