



Research Paper

## GURUKULA SYSTEM – AN EFFECTIVE CONCEPT IN REDEFINING MODERN TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

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### **Abstract**

Customer is the focal point when it comes to marketing of tangible or intangible products and services. But education which is a very basic and indispensable service is often seller / creator/service provider centric and is seldom student centric. Teaching is a way of moulding the personality, transforming the lives of the youth and equipping them to face the tough battles that lie ahead. Are we teachers able to reach out to our students both intellectually and emotionally especially at the higher education level?

The answer is no and there could be numerous reasons for this. The system of classroom education, the syllabi which restricts and limits you, the time (semester) boundaries that prevent you from straying into wide spectrum of knowledge, the conservative attitude of certain teaching faculty, the generation gap, could possibly be the few obstacles in making learning a participative and enjoyable process.

If we look into our rich cultural heritage, the “Guru-Shishya Parampara” occupied a prominent place in one’s life. In the Rigvedic times, the shishya (Student) was handed over to the Guru (Teacher) at a very tender age and was bestowed with the responsibility of shaping the life and future of the shishya. This system believed in Inter-disciplinary approach to learning and led to the overall development of the students. Through this paper, I would like to relate the glorious Guru - Shishya Parampara of the past with the present Teaching – Learning mechanism. There are a few takeaways from this comparison and it could help in defining the new paradigms in innovative teaching - learning practices.

**Keywords:** Gurukula System, Higher Education, Teaching – Learning practices, Guru - Shishya Parampara.

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is an undeniable fact of history that the destiny of the world has very often been shaped by great persons of sterling character, rather than the mediocre mortals who were a hapless part of history. Man’s struggle against nature results in his progress. This progress can be in two directions: external and internal. External progress leads to a better standard of living, i.e., civilization. Internal progress on the other hand, results in greater refinement of the whole personality, i.e., culture.

*“Vidya dadati vinayam, vinayad yaati paatrttaam; Patratva dhanvapanoti, dhanaad dharma tatah sukham.”*  
(Subhashitani)

(Knowledge leads to humility, humility leads to good conduct, good conduct provides wealth / money, wealth acquired in such a manner if spent rightfully would lead to happiness in one’s life.)

Civilization and culture do not necessarily go together. Nor are they mutually exclusive. They can be elegantly harmonized, provided one knows the relative proportions in combining them. Records of ancient and medieval history of our country as given by the foreign travelers and other foreigners like Megasthenes, Abul Fazal, , Max Muller etc, have mentioned Indians of having high degree of both civilization and culture. Both these are the outputs of education. French Thinker Froebel exclaimed and said, “Education should lead man to peace with nature, to unity with God”. The learning process has, over the years, undergone changes, rapid in some parts of the world and slow in other parts. From the ancient Vedic oral tradition to the present day online education, it has indeed been a long journey. The Indian traditional way of learning is of great significance and relevance to modern concepts of education.



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## **ANCIENT HINDU EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

The Upanishads, the ancient Hindu texts preach that whatever good is done with full knowledge and awareness becomes forceful and fruitful in life. Bhartrhari, a well known Sanskrit poet, compares a man without any education to a brute. Albert Einstein (A.D. 1879 – 1955) seems to concur with him when he compares a man with a specialized knowledge, but lacking in values, to a well trained dog. Vivekananda, the great patriot-prophet of Modern India, who could feel the pulse of Indian nation states that, Education, is life building, man making, and character-making assimilation of ideas.

It is rather astonishing that many Western philosophers have practically echoed Vivekananda's ideas on education though in different words. These can be briefly summarized as follows:

- a. Education should teach our children self control, the art of holding one's passions and prejudices.
- b. It should instill true and worthy motives, a profound religious feeling and inspire the formation of a great character.
- c. It should help us to understand the laws of God in nature and to shape our lives to be in consonance with those laws.
- d. It should pay much greater attention to the development of the powers of the mind than mere learning of facts.

