

Essence of Vedic and later Vedic education of ancient India

SUMANA MALLICK

Ex Student

Fakir Chand College, Diamond Harbour (W.B.) India

ABSTRACT

India had a multilingual, multicultural and multifaceted system of excellent education system in the land of diversity. Mighty perennial mountain river washed fertile plain, varied physiographic, diverse climatic and different pedologic regime of India have helped to generate congenial education system from time immemorial. The Harappa (Indus Valley) Civilization (c. 3300 BCE – 1300 BCE) in the pre-Vedic period had unearthed the cultural realm and afterwards, the Aryans in the Vedic Ages have enriched it in many spheres. The then highly flourished riverine settlement of 4000 to 5000 years before, bears the imprints of the use of metal and developed town planning. Their aims and practices of education are yet too unknown. The present study seeks to look back the glorious heights of India in the Vedic, and the Later Vedic periods in spreading up of knowledge by splendid ways of attracting students from transboundary locations.

Key Words : perennial, Scorching, Continentality, Monsoonal, Pedologic, Culture

INTRODUCTION

India was a land of high culture, being flourished from the fertile silt laded *doabs* of the great rivers, mostly originated from the snow melting event of the mighty Himalayan mountain peaks. Apart from retaining its originality in the land of literally segregated landmass by hilly highs in the north, harsh desert in the west, dense jungle in the east and deep oceanic stretches in its south, south-east and south-west, India was approachable for the cultured to mingle within the cultural milieu and thereby make enrichment to the both. Despite the mountainous cool of the north in winter, the scorching hot in the plains in summer and continentality in the central states, the mild climate of the coastal elongations and the utmost blessings of the monsoon, the growing incentives have nurtured the Indian society, literature and framed cultural heritage. Again, the hurdles of seasonal hardships, influx of deadly diseases such as malaria, cholera, plague etc. often in the form of epidemics, occurrences of flood, drought, famines, foreign invasions, India is an able tolerant one.

This endurance is the outcome of temperate climate with monsoon to water not only the awaiting seasonal dry soil but also to spring out the new thinking ability in literature and enrichment of culture. “India was a cheerful land, whose people, each finding a niche in a complex and slowly evolving social system, reached a higher level of kindliness and gentleness in their mutual relationships

than any other nation of antiquity. For this, as well as for her great achievements in religion, literature, art and mathematics, one European student at least would record his admiration of India's ancient culture" (Basham, 1967).

The ancient Indian education system was no doubt the endowment of the freefalling streams and rivers of pure water in the serene environment. The Rig Vedic and the Later Vedic cultures were highly indebted to those virgin rivers and associated lonely forested environment. Nature and natural happenings and self realization amidst the pristine environment have helped in attainment of plentiful of knowledge. The scourge of disastrous effect of these Earthly phenomena and to get rid of these effects, the inhabitants of that environment had praised the so called Originator or the respective Gods or Goddess. The *Gurus* had preached the disciples in this respect. The hymns for offering prayers to the known or unknown almighty had unearthed the *Mantras* which constitute the beginning of knowledge. The achievement of self-realization to perceive about the *Atma* to attain the *Moksha* or liberation, often believed as the core of ultimate knowledge.

The earliest known onset of the Indian education and culture were buried under the relicts of the Harappa Civilization (c.3300 BCE - 1300 BCE) having a peak period from 2600 - 1600 BCE (Ghosh, 2017). There is barely any written record or signs on seal which is hardly deciphered. That is why the noted professor of Edinburgh University on Prehistoric Archaeology, Mr. Stuart Piggott (1950) aptly undermined us that "... there are certain phases of ancient Indian culture which lie distinctly beyond any possible form of literary record." Languages, education system, customs, beliefs, traits, culture, moral lessons have transmitted orally from generation to generation, dynasty to dynasty since the inception of that civilization.

India had experienced two system of conventional education such as the Vedas using near Sanskrit language and the Buddhist using Pali language. In case of former system, Vedas, Vedangas, Upanishads and the related subjects were undertaken but in the later cases Buddhist school of thought was prevalent. Pure vocational system was also in vogue to enable them first apprentice under the master craftsmen and artisans. The aim of education was the attainment of Self-realization often envisaged as the supreme goal of life.

Aims and objectives of the study :

The present study aims at

- To look back into the essence of Indian education and culture in the past
- To highlight the ways and means of education
- To pinpoint the relevance in favour of nurturing these for the future

METHODOLOGY

Literatures, inscriptions, seals and related descriptions, historical deductions provide the basic materials along with conclusive opinion be it in the favour or disfavour of the incidence. The potential ranges of data sources include newspapers, yearbooks, memoirs, research publishing of the historical researchers. While using materials in this study, it may be echoed that "The potential ranges of data sources used by historical researchers is extensive, including news papers, legislative documents, court testimony, diaries, committee meeting records, yearbooks, memoirs, relics, and photographs" (Gay *et al.*, 1999).

