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Ancient Indian education: The Para-Apara Vidya continuum

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Abstract

This research note delineates how Vidya or knowledge was conceptualized in Ancient Indian Education and the differences between Para and Apara Vidya. Adding to the body of scholarship on this subject, this study construes Para and Apara Vidya as a continuum (and not as binary opposites) and that both are interlinked.

Keywords: Knowledge, ancient Indian education, Vidya, Para and Apara Vidya

Introduction

In ancient Indian education, there were different conceptualizations of the word knowledge (Veda or Vidya). Both Veda and Vidya evolved from the root word Vid (to know). Thus, Veda and Vidya can be translated as 'knowledge'. Knowledge is a collection of facts and information about a particular subject. Thus, Rig Veda is a compilation of Rig or verses and Kshatravidya is a compilation of all the information a Kshatriya or ruler should know.

Knowledge, as envisioned by the Vedas and Upanishads is beyond just memorization of the text and regurgitation during assessment. There is also an expectation of deep understanding and assimilation without which knowledge is considered incomplete.

As early as the Rig Vedic society, there was a distinction between those who just memorize the text versus those who know and understand the subject and that knowledge in its true form is revealed when understanding, contemplation of the meaning and assimilation of the subject is present.

उत त्वः पश्यन्न ददर्श वाचम्, उत त्वः शृण्वन्न शृणोत्येनाम्।

उतो त्वस्मै तन्वं विससे, जायेव पत्य उशती सुवासाः॥

Rig 10/71/4

There are those who even after reading don't understand the words, there are those who even after listening, don't understand the meaning. Then there are those for whom knowledge reveals its true form just like the beautifully decked bride shows her true form to her groom.

Complete knowledge acquisition also has both theory and practice in it for knowledge without practice is seen as incomplete or useless in the Vedic and Upanishadic eras. The Upanishads, Itihasa and other texts emphasize the role of both theory and practice and that both are needed together like the two wings of a bird (Sushruta Charita).

पठकाः पाठकाश्चैव, ये चान्ये शास्त्रचिन्तकाः।

सर्व व्यसनिनो मूर्खाः, यः क्रियावान् स पण्डितः॥

Mahabharata/Vanaparva 313/110

Those who keep reading and discussing the Shastras, if their knowledge is not practicable, then they are only fools. Only he, whose knowledge is practical, is really a Pandita or learned person.

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Classification of Vidya

Para and Aparā Vidya

द्वे विद्ये चेदित्ये इति ह स्म यद्ब्रह्मविदो वदन्ति परा चैवपरा च॥

Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.4

Para and Aparā Vidya is a fundamental classification system of knowledge in various Vedic texts like the Upanishads. There is contention among various scholars on the exact differentiation between Para and Aparā Vidya. Based on their philosophical leanings, scholars have translated Para and Aparā Vidya differently. Some have used hierarchy to differentiate the two concepts (Para Vidya is higher knowledge vs. Aparā Vidya is lower knowledge) while others have tried to differentiate based on content. A third classification is a hybrid of the previous two (hierarchy and content) with a catalyst to go beyond.

While the first two types of categorization based on hierarchy and content posit Para and Aparā Vidya as exclusive categories, the third seems to conceptualize it as a continuum between Aparā and Para Vidya. Thus the first two categories would assume that there is a distinction in the type of students who could attain mastery in both categories (the 'truth seeker' would attain higher knowledge and the 'student' would attain lower knowledge for hierarchy based classifying systems and students of different inclinations and/or those with different social compulsions would choose different forms of knowledge for content based classifying systems). In the third hybrid classification, students would typically start with Aparā Vidya and somewhere on the continuum, an alchemical reaction occurs to lead the student to attain Para Vidya. This would not be the case for all students but the possibility is there that the same student can attain both as Para Vidya is seen as a destination for learning in all forms of knowledge. Hence the anecdotal saying that all Aparā Vidya can become Para Vidya and Para Vidya is a manifestation of all Aparā Vidya.

Hierarchical classification is usually that of higher knowledge (Para Vidya) vs. lower knowledge (Aparā Vidya) with a value judgement that Aparā Vidya is inferior to Para Vidya (Hemant & Sharma, 2018) [3]. The most common content based classification seems to be that Para Vidya is Spiritual knowledge whereas Aparā Vidya is Material knowledge (Murshid, 2018) [4]. Thus, religion would be the domain of Para Vidya whereas science and other empirical knowledge would be in the realm of Aparā Vidya according to this classification. Interpretation of Para and Aparā Vidya as two opposites could be the reason that many scholars felt that ancient Indian education was not relevant to modern secular education as the former dealt with the study of Vedic Samhita which was classified as religious education which in turn was the domain of Para Vidya as it is opposed to science which is Aparā Vidya and thus more relevant to secular education as envisaged by modern society. This is further complicated by an in-built hierarchy that Para Vidya is a higher form of knowledge than Aparā Vidya which further fuels the religion vs. science argument.