The ancient and medieval systems of education recognized all these aspects while formulating the policies guiding them. Accordingly all fields of Vidya or knowledge were divided into two broad streams: the Paravidya (the higher knowledge, the spiritual wisdom) and the Aparavidya (the lower knowledge, the secular sciences). The latter is needed to lead a comfortable life here. The former helps one to be fully prepared for the hereafter. Hence, a balanced combination of both is advocated so that both civilization and culture are imparted.

Chandogya Upanishad, one of the ancient Upanishads written in the period 4000 B.C – 2500 B.C., mentions as many as fifteen branches of knowledge apart from the four Vedas (Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda). Some of them are: Vyakarana (Grammar), Pitrya (Science of obsequial rites), Ganita (Mathematics), Daiva (Knowledge of the portents), Tarka (Logic), Ekayana (Ethics), Bhutavidya (Science of the spirits), Dhanurveda (Martial arts and sciences), Jyautisa (Astronomy) and Devajanavidya (The art of preparing perfumes, music, dancing and sculpture).

Kautilya furnishes more details on more aspects of Vidya (knowledge). According to him a trainee (student) after his tonsure ceremony, had to learn the Alphabet (Lipi) and Arithmetic (Ganita). Then he had to study the three Vedas, Anviksaki (the philosophy of the Samkhya), Yoga and Lokayata under, teachers of acknowledged authority (Sista), the science of Varta (Agriculture, Cattle breeding and Trade), under Government Superintendents and the science of Dandaniti (the Science of Punishment) under theoretical and practical politicians. The trainee prince had to observe celibacy till he was sixteen.

Thereafter, in the forenoons he had to study the military arts: concerning elephants, horses, chariots and weapons. In the afternoon, the trainee had to hear to the Itihasa viz. Purana (traditional ancient texts), Itivrta (History), Akhyayika (Tales), Udaharana (Illustrative Stories), Dharmasastra (Law) and Arthasastra (Economics or Finance). Later Vatsayana (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D) recommended the study of sixty four arts (Kala) which included singing, dancing, playing on musical instruments, writing and drawing, tattooing, magic, ornamentation, gardening, sports and similar arts. There seems to have been considerable controversy among political thinkers in India in regard to the number and importance of these branches of knowledge. The most followed School of Manu held that there were only three Vidyas, namely the triple Vedas, Varta (Agriculture and Trade) and Dandaniti (the science of Government).

## **CONSTITUENTS OF AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

The three constituents of an educational system are: the teacher, the student and the content as also the methods of education. A spiritual teacher generally called 'Guru or 'Acharya' was expected to be 'Srotiya (learned in the Vedas and allied scriptures) and a 'Brahmanistha' (well established in Brahman or God). As applied to other



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fields of knowledge it could mean that he should be an expert both in theory and in practice. An impeccable character, earnestness to teach and a genuine love towards the student were the additional qualities expected in him.

‘Upadhyaya’ is another term that is sometimes used for a teacher. He is generally described as one who charges fees for his teaching, whereas the guru and the acharya do not. Eagerness to learn, humility, obedience to the teacher, self-control, absence of laziness in the pursuit of knowledge and willingness to do personal service to the teacher – these were the essential traits a Shishya (student/disciple) must possess to qualify for admission. When the disciple advances to great heights in religio-spiritual life, he is required to pass on that knowledge to worthy disciples thus keeping alive a great tradition for the benefit of humankind.

## **GURUKULA SYSTEM OF EDUCATION**

**Gurukul** (Sanskrit: गुरुकुल) is a type of school in India, residential in nature, with pupils (*shishya*) living near the guru, often within the same house. Prior to British rule, they served as South Asia's primary educational institution. The guru-shishya tradition (*parampara*) is a hallowed one in Hinduism and appears in other religious groups in India, such as Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

The word *gurukula* is a contraction of the Sanskrit *guru* (teacher or master) and *kula* (extended family). In a gurukula, *shishya* live together as equals, irrespective of their social standing, learn from the guru and help the guru in his day-to-day life, including the carrying out of mundane chores such as washing clothes, cooking, etc. The two aspects of education, the ‘learning processes and the ‘Guru-Shisyaparampara’ are inter-related., though distinct. The former confines itself mainly to the process, whereas the latter speaks of a tradition which is not a creation out of necessity but a culmination of perfection in providing the right kind of atmosphere in this essential aspect of life, viz., learning.

