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From Shankara to Vatsayana: Revisiting Classical Education for Modern Times

Dr. Palash Santra**ABSTRACT**

The classical model of education, anchored in traditions emphasizing rote memorization, moral discipline, and hierarchical dynamics, has long shaped intellectual discourse on the Indian subcontinent. However, its limitations in addressing modern needs for inclusive, holistic instruction have become apparent. This article examines the classical paradigm's strengths and structural blind spots, specifically focusing on its relevance to comprehensive sex education (CSE) in India. To highlight the necessity for educational re-evaluation, this study explores a critical episode from the hagiography of Acharya Shankara, whose debate with Bharati (the wife of Mandana Mishra) exposed a limit in his monastic learning regarding physical intimacy. Rather than dismissing the subject, Shankara exhibited profound intellectual humility by requesting time to study and master the domain. Synthesizing this openness with the secular, holistic curricular frameworks of Vatsayana's Kamasutra, this paper argues for an educational paradigm shift. By grounding contemporary social-emotional learning and relationship education within India's own classical, secular intellectual history, educators can dismantle modern cultural taboos and provide an inclusive model that effectively balances tradition with progress.

Keywords: Classical Pedagogy, Adi Shankara, Vatsayana, Kamasutra, Sex Education, Intellectual Humility.

1. Introduction

The global educational landscape stands at a challenging crossroads. While modern institutional frameworks excel in delivering technological and specialized market-driven vocational skills, they increasingly fall short in fostering emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, and interpersonal literacy among students. In contemporary India, this systemic challenge is complicated by a long-standing tension between Westernized educational structures and an idealized interpretation of traditional "classical" learning.

The classical Indian pedagogical paradigm—historically associated with the Gurukula system—is respected for its emphasis on mental discipline, character building, and text-critical preservation. However, it often possesses critical blind spots regarding gender sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and human sexuality. In modern Indian classrooms, discussions on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) remain deeply closeted under a cultural blanket of silence. Initiatives to introduce comprehensive sex education (CSE) frequently encounter sharp institutional and social resistance, often criticized as un-Indian or as a foreign ideological imposition.

This paper argues that an effective solution does not require abandoning classical heritage, but rather engaging in a critical, constructive reclamation of it. By analyzing the intersection between the monastic epistemological boundary encountered by Acharya Shankara and the secular-empirical frameworks built by Vatsayana in the Kamasutra, this study demonstrates that India's intellectual tradition contains robust, homegrown precedents for relationship and wellness education. This integration provides a sustainable framework for an inclusive pedagogical paradigm shift.

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2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses a qualitative, historical-hermeneutical research methodology paired with a critical comparative framework. Rather than evaluating classical Indian traditions as static or monolithic, this paper analyzes the interaction between two major historical intellectual streams: the monastic-metaphysical stream represented by the Advaita Vedanta school of Adi Shankara, and the secular-empirical stream represented by Vatsayana's Kama-shastra tradition.

The theoretical framework relies on modern critical curriculum theory, which posits that pedagogical updates are most effective and sustainable when they are culturally contextualized. Highlighting localized, traditional precedents for relationship and health literacy allows this study to build an analytical bridge. This strategy directly answers conservative anxieties, showing that progressive educational goals are deeply compatible with India's indigenous intellectual history.

3. Shankara's Boundary: Intellectual Humility and the Secular Encounter

Adi Shankara is universally recognized for his contributions to non-dualistic metaphysics and text-critical commentary. His educational model was highly demanding, focusing heavily on monastic discipline and ascetic detachment (Sannyasa). However, classical records—such as the hagiographical Sri Shankara Digvijaya—preserve a remarkable encounter that tested the limits of his strictly ascetic curriculum.

During his public philosophical debate (shastrartha) with the scholar Mandana Mishra, Shankara successfully established his metaphysical positions. Yet, upon Mishra's defeat, his wife, Bharati (Ubhaya Bharati), stepped in as an accomplished scholar and the debate's judge. She argued that a claim to complete knowledge (Sarvajnatva) must encompass all facets of human life, not just transcendental metaphysics. She pointedly challenged the celibate monk on the dynamics and psychology of marital intimacy and desire (Kama):

"What are the expressions and aesthetic features of desire? How does the physical experience of intimacy alter or limit human consciousness, and what are its regular cycles within the householder life?" [1]

Having entered monastic life in childhood, Shankara could not answer. Significantly, however, he did not dismiss Bharati's questions as profane or beneath scholarly interest. Demonstrating profound intellectual humility, he acknowledged the boundaries of his knowledge and requested a temporary deferment of the debate to systematically study the field:

"An unstudied domain is an incomplete domain. Knowledge cannot be rejected out of prejudice; it must be mastered through structured observation and reality." [2]

This episode highlights an essential pedagogical insight. If a pillar of classical Indian scholarship acknowledged that a curriculum excluding the study of intimacy and relationships is incomplete, then omitting these topics today under the label of "preserving tradition" is historical revisionism. Shankara's humility confirms that a genuine classical approach does not fear secular reality; it adapts and learns from it.