Knowledge, education and the Rig Veda :

The Sanskrit word "Veda" is derived from the root word "*vid*" which means 'to know'.

“Etymologically, thus “Veda” means knowledge (Sanyal, 1996). So, the concept of knowledge and its performing arts *i.e.* education might have originated from the Vedas. Education and the attended knowledge, give the perfection to man as knowledge is often considered as the inner eye of flourishing into the spiritual and divine attainment of perfection to ease the journey of life. That is why, A.S. Altekar (1944) had rightly mentioned as “the knowledge is a third eye of man, which gives him insight into all affairs and teaches him how to act. In the spiritual sphere it leads to our salvation, in the mundane sphere it leads to all round progress and prosperity. The illumination given to us by education shatters illusion removes difficulties and enables us to realize the true values of life” (Sharma *et al.*, 2012). The urge of restoring the hymns was for religious, spiritual or ceremonial or social need had proved the means of transferring knowledge for the better ritual performances or for the smooth maintenance of daily lifestyle. The Vedas and the Upanishads provided the essence of Education through the traditional verbal learning from the *Guru* to *Shishya* (teacher to student). The disciples usually took the learning in front of the *Gurus* in pristine environment for years together. It is finely exemplified by the term Upanishad where, *u* (at), *pa* (foot), *ni* (down), and *s* (*h*) *ad* (to sit) *i.e.* to sit down near (the teacher) (Singhania, 2016).

While discovering the age old and established fact about the rich heritage of Indian education system, a number of noted scholar, historian, scientist, writer, have expressed their views favouring India. A British historian, philosopher of history, Arnold J. Toynbee had expressed his opinion about the pioneering India as follows, “It is already becoming clear that a chapter which has a Western beginning will have an Indian ending. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history (Nuclear Age) the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian way” Moreover, Mark Twain, an American lecturer and writer had also echoed the same, like, “India is cradle of the human race. Most valuable and the most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only” (Chand, 2007).

Rig Veda, the ancient most (*c.* 1500 BCE) creation in the eyes of Max Muller is “a curious document” and “sometimes true, genuine, and even sublime, but frequently childish, vulgar and obscure” (Piggott, 1950). He also asserted that “...that there is nothing more primitive, more ancient than the hymns of the Rig Veda, whether in India or the whole Aryan world. The *Gurukul* (home of the teacher or *Acharya*) System with the *Gurus* (teachers) and *Shysas* (disciples or students) in an atmosphere of gathering of knowledge had revolutionized the system of education in the Vedic Ages. The *Gurukuls* were the practising ground of day to day activities along with the studies to be fitted with the next real world. The Being Aryan in language and thought, the Rig Veda is the most ancient of our books” (Mookerji, 1951). But Indian society, civilization and education were endowed with the inherited traits of both the Aryan and Non Aryans. The history of Indian education was thus, deeply rooted with solid base of Vedic-Brahmanic system with due uptake from the educations of the Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu and Westerners. Mookerji had estimated that the Rig Vedic Education was with 1,028 hymns, 10,580 verses in 70,000 lines (5000 repetition) and 153,826 words.

Religion and education :

Religion was the viable means of propagation of knowledge against the fear of deadly natural happenings which had helped them psychologically to be relieved of from the state of alas! It was predominated over the political, economic and social spheres. The ancient Indian literature was the means of communication of the religions. The prevalence of the religious aspects in post-Vedic Indian education system has been embraced with the auspicious occasion of performing rituals or

Sanskaras. These were *Vidyaramba Sanskara* (ceremony of commencement of child's education), *Upanayana Ceremony* (beginning of the an academic session), *Vedaramba Sanskara* (ceremony of commencement Vedic Education), *Medha Sanskara* (ceremony of spiritual birth of the fourth day of *Upanayana*), *Utsarjan Ceremony* (culmination of studies of the Vedas), *Kasanta or Golden Ceremony* (the ceremony of remembering of *Brahmacharya* or end of student life and entry to material life or family life) and *Samavartana Ceremoy* (the termination of students life and entry ticket to *Grihastha* stage). That is why, Mc donell, has aptly observed that, "Since the birth of the oldest Vedic poetry we find Indian literature for a period of more than a thousand years bearing an exclusively religious stamp ..." (Sharma *et al.*, 2012).

Religious teachings only had helped in quick spreading of education in Indian subcontinent. The Acharyas or *Gurus* had framed the education system with enormous materials aimed at man making. In comparison "With European pattern of education, education is just information providing. There is hardly any 'becoming' phenomenon; the being remains just being without becoming through knowing" (Girishkumar, 2018).