It is a well known fact as to how the Vedas of great antiquity have been preserved and passed on to posterity not with the aid of writing or recording but purely through oral transmission. The ancient sages deserve great appreciation for conceiving such a system whereby such a vast literature has come down to us without any addition, omission or alteration. The commitment of the Gurus (Teachers) to pass on all the knowledge to the next generation was remarkable. They did not consider themselves to be above others and others to be lesser mortals. They took the disciples into their fold in achieving the common task of preserving the Vedas.

In Indian tradition, the teacher has always been held in very high esteem. The foremost Indian law giver Manu says: “*Acharyo Brahmano Murtih*” (Manusmriti II, 226). In many cases, the Guru was also the father of the pupil. The importance and role of a guru is highlighted by Saint Kabirdas in his words, “*Guru Gobind dou kadey, kakey lagon paye; Balihari guru aapne, gobind diyo bataye*”. Age was not a restriction when it came to being a Guru. Manu cites the anecdote of young Kavi, the son of Angiras, who taught even elders like his uncles.

The Gurukula system of education was in vogue during the Vedic times. The practice of oral transmission, the vastness of the Vedic and auxiliary literature to be taught and the problem of distances, were the contributory factors for the development of the Gurukula system. Under this system, learning was not considered a transmission of information. It was more aimed at being and becoming and dedicating one’s life towards the achievement of one’s ideal. The coming together of the teacher and taught results in the situation where percept and practice are not contradictory.

The Gurukula system provides a very conducive atmosphere for the knowledge seeker to observe his model teacher from very close quarters, apart from learning from nature, from the co-students and from the teacher. The teacher adopted a systematic and methodological approach aimed at rousing the student’s inquisitiveness and thinking capacity without any prompting. The teacher was more a guide and helper rather than a taskmaster and dictator. Under the Gurukula system, concepts like Informal class, experiential learning and Group discussion also find mention. The teacher also encouraged his pupils to come up with questions and pose their doubts which were



addressed by the teachers. The teacher would derive satisfaction by imparting knowledge to a good disciple. Guru was expected to be thorough in his subject and also have concern for the welfare of the shisya.

The Gurukulas were located far from the city and had a very pleasing environment. They aimed at overall development of the pupils. Learning was not limited to mere knowledge; it focused on transforming the personality of the pupils. It stressed on morals, values and conduct. The Guru-shisya parampara should not be misunderstood as a mere platform for testing the knowledge of disciples. It is a great system which consists of a methodical learning process which can be adapted even in the present modern world. The Shastriji Maharaj Dharamjivan dasji Swami is the pioneer of the modern Vedic gurukula system. He initiated first Swaminarayan Gurukul, Rajkot, Gujarat State, India in 1948. Recently several gurukulas have been set up driven both by a desire to uphold the traditions and monetary gain. Examples of these new schools include the Ananda Marga Gurukula.

### AIM OF EDUCATION

The aims of education according to our ancient Indian tradition were never different from the aim of life. The ancient Indian pupil (student) was the true embodiment of Tyaga (Renunciation), Tapas (asceticism), Namrata (Humility) and above all Brahmacharya (Chastity). Thus, the Vedic education emphasizes more and more upon the personal purity and the ultimate ideal of the individual seeker of knowledge. On the other hand, the aim of education in the post-Vedic period centered round Svadhyaya (Self study). The principle aims and duties included ardent devotion to the teacher, feeding the fire, leading the cows and loving the sentient beings of the world. Apart from this the aims of education included unstinted character, unlimited self-restraint and endless humility. The ancient Indian education was meant to guide life in the direction of spiritual perfection. Its sole aim was the fulfillment of life ideals i.e., Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram.

