

Ancient Indian Philosophy and Education

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Abstract

A society is a mirror of its educational system, which reflects the hopes and aspirations of its people. This necessitates setting up educational goals within a moral and ethical framework. Hence education and educational systems must embrace practical philosophy. The educational thoughts in Ancient India display such a foundation. The oral way of imparting esoteric knowledge through the art of memorization, unaided by understanding followed by knowledge of prosody and poetics that needed understanding of original texts with an emphasis on perfection of pronunciation and correctness of language through Grammar, philology, and phonetics. It shows a continuous evolution in the Vedic educational system which can be culminated through broad-based curriculum. The system was thus accommodative of the spiritual as well as material aspects of existence. The synthesis of the spiritual and secular aspects in Vedic thoughts shows a fine balance of the concepts of educare and educere in the Vedic curriculum maintaining stability between the spiritual and the material.

Keywords: Education, Educare, Educere, Synthesis.

Introduction

By Practical philosophy, one understands the application of theoretical knowledge of Philosophy and philosophical tendencies in everyday life. It has its roots in natural and moral philosophy and is ridden with ethical implications because there is an emphasis on values, norms of behavior, and attitude towards life. It, therefore, gets blended into all fields of life.

Education is one such vital field of life that requires an ethical base. It is a way of life since it offers us a method to live and survive in this world. So practical philosophy, which in other words is applied ethics plays a crucial role in defining the educational ideals or goals of a particular time as they reflect the prevalent aspirations of the people of the time. Percy Nunn aptly suggests setting educational ideals within the framework of practical philosophy so that they retain their dynamism and are adequately implemented. Supporting a moral

foundation in education, Altekar also points out that education empowers men and women to develop their moral feelings which in turn assist in the character formation of individual beings. These and other similar views propose that education and practical philosophy are not to be isolated from one another because a combination of both is expected to achieve a higher degree of perfection which is instrumental in exalting human existence in general.

Further analysis of the word education reveals two Latin concepts at its root namely, “educare” and “educere”. As explained, educare means to train or mold young minds by preserving and passing down of knowledge from one generation to another. Educere, on the other hand, implies preparing a new generation for the changes that are to come i.e. readying young minds to create solutions to the problems yet unknown. Although these concepts serve opposite objectives as per the need of the time - the former keeping with tradition and the latter breaking away from tradition to respond to new challenges, yet a balance between the two seems necessary, and in this lies the importance of a moral foundation in education. Education devoid of such a base has detrimental repercussions in any profession.

In this paper, I have tried to show that the objectives of Ancient Indian Education not only reflect the above-mentioned concepts of “educare” and “educere”, but also the significance of a practical foundation in this field of life. I have tried to affirm this by exploring the educational thoughts prevalent in Ancient India. Although the Ancient Indian system of education comprises of educational perspectives in Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Buddhism, I have confined myself to the educational methods and thoughts in the Vedas. In the process, I have made an attempt to examine the tradition of oral transmission of the knowledge as a technique based on the concepts of “educare”. It was primarily spiritual knowledge that was transmitted through this method. Later on it led to the development of the Vedic curriculum involving the concept of “educere”. This is followed by a brief exposition of some Vedic concepts like Monism, “Samsara” and “Rta” to show their relevance to the idea of self-realization which constituted the goal of education at that time and has a bearing in present-day education.

Objectives of Ancient Indian Education

The primary objectives of education in Ancient India as summarized by Radhika Kapur (2018) are as follows:

1. In ancient India education was a matter of individual concern with a primary focus on the personality development of the students.
2. It was identified as a process, leading to one’s progression and self-fulfillment.

3. The progression of an individual meant the training of his or her mind as the instrument of acquiring knowledge that would improve his creative abilities.

4. The thinking principle was esteemed higher than the subject of thinking. Thus the primary subject of education was the mind itself.

The objectives imply that “training of the mind” with the aim of attaining self-realization was the essence of Ancient Indian Education. Progress and self-fulfillment consisted in the attainment of the realization that every individual soul is one with a Divine soul. The teachers left no stone unturned to train their students in this direction. With the vast repertoire of inherited knowledge they had, the disciples were trained to face the activities of daily life and not to run away from them. They were taught to assign a lower category to self-hood and consider life as one continuous process with an equal stress to attain perfection at every stage of life. This kind of training was founded on the philosophical principles of non-ego, immortality and transmigration of the soul, and the doctrine of karma. The purpose was to prepare the young minds to control their cravings for material comfort. In other words, the teachings imparted a technique to rise above the transitory and attain the ultimate self-realization.

