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Aparna Rajagopalan
Ph.D., Scholar, Department of
Sanskrit & Indian Culture,
Sri Chandrasekharendra
Saraswathi Viswa,
Mahavidyalaya University,
Delhi, India

Holistic student-centred education in the Vedic Gurukula system

Aparna Rajagopalan

Abstract

This study examines the ancient Indian Vedic Gurukulas and the various debates around the nature of this system. The Gurukula system is first evaluated through a modern educational lens of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Then the debates around various aspects of such an education system is analysed and discussed.

Keywords: Ancient India education, Gurukula, Vedic education, student-centred

Introduction

Countries all around the globe are anchoring themselves to their roots on education since they seem to have realized that education, to be successful, needs to be appropriate to the socio-economic and cultural context of the student/learner. Indigenous education systems were successful as they evolved from the reality of the socio-economic and cultural context of the society at that time and also addressed the complex developmental needs of the individual learner irrespective of the age. This twin focus of education systems like the Gurukula system of India, Te Whariki of New Zealand, Reggio Emilia approach of Italy etc. aimed to make every student (keeping in mind the individual's ability, personality and interests) a cherished member of the society. If an education system can address the individual's needs in the socio-economic and cultural context of his/her society, it becomes a student-centred and a holistic education system and the need of the hour in today's world is to research such systems; their tenets, philosophies and approaches and learn from them so as to initiate and engage the learners with best practices appropriate to the society.

As a step in this direction, this article briefly examines the Vedic Gurukula System and introduces the modern debates and points of contention on the student-centred dimension of the Gurukula System that flourished in the Indian sub-continent. These debates are usually centred around how the system compares with some modern educational thoughts especially in relation to cognitive attainment and customization & contextualization (the latter being a thrust area in modern educational systems). What is of note here is that much of these debates on the relevance of the Gurukula to the modern educational systems are based on the descriptions and notions of the Gurukula system mentioned in the texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas. Such modern debates become significant because they help verify the effectiveness of Gurukula system in all its spatio-temporal dimensions and helps draw insights and inspiration to aspects that can be re-introduced to the contemporary educational system.

Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment followed in the Vedic Gurukulas Aim and Philosophy of Education

ऋचोऽक्षरे परमे व्योमन् यस्मिन्ह देवाः विश्वे निषेदुः।

यस्तन्न वेद किमृचा करिष्यति य इत्तद्विदुस्त इमे समासते।।

Rig Veda 1/164/39

The hymns of the Vedas describe the same omnipresent indestructible ultimate reality in whom all the deities are immersed. The one who doesn't know that reality, what will he do with the mere hymns? And if he can understand that reality, then knowing the deities and other gods becomes very easy.

Corresponding Author:
Aparna Rajagopalan
Ph.D., Scholar, Department of
Sanskrit & Indian Culture,
Sri Chandrasekharendra
Saraswathi Viswa,
Mahavidyalaya University,
Delhi, India

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूः मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥

Srimadbhagavad Gita 2/47

Only to act is within your right, not to expect the rewards of such action. Therefore, do not take reward to be the cause of such action and do not sit idle either.

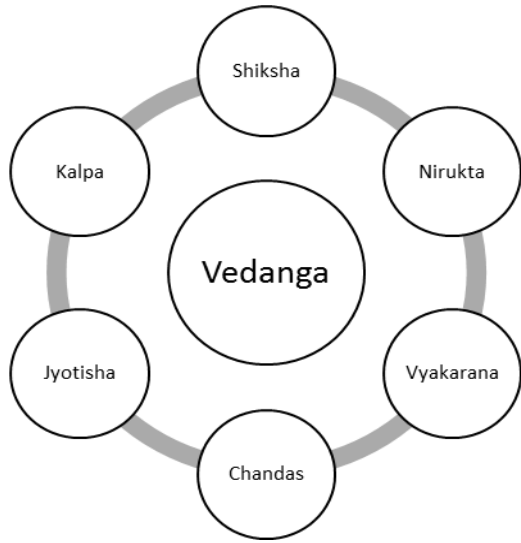
The Vedic Education system, at its core, followed a constructivist paradigm where the students actively participated in their learning and constructed meaning based on experience and prior knowledge. The ultimate aim of the Vedic system of Education was the knowledge of the ultimate truth i.e., the nature of the Para Brahman through the acquisition of a knowledge of Vedas, Vedangas, Brahmanas, Upanishads and other Sruti texts.