Apart from this, the harmonious development of physical, mental and the spiritual aspects of human life occupied significant place in the Brahmanical system of education. The Buddhist system of education emphasized more and more on attainment of Nirvana. The Buddhist teacher pleaded for the service of the Sangha (Group). Extensive travel was also considered as one of the principle aims of Buddhist system of education. To develop an intense love for knowledge and control of the senses were viewed as the fundamental principles of education by Swami Dayananda. The aim of education according to him was physical and mental austerity. According to Swami Vivekananda the aim of education must be in keeping with the natural tendencies of the child. He believed that education is encouraging one's own talent and also aiming at realization of the ultimate.

Mahatma Gandhi has presented altogether a different aim in his theory of education. Each child after finishing the course of his education should be an earning unit says Gandhi. Thus, the real aim of education is synonymous with finding an occupation. Training the hand, head and the heart come under the immediate aims of education and the knowledge of God and self-realization fall under the ultimate aim of education. Gandhiji opined that education is not the acquisition of more knowledge of facts but an experience of truths.

According to Rabindranath Tagore, the objective of education is harmony with all that exists around us. The real ideal of education is no less than the creation of the Vishvamanav (Universal Man). He believed that mere provision of academic courses of teaching and learning may not solve the real problem of the modern youth. A cultural orientation is important for a man to realize the unity of truth.

Sri Aurobindo, the prophet of integral theory of education emphasizes on the training of the senses in order to realize the real aim of education through love, knowledge, power and beauty. According to him, true education caters to the needs of the physical, mental, psychical and spiritual dimensions of human personality. Our ancient systems as well as these luminaries believe that the aim of education is drawing out the best from the child. It automatically implies that each and every child has the 'best' in him / her. The aim of education is the aim of human life. It means learning of minimum basic skills, the requirements of necessary life and also the ingredients of comfortable creative living. Comfortable life implies a life of culture and civilization.



### **COMPLEXITIES OF THE PRESENT EDUCATION SYSTEM**

The present educational institutions have failed to impart a 'common culture' to children of diverse castes and religions. The common uniforms, the common instructions are not enough. We need to understand the students and their cultural background before imparting education. But right now it is all about numbers, the bottom line is important. The strength of the class is normally determined by the space of the classroom. Quality takes a back seat, as the focus is only on having large number of students in each discipline. Individual and focused attention is surely unimaginable. A college or a university is not a mere temple of learning; it is a centre of dissemination of knowledge. It is a medium of reform, a reflection of future hope for mankind. Higher education is not a mere accumulation of intellectual knowledge and understanding. It is in fact a source of deeper insights and understandings which tend to keep civilization alive and humane.

Education which helps one to become great and virtuous is real education. But the scenario today is different. Knowledge is judged on the basis of marks, scores, grades and ranks obtained. The instruction and teaching in colleges is so mechanical and lifeless that it has lost all its charm. A teacher is trying to transfer the material from the books to the students whereas the students in turn are trying their best to retain their mechanical performance by unloading the same in the examination halls. This is mimicry in education. Learning for degrees and qualification is no learning at all. Education which transforms the structure of one's living is the true and living education. That education is valuable and useful which renders a new status to the seeker of knowledge by imparting new awareness and consciousness. Real education must be processed through several stages of learning, unlearning and ever re-learning.

The current system of education has not left a deeper impression in the minds of the people. It has rather failed miserably to relate its aims and claims to the growing needs and requirements of society. On the one hand, the present system of education has neither increased the morals of individuals nor strengthened the society. On the other hand, it has raised the level of general intelligence and understanding, increased the status of specialization techniques and technological skills. It has equal advantages and disadvantages to its credit. The present system of education has not effected any value change. It has either inhibited or destroyed the existing human values.

