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ANCIENT INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The study highlighted the Indian education system especially the Hindu education as depicted in the epics and Smriti Sastras of ancient India. It also mentioned some of the important observations by Hiuen Tsang in 7th century AD related with the existing Hindu education system at that time. The Vedic and Brahmanic system of education with its Upanishadic essence emphasized not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also the wholistic development of personality, especially the spiritual and moral development of character. This glorious tradition of ancient Indian education system surpassed time and ages especially due to its everlasting and core concept of self-realization and ultimately the realization of the Ultimate or the Absolute Truth.

Index Terms - Indian Education System, Vedic, Brahmanic, Upanishads, Absolute.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian knowledge system or Bharatiya Gyana Parampara consists of rich cultural heritage and the traditional knowledge that the country imbibed from her glorious past in the fields of literature, arts, basic sciences, agriculture, technology, economics, management, health, hygiene, medicine etc. Swami Vivekananda through his life and through his speeches wanted a great amalgamation of rich cultural traditions of the East with scientific temper of the West for the holistic development of the inner potentialities inherent in everyone. Technological Innovations and interventions create great impact for leading a quality life in Indian Perspective. So, it becomes a necessity to combine a traditional Indian knowledge system along with the technological changes for the achievement of holistic development of humanity – good mental and physical health, moral and value education and sustainable environment. NEP (2020) envisioned the same vision of education that would be affordable and accessible to all students through quality education and research. Traditionally, Indian sub-continent was considered a storehouse for knowledge and culture and it promoted a harmonious living and existence of self or Atma, environment or Prakriti and the universe or Brahma as well as sustainable development and welfare for all or humanity at large. Knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, health, consciousness studies have Indian origins and several ancient texts suggest that metallurgy or material sciences and technologies have Indian origins. Chemistry or rasyanashastra also existed as a codified knowledge system. Ayurveda and Yoga are the two areas of knowledge where India has a rich tradition in ancient era and these were used as a part of holistic development.

II. THE CONCEPT OF HINDU EDUCATION

Upanishads and Brahmanas are the earliest references to the educational systems in India and three different types of institutions that preserved culture of the country emerged during that period.

Firstly, the system where the students were admitted at a very tender age under the tutelage of Guru in his residence or Gurugriha, left their parental homes on the first dawn of consciousness. The need of instruction under a teacher is emphasized by Upanishads. Upanayana or initiation ceremony indicates the spiritual character of the process. The students were carrying fuel as a token of service to the teacher. This initiation into Guru's home is a kind of rebirth and as a result Bbrahmacharis became a Dvija and an Antevasin. The period of studentship was normally extended into twelve years.

The student or shishya had to perform several household duties to live in the house of his Guru for the development of moral and spiritual faculties. Begging was performed for his teacher and in every occasion the student awaited his commands. Vedic studies, recitation and teaching of Vedas are part of their daily lives. Knowledge of Brahman, Upanishadic instruction helped to develop mental and moral attributes that really fit him to receive the highest knowledge. Upanishads and the very concept of Brahmacharya embrace not merely student's life but the entire course of life. The knowledge of Upanishads aimed at the application of the whole life and is preparatory to the realization of the knowledge of the Absolute.

Subjects that were studied during that period as referenced in Upanishads and Brahmana: Vedic study, Tryi-Vidya or three-fold knowledge that of Rich, yogas and Saman. Anusasana is the name given to six Vedangas- a) phonetics(siksha), b) Ritualistic Knowledge(kalpa) c) Grammar(Vyakarana), d) Exegetics(nirukta), e) Metrics(chhandas) and f) Astronomy(jyotisha). Vidya which may mean either philosophical systems like Nyaya, Mimansa etc. or special sciences like Vishavidya(science of poisons),

Ithasa-purana(stories of old heroes, myths), Akhyana(stories), Gatha(songs and verses), Rasi(arithmetic), Sloka(stories found in Brahmanas) and Devajanavidya(art of singing, dancing, playing musical instruments etc). Upanishads also mentioned Paravidya or Supreme or highest knowledge as distinguished from all other types of knowledge termed as Aparā. Paravidya deals with special subject matter that is Ultimate Reality- “the foundation of all arts and sciences.”

For attaining wisdom or knowledge about the Ultimate Reality one has to undergo two things: i) annihilation of “the illusion of a manifold universe, of the consciousness of plurality.” This means two ends popularly known as Sannyasa and Yoga. The former denotes leaving off from one's home, family, possessions and desires and the later depicts withdrawing of the sense-organs from objects and concentrated on Inner Self and unison with Atman.

