

# Ancient *Gurukula* Education System in Nepal and India

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## Introduction

Tradition of Sanskrit Education is believed to be of very ancient time in the Indian Subcontinent (present day India and Nepal). Nepal was well known as a land of vast knowledge and education. For that, Buddha could be an ample example. Buddha had completed intensive study during his childhood, and had mastered *Pali*, *Prakrit* and Sanskrit languages. However, such knowledge wasn't easily accessible to all. Only children from well-established families were able to receive an education in Sanskrit. This educational system functioned through a type of lineage in Brahmin families, whereby the son was taught by his father and the father by his father; or in case of royal families, the princes and princesses were taught by royal teachers who were learned Brahmin. This meant that this type of education was exclusive.

The only other means of education accessible to the public was the *Gurukula*. *Gurukula* is a type of ancient school in Nepal and India that is residential in nature with the students and the *Guru* or teacher living together as equals, in proximity, irrespective of their social standing, many a time within the same house. *Gurukula* translates into "home of the teacher", and rightfully so, since the students were largely a part of the teacher's household. The students would come from different economic backgrounds, different social standings and both genders. Males and female were both equals in the Vedic times and no distinctions were made between them in *Gurukula* education system. *Gurukulas* were *Vedic*, *Buddhist* or *Jain*; I shall be discussing the Vedic *Gurukula* in this speech. The *Guru* would always be a learned Brahmin sage, who would be a master of the *Veda* and its branches.

## 'Guru'

The word '*Guru*' in itself is composed of two roots, 'gu' means ignorance or darkness, and 'ru' means to destroy or to remove. *Guru* can essentially be defined as someone who removes the darkness and brings light. Hence, ancient teachers were known as *Gurus*. According to Vedic tradition, a scholar could only be proclaimed as a *Guru* after he finds an eight year old Brahmin lad, welcomes the lad into his own household, conducts his '*Upanayana*' ceremony and finally teaches him the Vedas. *Upanayana* is a ritual done by boys where they take some Vedic vows at the age of eight, and marks their coming-of-age to proceed towards formal Vedic Studies.

There were two types of *Gurus*, *Acarya* and *Upadhyaya*. *Acaryas* was the ones who taught the students, fed them, clad them, and gave them a place in their own household for free. They would turn young children into wise young scholars and sent them off only after graduation. The other types of teachers were *Upadhyayas*. They would teach the students for their own livelihood, thereby incurring tuition charges from the students. Therefore, *Acaryas* were

considered great among teachers. Generally, Upadhyayas taught royal families and such while *Acaryas* ran the *Gurukulas*.

### ***Gurukula***

As we know, *Gurukulas* were the homes of teachers that also acted as residential schools for the students. The students were considered a part of the teacher's family. Students lived in a warm homely environment, without discrimination from either the *Guru* or their fellow students, despite their economic background or social standing. The *Gurus* treated all students equally, be it a King's son or a peasant's, as though they were his own children.

The primary source of food for the *Gurukula* was *bhikshya*. *Bhikshya* means alms or donations, generally food such as food grains, vegetables, fruits etc. Students had to go to nearby certain communities regularly asking donation to generate rations essential for them to eat, and they had to offer such collected donation to their *Guru*. The *Guru* then rationed the food and distributed them to the students in equal amounts, so that they could eat communally. Sometimes the donated food would be pre-cooked, but mostly it would be raw grains or vegetables. So students took turn with cooking duties. Similarly, everyone would circulate their chores, hence taking turns at cleaning, washing clothes, collecting firewood from the forests, and gathering kush grass (for various rituals) and picking fruits from the forests. They also indulged in cow-farming for milk, butter and yoghurt; and very rarely in agriculture for vegetables and crops.

### **Story about the leaking paddy field**

The relationship between the *Guru* and the student was considered sacred. The *Guru* offered the student food, board, clothes and education, with affection and compassion. In return, the students greatly respected their *Gurus* and would follow the *Guru's* instructions without hesitation. There is a very famous story in the Upanishads, about the devotion of a student towards the *Guru's* commands.

