



# Indian Heritage of Gurukula System, Ethics, Student -Teacher Relationship

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## Introduction

Ethics by definition refers to principles and value systems concerning the way we lead our personal life in relation to others in the society at large. This can be easily seen to depend on the cultural milieu and may change slowly over periods of time. Nevertheless, by ethical principles, one usually means such ideals and practices that nurture a sense of happy balance among the citizens in leading their day to day life. This applies to all walks of life including the system of education. In this article a brief picture of the *gurukula* system indigenous to our country is presented highlighting the eternal ethical values that have been upheld over millennia by the Indian civilization.

## Gurukula

When we think of a *gurukula*, the picture of an *ashram* in a tranquil forest situated by the side of a flowing river, where a venerable sage sitting under a banyan tree is explaining an abstruse point to a group of students arises before our mind. This perception itself is a

wide spread cultural heritage carried in the collective societal memory for three to four thousand years and continues to this day. There are institutions even now carrying out Vedic teaching in the ancient way maintaining the ambience of the ancient *gurukula* as closely as possible. The *gurukula* system, by itself has undergone enormous transformation in its form and content over the millennia. But it is the traceable spring well out of which newer intellectual traditions and schools of philosophy evolved in our country. Over centuries the *Vihāra*, *Basadi*, *Ghatikā*, and *Maṭha* of Buddhists, Jainas and Hindus absorbed the essentials of the Vedic *gurukula* system to grow into large size monasteries and educational institutions, such as the ones at Nalanda, Vikramashila, Kanchipuram, Shravanabelagola and other places.

In its very early stages formal education was primarily at the family level, when girls were also initiated into Vedic studies, a practice that appears to have ceased after about 500 BCE. It is known that there

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were female teachers who were addressed *ācāryā* in contrast to wife of a male teacher being known as *ācāryānī*. Over time the personalised system of education expanded into the *gurukula* system without supplanting the family schools. In fact hereditary family schools were the rule in imparting professional skills such as agriculture, carpentry, sculpting, metal working and the like.

We get a picturesque description of the Vedic *gurukula* education in a few of the *upaniṣads*. It was purely private, the student going in search of knowledge and the teacher eager to impart that without any expectation of monetary benefit. Acquiring and transmitting the knowledge bequeathed by the most ancient Vedic Ṛshis was the goal, which in turn defined the student-teacher relation. The curriculum consisted of the Vedas, associated ritual texts and the *upanishads*; all taught and learnt orally through specialized methods of memory training. The stay in the *gurukula* was synonymous with training in harmonious living with other students, helping the household, sharing the labour in taking care of the cows, tilling the land, watering the fields etc. Begging for food as instructed by the teacher, was training in humility particularly for rich students coming from royal households. There are incidents in the lives of students such as Uddālaka Āruṇi, Satyakāma Jābāla, Naciketa and several others, narrated in the texts that are inspirational examples to this day for single minded devotion to their work ethics. The *śikṣāvallī* of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣat* is used currently as an invocation in some of our universities on the convocation day. This text is replete with the ethical and moral principles behind Vedic education. The context is that of

a Vedic student leaving the *gurukula* having stayed with his *guru* as a family member for around twelve years. At the completion of the studies, the teacher affectionately addresses his student as *antevāsī* (one who lived with him in his house). The first three precepts: a) *tell the truth*; b) *practice dharma* (ethical life) and c) *don't be idle in self-studies and teaching*, are the foundations for the future life of the student. After enjoining that the mother, the father, the teacher and the guest should be respected, the *guru* instructs that only such actions that are considered ethical should be carried out and none others. The *guru* always instructs by example to cultivate humility. He further instructs '*follow us in our good conduct, not otherwise. If you meet someone better than us honour him. Go forth, and live according to these principles.*'

The above picture of a mutually respectful and affectionate relation between the teacher and disciple emerges directly from several of the Vedic texts with great impact. The ideology behind the Vedic education was to impart knowledge that illuminates the student to live in peace in the society imbibing a sense of harmony with nature. We can say that the student was trained to conduct his future life as a responsible citizen of the society. At the same time the spiritual, intellectual and cultural heritage of the country was nurtured further to be passed on to the next generation. These principles are well attested in the *Upaniṣads* that form the last part of the Vedic corpus that was learnt by rote, but the meaning of which was clear and the practice of which was reflected in the personal life of the teacher. One could say that in the *gurukula* the teachers aimed at shaping the students

perpetually in the mould of their own past teachers.