Another type of instructions ministered the needs of the advanced students whose quest for knowledge and truth never to be ceased. Students of those institutions tried to improve their knowledge through discussions and discourse with specialists in the field. They participated in academic meetings held throughout the course and the main course of discussion was often based on searching the truth about Atman, the Ultimate Reality and the knowledge was tested and matured through criticism, debates and friction of minds.

Besides these academic circles or parishads of different localities, there was also a national gathering or congress summoned by a king, in which representative thinkers, philosophers and intellectuals of the country of various schools were invited to exchange their views and opinions. One of such congress is reported in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishada and Vayu Purana. Such type of gatherings helped to spread knowledge in those days.

III. HINDU EDUCATION SYSTEM AS DEPICTED IN THE EPICS

The educational system that was mentioned in the Upanishads and Brahmanas is depicted in greater detail during the period of epics and Smriti texts. The tender age or the first stage of life is the preparation through education, discipline and training. This was the preparatory stage through education which was purely vocational or practical and contents and methods were different for different castes and classes of pupils. The life of learning or intellectual career was prescribed only for the economic career. The Sudras mostly belonged outside of the educative influence of the country.

There are several passages in the epics which sum up the duties and disciplines of the asrama life of the pupil lived in the preceptor house. He had to perform Vedic rites, practice celibacy, vows, humility and beg alms for his Guru. He had to purify his soul and study Vedas and be always ready to carry out his Guru's commands even at the cost of his life. Takshasila was treated as the ideal Centre of Learning. One of the famous teachers named Dhaumya had three disciples named Upamanyu, Aruni and Veda, whose ideal devotion to their Guru is set out in great detail. Such stories conform the Upanishadic tradition regarding the system of studentship. The Mahabharata pictured typical hermitages where students gathered for instruction received from teachers. One of such mentioned hermitages was that of a Naimisha forest which was active like a university. The presiding personality of the place was Saunaka who invited a vast concourse of learned men to Naimisha to participate in discourses on religions, philosophical and scientific topics. The hermitage of Kanva was another famous Centre of Learning. It was like a forest university where every branch of learning was cultivated like four Vedas, sacrificial literature, and art, phonetics, metre, grammar, philosophy of the Absolute, philology, Bramopasona, solid geometry and physics. Other famous hermitages mentioned in Mahabharata are those of Vasishtha, Visvamisra and Vaysa.

Normally, the kshatriyas was to study alone and the Brahman to study as also to teach and perform sacrifices for others. Pandavas are described as having studied all the Vedas and proficient in archery, fight, swordsmanship, driving of elephants. The education prescribed for the sons of kings includes: “knowledge, the family laws, the science of bow, the Veda, elephant-riding, horse-riding, chariot-driving, rules of propriety, word-science, music and the fine arts, legends and tales.” From the Ramayana as well as the Mahabharata, it is clear that the list of subjects the king is expected to study includes dhanurvedya, Veda, Nitisastra(politics) and the art of riding elephants and cars besides the art of painting, writing, jumping and swimming, logic and politics. Several similar lists occur in Mahabharata. One list enumerates: medicine with its eight branches, Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Atharva-Veda, all scriptures, history, Upavedas, Vedangas, Vani(speech) of seven kings, Samans, Stuta-sastras (kinds of hymns), various kinds of Gatha(Literature), Commentences, Epics and stories. Military training of the kings and princes seem to have been known by the term 'dhanurveda' that includes methods of warfare and how to conduct all weapons.

IV. AS DEPICTED IN THE SMRITI SASTRAS

The educational system as depicted in Smriti literature elaborated pupil's introduction to education or Vidyambha ceremony. The formal introduction was initiated by Upanayana, known as second birth. The rules of initiation vary with different castes. The period of theoretical studies or book learning was much shorter than that of Brahmana, other castes took their respective professions in practical spheres of life. Elaborate details are given regarding the ceremony of Upanayana. Certain moral conditions are also laid down qualifying a pupil for admission. He had to be pure, attentive, possessed good memory and of controlled passion and well-behaved. The spiritual bond that connected the teacher with the pupil was regarded as sacred and inviolable. The studentship formally begins after the performance of Savitra Vrata. The duties to be performed of the student for his teacher as well as for his moral development were begging, fetching fuel, water, flowers and other articles of sacrifice and tending the sacred fire at the preceptor's home. Various regulations are laid down governing the student's life and conduct and manner and method of study. The pupil had to cultivate certain moral qualities such as freedom from sensual desires, anger, envy and covetousness. He must not talk with women more than is strictly necessary.