“A *Gurukula* used to farm paddy, which needs a lot of water in the field to grow. But due to flooding, the dams around the field started to crack and the water started to leak out of the fields. The *Guru* was distressed due to this situation and therefore, asked his student to cover the leaks and prevent the loss of water from the paddy field. The student humbly accepted his task and went to the field to deal with the situation. He tried sealing the leaks with soil and with stones, but all his attempts did not work. He tried to devise a plan to seal off the water leakage all day, and to no amount. Finally, as night was approaching, he decided that there was no other way, so he lied down in the field, with his body pressed against the cracks so that water couldn't escape. He stayed there all night, and in doing so, prevented the loss of water from the paddy field. Meanwhile, in the *Gurukula*, it was discovered that the student was missing. So early in the morning next day, the *Guru* and a few other students set out to search for him. The *Guru* called out his name in the field and there was a response. So he approached the sound only to discover his student, lying in the field, covered in mud. The student explained to the *Guru* why he did so;

and upon hearing his story, the *Guru* was so pleased that he instantly blessed the student with all knowledge.”

From this story, we see how determined the student is to obey his *Guru* and not disappoint him. Thus, we can understand the reciprocal relationship between the *Guru* and his students. *Gurus* have a great deal of affection and compassion for their students, and the students have a great deal of respect, devotion and affection for their respective *Gurus*.

### **Teaching-learning system at the *Gurukula***

Every ancient *Gurukula* had only one *Guru*. But there were a large number of students in the *Gurukulas*. So the question arises, how did one *Guru* manage to teach such a large number of students, of different academic levels, all at the same time?

The system worked in a special way. The *Guru* taught the most senior students himself, and those students taught their juniors, and them their juniors; such that the students admitted a few months before them taught the newly admitted students. Whatever knowledge the students gained, they had to immediately teach to their successors, in a repetitive manner. In this way, teaching and learning happened simultaneously. So, everyone would easily memorize the tenets.

### **Subjects taught at the *Gurukula***

Primarily, eighteen (18) different subjects were taught at the *Gurukula*. They included:

1. Four *Vedas*: The primary scriptures of ancient Indian religion and philosophy composed of sacred hymns and formulas. The four Vedas are Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda.
2. Six Disciplines of Vedas:
  - i) *Siksha* (phonetics and phonology): It deals with the he letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, accent, quantity, stress, melody, and rules of euphonic combination of words during a Vedic recitation.
  - ii) *Kalpa* (rituals): It deals with procedures for Vedic rituals, rites of passage rituals associated with major life events such as birth, wedding and death in family, as well as discussing the personal conduct and proper duties of an individual in different stages of his life.
  - iii) *Vyakarana* (grammar): It deals with the rules of grammar and linguistic analysis to establish the exact form of words and sentences to properly express ideas.
  - iv) *Nirukta* (etymology): It deals with explanation of archaic words as well as linguistic analysis to help establish the proper meaning of the words, given the context they are

used in.

- v) *Chanda* (prosody): It deals with the poetic meters, including those based on fixed number of syllables per verse, and those based on fixed number of morae per verse.
  - vi) *Jyotish* (astrology): It deals with the study of astronomy, astronomical events such as eclipses, and the movement of celestial bodies like planets and stars to determine calendars etc.
3. *Puranas* (historical canons): It includes 72 books containing historical canon.
  4. *Nyaya* (logic): It is one of the major branches of Indian Philosophy that deals with analysis of logic and epistemology.
  5. *Mimamsa* (Vedic rituals): It deals with the philosophy of Vedic rituals and ritualistic hermeneutics.
  6. *Dharmasastra* (religious canons): It deals with the study of religion and religious canons.
  7. *Ayurveda* (medicine): It deals with the study of ancient medical system, along with healing, treatment and medication.
  8. *Dhanurveda* (archery): It deals with weaponry, mostly archery with bows and arrows.
  9. *Gandharvaveda* (music): It deals with music and musical instruments, and all types of classical dances.
  10. *Arthasastra* (economics): It deals with economics and political sciences.

Apart from these, other 64 performing arts were also available for study in certain special *Gurukulas*.