However, the Mundaka Upanishad refutes this argument to an extent by declaring that "there are two forms of knowledge – the Para and Aparā Vidya wherein Aparā Vidya consists of the four Vedas; Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharvana, Shiksha, Kalpa, Vyakarana, Chandas and

Jyotisha. Para Vidya is by which the imperishable is attained." (Sharvananda, 1920).

तत्रापरा ऋग्वेदो यजुर्वेदः समावेदोऽथर्ववेदः शिक्षा कल्पो व्याकरणं निरूक्तं छन्दो ज्योतिषमिति अथ परा यथा तदक्षरमधिगम्यते॥

Mundaka 1.1.5

The Mundaka Upanishad buckets all forms of cognizable knowledge (including the Vedas and Vedangas like Vyakarana, Chandas, Jyotisha etc. and by extension all forms of science, art & craft etc.) as Aparā Vidya and that knowledge by which the imperishable is attained alone as Para Vidya. Thus, the differentiation between Para and Aparā Vidya doesn't seem to be as simplistic as religion vs science or spiritual vs. material.

Further, the Mundaka Upanishad also goes on to state that the knowledge of Atma (Paravidya) cannot be attained by the study of Vedas, intellect or by repeatedly listening to the scriptures – it reveals its form to whom it chooses.

नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्यो न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेना
यमेवैष ब्रूणते तेन लभ्यस्तस्यैष आत्मा विवृणते तनुं स्वाम्॥

Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.3

But, these pithy statements raises a new challenge on what is Para Vidya if everything we learn and comprehend seems to be in the realm of Aparā Vidya? Mediating this difficulty, some scholars have tried to differentiate Para and Aparā Vidya differently like Knowledge of Spirit vs. consciousness (Gupta, 2018) [2] but this still doesn't clearly define these two types of knowledge.

Adi Shankaracharya, in his commentary on the Mundaka Upanishad seems to interpret the Sanskrit Verses 4 & 5 that Para Vidya is beyond the knowledge of the 'assemblage of words' in the texts of the Vedas, Upanishads etc. The implication is that there is a 'realization' of the ultimate truth through catalysts which could include approaching the right Guru, detachment and deep reflection and contemplation (Sharvananda, 1920).

This is probably the reason that some scholars of Vedanta have relegated the learning step of Nidhidhyasana as only relevant to Para Vidya (will be discussed in detail in the next section). This seems to be in support of the continuum theory of Para Vidya and Aparā Vidya.

Regardless of the conceptualization of Para-Aparā Vidya (either as a continuum or binary classification), the general agreement is that successful attainment of Para Vidya renders all other knowledge as unnecessary and is the aspiration of all scholars. The attainment of the 'knowledge of the soul' is exhorted in multiple Shastras as the culmination of the process of education and a worthy goal for the learned.

पठन्ति चतुरो वेदान्, धर्मशास्त्राण्यनेकशः।
आत्मानं नैव जानन्ति, दर्वी पाकरसं यथा॥

Chanakyaniti 15/12

Those who after reading the four Vedas do not know the essence of the soul, must find their lives as useless as that of the ladle which when stirring the delicious dishes being prepared, knows nothing about their taste

In the above verse from Chanakyaniti (considered mostly as a secular text of governance and statesmanship), the overt text of the Vedas and Dharmashastras is compared to the ladle whereas the knowledge of the essence of the soul is compared to the rich taste of the food. Thus, while the ladle is needed to stir and prepare the food (akin to the knowledge of the Vedas and other Shastras that help to refine and churn one's intellect and discernment); by itself it cannot convey the deeper knowledge i.e. knowledge of Brahman – the latter is the outcome of all the fermenting, churning and refining that the individual intellect has undergone. Thus, Apra Vidya is a step in the process towards the attainment of Para Vidya.

This is also visible in the conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad where the former mentions 'मैत्रेय्यात्मनो वा अरे दर्शनेन श्रवणेन मत्या विज्ञानेनेदं सर्वं विदितम्' or one who has done shravana, manana, and nididhyāsan on Paramātmā properly and attained realization (Paravidya) has known everything. There is nothing else left for him to see, hear, know, or contemplate (Ferrer, 2018) ^[1]. Thus, a person who has acquired the textual knowledge, understood it's meaning and practical applications and has attained an understanding of the soul would have become wise or a Jnani.

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