The course of study included the whole Veda together with rahasyas (secrets) as stated by Manu. The Puranas, Itihasas, Vedangas and the institutes of sacred law are also included among different subjects of study. The knowledge imparted to the pupil is stated to be of three kinds: worldly knowledge (related to poetry, rhetoric etc.), sacred knowledge (related to Vedas and Vedangas) and knowledge of the Supreme Spirit.

The technical name for rules of Vedic study was 'anuvachana'. The method of instruction was oral. In the first place, the text of a hymn of the Rig-Veda is taught to the student. Secondly, the 'rishi' (seer), deity and metre of the hymn are taught to him. In this way, the teacher is to go on reciting the hymns belonging to each rishi or each 'anuvachana', which make up the lesson for each day. Teacher should be highly qualified and taught Vedas to his pupils, without remuneration, purely, as a religious duty. The absence of any economic relation between the teacher and the taught allowed the teacher complete independence as regards the choice and admission of the pupil. The tests for admission and the regulations governing the life of the student after admission were determined by the ideals and aims of that education. The aim was to produce not mere scholars, but the whole man, ideal householders who would perfectly uphold the family, the society and the country.

V. AS DEPICTED BY HIUEN TSANG- 7th CENTURY AD

Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese Scholar and the globetrotter has recorded certain observations on Brahmanical education and the culture. The ascendancy of Brahmanism was observable from several signs. Instruction was imparted orally and was characterized by painstaking labour on the part of the teacher. The pedagogic method followed was part of trying to quicken and arouse the latent powers of thinking in the student and lead him on to conclusions. The period of studentship was fairly long. Hiuen Tsang alluded to the practice, referred to in the earlier Smritis, of the retiring students paying the preceptor his fees for educating them. Brahmacharis who chose to concentrate themselves to lifelong studentship and celibacy in quest of further learning was not extinct in India in Hiuen Tsang's time. Renouncing worldly possessions, name, honour, self-imposed poverty and hardship, they spend all their time in the pursuit of different arts and sciences. The system of Brahmanical education, which was a unique achievement of the Hindu genius, thus fulfilled the highest aim of a school of learning, namely, to produce in its alumni an absorbing love of learning for its own sake. The methods of teaching pursued in these schools were not mechanical, soulless and oppressive, but living and natural, which helped to generate in the young learners a spirit of enquiry, of the quest of truth which is the highest gift a teacher can bestow on them. Their lives were an embodiment of the great ideal of 'plain living and high thinking'. The academic debates and tournaments, which formed so long a part of the intellectual life of the country under the Brahmanical system of education from days of the Upanishads, were also a marked characteristic of the Buddhist literary world. Hiuen Tsang has collected the more important traditions and facts on the subject. From which we can realize how these intellectual tournaments brought together scholars from different parts of India, promoted active intercourse between different monasteries representing different schools of thought and united intellectuals of different provinces. From the distant south, overcoming the physical factors of isolation achieved an honoured place in the Indian intellectual system as in northern parts of India like Nalanda in Magadha. This phase of intellectual life was encouraged by the permanent Indian sovereignty at the time of pilgrims' visit, i.e., Harsha the Great, who used to bring the brethren together for examination and discussion and reward the meritorious.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the Vedic and Brahmanic tradition the development of personality in all its aspects- physical, mental, spiritual, social, intellectual was the chief concern. In 'History of Indian Education, Ancient and Later Times', Keay, F.E. observed, "Not only did Brahmana education develop a system of education which survived the crumbling empires and the changes of the society, but they also, through all these thousands of years, kept aglow of the torch of higher learning and numbered amongst them many great thinkers who have left their mark not only on the learning of India, but upon intellectual life of the world." Religious aspects were more emphasized in Vedic education, but in Brahmanic system wholistic development of personality was emphasized that included self-control, self-reliance, character-formation, knowledge of social life, preservation of culture along with Yoga and physical exercise for physical development. Ancient Indian education system is the outcome of the traditional knowledge system of the country based on life, culture and values. It caters the spiritual solitaires – not merely the acquisition of objective knowledge, but moving towards self-fulfilment, towards the Supreme or the Absolute Truth.

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