

The Gurukula System

Gurukula is the age-old education system which was prevalent in India before it fell under British rule, where the student resides with the teacher, rendering service and simultaneously gaining knowledge. The *Guru* (teacher) was a guide, father and role-model. Education did not only take place in the classroom but also outside. The student learned in every situation and wherever he or she happened to be. To understand this ancient education system it is helpful to understand the organization of traditional Indian society and its aims.

Indian society believes in an eternal life principle called *atma* or *jiva*. *Atma* is distinct from the mind-body complex, which is like its dress. *Atma* transmigrates from one body to the next. The type of body one receives is according to the good or bad actions (*karma*) performed during one's life. In other words the favorable and unfavorable situations which one encounters in the present life are primarily an outcome of one's past actions. The purpose of human life was envisioned to live happily here, end the cycle of birth and death and attain an eternal blissful life in the spiritual world which is beyond the material creation. However to achieve this other-worldly goal the life here on Earth was not to be neglected. Therefore, there were two other pursuits of life, namely economic development and material objects for sustenance and sense pleasures. Both of these had to be done in such a way that they did not harm an individual or the society. To ensure this, the fourth pursuit of human life, *dharma*, was formulated. *Dharma* was the discipline which guided the social, political, economic and cultural life of the society.

A human being is born in ignorance and thus needs training. Every human being is unique yet shares some common attributes with others. It would be impractical to make rules and define duties for each individual separately. Therefore, based on the proclivities of the human mind, society was broadly divided into four groups, each having further sub-groups. Each group had their respective duties and roles in society. Considering an average human life to last for one hundred years, the human life was divided into four stages called *ashramas*. The first part of life was meant only for education and preparing one to achieve the above stated human pursuits while being a capable and useful limb of society. The goal of education, therefore, was not geared merely towards economic development but to lead a life according to *dharmic* principles and achieve eternal happiness. Education, thus, encompassed all the facets of life. It included human relations, religious rituals, local culture, economy, politics, social customs and more. It was a holistic approach to make a student a worthy member of society and achieve fulfillment in one's life.

This education system was based upon the Vedic theory of knowledge, its corresponding scheme of life and values. It took into account that life includes society, nature, the creator and maintainer of the cosmos and even the death of an individual

person. This system gives a vision, a sense of perspective in which the material and moral, the temporal and spiritual, the ephemeral and eternal interests and values of life are clearly defined and strictly differentiated. Individual life is not seen as a disjoint phenomenon but an integral part of the universe. Study of life included death as an important aspect of it. Life and death happen around the unchanging inner being called *atma*. The knowledge of this distinction between the outer shell called body and the inner being, the *atma*, is one of the most important features of the *Gurukula* system. The fulfillment of life is not only to satisfy the senses, body and mind but to free the *atma* from its empirical conditioning.

The education system was geared towards the upliftment of the individual as well as society as a whole. It was not merely based on objective knowledge. Modern Science has now proven that ultimately there is nothing which is purely objective. This fact was very well known to the founders of *Gurukula* education system. Therefore, it was more concerned with the subject than the object, more with the inner world than the outer. The idea was that if we understand the whole, the parts will also be known, and not vice-versa. If we know the source we will know the product. Modern science breaks the matter into the smallest particles and tries to find the cause of the universe. But the study of effect alone is not sufficient to know the cause fully. The Indian system studies the whole, the source, the complete unit which includes the student himself. The pursuit of objective knowledge was thus not the chief concern of this education system. Rather it was designed for the overall development of the student. He or she was the center and chief concern of the system.

Based on this principle of subjectivity this system assumed that the universe is not limited to what is perceived by our senses. There is higher way of knowing which needs training of the mind. The prime aim of education was therefore to open up other avenues to knowledge than the mere sensory perception. It sought to harness the power of the mind and link up with the omniscient Reality, the Ultimate Cause. Therefore, training the mind was one of the chief concerns of this education system. Through meditation, chanting of mantras, worship of Divinity and leading a disciplined life, the mind, the very instrument of knowledge, was rendered peaceful, sober and strong. Rather than filling the mind with objective knowledge, this system strived to make the mind come in contact with the omniscient Absolute Reality. It was more important to **teach the process of knowing** than to feed the mind with information. Thus the goal was more to align oneself with nature and Reality than to objectively study it from afar. The idea was to let the nature, and Reality, reveal themselves.

Discipline and meditation were an important part of education because they are the tools to train and harness the mind. It is for this reason that the student was called *shishya* or one who is to be disciplined (The English word disciple conveys the same meaning). Such being the case, an individual, the *shishya*, was the chief concern of education. Thus education was individual oriented and not an impersonal, mass

production assembly line. Every student is different, has different capability, different social heritage and experiences stored in the unconscious mind as subtle imprints, *samskaras*, thus each student needs individual attention. There cannot be the same syllabus and class schedule for each student. A person's nature and individual intelligence were taken into consideration. Just as we cannot prescribe the same treatment to different patients suffering from different ailments, we cannot give standard education to each student. A student is also called a *brahmachari*. It means a student who follows a discipline to realize Brahman, the Absolute Reality, or one whose character is in line with the Absolute Reality. Celibacy is the natural requirement for that.

Knowledge was transferred from the teacher to the shishya. Therefore the intimate relation between them was a necessary requirement for such a knowledge transfer. This relationship was officially inaugurated by a religious ceremony called *upanayana samskara*. The word *upanayana* literally means bringing the student close to the teacher. Then metaphor was given of the teacher holding the student within him as if in a womb, impregnating him with his spirit and giving him a new birth. The student was then called 'twice-born, *dvija*, because he received a new identity and a new life to lead. He became a member of the *Guru's* family (*kula*), the *Guru* being his new father.

