



History of Human Values in Ancient Indian Education Traditions

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Abstract : This article traces the historical development of human values as a central, organizing concern of Indian educational practice from the Vedic period through the classical Buddhist monastic university system. Drawing on the foundational studies of Radhakumud Mookerji and A. S. Altekar together with recent historiographical scholarship, the article argues that ancient Indian education treated character formation not as a subject alongside others but as the structuring purpose of the curriculum itself, transmitted through the sustained daily relationship between guru and shishya and, later, through the communal monastic discipline of institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila. The article concludes by examining the self-conscious revival of this value-centred conception of education in Gandhi's twentieth-century scheme of Nai Talim, or Basic Education, arguing that this revival illustrates the continuing historical significance of the ancient Indian conviction that education is fundamentally a moral, and not merely an instrumental, undertaking.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian education is, from its earliest recorded expressions in the Vedic period, inseparable from the history of Indian ethical thought. Unlike educational traditions that treat moral formation as a subject alongside others in a curriculum, the ancient Indian gurukula and, subsequently, the great monastic and residential centres of learning at Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramshila treated character formation as the organizing purpose of instruction itself, with intellectual attainment understood as one expression of a broader cultivation of the self. Radhakumud Mookerji's foundational study of Brahmanical and Buddhist education observes that the pedagogical relationship between guru and shishya combined the transmission of specific bodies of knowledge - grammar, logic, the sciences, and statecraft - with a sustained programme of ethical and spiritual discipline conducted through daily communal life in the ashrama ¹. This article traces the historical development of human values as an explicit and organizing concern of Indian educational practice, from the oral Vedic tradition through the Buddhist monastic university system, and examines how this value-centred conception of education was later reinterpreted, most notably by Gandhi, in the movement for national education in the twentieth century.

2. THE GURUKULA AND THE ETHICAL CURRICULUM OF THE VEDIC PERIOD

A. S. Altekar's classic study of education in ancient India documents in detail the residential character of Vedic pedagogy: the student, or brahmacharin, left the parental home to live with a guru,

¹Radhakumud Mookerji, *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1951).

adopting a disciplined mode of life organized around simplicity, service, and daily recitation ². This residential arrangement was not incidental to the curriculum but constitutive of it. Because the guru-shishya relationship extended across every hour of the student's life rather than being confined to formal lessons, values such as humility, self-restraint, truthfulness, and respect for the teacher were transmitted through sustained example and lived practice rather than through separate ethical instruction. Recent scholarship reviewing this literature similarly notes that ancient Indian education was organized around the notion of dharma - a comprehensive concept encompassing moral duty, right conduct, and social obligation - such that the cultivation of ethical behaviour was treated as being of equal or greater importance than intellectual attainment across the Vedic gurukulas, Buddhist viharas, and Jain centres of learning alike ³.

This ethical curriculum was not abstract moral philosophy detached from practical life. Altekar's account shows that the daily regimen of the gurukula combined study of the Vedas with domestic service to the teacher's household, physical labour, and participation in communal rituals, so that values such as discipline and service were practised repeatedly rather than merely discussed ⁴. The student's progression through stages of study was itself understood as a moral as much as an intellectual journey, culminating in a formal rite of return to society, the samavartana, at which the graduate was expected to have internalized both knowledge and character.

3. DIVERSITY OF SUBJECTS AND THE HOLISTIC IDEAL

The breadth of subjects taught within this value-centred framework is itself instructive. Contemporary reviews of the historiography note that ancient Indian education, beyond the core Vedic corpus, encompassed grammar, mathematics, astronomy, logic, ethics, music, warfare, and statecraft, reflecting an integrated conception of the educated person as one whose intellectual, physical, and moral faculties developed together ⁵. Scholars examining the challenges and character of the ancient Indian gurukul system similarly emphasize that its educational tenets stressed humanism, self-discipline, and respect for others, transmitted through the guru's personal example as much as through formal instruction across fields ranging from medicine and philosophy to physical education and defence ⁶. This breadth reflects a specific pedagogical premise: that technical and professional competence, whatever the field, was understood to be incomplete without a corresponding ethical formation, since knowledge divorced from character was held to pose its own risks to the individual and to society.

4. CONTINUITY AND ADAPTATION: THE BUDDHIST MONASTIC UNIVERSITIES

The rise of the great Buddhist monastic universities - Nalanda, Takshashila, and later Vikramshila and Vallabhi - represents both a continuation and an institutional elaboration of this value-centred model.

²A. S. Altekar, *Education in Ancient India*, 6th ed. (Varanasi: Nand Kishore and Bros., 1965).

³"The Education System in Ancient India," *Historical Research: Journal of History and Archaeology* 2, no. 1 (2024).

⁵"Education Systems in Ancient India: Evolution," *IJFANS International Journal of Food and Nutritional Sciences* 11, no. 13 (2022).

⁶Amrita Singh, "Study the Main Challenges of Ancient Indian Education System," *International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods* 6, no. 5 (2024).

Mookerji's account of Buddhist education documents how the vihara combined rigorous intellectual training in logic, medicine, and the sciences with an equally rigorous monastic discipline oriented around the Buddhist ethical precepts of non-violence, truthfulness, and detachment ⁷. Where the Vedic gurukula organized ethical formation around the individual relationship between guru and shishya, the Buddhist monastic university extended this formation into a structured communal discipline governing an entire residential scholarly community, drawing students from across Asia and thereby giving India's value-centred educational model an international reach and reputation that persisted for several centuries before the decline of these institutions.

5. FROM ANCIENT IDEAL TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY REVIVAL: GANDHI'S NAI TALIM

The historical significance of this value-centred tradition is underscored by its deliberate revival in the movement for national education under colonial rule. Gandhi's scheme of Basic Education, or Nai Talim, articulated at the Wardha Conference of 1937, explicitly rejected an education organized primarily around literacy and examination in favour of one that drew out, in Gandhi's own words, the best in the child in body, mind, and spirit through productive craft work integrated with moral and social education ⁸. While Nai Talim was formulated as a response to specific colonial conditions rather than as a direct continuation of Vedic or Buddhist pedagogy, its structuring premise - that intellectual and manual training could not be separated from character formation, and that the daily discipline of productive work was itself a vehicle of ethical development - drew self-consciously on the older Indian conviction that education is, at its core, a moral undertaking rather than a purely instrumental one.

6. CONCLUSION

The history of human values in ancient Indian education traditions reveals a sustained and structurally embedded commitment to character formation as the central purpose of education, rather than as an adjunct to intellectual training. From the residential discipline of the Vedic gurukula to the monastic communities of Nalanda and Takshashila, and later in the deliberate revival of these principles in Gandhi's Nai Talim, Indian educational thought has repeatedly organized its curricula, its institutional structures, and its pedagogical relationships around the premise that knowledge acquired without corresponding ethical formation is incomplete. This historical record offers a substantive resource for contemporary discussions of values-based and holistic education, provided that resource is engaged through careful historical scholarship rather than through idealized or undifferentiated appeals to antiquity.

⁸Mahatma Gandhi, Basic Education (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1951).

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