The Vedic education tradition seems to have undergone slow and steady changes starting from around 1500 BCE when specialization in subjects like Grammar, Linguistics, Philosophy, Astronomy, Logic, Ethics, Poetry, Music, Statecraft and Law became important to the community in the interpretation and understanding of the Vedas to carry out religious, social and political activities in a principled fashion. This led to tremendous intellectual activity that was the harbinger of a unique way of life of *sanātana dharma* that is nowadays characterized as Indic Civilization.

On the one side learning Vedas was considered a moral duty, by which the heritage of the Vedic Ṛṣis had to be unconditionally preserved for posterity. Hence the inherited style of recitation, accent and pronunciation was continually preserved for future generations without distortion. To aid error free recitation of Vedas by memory, new texts were composed. Memory power was extolled against other faculties. This type of *gurukula* training was very rigorous but quite mechanical and not much focussed on the meaning of the texts. Nevertheless, the orthodox *gurukula* Vedic education was carried out by a small but determined group of Brāhmaṇas as an immutable ideal and goal of life. As natural reaction new schools branched off for teaching other subjects, arts and crafts including archery and medicine without supplanting the older *gurukulas*. This seems to be the situation in the first millennium BCE when teaching of subjects other than Vedas was wide spread. But separation between schools teaching only the Vedas and schools

that taught other secular subjects widened.

The teaching was private, personal, and wide spread as previously, till perhaps the society felt the need to have organized institutions like the Buddhist *vihāras*. This trend gained momentum from 500 BC onwards when Buddhist and Jaina schools arose in different parts of the country.

We do not have direct information on the methods of teaching or the organizational structure of such institutions other than that the fundamental ideal was same as in the ancient *gurukula*, that all education imparted to the students was considered sacred and beneficial to the country. Education was voluntary and free. Teaching was considered a sacred duty and teachers led a life of relative poverty but nonetheless were held in high regard by the society. From the Buddhist *Jātakā* tales, folklore, inscriptions, travelogues of Chinese travellers and some literary writings we can form a broad idea of the educational scenario in medieval India spread far and wide from Takṣaśila in the north to Kanyākumāri in the south.

### **Kauṭilya on Education**

The *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya (*aka* Chāṇakya, 400-300 BCE) is a famous text on statecraft and governance of a kingdom. The author who was the Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya, studied at Takṣaśila (Taxila). This city (now in Pakistan) was famous from the time of Pāṇini (600-500 BCE) the great grammarian and even earlier. Kauṭilya's views on education though written with princes and kings in mind, are general enough. He says that the entire gamut of worldly knowledge can be classified into four

fields as *Ānvīkṣikī*, *Trayī*, *Vārtā* and *Danḍanīti*, each made up of further subdivisions. The first is about intellectual systems, among which, he specifically mentions *Yoga*, *Sāṅkhya* and *Lokāyata* (Atheism). The next one, *Trayī* covers the Vedas, religion and associated topics. *Vārtā* is about trade, commerce, agriculture, farming and allied subjects. The art and science of government is the *Danḍanīti*. By implication, good kings had mastery over the above subjects and these were taught by the teachers at the *University* in Taxila. The children were taught *lipi* (script) and *sāṅkhyā* (arithmetic) after their tonsure ceremony around four years of age at their homes. Going to a school for studying the previously mentioned four subjects was compulsory till about at least sixteen years of age for the princes. A disciplined life was compulsory in the residential schools for all the students with no exceptions for the rich. The broad day to day discipline consisted of reciting the sacred texts, ritual of fire worship, celibacy, vow of begging food for self and for the teacher if needed, and service to the teacher. Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* prescribes a timetable of study and military training for the princes and kings even after their return from the *gurukula*.

### Aims of Education

Inculcation of humility and piety, development of personality and character, teaching-learning process leading to self-illumination, social responsibility towards the society, preservation and spreading of culture were the visible aims of the *gurukula* education. The teacher was obliged to teach the rich and the poor without demanding money. If this was the ethics of the teacher, the student had the moral obligation to give

back the teacher his due in cash or kind after completing his education. The society being the primary stake holder in educating its youth had the moral responsibility to support the education system by providing land, material and food. As these three pillars of the ancient *gurukula* resonated with mutual respect and coherence for perpetuating *Dharma*, the system gradually gained momentum by its very altruistic ideals and grew into large size monasteries and temples for religious studies and in some cases eventually flowered into universities of great repute attracting students from long distances within the country and abroad.