Teachers are a very important component in knowledge dissemination. A good teacher is one who does not teach in the class, but communicates and identifies with his pupils in all respects. He / she should encourage his pupils to freely share their concerns and thoughts. 'Out of the box' thinking should be welcomed. A teacher should not interfere in the normal and natural growth of their pupils. According to some, the senior most teachers may be disadvantageous in the learning of new knowledge. As the teacher becomes more and more senior, greater are the hurdles in the assimilation and absorption of new and innovative learning practices. The present university system of higher education has domination of this senior category of teachers. Hence, they are bound to suffer from the age old inhibitions and traditions. Their openness to accept change and transformation is a major setback in making learning an interesting process. Teachers need to assume the role of facilitators and helpers instead of donning the role of controllers and regulators.

### **TAKEAWAYS FROM GURUKULA SYSTEM OF EDUCATION**

The present education system lacks depth, consistency, soul and learning. Higher education which equips a student with specialized knowledge and skill needs to be dealt seriously. Present system should bring in the concept of overall development of students. A student should eventually show growth in all aspects, psychological, mental and spiritual. A residential concept of education appears much more effective at higher levels of education. The teacher-student ratio needs to be brought down. Personal attention and individualistic learning needs to be encouraged.

Teachers should not hesitate to stray away while explaining a concept. Use of cases, stories, incidents would make it an enjoyable process. Limiting oneself to the syllabi would be limited learning. Teachers should also help and assist students in discovering their inner potential and encourage the student to excel in that direction. Oral teaching should be given more importance as opposed to use of mechanical/electronic aids in teaching. There



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should be stress on developing the communication skills of the student. Ancient Sanskrit poet ‘Bhartrhari’ in his book ‘Nitishatakam’ mentions the importance of communication skill in his verse:

*“Keyurani na bhushayanti purusham hara na chandrojwala; Na snannam na vilepanam, na kusumam nalankrita murdaja; Vanayeka samalankarotti purusham ya samskrita dharyate; Kshiyante khalu bhushnani satatam vagabhushanam bhushnam.*

(Good speech / good oration skill is the only treasure of every human being. The ornaments and dresses he puts on do not add much to his personality).

Participative learning practices and discussions should be used to make learning interesting. Value based learning should be encouraged; students should be groomed in the right way to become better citizens. They need to assume the role of responsible citizens. Integrity, honesty, dedication should be the values that teachers should imbibe in their students. Last but not the least, knowledge acquisition should not be merely to obtain a certificate or a degree, it should define the identity of an individual. Keay, author of the book ‘Ancient Indian Education: An enquiry into its origins, development and ideals’ has rightly commented on the significance of the Gurukula System. He says, ‘Not only did the educators develop a system of education which survived the crumbling of empires and the changes of society, but they also, through all these thousands of years, kept aglow the torch of higher learning and numbered amongst them many great thinkers who left their mark not only on the learning of India but upon the intellectual life of the world’.

## CONCLUSION

Education must focus on two important aspects for it to be termed valuable and effective. Firstly education must aim at the elimination or eradication of evils from the individual and society. Secondly, it must inculcate and install some positive norms or values for higher achievements or aims and goals in life. Quality education is concerned with the ‘inner life’ of the individual as much as with the outer achievements and progress. Education which deals with the essentials of life i.e., ‘artha’, ‘kama’, ‘dharma’ and ‘moksha’ is the true and living education.

The values and morals in society are fast de-generating. This decline or de-generation is the crisis of the present man. Any amount of progress in science and technology cannot find solution to this crisis. In order to raise the status of the present man, we need a new approach in education. The most important and urgent reform needed in education is to transform it and ensure that it relates to the life needs and aspirations of the people and thereby make it a powerful instrument of social, economic and cultural transformation necessary for the realization of the national goals. The ultimate aim of education is highlighted in the following verse:

*Sahna Vavatu, Sahnau Bhunaktu; Sahviryam Karvavahai;  
Tejasvina Vadhitamastu;Ma Vidvishavahai.  
Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti*

(Let us live together, Let us dine together, Let our offspring prosper; Let our life be filled with glory and fame, let us not hate / betray anyone, Let peace prevail everywhere).

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