Vedic education :

The cultural upliftment especially through the mingling of Aryans and Non-Aryans had deserved the spreading up of knowledge. Silt laded high fertile soil mass had generated tones of food grains. Its preservation practices had paved better ways and means of education. Abundance of food supplement from the virgin forest in initial phases and the onset of agricultural practices in the later years had eased the eradication of searching endeavour for food and enlarged the opportunity of education practices. Regular natural calamities had also generated the urge of combating, from which education began.

The Vedic Education system may be characterized as follows

- The Vedic Hymns were the principal matters of learning.
- The method of learning was memorizing (*Sruti*), in the absence of writing.
- The *Ashram* (*Gurukul* or place of learning) was in lonely forested environment.
- Religious rituals predominated the education.
- Secular non-religious education practices might have present in the Vedic days (Mookerji, 1951).
- Astronomy, mathematics, medicines, geometry, biology were also practiced.
- Vedic language was the medium of instruction.
- Education was teacher centered (teacher occupied the primary place). Teachers were honoured high, even by the king.
- The teacher was regarded as father substitute and so friend, philosopher and guide who have helped the pupils in building character through education and provided other impetus for better ways of living.
- Education was free and sacred in nature. But the teachers often received material kinds for livelihood.
- The commencement of education began at the age of 5 years.
- The teacher's home constitutes the place of sacred learning where students had to stay 12 years and 24 hours to learn the particular Veda.
- 'The process of education passed through three stages of comprehension, meditation, and memory and *nidhi-dhyasana*' (Singh, 2007).
- Education aims at self fulfilment and freedom from material desire *i.e.* *Chiita Vritti Nirodh*.

- Truthfulness, obedience and reverence constitute the three pillars on which the ethics of pupils rested.
- Both students and teachers led high moral life.
- Boys and girls, both were allowed to take part in education in the Vedic India.
- The examination system was oral in nature. There was arrangement of conferring degrees.
- Education was compulsory and fully residential in nature. It had helped the student to learn not only the taught by the teacher but also to acquire the combating technique of adverse situation in daily life from their master.
- ‘Emphasis on correct pronunciation, intonation and articulation were given in teaching’ (Singh, 2007).
- The ultimate aim of education was the attainments of self-realization and salvation.
- Reading, assimilation of knowledge and experience were the immediate objectives of education (Mookerji, 1951).
- In the Vedic system, *Brahmachari* became *Grihastha*, after the completion of the education.
- Women also experienced *Upanayana Ceremony* in the Vedic Ages. They were engaged in studies till their marriages, while *Bramhavadinis* (who did not marry) continued their studies through their lifetime. They were permitted to teach the Vedas and Vedangas but they were restricted within the hymns of *Yajna* (sacrifice) or other rituals. (The noted *Rishikas* or women sages of the Rig Veda constitute Apala, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Jooha, Saraswati, Vishwavara, Indrani etc.).
- The Vedic Ages had initiated the discipline and rituals to be performed which in turn, thereafter, caused the emergence of the urge of transmission of knowledge from generation to generation.

Later Vedic / Brahmanic education :

The later or post-Vedic period, which might have extended from 1400 BCE to 600 BCE was dominated with the priestly categories of Hotri, Udgata, Adhawarya and *Brahman* classes (Sharma *et al.*, 2012). The education system was the refinement of the Vedic System, although ritualistic prevalence was earmarked in its entire round. Rituals of satisfying different deities through various gestures through the performances of breath related activities, water pouring among the first *Varna* were in practice as that of today. Brahmanic learning was in vogue along with the Buddhist in the Buddhist period which proves the supremacy of the Brahmanic ideals.

Education of the Later Vedic period was characterized as follows :

- Initiation of learning began in an auspicious day following astrology with *Vidyarambha Ceremony*. Learning of alphabet began with the worship of the Goddess Saraswati.
- Education began in the full moon of *Shravana* (July) and culminated in the full moon of *Paush* (January).
- Education was free and universal in nature.
- Mother tongue was the medium of education, although other languages remained in practice to cope with the local languages while travelling from place to place.
- *Gurukul* or the learning centers were situated at distant places from the settlement, mostly amidst the forest.
- The development of art of writing had changed the ways of teaching from oral to written form.
- The techniques of teaching-learning involved were listening, comprehension, question-

answer, discussion, self study, recall etc.

