

Education in Ancient India with special reference to Veda

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Abstract

Education in ancient India was a holistic and value-based system rooted in the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural traditions of the Vedic age. The Vedas—Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda—served as the foundational texts, shaping the philosophy, content, and methods of learning. Education was viewed not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but as a sacred journey toward self-realization and liberation (*moksha*). The Gurukul system of teacher-student interaction emphasized discipline, celibacy, humility, and service, while oral transmission through *shruti* (listening) and *smriti* (remembering) ensured the accurate preservation of vast knowledge. The curriculum extended beyond ritualistic learning to include philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, music, and ethics, thereby balancing intellectual, moral, spiritual, and practical dimensions. Debate (*shastrartha*), meditation, and observation further enriched the pedagogical process, cultivating reasoning as well as inner discipline. The teacher (Guru) acted as a moral and spiritual guide, while the student (Shishya) followed a strict code of conduct, with initiation through *Upanayana* marking entry into the educational journey. Thus, Vedic education sought to develop complete human beings—wise, virtuous, spiritually awakened, and socially responsible—ensuring continuity of knowledge and social order. Its ideals have left a profound legacy, influencing later Indian educational systems such as Buddhist monasteries, Dharmashastras, and classical universities like Nalanda and Takshashila.

Keywords: Vedas, Gurukul system, Shruti and Smriti, Self-realization, Brahmacharya

Introduction

Education in ancient India was deeply rooted in its spiritual, cultural, and philosophical traditions, with the Vedas forming the earliest and most significant source of knowledge. The Vedic period (around 1500–600 BCE) established the foundation of learning, where education was not only a process of acquiring knowledge but also a means of achieving self-realization and harmony with the universe. The Gurukul system, where students lived with their teachers (gurus), was central to this educational structure. Learning was holistic, combining intellectual

training with moral discipline, physical development, and spiritual awakening. The primary subjects included recitation and interpretation of the Vedas, phonetics, grammar, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and logic, along with ethics and philosophy. Education was considered sacred, transmitted orally through memorization and chanting, ensuring the preservation of the Vedic corpus across generations. Importantly, the objective was not merely career-oriented but aimed at forming individuals of strong character who could contribute positively to society and uphold dharma (righteousness).



Ancient Indian students were taught on the basis of the the Vedas; Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda were the oldest curriculum used. Rigveda favored a focus on hymns and cosmological knowledge, Samaveda incorporated music and rhythm in the educational process, Yajurveda advised on rites and Atharvaveda imported knowledge to medicine and healing as well as everyday life. This shows that Vedic schools were not merely religious schools as they taught science, arts and also worldly wisdom. The teaching or learning techniques, i.e. shruti (listening) and smriti (remembering), developed a good memory and understanding skills. There was interaction and dynamism focused on debate, discussion, and reflection, as teachers promoted it. Further, the Vedic culture emphasized on values of truth (satya), self-control, respect of old age and diligence in study and these marked the ethical foundations of the society. Education was therefore elitist and inclusive in that though higher education was mostly restricted to Brahmins and Kshatriyas but knowledge in many forms trickled down to some form of caste such as artisans and farmers, which influenced social life. In a nutshell, the Vedas provided the philosophical and pedagogical background of Indian education that helped form the later systems like Buddhist monastery, Jain pathshala, and medieval Sanskrit Universities, such as Nalanda and Takshashila.

Concept of education in ancient Indian civilization

The ancient Indian conception of the aims of education was based on a deeply rooted holism, combining intellectual, moral, spiritual, and practical aspects of human growth. Unlike contemporary systems, where material achievement and professional training dominate, ancient Indian education aimed at the full development of the human being, encouraging students to pursue self-actualization and to follow their *dharma* (righteousness). As the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches: “स्वधर्मो निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः” (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.35) — “It is better to die performing one’s own duty than to follow another’s duty, which brings fear and danger.” This reflects how education was tied to moral responsibility and the pursuit of one’s rightful path.

