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Education And Learning System In Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

Education always engaged a high place in the society. It was a preliminary to one's starting his vocation as a student and to acquire Education (*vidya)*. A much regimented life was laid down by the ancient digests for students receiving *brahmanical* education. By the time a boy attained the age of sixteen years, he was expected to be the master of all sciences and arts. It is held in the *Nitisataka* that a man devoid of education and wisdom is nothing but a beast. Different institutions had put in their efforts to educate the people during the ancient period. Temples, *brahmapuris* and *agrahāra* villages were the main centers of education consisting of poets, philosophers, disputants and orators. Rulers granted lands and some gifts for the maintenance of *Vidyāmandirs* and *agraharās*. While the instruction in the *agraharas* was confined to the study of the *Vēdas* and other traditional *Sanskrit* learning, in the temple provision was made for the study of several branches of knowledge including fine arts. Educational institution (*matha)* is a monastic establishment and was meant to propagate different religious creeds of Hinduism. The rulers and the *gurus* learnt not only *Veda Vidhya* but also learnt science education in ancient times.

Key words: Education, Brahmanical education, *Agraharas*, *Mathas*, Temples

Introduction

The development and success of any nation or society are largely influenced by the educational values and practices of its time. To truly understand the intellectual and spiritual richness of ancient Indian society, it is important to carefully examine the educational systems that existed in those times. While it is natural and commendable to feel pride in a rich cultural heritage, it is equally important to evaluate historical achievements through the lens of modern scientific inquiry, distinguishing verified facts from myths and legends passed down through generations.

The ancient Indian education system was a holistic and well structured approach to learning that emphasized intellectual, physical, spiritual and moral development. This system was primarily imparted through the *mathas*, *agrahara* villages and Gurukulas, where students resided with their tutors and learned various subjects' viz., Vedas, mathematics, medicine (*Ayurveda*), philosophy, logic (*Nyaya*), astronomy, grammar (*Vyakarana*), Arts, music, and warfare etc. The students lived with their teachers in residential schools, receiving personalized instruction tailored to their individual needs.

The kings and their subordinates, other officials were encouraged to learn the education and establishment of *vidyalayas* in ancient period, sometimes, the kings Gifting of *brāhmadēya* lands to the learned *brāhmaṇās* yielding sufficient produce, being exempted from the payment of taxes and fines was not merely a reward for learning the *veda* education, but an honorarium for imparting of their knowledge. Land grant to a single or a few *brāhmaṇās* is usually known as *bhattavriṭṭis* and when a whole village was settled by a number of learned *brāhmaṇās*, it was commonly known as an *agrahāra*. The *Kshtriyas* were also learnt the warfare education from the teachers in Gurukulas. The records inform us that the *ghadiya* was a *brāhmin* endowed with *yama*, *niyama* and *dharma* and well-versed in all the *śastras*.[1]

In the field of education we may refer to the huge monastic establishment of Nalanda. It attracted students not only from different parts of India, but also from Tibet and China. The standards of examination were stiff, and only those who could pass the test prescribed by the *dvarapandita* or the scholar at the gate could be admitted to this university. Thakshasila and Nalanda universities are the earliest examples of a residential cum teaching institution, which housed thousands of monks devoted to learning, philosophy and meditation.[2]

Primary Education

Every child had to go through initiation ceremony called *Upanayana*, before he was entitled to receive education. The *Upanayana*, literally means taking a pupil close to his teacher, the age limit prescribed for *Upanayana* ceremony was eighth year to Brahmins and twelfth year for other castes. The primary education was practiced either in temples or private housed of teachers, who would select pupils of their choice. However, private tuitions were also in Vogue but generally looked down upon. The teacher who charged for teaching was termed as *Bhritkadhyapaka* or a paid teacher to distinguish him from the regular ones, who lived on grants. Similarly, the pupils who very frequently changed their teachers were known as *Tirthakaka* with a strange habit of transitory stay like a crow.[3]