Curriculum

मन्द्रा कृणुध्वं धियं आ तनुध्वं नावमरित्रपरणीं कृणुध्वम्।
इष्कृणुध्वम् आयुधारं कृणुध्वं प्राञ्चं यज्ञं प्रणयता सखायः॥

2/101/10 Rig Veda

be innovative after ,write pleasing verses –O disciples grow a variety of ,build oar driven boats ,proper reflection make lethal weapons for the destruction of your ,crops and continue ,fire keep burning the Yajnic ,enemies ,performing deeds for the welfare of others



Many scholars have characterized the Vedic system of education as purely religious in nature and thus meant only for the priestly class or Brahmins. This assumption is partly true in that the Samhita portion of the Rig, Yajur and Sama Veda (especially the latter two) dealt largely with different sacrifices and roles of the different types of priests involved in conducting these sacrifices.

However, characterizing the Vedas as purely religious in nature would be a fallacy as the Vedas also contained knowledge germane to other fields like philosophy, sociology, humanities, science and economics as they were concerned with how to live, prosper and attain Para Vidya through the Aparā Vidya of Vedic Samhita and Upanishads. The Vedas also chronicled the history of the Aryan people (various fights between tribes are mentioned) in India and thus was a source to understand the history of the society. Finally, many of the secular subjects that pre-common era

India was known for traced their origin to the Atharva Veda. For example – the seeds of early medicinal thought are present in the Atharva Veda with different types of doctors being mentioned and an initial classification of the different specializations in medicine are listed. This was later expanded and developed into a specialized stream of knowledge by the renowned Sushruta, Charaka and later Jivaka in the Buddhist tradition.

Thus, the Vedas were required reading for all sections of the Aryan society (Sudras and women were initially given access to the Vedas) as they formed the base knowledge for most professions. However, the duration of compulsory Vedic education differed based on the Varna of the student.

Pedagogy

The main pedagogical system used was the Sravana-Manana-Nidhidhyasana model where the Acharya would first delineate a section of the Vedic Samhita to the student that the student would memorize (Sravana). Then through a combination of Socratic dialogue with the Acharya and independent reflection the student would understand the meaning of the section (Manana) and remove doubts, if any. The last step of Nidhidhyasana would be where the student contemplates the new knowledge and tries to fit it into his or her existing schema of learning. This assimilation of new knowledge into existing schemas would be a large component of higher education in the Vedic system as the student would have already built a knowledge bank of existing learning through the compulsory education period.

The Vedic system acknowledged that one Acharya did not possess all knowledge and the expert student was encouraged to approach renowned teachers across the realm who specialized in their area of choice.

Another pedagogical device often employed in advanced learning was that of dialogues between the student and the teacher. Often, the student instigated the dialogue by questioning the teacher on a particular subject (Prashna) and the teacher expounded on the given subject at length. The discourse is in the form of a graduated set of questions-answers between teacher and student where the teacher would use the techniques of stories, comparisons, parables etc. to communicate a point. The different Upanishads like Kenopanishad and Kathopanishad illustrate these devices in detail. The Taittiriya Brahmana uses the terms प्रश्निन् (questioner) (अभिप्रश्निन्) cross-questioner (and प्रश्नविवाक (answerer) to describe this process. Given the nature of this instruction form, it is conceivable that this was often used for advanced learning to clarify and refine student doubts or expound on a complex subject or philosophy.

Assessment

का ते अस्त्यरंकृतिः सूक्तैः कदा नूनं ते मघवन्दाशोमा।
विश्वा मतीराततने त्वायाथा म इन्द्र शृणवो हवेमा॥

Rig Veda 7/29/3

O Gurudeva, master of knowledge and fame! Please tell us what beautiful words we should use that will make you happy? When should we give you the test for the lesson that we have learnt? When can we add to our knowledge with your instruction and get our learning tested by you again?