Education, based on the Vedic tradition, was considered a sacred responsibility and a lifelong process, with emphasis on the Gurukul system where students lived with their teachers and learned discipline, humility, and respect. Knowledge was passed on verbally in the form of *śruti* (listening), *smṛti* (remembering), and *manana* (reflection), which trained the faculties of memory, reasoning, and analysis. The scope of study was vast, ranging from the Vedas, Upanishads, and philosophy to astronomy, mathematics, medicine, agriculture, arts, music, and military training, depending on the social role of the learner. The holistic aim is well captured in the *Chandogya Upanishad*: “सविद्यायाऽविमुक्तये” (*Chandogya Upanishad* 7.1.3) — “That alone is true knowledge which leads to liberation.” Thus, education in ancient India was not merely utilitarian, but a path to inner freedom, harmony, and the realization of the highest truths.



In essence education was about values and these were truth, self-control, compassion, and respect towards all life and this was the way to learn that it could be used not just to enhance personal growth but also promoting the well-being of the whole society. Notably, education

was envisaged to be an avenue to freedom (moksha), to bring the human mind into harmony with cosmic order. Although the access was influenced by the social framework where the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas could access formal education, the civilization also passed the knowledge in applied arts, folk art and oral traditions into broader society. In such a way, education in ancient India was a complete vision of life which has incorporated knowledge, ethics, and spirituality into one cultural heritage.

Role of Vedas as foundational texts

The **Vedas** take a key role in ancient Indian civilization since they serve as the seminal inventory of knowledge, philosophy, and culture, determining the whole course of education, religion, as well as social structure. The four Vedas came into existence in the period 1500–500 BCE — the *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda* — which are the earliest literature in the human world and are technically considered as *śruti* (that which is heard), a symbol of divine wisdom communicated to sages. They were not only religious texts but also reflected all-round schools of learning, with hymns, cosmological ponderings, ethics and prescriptions of rites, physical and societal responsibility. For instance, the *Rigveda* proclaims: “ऋतंचसत्यंचाभीद्धात्तपसोऽध्यजायत” (*Rigveda* 10.190.1) — “From *tapas* (austerity) arose cosmic order (*ṛta*) and truth (*satya*).” This underscores the centrality of truth and order as foundations of life. The *Samaveda* stressed music and rhythm, while the *Yajurveda* dealt with sacrificial rites, and the *Atharvaveda* expanded into medicine, healing, and daily affairs, thereby covering the whole vision of life.

Indian memory culture and the educational system were based on the oral tradition of preserving and passing these texts, a practice that formed the intellectual discipline of the country. Ethical ideals like *satya* (truth), *ṛta* (cosmic order), and *dharma* (duty) were constructed using the Vedas and became permanent pillars of Indian thought. As expressed in the *Atharvaveda*: “माताभूमिःपुत्रोऽहमृथिव्याः” (*Atharvaveda* 12.1.12) — “The Earth is my mother, and I am her son.” This verse reflects the holistic worldview and sense of responsibility ingrained in Vedic wisdom. Their impact spread to other philosophical systems — the *Upanishads*, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the schools of *Nyaya*, *Mimamsa*, and *Vedanta* — all of which stood upon Vedic foundations. The Gurukul system, rites of passage, and moral codes were social institutions legitimized by Vedic authority, ensuring that they became the basis of India’s spiritual and cultural identity. Thus, the Vedas were at once

scripture and science, establishing a formula of religion, philosophy, and education combined into one truth-seeking journey of self-discovery.