### **Beginning of study**

Even though the formal studies in a *Gurukula* started at eight years old for young students, their introduction to letters and syllables was done earlier on. It was prohibited to expose kids under the age of five to schools and any form of scholastic education. But when a child turns five, a ceremony called *aksharambha* was done to introduce him to basic alphabets and syllables, and slowly start to teach him to read and write. This was also a preparation to send the child to *Gurukula* when he/she comes of age.

## **Duration and method of study**

Life in the ancient times was demarcated into four phases. Assuming a person lived for 100 years, each quarter of their lives (25 years) was called a phase or an *ashram*. The first 25 years was known as the *Brahmacarya* phase. During that time, a person is meant to study and learn the above-mentioned subjects. Since they started at 8 years old and studied till 25, they spent almost 18 years studying in the *Gurukula*.

The accessibility to books or reading materials was rare. Therefore, students recited the words uttered by the *Guru*. The initial phase of studying was largely verbal. Regarding the Vedas, their primary course of study, they recited and memorized the Vedic hymns and verses without the knowledge of their meanings for almost twelve years, till the age of 20. After that, in the final five years of their study, they understand the meanings of the whole Vedic canon that they previously memorized. In this way, young children commit Vedas to their memory and when they come of age, they understand the meanings of their memorized texts. This is a very efficient way to impart canonical knowledge.

A famous poet has mentioned this method of acquiring knowledge in one of his poems this way:

“*Adhiti bodhacharana pracaranaihi*”

It means, “first one needs to memorize, then he needs to understand, then he needs to practice and finally needs to teach others.”

## **Daily routine and vacations**

It was mandatory to be awake two hours prior to the dawn. Till dawn, they used to self study and recite the Vedic hymns. After sunrise, they would exercise, do yoga and practice combat, with and without weapons. After that, some students would set out to the forests to gather *kusha* grass, fruits and firewood, and the rest would set out to city to ask for alms and donations. They would rest for an hour after consuming food, and would restart studying with the *Guru* or their fellow students after noon. They would consume light food during the evening and study till 9 pm. Then they would go to sleep.

They did not have summer vacations, winter vacations or weekends; national or public holidays didn't matter. However, in each fortnight according to the ancient lunar calendar, the first day and the eight day were considered holidays. The first day, called the *Pratipada*, was considered unsuitable to study, for anyone who studies that day would have their knowledge thinned out. This is also mentioned in a verse in an ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Valmiki's Ramayana*.

Ram's wife Sita had been abducted and held captive by the villain Ravana in Lanka. So Ram had sent his loyal follower Hanumana to Lanka to survey the situation and inform him of Sita's condition. When Hanumana returned from Lanka, he said to Rama: “My Lord, your wife is

slender, lean and thin by nature. But separation from you has further thinned her just as the knowledge of someone who studies during the first day of the fortnight.”

### **Graduation ceremony**

At the end of 25 years, the students finish their study at the *Gurukula*. Then they leave for their home and starting of their domestic lives. There would be a formal ceremony to send off the students, called *Samavartana*, which means completion. It marked the fulfillment of the vows taken by the children at the age of eight in their *Upanayana* ritual. Therefore, in their *Samavartana*, they consider their vows fulfilled and themselves free to move on with their lives by returning home. During *Samavartana*, the *Guru* bestows his final teachings to the students. They were:

1. Always speak the truth; never lie.
2. Always follow the rules of the tenets.
3. Never be lazy to study.
4. Impart your knowledge whenever you can.
5. Always respect the gods and your ancestors.
6. Treat your parents, teachers and guests like gods.

Before returning, however, some students have a desire to express their gratitude to their *Guru* and hence offer them '*Gurudakshina*' which means 'offering to the teacher' of their own free will. There are many examples of the offering, acceptance and rejection of *Gurudakshina* in the ancient canons.

A few students who desired to deeply study their particular fields of interest would ask permission to the *Gurus* to keep staying in the *Gurukula*. Such students lived there for many more years, specializing in particular subjects, without having to follow certain rules of student life, but without disturbing the younger students.