Higher Education

The higher education was probably more systematic and looked after by the kings of the era. The important centers of higher learning viz., Takshashila, Vallabhi, Nalanda, Vikramasila, Kanyakubja, Pataliputra and Rajagriha also attracted by the scholars and students attracted from all over country and even abroad. Then, the various *mathas* and *agraharas* also imparted higher education to the students of nearby localities. The uniform prescribed for the students, known as *Snataka* in the above centers, consisted of a tightly worn *dhoti*, long hair and a stick. The finances and overall supervision of the seats of higher learning were the subjects of state wherein the kings and nobles excelled each other in their benevolence and patronage. The higher education was based on traditional subjects who consisted of fourteen branches of learning. The four *Vedas* i.e., the *Rig-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda* and *Atharva-Veda*; the six *Vedangas* i.e., *Siksha, Kalpa, Vyakarana, Nirukta, Chhanda* and *Jyothish* which correspond roughly to mathematics, astronomy, grammar, linguistics metrics and astrology and four *sastras* i.e., *Puranas, Anvihshiki, Mimamsa* and *Dharmashastra* corresponding roughly to history, philosophy, logic and law constituted the complete course for a *snataka*. Apart from this, economic, erotic's, fine-arts, political and military science were also prevalent particularly for the students of the royal household. There were other vocational subjects to be studied by the students specializing in various professions. For instance trade, agriculture, animal husbandry, examination of minerals including metals and gems, textiles, perfumery and business management were prescribed for the students of business community. For the lower section of the people, the practical training of various arts and crafts was also vogue which was imparted mostly on hereditary basis.[4]

Mathematics

By the third century B.C. mathematics began to develop separately. In the field of mathematics the ancient Indians made three distinct contributions the notation system, the decimal system and the use of zero. The Indian notational system was adopted by the Arabs who spread it in the western world. The Indian numerals are called Arabic in English, but the Arabs themselves called their numerals *hindsa*. Before these numerals appeared in the west they had been used in India for centuries. They are found in the inscriptions of Asoka, which were written in third century B.C. The Indians were the first to use the decimal system. The most famous mathematician Aryabhata (476-500 A.D) was acquainted with it. The Chinese learnt this system from the Buddhist missionaries, and the western world borrowed it from the Arabs when they came in contact with India. Zero was discovered by the Indians in about the second century B.C. From the very beginning the Indian mathematics considered zero as a separate numerical, and it was used in this sense in sum of arithmetic. In Arabia the earliest use of zero appears in 873 A.D. The Arabs learnt and adopted it from India and spread it in Europe. So far as algebra is concerned both the Indians and the Greeks contributed to it, but in Western Europe its knowledge was borrowed not from Greece but from the Arabs

who had acquired it from India. In the second century B.C *Apstamba* produced a practical geometry for the construction of altars at which the kings could offer sacrifices. It describes acute angle, obtuse angle, right angle. Aryabata formulated the rule for finding the area of a triangle, which led to the origin of trigonometry. The most famous work of this time is the *suryasiddhanta*, the like of which is not found in contemporary ancient east.[5]

Science and Technology

India made an important contribution to science. In ancient times religion and science were inextricable linked together. The science of grammar and linguistics arose because the ancient Brahmanas stressed that every Vedic prayer and every *mantra* should be recited with meticulous correctness. In fact the first result of the scientific outlook of Indians was the production of Sanskrit grammar. In the fourth century B.C Panini systematized the rules governing Sanskrit and produced a grammar called the *Ashtadhyayi*. The most renowned scholars of astronomy were Aryabhata and Varahamihira, Aryabhata belonged to the fifth century and Varahamihira to the sixth century. Aryabhata calculated the position of the planets according to the Babylonian method. He discovered the cause of lunar and solar eclipses. The circumference of the earth which he measured on the basis of speculation is considered to be correct even now. He pointed out that the sun is stationary and the earth rotates. The book of Aryabhata is called the *Aryabhattiya*. Varahamihira's well-know work is called the *Brihatsamhita*, which belongs to the sixth century A.D Varahamihira stated that the moon rotates round the earth and the earth rotates round the sun. He utilized several Greek works to explain the movement of the planets and some other astronomical problems. Although the Greek knowledge influenced Indian astronomy, there is no doubt that the Indians pursued the subject further and made use of it in their observations of the planets. The Indian dyers invented lasing colors and they also discovered the blue color. It has been already stated how the Indian smiths were the first in the world to manufacture steel.[6]