Objectives of Vedic education

The objectives of Vedic education were deeply rooted in the holistic development of an individual, aiming to balance intellectual growth, moral discipline, spiritual awakening, and social harmony. Knowledge (vidya) was the foremost aim, where learners were trained in the Vedas, phonetics, grammar, logic, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and arts, ensuring mastery of both theoretical wisdom and practical skills. However, this pursuit of knowledge was not for material gain alone but for enlightenment and self-realization. Morality (neeti) formed the ethical foundation, as education inculcated values such as truthfulness, self-control, humility, non-violence, and respect for elders and teachers, thus creating individuals of character who could uphold righteousness (*dharma*). Spirituality (adhyatma) was central, as Vedic education guided learners towards the realization of the self and the ultimate truth, emphasizing meditation, chanting, and philosophical reflection to connect the individual soul (*atman*) with the universal spirit (*Brahman*). Education aimed at maintaining social order (*samaj vyavastha*) and the individuals were trained to carry their functions in the society either as the teachers, rulers, warriors, or traders to maintain the stability and common good. The students were taught discipline, cooperation and service through the Gurukul system which strengthened communal ties and cultural traditions were perpetuated. So the goals of Vedic education were not of simple literacy; rather they saw the creation of an entire man, and woman; not only intelligent in thought but also virtuous in behaviour, inwardly refined, and outwardly responsible toward the society; and this was the starting point of the creation of a civilization in which knowledge and ethics collaborated with each other in harmony to provide balance between personal development and social stability.

Sources of Ancient Indian Education

Vedic Texts

The earliest and most authoritative sources of ancient Indian education were the **Vedas**, regarded as divine revelations and the foundation of all knowledge. The *Rigveda* contained hymns reflecting cosmology, nature, and philosophical questions, such as “आनोभद्राःऋतवोयन्तुविश्वतः” (*Rigveda* 1.89.1) — “Let noble thoughts come to us from every side” — which emphasizes the

openness and universality of Vedic learning. The *Samaveda* emphasized music, chants, and rhythm, illustrating the integration of art with spiritual practice. The *Yajurveda* provided guidance on rituals and sacrifices, serving as a manual for priestly duties, while the *Atharvaveda* expanded into healing, medicine, and everyday life, offering a more practical dimension of knowledge. Moreover, the holistic spirit of Vedic education is beautifully captured in the *Isha Upanishad* (mantra 11): “विद्यांचाविद्यांचयस्तद्वेदोभयंसह” — “He who understands both knowledge and ignorance together transcends death through ignorance and attains immortality through knowledge.” These four Vedas together shaped the curriculum of Vedic education, where oral recitation, memorization, and chanting became the key methods of preserving and transmitting wisdom.

Ancillary Literature

In parallel to the vedas, a set of secondary literature arose to elaborate and complement Ved knowledge. The Brahmanas expounded on procedures in the rituals and practice of sacrifice having a focus on symbolic meanings and social significance. The Aranyakas, so named as the texts of the forest, were an expression of the shift in perspective towards ritualism to contemplation and the sages who retreated to solitude to further reflect. As a philosophical treatise, the Upanishads were the culmination of this development, in which such themes as the self (Atman), the ultimate reality (Brahman) and liberation (moksha) were developed. In these writings, the process of movement of ancient Indian education toward philosophical study, rather than the study of rituals, became prominent, and these ideologies have developed Indian intellectual and spiritual culture.

Later Texts

Other forms of literature also supported the tradition of learning in the post-Vedic times. The **Smritis** and the **Dharmashastras** gave guidelines toward social behaviour, ethics, law, and duties, thus relating education to social as well as moral order. Epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* also played an important role in popular learning through the transmission of values, heroic ideals, and moral dilemmas in a manner that could be understood by society at large through the form of narrative. For instance, in the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita* declares: “कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्तेमाफलेषु कदाचन” (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.47) — “You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but never to the fruits of your actions.” This verse highlights the ethic of duty without attachment, a cornerstone of Indian philosophy. Similarly, the *Ramayana*

emphasizes righteous conduct and devotion, as in “धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः” (*Ramayana, Ayodhya Kanda*) — “*Dharma protects those who protect it.*” Embedded in these epics, the *Bhagavad Gita* became a philosophical and ethical manual, combining duty, devotion, and knowledge. These later writings ensured that learning was not restricted to classroom education, but was woven into cultural, ethical, and religious life, thus making ancient Indian education holistic and sustainable.