- Religion dominated both in the education and society.
- Education was student centered (student occupied the prime place).
- Women education was grossly neglected.
- Monitorial system was present in the Brahmanic Education.
- Education was free and universal in nature. Gifts were allowed to *Gurus* only after returning home (*Samavartana*) with due permission of the teacher. These often constitute cow, horse, parasol, shoes, grain etc.
- Vedic literature predominated the curriculum, but studies of heroic and historical events were also included.
- Students enjoy the freedom of choice of subjects.
- Monotonous rote learning practices often prevailed to memorize bulk of study material.
- King generally paid the teacher, though they were not at all agreed to accept in most cases barring a minimum for daily living.
- The teacher was dutiful to teach the students in time and with utmost care.
- Teachers and scholars were honoured high.
- The teaching system was individual in character and each student was individually taught by the teacher, though in some occasions the teacher explained something to all of them at a time.
- Uniform among the *Brahman*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaisya* were different during studentship. Girdle with materials of *munja* grass, bow string, a woollen or hempen thread and upper parts were with the skins of black buck, spotted deer, and he goat respectively. The hemp, flask, wool, inner bark of tree were generally used for the lower garments (Keay *et al.*, 1967).
- Bad habits such as spitting, laughing, yawning etc. in front of the teacher were highly prohibited.
- Teachers or *Gurus* were against the all kinds of punishment. Although, Apastamba mentions, ‘frightening, fasting, bathing in cold water, and banishment from the teacher’s presence’ (Keay *et al.*, 1964).
- The aims of education were to acquire true knowledge and realization of the ‘Absolute’.
- Development of character, skill, personality and awareness to cope with the social, physiological, psychical, moral, cultural, political and religious spheres were also practiced.
- The *parishads* of 21 learned *Brahmans* in the earlier period and 10 in the later period in a settlement were likewise the University of Modern Times. They enjoyed the supreme power to resolve disputes regarding education and religion.
- The period of studentship was not only the period of mere learning but also the period of strict discipline.
- The learning of the Veda was compulsory among the *Brahmans* to retain characteristics of the same *Varna*.
- The hymns of sacrifice of the noble families by the priests often became the ways of competitions. These literally dialects or “technical lore of language and hymns was handed down from father to son, and this was no doubt the beginning of Brâhmanic education” (Keay *et al.*, 1964).
- Teaching and learning had undergone through understanding and co-operation among the teachers and students which is envisaged from the following ‘Nârada approached Sanatkumâra and said, “Teach me, sir!” Sanatkumâra said to him: “Please to tell me what you know; afterward I shall tell you what is beyond” (Keay *et al.*, 1964).

- In Later Vedic period, “Students received the constant company of the Guru, who, in the absence of books was the human ocean of learning and an ideal character for the pupil to emulate” (Banerjee, 2010).
- *Gurus* were poor in economic and material life but rich in intellectual sphere.
- Regular recitation of the Gâyatri *Mantra* constitutes the beginning of the learning of the day for the *Brahmans*.
- Along with the Vedic texts the “Limbs of the Veda” or six *vedângas* were also taught such as *kalpa* (ritual instruction); *ûiksâ* (pronunciation / phonetics); *chandas* (‘poetic meter, prosody’); *nirukta* (etymology); *vyâkarana* (grammar and linguistic analysis); and *jyotisa* (astronomy and astrology). Metaphysics, mathematics, economics, history, literature, agriculture, law were also taught.
- Medical Science had flourished in those days. *Vaidyas* or Hindu Physicians were expert in Âyur-Vedic medicine.
- Labour was dignified and was considered as part of life by which the students were involved in collection of fuel wood, rearing of cattle etc.
- Education helped them to provide training while performing socio-economic and religious duties and also restoration of cultural heritage with splendid ideas.
- Open discussions, debates etc. at regular intervals constitutes the most convenient method of education.
- In late Vedic times, “Studentship was open for first three castes. But teaching was no more a prerogative of the *Brahmin*. Some *Kshatriyas* acquired fame of teachers...” (Banerjee, 2010).
- Social class division according to *Karma* or *Varna* had compelled the *Brahman* community to transmit knowledge to the royal classes and within the own community.
- *Upanayana ceremony*, the leaving ceremony of the boys to the *gurugriha* (teacher’s home) used to begin at the age of 8 for *Brahmans*, 10 for the *Kshatriyas* and 12 for the *Vaishyas*.

Conclusion :

The past glorious education systems of the Vedic and the Later Vedic Periods of India had unearthed the initiation of education system probably in the entire Planet Earth. Its outstanding features have played a bountiful of resource for the later ages. The lessons of discipline, morality, obedience, reverence, dutifulness, mannerism, methods, and free status belong to all time unparallel to accept. The salvation teaches us to be benevolent for the sake of others, which had taught us many incarnation of God from time to time. If we adopt and enact the lessons from the erstwhile rich heritage, Indian education and society will regain its formal essence.

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