तानि कल्पद् ब्रह्मचारी सलिलस्य पृष्ठे तपोऽतिष्ठत्प्यमानः समुद्रे।
स स्नातो बभ्रुः पिङ्गलः पृथिव्यां बहु रोचते॥

Atharva Veda 11/5/26

During his student life, a student with sea-like seriousness kept on observing penance for bathing in the waters of education. Now that he has graduated and acquired the capabilities for earning his own livelihood, he seems stronger and is looking glorious on the earth.

तृणोत्कया ज्ञायते जातरूपम् वृत्तेन भद्रो व्यवहारेण साधुः।
शूरो भयेष्वर्थकृच्छ्रेषु धीरः कृच्छ्रेष्वापत्सु सुहृदश्चारयश्च॥

Viduraniti/Chapter 3

The purity of gold is tested in fire. A good man is known by his character. The goodness and wickedness of an individual is testified by their behaviour just as the brave are discovered while facing adversity. Forbearance is discovered when one suffers through poverty. Friends and enemies are tested during the time of difficulty.

Assessment is a part of the Sravana – Manana – Nidhidhyasana model as the Acharya would make a continuous, formative assessment of the student's learning after learning each chunk of knowledge. There is also the possibility of self-assessment through the mnemonic techniques of the Sravana stage wherein if there was an error of omission or addition in the verses (example: an extra syllable), then the mnemonic system would not work correctly, and the student would know an error was introduced.

Points of Contention on Student-Centredness of the Gurukula System

The picture we get when we visualize the Gurukulas of yore is that of a sylvan 'forest-university' (Chidbavananda, 1964)^[2] where individuals, in the Brahmacharya phase of their lives, entered leaving behind their family's social status (princes and paupers were equal here thus hinting at the idea of social equality) and stayed together as a fraternity under the watchful eyes of the Guru and Guru-Patni. Such social equality also ensured that each of these students built the necessary social and the cultural capital in parallel to the educational capital needed for a life time to prosper in a society.

The Ashrama was self-sufficient in servicing the simple wants of the occupants and the mission of such an ashrama was to help students holistically develop themselves amidst nature. This residential system had the advantage of the Guru being able to observe his wards unobtrusively in all facets of their lives and thus, tailor his instruction according to the pupil. Along with formal instruction, students were also able to learn and practise their knowledge in the laboratory offered by nature in the Gurukula. This provided the Guru with umpteen opportunities to assess the students' assimilation of the instruction and decide on the curriculum most suited for a particular student's interests and abilities. The Guru-Patni and other residents of the Gurukula (not to forget the Guru himself) provided pastoral care and acted as foster parents to their wards during the tenure of the student's education. This holistic approach to education and character-building addressed all facets of the individual and was eminently suitable to the society of that time-period.

Modern scholars have deconstructed the student-centeredness of the Gurukula system and have questioned its effectiveness in the modern context based on a few variables of interest which are as follows.

In the Ashrama system, the first stage (roughly the first 8 years of an individual's life) is characterized by learning to

live independently, the next stage is usually a time to acquire knowledge and a preparation for living a fulfilled life. In this stage known as the Brahmacharya Ashrama, students were sent for a period of *gurukulavasam* or residence in the abode of the Guru. In modern times, there is a debate among scholars on what exactly was *gurukulavasam* and more importantly, what did it equip the student with. While some scholars believe that knowledge gained in the Gurukula was mainly restricted to memorization of religious texts and other religious matters (Seshagiri, 2010)^[4], others claim that the Gurukulavasam was more holistic and equipped students with both religious & spiritual knowledge (*Paravidya*) and knowledge of the world (*Aparavidya*) (Sreekala Devi & Pillai, 2012)^[5].