The Buddhist *vihāras* were primarily monasteries but they also offered religious education to lay people. There were similar institutions known as *jinālaya* or *basadi* in Karnataka by the Jain monks and teachers. Institutions called *ghaṭikā-sthāna* in the south continued imparting education in contemporary arts and sciences of the day primarily in Sanskrit. Since script (*lipi*) had become part of the social culture, writing on sand, slate, palm leaf and stone inscriptions came into vogue. This enlarged the scope of education in the *pāṭhaśālā*, which still retained the oral tradition for the Vedas, but scholarly works on a variety of subjects were composed and written on palm leaves and other natural medium. These had to be copied every two hundred years to preserve the contents intact. This led to profusion of written material in different scripts on perishable material, copying and preservation of which became a profession. It is estimated that more than a million such manuscripts are stored in the libraries of India and abroad awaiting

scholarly intervention to read, understand and bring to light important texts of academic and/or historical importance among them.

### Centres of Learning

As newer subjects appeared on the educational curriculum, *gurukulas*, gradually spread to religious places, pilgrim centres, and capitals of powerful kingdoms. The system was still private, but expansion of *gurukulas* was natural, given the availability of free resting halls and food in pilgrim centres and temple towns particularly for teaching religion and philosophy. Teachers of different specializations formed their particular schools and in time there were clusters of such *gurukulas* in Takṣaśila, Vārāṇasi, Banavāsi, Avanti, Amarāvati, Valabhi, Kānchi, Srirangam to name only a few. All the three systems of learning, namely the Hindu, the Buddhist and the Jaina contributed to the growth of such education clusters, sometimes supporting and at other times countering each other in intellectual discourses. Positive sciences such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, grew side by side with fine arts, law and philosophy. In this connection Takṣaśila (Taxila) the capital of Gāndhāra famous from the times of the Mahābhārata deserves special mention. It was famous for its teachers already in 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. We get information about the education pattern there from the Buddhist *Jātaka* tales. The *gurukulas* or schools were all private. Students went to Taxila for higher education when they were around sixteen years of age. It is said that at one time more than hundred princes were specializing in archery at Taxila. It is said that princes and well to do students could stay in rented places, whereas poor students stayed with the teacher

and also worked for him outside the classes. It appears the schools were independent and survived on the fame of the teachers. Under the invasion by foreign Huns the city slowly lost its importance and was in ruins when Xuanzang visited the place in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Kauṭilya meticulously explains the system of administrative offices to be established in a Kingdom for religious, commercial, revenue, defence, mining, spying and many other purposes but is interestingly silent on education. It was understood that the *gurukulas* were autonomous and self governing, sustaining themselves with high ideals but with weak infrastructure.

### Nalanda Mahāvihāra

Evolution of *gurukula* education under individual private teachers into organized unitary institutions started with Buddhist monasteries expanding their outreach to include religious and secular education in a single location. Monasteries which initially catered to training the monks opened the place for lay citizens also, with explicit patronage from the rulers of the day. There was a small monastery at Nalanda in memory of Śāriputra the chief disciple of Buddha, whose birth place was nearby. The Gupta rulers, though Hindus, contributed a major share to the founding and further development of the *Nalanda Mahāvihāra*, renowned as the greatest Buddhist University of all times. Kumara Gupta (414-455 CE) endowed the *gurukula* with a land of 75 acres and revenue accruing from two hundred villages. The university was residential for both the teachers and the students. Food and simple

clothing was provided by the administration or by charities provided by rich merchants and rulers. There were seven large halls for congregation and nearly three hundred rooms for lecturing. I-Tsing and Xuanzang who lived at Nalanda for several years in the 7<sup>th</sup> century have left records praising the University in superlative terms, It is recoded that about five thousand monks resided at Nalanda and the students were around ten thousand. Though a Buddhist dominated institution, Vedas, Sanskrit, Grammar, Logic, Astronomy and other subjects were included in the curriculum. Foreign scholars stayed at the place to make copies of Sanskrit works on Buddhism, in Tibetan and Chinese scripts. Nalanda continued as a famous centre of learning till 13<sup>th</sup> century when Islamic invaders led by Bhaktiyar Khilji destroyed the institution by burning the three libraries and killing the peaceful teachers and unarmed inhabitants of the university campus.