The Tradition of Oral Transmission of Knowledge

The process of oral transmission of knowledge emerged during the Vedic period with the recurrence of the verses of the Rig Veda in Yajur Veda and Sama Veda, though in different contexts, to suit their religious and ritualistic ends. It is said that the educational goals were more pronounced in the Rig Veda as the hymns reflected spiritual and speculative thoughts and also carried the seeds of many scientific discoveries of the later time. For example, the art of writing and the need for compiling a manuscript in the tenth Mandala of the Rig Veda expressed that speech ought to be written and compiled because they are neither seen nor heard. Similarly the Yajur Veda hinting at the importance of ‘writing’ conveys that we cannot grasp concepts without the aid of writing. It is also maintained that the Rig Veda describes the annual motion of the Earth whereas its diurnal motion is described in the Yajur Veda. It may thus be observed how some thoughts were common both in the Rig Veda and the Yajur Veda to stress their continuity across generations by way of repetition. Thus the tradition of selective repetition of verses and passages was created. They were orally communicated to succeeding generations of disciples at a time when printing technology was not available and neither were their papers to write down one’s thoughts and experiences. It is in this manner that the method of oral transmission including the concept of “educare” is supposed to have surfaced in Ancient India. It was the only available method for the

preservation and conservation of the valuable teachings that were contained in the Vedas which some ancient thinkers considered to be revealed literature. Gradually this trend became a part of the educational system in Ancient India.

A very significant contribution of the oral tradition was the cultivation of ‘racial memory’. In Psychology, ‘racial memory’ is described as feelings, patterns of thought, and fragments of experience that have been transmitted from generation to generation in all humans and have deeply influenced the mind and behavior of individuals.

Referring to ‘racial memory’ Sir Percy Nunn also coined the word “Mneme” and described it as a particular aspect of the mind by virtue of which the past is retained and conserved. He explains that it has a much wider connotation than the word memory as it operates both at the conscious as well as subconscious levels. It may thus be inferred that ‘racial memory’ was instrumental in conserving the heritage of the past in Ancient India. It was the only method available to connect the past with the present and the present with the future in order to maintain the process of continuity in thoughts and feelings. It is thus assumed to have contributed towards the enrichment of human knowledge in humanities, philosophy, and science.

It is important to mention here that the recurrence of Rig Vedic verses in Sama Veda which has been interpreted as the Veda of music initiated the importance of music which has a spiritualistic impact and elevates the soul. Consequently, with time music also became an indispensable adjunct of education.

Thus the tradition of oral transmission along with racial memory or memorization played an important role in maintaining the essence of Vedic thoughts for generations and ensured the growth and continuity of human knowledge.

However, with the passage of time, the art of memorization underwent significant changes. Mechanical memorization which dominated the early Vedic period encouraged the rote method of learning. There was less effort to understand what was committed to memory and students would face hardships in learning. Over a period of time, during the later Vedic period, it was realized that such a method was not at all conducive to the growth of one’s creative imagination and conscious use of skills. The teachers felt that for memorizing the sacred texts and appreciating the subtleties of the hymns and rhymes, knowledge of prosody and poetics was necessary because that required greater attention and understanding of the original texts. In fact, students of prosody were expected to compose poems based on the original text. The purpose was to make memorization interesting and intelligible and also to remove the difficulties of rote learning.

Thereafter grammatical knowledge, philology, and phonetics were also given due ascendancy for the care of the Vedic texts. These subjects focused on the correctness of the language and the perfection of pronunciation. The idea was to eliminate linguistic and grammatical errors and faulty pronunciations so that purity in thought and language was attained across generations. All this aided in sustaining the technique of oral transmission of the knowledge with perfection. Besides Astronomy, Geometry and Algebra were also added to the Vedic curriculum in order to make it broad-based. The addition of these secular subjects (meaning subsidiary here) however did not dampen the spiritual aspect of Vedic teachings. As is claimed, their inclusion enriched the technique of oral transmission and prevented it from drying up.