Another area of debate is whether the Gurukula system promoted only rote learning, based on the fact that texts were committed to memory (Seshagiri, 2010)^[4]. The teacher is visualized as initiating all learning with students as passive receptacles of this knowledge. This is often compared negatively to modern educational thoughts like 'activity based learning' and 'student initiated learning' that are lauded for being student-centric. Contrary to this thought, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad points to education as a trifold process comprising of *sravana* (hearing from the teacher), *manana* (assimilation by student through contemplation and reflection) and *nidhidhyasana* (concentrated contemplation of truth so as to realize it) (Sreekala Devi & Pillai, 2012)^[5]. This idea makes education student-oriented with the Guru donning the role of a facilitator and resource person. Further, the students had to display *shraddha* or devotion & steadfastness to attain higher levels of learning putting them in charge of charting their own course of learning (Chidbavananda, 1964)^[2].

Similarly, flexibility and inclusion are also areas of debates which prove to be points of contention. However, they were hallmarks of the education philosophy prevalent in ancient Indian education. Extant literature suggests that there are two areas where such flexibility was very apparent: a) the age of entry into the Gurukulavasam and tenure of stay and b) the customization of teaching pedagogy based on ability and interest displayed by students. Sreekala Devi & Pillai (2012)^[5] state that the usual age of entry was the eighth year of an individual's life; though it could extend up to the twelfth year, depending on the readiness of the student. The tenure depended on the purpose (usually related to the career choice of the student) and could range between twelve years (mastering one Veda) to forty-eight years (mastering all four Vedas).

The question of recognizing the diversity of differences in abilities and interest among students and being inclusive is addressed by the evidences available in different texts starting from the Vedas. Mookherji (1999)^[3] states that the Rig Veda points out that "*classmates or sakhas (those of same knowledge or who have studied the same Sastras) may have equality in the possession of their senses like the eye and ear, but betray inequality in respect of their power or speed of mind or the knowledge or wisdom which is attained by mind*" (pg 25-26). He goes on to say that students were divided into *Mahaprajnan* (high ability), *Madhyamaprajnan* (medium ability) and *Alpaprajnan* (low ability). The Gurus accounted for this difference in abilities and customized the subjects and teaching methods according to the student's requirements. The latter included self-study, listening to Parishads or conferences of learned men, practical sensorial

experience, question and answer sessions between teacher and student, fables & stories from texts like the Upanishads and so on depending on the subject and individual student (Avinashilingam, 1997) ^[1].

The question of holistic student centred development of the Gurukula system apart from cognitive achievement, is also addressed. The Gurukula system also catered to the students' overall well-being by catering to the affective needs of the individual, promoting physical education and engendering a sense of spiritual well-being. Mayr & Ulrich (2009) described six dimensions of well-being, which are: a) Making contact (forming secure relationships), b) Pleasure in exploration (environment is a safe base for exploring the world), c) Self- control/thoughtfulness, d) Emotional stability, e) Self-assertiveness and f) Task orientation. The Gurukula system worked on similar principles to help students develop holistically along with their cognitive achievement. The Gurukulas were usually located in a secluded forest and provided controlled environments for the students to explore. The students, apart from their studies, also participated in other chores and thus, were already getting prepared for the responsibilities of adult life (Chidbavananda, 1964) ^[2]. The other inmates of the Ashram (the Guru-Patni, senior disciples of the Guru and so on) tended to the young wards and built strong relationships that made the students feel secure and develop emotional stability. Peers, across class and geography, fostered a sense of equality and this help the student to develop assertiveness and confidence. Finally, concrete tasks set by the Guru helped develop the task orientation of the student and the positive discipline helped them to muster physical alertness and self-control. This overall physical and emotional well-being was conducive to the individual to gain a sense of spiritual well-being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Gurukula system embedded itself and related its curriculum to the Socio-Cultural-Economic-Moral context of that era and hence the different elements of pedagogy developed concerned itself with the holistic student-centred education. Understanding such holistic nature of the Gurukula system of that age, through the critical lens of modern educational paradigms and thoughts, especially aspects such as cognitive instruction, character building, customizing and tailoring such an education to the needs of the learner, pastoral care and affective development, physical development, sense of belonging, relationship with the natural world and social consciousness is crucial. Finally, it is important that we cull out the lessons that can be learnt from this system by today's education models, as appropriate to the philosophies and socio-cultural realities of this age.

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