4. De-stigmatizing Vatsayana: The Kamasutra as an Educational Treatise

In popular culture, Vatsayana's Kamasutra is routinely misread as an isolated manual on erotics. Historically, however, the text was written as a disciplined scientific and sociological treatise (Shastra) on civic responsibility, emotional balance, and relationship literacy.

Vatsayana sets his work alongside moral virtue (Dharma) and material welfare (Artha), framing emotional harmony (Kama) as a necessary pillar for a well-rounded life. In the text's opening sections, he outlines a clear, lifelong curricular framework:

"A human being should practice the three values of life—Dharma, Artha, and Kama—in harmony. In childhood, one should master academic and material sciences. In youth, one must apply themselves to the study of emotional harmony, relationship literacy, and mutual respect." [3]

The Sixty-Four Arts (Chatusshashti Kalas)

Vatsayana asserts that relationship literacy requires a broad creative and technical base, mandating the study of sixty-four auxiliary arts (Kalas). This interdisciplinary framework includes:

- **Scientific and Practical Skills:** Architecture, botany, chemistry, and mathematics.
- **Aesthetic and Expressive Arts:** Music, poetry, literary analysis, and theater.
- **Psychological and Interpersonal Capabilities:** Behavioral observation, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation.

To understand how Vatsayana's ancient curriculum directly aligns with modern educational categories, consider the structured mapping below:

Classical Domain (Vatsayana)	Core Curricular Component	Modern Pedagogical Equivalent
Sharira-shastra & Kshema	Anatomical health, hygiene, and reproductive biology.	Health Education / Biology
Manasa-shastra	Analysis of desire, personal boundaries, and consent.	Relationship Psychology
Socio-Civic Character	Mutual respect, equity, and civic responsibility.	Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)
Auxiliary Arts (Kalas)	Creative arts, composition, and technical skills.	Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts

Crucially, Vatsayana notes that this relationship curriculum must be inclusive, stating explicitly that women should be thoroughly educated in these arts. The text continuously champions personal agency, mutual respect, and clear consent, offering an ancient model for holistic relationship education.

5. The Contemporary Crisis: Taboos and Educational Gaps in India

Despite a philosophical history that treats relationships with objective clarity, modern India's education system maintains severe anxieties regarding sexual health. The historical combination of Victorian colonial morality and defensive modern traditionalism has produced a strict culture of silence in institutional spaces. This structural silence leaves adolescents highly vulnerable during key developmental phases, triggering the spread of misinformation via unverified digital channels, severe emotional stress/shame over normal biological updates, and a lack of baseline boundaries/consent training.

6. Synthesis: A Progressive, Culturally Grounded Pedagogical Paradigm

To build an effective educational framework for the 21st century, educators must move past the false choice between repressive traditionalism and uncontextualized Westernization. First, comprehensive health modules can be structurally validated using classical history, reframing relationship literacy as an ancient science. Second, the classroom environment can draw from Shankara's intellectual humility to treat questions about identity and health with scientific seriousness instead of moral judgment. Finally, Vatsayana's integrated framework directly strengthens modern Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) pathways.

7. Conclusion

Improving modern education requires neither the uncritical preservation of rigid systems nor the erasing of historical heritage. Shankara's historic encounter with Bharati demonstrates that true scholarship demands the courage to recognize the limits of one's perspective and cross intellectual boundaries. Similarly, Vatsayana's treatise shows that understanding human relationships and emotional well-being is a scientific necessity for a healthy society. Synthesizing the intellectual humility of Vedanta with the comprehensive literacy of the classical Shastras allows modern institutions to move past contemporary taboos, creating an educational paradigm that honors its heritage while advancing toward an inclusive, progressive future.

Endnotes;

- [1] Adapted from Madhava-Vidyaranya, Sri Shankara Digvijaya, Chapter 9, Verses 50-65.
- [2] Ibid., Verse 74.
- [3] Vatsayana, Kamasutra, Book I, Chapter 2, Sutras 1-4.

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