Philosophy and Aims of Vedic Education

The philosophy of Vedic education was anchored in the idea that learning was not merely the acquisition of worldly knowledge but a pathway to self-realization and ultimate liberation (*moksha*). The Vedas emphasized that true education should lead the learner from ignorance (*avidya*) to knowledge (*vidya*), and from the temporal to the eternal. The goal was to awaken the inner self, realize the unity of *Atman* (individual soul) with *Brahman* (universal spirit), and attain spiritual freedom. This vision made education sacred, ensuring that intellectual pursuits were tied to spiritual progress rather than material gain.

Transmission of Knowledge

Vedic education system was one of its kind and had much use of oral tradition and memory. Due to the absence/limited extent of writing during the early Vedic age the retention of large knowledge system relied on meticulous recitation and repeating. In Gurukul system, students also used to stay with their teachers and they learned it by shruti (listening) and smriti (remembering). The oral pedagogy developed clarity of memory, focus, and discipline as well as the strong relationship of the teacher and his/her pupil. Vedic learning process, which focused on dialogue, inquiry and reflection, also promoted intellectual interest and intellectual curiosity.

Moral, Ethical, and Spiritual Development

In addition to intellectual development, the aim of Vedic schooling was the formation of character and morale of the student. The moral backbones of the process of education were the teachings of satya (truth), dharma (righteous duty), ahimsa (non-violence), self-restraint and respect towards the seniors. Meditation, reciting mantra and reflection on Vedic hymns enhanced inner control of the learner. In this sense, education was not divided into pieces but a process bringing people up the mind, heart and soul as a whole. It tried to produce responsible individuals who were productive on family, community and the society at large.

Integration of Intellectual and Practical Skills

Another significant aim of Vedic education was the integration of intellectual and practical skills. While the study of Vedas, philosophy, and metaphysics sharpened intellectual abilities, practical knowledge in areas such as medicine, agriculture, mathematics, astronomy, music, and military training ensured that learners were equipped for life's responsibilities. Education was tailored to one's social role, yet it maintained a holistic vision of human development. This blending of theory and practice reflected the broader philosophy of harmony in Vedic thought, where education was both a personal quest for liberation and a social duty for maintaining order and welfare.

Literature Review

Vedic education has been a popular subject of research among scholars, who have tried to understand its philosophy, methods and applicability in the modern times. Kumari (2017) notes the organization of the education system in the Vedic period and its focus on the Gurukul system, the orality of the system as well as the inclusion of intellectual, moral and spiritual aspects within a single structure. In the same vein, Kapur (2018) gives an overall description of the ancient Indian education and indicates its role in the development of personality, social and societal coexistence and culture. Ferrer (2018) further elaborates this by examining an differentiated approach to Vedic, and Upanishadic education, positing that such approach combined intellectual education with spiritual and ethical self-discovery, which seems to be in a completely different model we currently live in than an utilitarian approach to education.

Various authors have written about the present-day relevance of Vedic education. According to Mishra and Aithal (2023), the ancient Indian educational ideals have remained deeply relevant even in the modern twenty-first century in creating value-driven learning rather than exam-oriented learning systems. BatarelloKokic and Kokic (2024) continue the same manner of thought and propose that the ideals of discipline, self-realization, and community-based education can be used as guides to future reform in the world education systems. Panda and Bengal (2024) further support such a standpoint by drawing attention to the purposes of the Vedic education, i.e., self-realisation, spiritual evolution, moral control, emphasizing their eternal relevance. Yadav (2017) adds complexity to this analysis when he pinpoints the variety of pedagogic streams of the age of Vedas such as the modes of memorization and debate,

observation and meditation as the indicators of a moderate pace of intellectual and hands-on training.