### **Modern education systems**

When Westerners knew about the vast knowledge and treasure in Sanskrit language, they started teaching learning and research activities on it. The thousands of years old traditional system of *Gurukula* Sanskrit education transformed into modern education system and got place in the system. Prior to the formulation of education policy by the British rule in India, Sanskrit education was largely imparted in its own traditional *Gurukula*-based model. In other words, then governments or state systems did not pay that much attention in the education. Whatever resource spent in education was either religiously or willingly, but there was no mandatory rule to provide support in education. It means, then education was not run from state support.

Therefore, the students had to go for *Bhiksha* in many households, as they did in the ancient times, to collect resources mostly, from which then education system was run and lasted for ages.

But this tradition of *Gurukula* education gradually lost its momentum when British rule got strong hold in India. However, they could not discard the traditional Sanskrit education from India as it was the crux of education there even after enforcement of their new education policy. Therefore, they established Sanskrit colleges in some parts of India in that sequence. In 1791 AD, Banaras Sanskrit College was established and formal teaching and learning of Sanskrit was started there.

Slowly, modern education system started to replace the traditional *Gurukula* system. Due to the influence of British rule in Nepalese power politics, the British education system started to dominate the Nepalese' education system as well. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the Rana regime, as Nepal stepped towards English education system, Sanskrit education also got state recognition and received state protection, and had chance to be organized. But the achievement was not so easy to make, and actually was a result of long time struggle of many individuals who fought hard to preserve the ancient Sanskrit education systems.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both countries completely adapted to the modern education systems. But some people, even if with slight changes, were keeping the *Gurukula* tradition alive in their communities. Today, as the world functions in formal degrees and modern education system, there are still some *Gurukulas* left in Nepal and India that function parallel with the modern systems.

### **Advantages of *Gurukula* Education System**

*Gurukula* Education System is discarded for the rank-based competitive education system of today. But it is quite an effective and important method of teaching and learning, which has some distinct advantages over the modern education system, such as:

1. The system of education was more collaborative than competitive, so that there was no unhealthy competition or animosity between peers. Everyone could learn at their own pace, free of judgment, increased stress levels, and familial and societal pressure to achieve excellent grades. This made the education system knowledge and learning based, as opposed to the marks-based education of today.
2. Living in *Gurukula* made the children more responsible for their own actions, and more independent. They learnt to take care of themselves, do their own chores, cook food, and fend for themselves, in the absence of parents to do it for them. They also learnt discipline and to abide by the rules of community, which automatically made them decent human beings.

3. They would have to live off the donations given to them by the society. This led to development of gratitude, which then instilled a sense of duty towards the society, and motivated them to give back to the society when they reached a position to do so.
4. While asking for donations, they also learnt to let go of their ego, vanity or pride, and developed a sense of humility. They occasionally met with harsh remarks or criticism while asking for donations, and would have to learn to accept the criticism with politeness and softness. This ultimately made them better citizens.
5. *Gurukula* system ensured a healthy relationship of love, respect and trust between the teacher and the student, which directly translated into motivation for both parties to do better. This also developed a sense of security in the students and compensated for their separation from their biological parents.
6. In the modern education system, there is absence of creation of moral conscience and ethical training, which took place in the traditional *Gurukula* system.
7. Since the *Gurukula* system was not commercial in nature, the motivation for teaching was not corrupted by desire for wealth. Furthermore, monetary situations did not hinder the students' education. Money, therefore, was not a deciding factor for the quality of education received, unlike today's modern system.
8. The *Gurukula* education focused in applied knowledge, which would be put to use in the lives' of students later, and was not limited to bookish knowledge like that of today. It prepared students for all fields of life to face the world that lay ahead of them.

## **Conclusion**

As we step into an age of globalization of technology, we cannot deny the fact that modern education system has become a major part of the functioning of society. But at the same time, we cannot overlook the negative impacts of such a system. So perhaps the world needs to take a step back and learn a few things from the classical education systems, which were more simplistic and yet effective. And all the while, there must be efforts made to preserve the ancient systems, and attempts to combine the positive methods from systems like *Gurukula* into the education system for our children and theirs. Perhaps a combination of the traditional and the modern is what the world needs.

In this way, I presented the brief scenario of traditional *Gurukula* education before the august gathering here. I hope you might have got some glimpses, and would love to respond your queries if have any.

Thank you!