The constant and intimate association between guru and student were vital to education in this system. The student had to imbibe the mood of the guru, the secrets of his efficiency, the spirit of his life and work. He had to match his heart with the *Guru's* heart. When their hearts were in complete harmony the knowledge flowed smoothly and the secret hidden in the heart of the *Guru* became revealed to the student. The word *Upanisad* (part of the *Veda*) conveys this very sense of intimacy between *Guru* and student. These things are subtle and cannot be taught in an hour long lecture held in a closed classroom. It is something to be experienced and cannot be understood from books. The intimacy between student and teacher, and among the students themselves, assured that the student did not repress his or her feelings, desires and emotions. In this system the student belonged to the teacher and not to an impersonal entity called school or college. The *Guru* felt personally responsible for the student. There was a sense of duty to begin with which matured into unconditional love. The teacher did not teach because he had to support himself or his family. It was his passion. Therefore, he did not charge for imparting education. He subsisted on voluntary contributions given by students or society or by both. There was no discrimination on the basis of economic status of a student. However, the teacher had the right to test a prospective student. Because the teacher was not a hired employee of an organization he could exercise his judgment and authority in training the student. A standardized mass-oriented scheme of teaching may be more efficient from an economic and managerial point of view but it is less suitable for an individual's personal development not being able to properly consider individual nature and talent.

The life of a student was very austere, simple and without much comforts. The idea behind it was that if the student lived an austere life then he would be able to tolerate any hardships which may come later in his life. Such students would be able to appreciate life better after such a training in *gurukula*. Whereas if he were to live comfortably as a student then any trouble faced later would be frustrating to him. Even princes had to live in the humble settings of the *gurukula*. Later when they would become kings they could better empathize with the poor people in their kingdom. They would remain in touch with the ground reality. Because the students usually did not pay any fixed fees and were supported by the community they felt obliged to the society for the rest of their life. They would naturally give support to the local *gurukulas*. In this system even poor students could study without being a burden on their parents for their monthly fees. While living in the *gurukula* the student had to do menial services in the *ashrama*. This gave him hands-on training of living a life of self-help. Even if later in life he would have servants to do the physical work he would be able to evaluate their work. He would also know the labor and endeavour involved and thus would not be cruel towards them.

The basic education included the study of the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar and proper pronunciation (*Shiksha*), history (*Itihasa*), *Dharma-shastra*, polity (*Niti*), logic (*Nyaya*), poetics (*Sahitya*), astrology (*Jyotisha*), meditation. Besides this a student studied subjects related to one's occupation. This education furnished the student with 1) Basic language skills; 2) Knowledge about the religious ceremonies to be executed at different stages of life; 3) One's duties towards the society; 4) Moral and ethical principles; 5) Logical thinking; 6) Control over mind and senses; 7) Basic principles of physical and mental health; 8) One's relationship with nature and her Creator; 9) Occupational skills as per one's status in the society. The purpose of education was that an individual and the society as a whole progressed spiritually while living a life of peace and happiness. A student never felt lost or lonely in this system. He felt as part of a family who had a distinct place and role to play in the society. A sense of worth and placid individuality could grow in him.

Teaching happened through hearing from the mouth of the teacher. According to *Brihad Aranyaka Upanisad* (2.4.5) there are three stages of learning. First there is hearing, *shravana*. There were no printed books. The whole education was based on oral tradition. Although manuscripts existed, they were primarily used for reference. Teachers had everything committed to their memory. People in India, even up to recent times, had enormous capacity to memorize things. A student would learn everything by hearing. This was called *sampradaya* or *guru-parampara*. Hearing was followed by deliberation or reflection on what was heard, *manana*. This included trying to understand the subject with logic, raising doubts and clarifying them. The last stage was to internalize this knowledge with experience, *nididhyasana*. At that point one's education was complete. One had no doubt about his knowledge because it culminated in experience.

Besides the special educative value of the teacher's home as school, the environment also played a big role. The *gurukula* was set up in sylvan surroundings. A student was connected to nature. He understood the importance and value of nature and thus was always respectful to her. He was taught to see divinity in everything, be it a river, mountain, a lake or trees and creepers. He would go to the forest and get wood for performing *yajña*, fire sacrifice. *Yajña* was an important part of life. The day began and ended with a *yajña*. It taught him the principle of inter-dependence and recycling. He learned to show gratitude towards God and the gods, the controllers of various life principles. He understood the law of *karma* which is one of the basic principles of human life and very much missing in the modern education. *Yajña* reminded him that life itself is a *yajña* and meant for sacrifice. One needs to sacrifice one's egotism and pride. Then one can render loving service to God and His creation. One's teacher, parents, guests and all seniors either by age or by knowledge were to be respected like God. The ultimate purpose of all this education was to attain unconditional love for God.

Another important feature of the *gurukula* education was begging. This may sound rather odd at present, but not so in the Indian cultural setting. Begging was not a symbol of poverty or laziness. Students went to nearby villages to beg for the support of the school. Whatever they received in alms they would offer it to the *Guru*. Then *Guru* would distribute it to the students according to their needs. Begging also had other purposes such as to cultivate a sense of humility, renunciation and relation with society. The student was able to study the society of which he was going to be a part. One was able to study one's own mind and see if one was really renounced or felt attracted to material pleasures. Yet one was safe because one went in the company of fellow students and could not be allured away from one's *gurukula*. Without such a stint with society a student could become very reclusive and indifferent towards the society for which he was trained. Begging made him humble and thus kept his mind free of unnecessary desires. Since one spent a considerable number of years leading such a life one developed the principles of simplicity and humility as part of one's character. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore remarked about the *gurukula* system, "A most wonderful thing we notice in India is that here the forest, not the town, is the fountain-head of all its civilization."