The other famous institutions of learning in the north and in the south had similar growth under patronage of local rulers and also declined under political upheavals. These colleges were able to attract students from all over India and abroad due to their broad outlook and providing opportunity to study not only Hindu, Buddhist and Jain texts but also secular subjects. The benign feature of the ancient Indian educational ethos was that unmindful of the political upheavals, private *gurukulas* run by one or two teachers continued their existence catering to educational needs of the society at the grass root level. The picture of one such *gurukula* in the Vindhya forests, presided over by a fiercely independent monk Divakaramitra is immortalised by the famous

Bāṇabhaṭṭa in his *Harṣacarita* a Sanskrit text describing the reign of King Harshavardhana (590-647 CE), in the following words:

“.....That was the hermitage of a Buddhist recluse in the forest of the Vindhya, Divakaramitra by name, who was a Brahman by birth and education. The reputation of his learning drew to his out-of-the-way and remote retreat crowds of students of all possible Schools of thought and belief : there were Buddhists of different varieties, perched on pillars, dwelling in bowers of creepers, lying in thickets or in the shadow of branches, or squatting on the roots of trees ; there were Jains in white robes and worshippers of Krishna; there were ascetics of various orders, Sāṅkhya-ists, Lokāyatikas, Vedantins, followers of Nyāya and Vaiśeshika, of the Institutes of Law and of the Purāṇas, adepts in sacrifices and even Grammarians and others beside, all diligently following their own tenets, pondering, urging objections, raising doubts *and resolving them, discussing and explaining moot points of doctrine, in perfect harmony...*” (R.K Mukherji, *Ancient Indian Education*, 1947)

## Epilogue

A brief picture of the *gurukula* heritage and the ethics that characterized the ancient education system has been presented in this article. The vision of the knowledge society of the Vedic thinkers with an ideal student-teacher relationship might not have been possible through all epochs in the chequered evolution of the *gurukula* concept. But undoubtedly it is these very ideals that provided the motive force for the indigenous education system to grow to great heights in

the form of well established institutions of universal fame. The barbaric destruction of Nalanda, Vikramaśila, Valabhi and many other places were undoubtedly episodes of history altering enormity. The above destruction was the major reason for the absence of Buddhist studies in India after 14<sup>th</sup> century. But the unitary *gurukula* at the grass root level continued driven on the one side by orthodoxy and on the other side by the youth seeking new knowledge. Large number of original texts was written in the second millennium CE on mathematics, astronomy, music, architecture and other subjects. Many of these were composed by individual teachers in their schools and propagated through their students with minimal infrastructure and patronage. One such *gurukula* was the one founded by Mādhava of Sangamgrāma a village near Trichur. This school of mathematics flourished for some two hundred years during 1340-1570 CE. This *gurukula* lineage developed Calculus, the esoteric mathematical concept of Limit and infinite series representation of trigonometric functions long before these were to be attributed as the discoveries of Newton (1643-1727 CE) and other Europeans.

The status of indigenous education original to India before the introduction of the British system in the colonial period is well researched and analysed by Dharampal in his monumental work *The Beautiful Tree*. With all the political changes and destructions by the invaders, the system of education original to India was robust and thriving well. It is interesting to see from the data collected by the British in 1823 for Northern Kerala, that out of 1594 students in the various *gurukula* schools, more than 50% (808 including 38 women) were studying Astronomy.

There is a recognizable discontinuity in the present system of higher education in comparison with the indigenous system born out of the *gurukula* heritage. The three elements that contribute to the overall ethics of education namely, the student, the teacher and the society are same now as they were in ancient India. The conspicuous difference is in the value systems. The indigenous system was teacher centric whereas the current system is by default student oriented. The *gurukula* teacher irrespective of the subject taught was fired by the idea of transferring the cultural and intellectual treasure bequeathed by the ancestors to the next generation with further value addition, in terms of new theories, discoveries and monographs. In contrast, the current student-teacher relation is not in synchrony with the emotional concept of belonging to a hoary intellectual heritage. This aspect stands out as the central ethos of the Indian *gurukula* heritage waiting to be internalized by the prevailing system of higher education in the country.

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