Srivastava (2017) also shows the philosophical and spiritual foundation of Vedic education where he singles out the imperative of spiritual education that teaches moral lives and disciplined existence. By giving a spotlight to the ancient foundations of Vedic education, Scharfe (2022) positions it within the history of Hinduism in general and draws parallels between the traditions of classical and contemporary Hinduism and the Vedic one. A different light goes straight to Ghonge, Bag, and Singh (2020) who give a comparative view on the changes that education underwent between ancient, medieval, and modern time, mentioning that the Vedic ideas of holistic development did not fade with time but manifested themselves in subsequent systems. A specialist development is added by Keswani (2021), who traces the history of medical education in India to its Atharvavedic healing and Ayurvedic origins.

Additional information is provided by case-based and historical researches. Larios (2017) explores traditional Vedic schools in Maharashtra to reveal that oral tradition and ritual activities are still evident in modern times. Rath (2011) examines the early medieval charters, and points to the way in which Vedic education was institutionalized, then transferred following the fluctuation of the politic background. Singh (2023) discusses the inter-relationship between yoga and education, and the two were perceived as a method of bringing harmony in body, mind and spirit. Another aspect according to Koirala and Ghimire (2023) is their emphasis on scientific aspects within the Vedic philosophy like the astronomy, science, and mathematics elements, which combined with the rest of the education structure and proved interdisciplinary.

In summary, the literature reflects a rich and multifaceted understanding of Vedic education. Scholars unanimously agree that it was not restricted to ritualistic learning but encompassed moral, spiritual, scientific, and practical knowledge. While Kumari (2017) and Yadav (2017) highlight its methods and structure, Ferrer (2018) and Srivastava (2017) emphasize its spiritual depth, and Mishra and Aithal (2023) along with Batarello Kokić and Kokić (2024) underline its modern relevance. The continuity of Vedic traditions, as noted by Larios (2017) and Rath (2011), indicates the enduring legacy of these practices. Collectively, these studies suggest that Vedic education was a comprehensive system aimed at producing individuals who were

intellectually sharp, morally upright, spiritually enlightened, and socially responsible—an ideal that continues to hold relevance in shaping education for the future.

Methods of Teaching

Oral Tradition, Memorization, and Intellectual Practices

The methods of teaching in Vedic education were unique and highly effective, centered on oral transmission of knowledge through *shruti* (listening to the teacher) and *smriti* (remembering and retaining). Since the Vedic corpus was vast and writing was either rare or considered secondary, the spoken word was the primary medium of instruction. Students were trained rigorously in memorization and recitation, often repeating hymns, verses, and mantras for years until perfect mastery was achieved. This not only preserved the authenticity of texts but also developed extraordinary mental discipline, concentration, and memory. Alongside recitation, dialogue and debate (*shastrartha*) formed essential teaching methods. Students were encouraged to question, analyze, and engage in intellectual discussions with teachers and peers, making the learning process interactive rather than mechanical. This cultivated logical reasoning, critical thinking, and the ability to articulate complex ideas, which later became the hallmark of Indian philosophical traditions. Thus, Vedic pedagogy combined the precision of oral preservation with the dynamism of intellectual discourse, ensuring both accuracy and creativity in learning.

Discipline, Meditation, and Experiential Learning

Another vital dimension of Vedic teaching methods was the emphasis on discipline, meditation, and observation. Education was imparted in the Gurukul system, where students lived with their teachers under conditions of simplicity, self-restraint, and service. Strict codes of conduct—such as obedience to the guru, austerity, humility, and regulated daily routines—instilled moral discipline and character formation. Spiritual practices like meditation, chanting of mantras, and silent reflection helped learners internalize knowledge and connect intellectual study with inner awakening. Observation was also a key method: students learned by closely watching natural phenomena, rituals, and the lifestyle of their teachers, gaining both theoretical and practical insights. The holistic approach meant that education was not confined to intellectual learning but extended to physical training, ethical behavior, and spiritual growth, ensuring that knowledge translated into life skills and societal contribution. In this way, Vedic methods of teaching blended oral mastery, intellectual debate, ethical discipline, and

experiential learning into a unified educational philosophy that preserved tradition while cultivating independent thinkers and spiritually enriched individuals.