The machines of early historical India were simple devises such as the *variyantra*, a kind of water spray for cooling the air. The presence of Yavana engineers in Kushana court and in the Tamil literature shows interaction in this field. Engineering skills in the building of dams and irrigation tanks are evident from their remains. Geometry seems to have developed and was increasingly being used in erecting fire altars. In the field of astronomy, the Greek influence is evident from the text *Romaka Siddhanta*. The seven days division of a week and the names of satellites are Roman borrowings. The indo-Greeks seem to have introduced the tradition of putting images of kings and engraving legends on the coins.[7]

Medicine

The ancient Indian physicians studied Anatomy. They devised methods to diagnose diseases and prescribed medicines for their cure. The earliest mention of medicines is in the *Atharva-veda*. But as in other ancient societies, the remedies recommended were replete with magical charms and spells, and medicine could not develop along scientific lines. In post-Mauryan times india produced two famous scholars of the *Ayurveda*, Susruta and Cheraka. In the *Susrutasamhita*, Susruta describes the method of operating cataract, stone disease and several other ailments. He mentions as many as 121 implements to be used for operations; in the treatment of disease he lays special emphasis on diet and cleanliness. Charaka wrote the *Charakasamhita* in the second century A.D. It is like an encyclopedia of Indian medicine. It describes various types of fever, leprosy, hysteria and tuberculosis, possibly Charaka did not know that some of these are infectious. His book contains the names of a large number of plants and herbs which were to be used as medicine. The book is thus useful not only for the study of Indian medicine but also for that of ancient Indian flora and chemistry. In subsequent centuries Indian medicine developed on the lines laid down by Charaka.[8]

Geography

Ancient Indians also made some contribution to the study of geography; they had little knowledge of the geography of the lands outside India, but the rivers, mountains ranges, places of pilgrimage and different regions of the country are described in the epics and *puranas*. Although the Indians were acquainted with China and Western countries, they neither had any clear idea of where they lay nor of their distances from India. In early times the ancient Indians obtained some knowledge of navigation and they contributed to the craft of shipbuilding, but since important political power had their seats of power far away from the coast and since there was no danger from the sea side, the ancient Indian princes did not pay any particular attention to navigation.[9]

Vocational education

It appears that this education aimed at elementary knowledge and also at self sufficiency to those students, who did not continue their studies. Consequently, the practical subjects like tailoring, calligraphy, embroidery, elementary medicine, drawing and painting etc., were taught in the initial stage only. Thus, it is evident that early education was job oriented, apart from its efficiency to dispense knowledge.[10]

Conclusion

The education system in ancient India was holistic, spiritual, and deeply rooted in values, discipline, and knowledge. It emphasized not only intellectual development but also moral and character building. Gurukulas, universities like Nalanda and Takshashila, and oral traditions played a central role in imparting education. Subjects ranged from the Vedas and philosophy to mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and arts, reflecting a broad and advanced curriculum. Teachers (*gurus*) were highly respected, and education was often personalized, with a strong teacher-student bond. Despite limitations like restricted access for certain social groups, the system fostered a deep pursuit of knowledge and contributed significantly to global intellectual heritage. In summary, ancient India's education system was a well-rounded and profound model of learning, which combined academic rigor with ethical and spiritual growth.

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