Monism “Samsara” and “Rta”

The spiritual side of Vedic knowledge is attributed to the conceptions of Monism, “Samsara” and “Rta”. The Vedas upheld the worship of One Divinity in many names indicating that Being is one. This exemplifies Monism which is a doctrine of unity and treats the entire reality as one individual whole. It asserts the supremacy of God and advocates kinship between man and God through the process of continuity from the lowest to the highest level. The goal of education as indicated above was the realization of this oneness of the individual soul with the Divine which the ancient teachers visualized to be attainable with education- because only education prepares the mind to conquer the lower passions and move towards this higher priority in life.

Closely connected to Monism is the concept of “Samsara”. It implies the presence of a creative force that assisted in the process of continuity by transcending all notions of finiteness. Any idea of stagnation and finality was rejected by this principle concept of Ancient Indian Philosophy. The continuity of life was stressed by explaining that the world has neither a beginning nor an end and that life is a perennial stream. In this way the concept of “Samsara” spelled out the underlying dynamism and progress at all levels of life. Following an ethical criterion, it urged mankind to face life as it came and to create a zest for the acquisition of knowledge.

The concept of “Rta” was said to have great aesthetic value in Rig-Vedic hymns along with that of ‘Satya’ bearing an ethical significance. These were complementary concepts and could not be thought of separately. Whereas ‘Rta’ meant eternal order, ‘Satya’ meant truth. Together they established a great law for the universe which had two-fold significance: one, at the cosmic level, and the other at the moral level.

On the cosmic level, the law symbolized the order and rhythm of physical events like the change of seasons and other natural phenomena. Moreover, it also embodied the vastness and restlessness of the universe thus anticipating the formation of a number of scientific ideas like Cosmology which studies the nature of the universe and the laws governing it as an ordered whole. One may even consider this law behind Albert Einstein's theory of relativity in the twentieth century. Maurice Bloomfield rates it as the "best conception" by the early Aryans. It seemed to have had great implications for such modern educational thoughts that were tied to Science and Philosophy. Commenting on this eternal order, Prof. Hocking also observed that the order of Nature was established by God and would be analogous to 'Rta'.

On the level of morality, "Rta" emerged as the moral law of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness which governed the world of men, and established harmony between the physical and the transcendental world. It manifested itself as an all-pervasive cosmic and moral law which raised a conscience of humanity at the worldly level. It not only symbolized the strength of natural and spiritual powers but also the source of nobility and beauty.

These above-mentioned philosophical conceptions were deeply rooted in Vedic teachings and made the educational thoughts in Ancient India rich and versatile.

Conclusion

The Vedic curriculum under the garb of a synthesis between the spiritual and secular aspect of the Vedic thoughts and teachings shows a balanced use of the concepts of educare and educere. A combination of these concepts turned out to be extremely valuable as it prevented humanity from reducing into a soul-less existence. In this context, Dr. S Radhakrishnan expresses in a Forward written to "New frontiers in East-West Philosophies of Education" that a soul-less system of education does not give any importance to values and ignores the unity of man's soul with the Supreme Lord.... will positively convert human beings into Robots who will worship the flesh and denounce the spirit. He makes an appeal to the upcoming educationalists to adopt such a synthesis in their curriculum. Even Aldous Huxley in his fictional novel "Brave New World" recommends the execution of such a synthesis by educational thinkers in modern time to safeguard the future from becoming "machine-ridden" and "efficiency-obsessed". He tries to show that if the "educational list" is devoid of God, nature, poetry, music, art, heroism, etc, which represent Truth, beauty, and Goodness, then the new world will offer courses in sleep- teaching, mind- conditioning and so on. As a result, he expresses that human activities bearing the mark of goodwill and tolerance will have no place and robots will occupy the earth.

It may be concluded from the above that educational objectives in Ancient India gave utmost importance to an ethical foundation. The teaching practices were not only confined to spiritual training but were also open to the idea of incorporating scientific discoveries of that time. This ensured progress on both spiritual as well as material fronts. Ancient Indian Education thus reflects an amalgamation of spiritualism and materialism. This was helpful in arresting materialism from making headway in all fields of life.

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