Role of Teacher and Student

Teacher (Guru) as Moral and Spiritual Guide

The ultimate importance of Teacher or Guru was paramount in the Vedic system of education; it was perceived not just as the provider of knowledge; but also as an ethical and spiritual instructor. The Guru was also the epitome of wisdom, discipline, and selflessness to set an example to students to follow. He was not just to teach Vedic hymns or science, but it was his duty to mould the character of the student and cultivate in him, virtues of truth, self-restraint, humility and service to dharma. The GuruShishya relationship was fuelled with reverence and trust and was comprised of the Guru and learner whereby the former mentored the latter through intellectual pursuits, morality and spiritual activities. In exchange, the Guru was treated just like parents and gods and their duty of teaching was held as a holy practice.

Student (Shishya) and Code of Conduct

The student, or Shishya, had equally important responsibilities. On entering the Gurukul, the student was expected to live a life of discipline, celibacy, and simplicity. The code of conduct emphasized obedience to the Guru, devotion to learning, truthfulness, humility, and service. Students were required to assist in domestic chores of the Guru's household, reflecting the value of labor and fostering bonds of mutual respect. Celibacy (*brahmacharya*) was strictly observed to ensure purity of mind and focus on study, while strict discipline in speech, behavior, and food habits cultivated inner control. The Shishya's devotion and readiness to sacrifice comfort for knowledge reflected the seriousness of education in ancient India.

Initiation and Stages of Student Life

Formally the life of student started with a milestone of Upanayana, initiation into studies and start of the Brehmacharya or the student phase of life. According to this ritual, the student too underwent a second birth whereupon he became a student who was capable of studying the Vedas, and entering into the spiritual learning process. In Brahmacharya stage, all the time was spent in learning, observing discipline, and Guru-service and internalizing the moral-spiritual values. The Guru would decide the duration of study, following which the student had an option of going back into the life of a householder (grihastha ashram) or carry on the rest of his days being a student in pursuit of study. This systematic organization way did not focus on

overall formation of individuals using education as a means to achieve education literacy or technical values rather than focusing on overall formation resulting in manners possessing intellectual clarity, moral strength and spiritual clarity to benefit the society positively.

Conclusion

The study of education in ancient India, particularly with reference to the Vedic tradition, reveals a system that was not only advanced for its time but also deeply holistic in its vision. Unlike modern approaches that often focus on professional training and material success, Vedic education emphasized the all-round development of human personality—intellectual, moral, spiritual, and practical. The Vedas served as the foundational texts, guiding the aims, content, and methods of learning, while the Gurukul system ensured the close bond between teacher and student through discipline, celibacy, and humility. Oral transmission through *shruti* and *smriti* preserved vast bodies of knowledge with remarkable accuracy, and pedagogical methods such as memorization, recitation, debate, meditation, and observation cultivated both reasoning and inner discipline. Thus, education was perceived not simply as an academic pursuit but as a sacred duty, a means of realizing truth, and ultimately a path toward liberation (*moksha*).

At the same time, Vedic education fulfilled essential social functions, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage and the smooth functioning of social order. It integrated intellectual learning with practical skills, covering diverse fields such as astronomy, medicine, mathematics, music, agriculture, and ethics, thereby preparing individuals for meaningful roles in society. The teacher (Guru) functioned as a moral and spiritual guide, while the student (Shishya) embodied devotion, humility, and discipline, together creating an environment where knowledge was revered as sacred. Even though access to education was shaped by social structures, the philosophical ideals of truth, duty, and self-realization made Vedic education timeless in its relevance. Its legacy continued to influence later traditions—Buddhist and Jain education, Dharmashastras, and great universities like Nalanda—demonstrating its enduring significance. In conclusion, ancient Indian education, with the Vedas at its core, not only produced learned individuals but also cultivated virtuous citizens, making it one of the most remarkable educational traditions in human history.

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