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Mr. Diptiranjan Mohanty

Research Scholar,
Dept. of Sanskrit,
Utkal University, Vani Vihar,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Prof. Manoranjan Senapaty

Professor in Sanskrit,
Dept. of Sanskrit,
Utkal University, Vani Vihar,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Correspondence:**Mr. Diptiranjan Mohanty**

Research Scholar,
Dept. of Sanskrit,
Utkal University, Vani Vihar,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Learning Across Time: Ancient Roots, Modern Relevance

Mr. Diptiranjan Mohanty, Prof. Manoranjan Senapaty

Abstract:

In ancient India, the institutions designed for imparting knowledge of both secular and spiritual fields were considered as the knowledge capital of the Asian sub-continent. Those institutions used to stand on a foundation of three disciplines - *Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana*. But in the later period, with various foreign invaders, leading all the way up to the British empire in 1947, India and its glorious education traditions were thwarted and, in some cases, totally corrupted.

Evidently, we see aspects of the format of British education in our current education system and unfortunately have turned a blind eye to our own methodologies in the form of *Śravaṇa*, etc. To throw light on our own ancient methods and their relevance, this paper briefly presents ideas about the Gurukula System, and comparatively the current education system, with the hope of linking tradition with modern styles of learning.

Keywords: Education, Methods, Learning techniques, *Śravaṇa*, *Nididhyāsana*, *Vākyasudhā*, *Subhāṣita*, etc.

Introduction:

Education has held a significant place in the cultural and intellectual tradition of India since ancient times. The Gurukula system was one of the most important institutions of learning, designed to impart both secular and spiritual knowledge. This traditional system was firmly based on the three disciplines of *Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana*, which together formed a complete process of learning. *Śravaṇa* emphasised attentive listening, *Manana* focused on reflection and logical analysis, and *Nididhyāsana* aimed at the practical application and internalization of knowledge.

In contrast, the present education system in India largely reflects the structure inherited from British education, where examinations and formal curricula occupy a central place. Although modern education has its own strengths, the traditional methods of learning continue to remain relevant. This paper attempts to examine the Gurukula system and compare it with the modern educational framework in order to highlight the continuing relevance of ancient Indian learning methods in the present context.

Student and Teacher: The Criteria

The lifestyle of Gurukula expected certain discipline from students. One very famous *Subhāṣita* points out the traits of a good student as, 'being vigilant like a crow, having the capacity to concentrate like a crane, a light sleeper like a dog, a moderate eater and the ability to not get distracted by family matters, are the five qualities a student should possess.'¹ In addition to what is expected of a student of Gurukula, pointers about the qualities of the *Ācārya* (teacher) are also enumerated in ancient literature. One such reference which highlights the qualifications of the *Ācārya* of Gurukula is that of Skanda Purāṇa² - where Lord Śiva narrates to Goddess *Pārvatī* the qualities of a teacher as one possessing knowledge, experience, equipoise, dispassion, oratory skills, and conviction.

The high standard expected of both teacher and student in the Gurukula system speaks volumes to the importance given to education in traditional India. With such a system of education, it seems only fitting that Indian parents placed education as a high priority for their children; the outcome of which is still seen to this day, though the style of education has changed. The commitment to twelve years of rigorous study and lifestyle

development in Gurukula stands on a foundation of three disciplines - *Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana*.

Śravaṇa (The art of Listening):

The first underlying foundation of the dissemination of knowledge in Gurukula is the principle of *Śravaṇa*. *Śravaṇa* can be translated as listening or hearing. However, merely listening or hearing the words of the *Ācārya* is not what is implied here in the context of Gurukula. The art of *Śravaṇa* as commented upon by Sadānanda Yatī in *Vedanta Sara* envisions a six-point model of listening³ by which the central theme of a particular message is established.⁴

1. उपक्रमोपसंहारौ – Introduction and conclusion
2. अभ्यासः – Points of emphasis and repetition
3. अपूर्वता – Unique points and concepts
4. फलम् – Resulting impact and effect
5. अर्थवादः - Commendations and special mention
6. उपपत्तिः – Logical arguments and reasoning

Through the discipline of *Śravaṇa*, the student is expected to capture, retain, and recall the six pointers after every lesson module. This method ensures maximum absorption of class material. Consequently, it lays the foundation for the next step in the learning process, known as *Manana*.

Manana (The art of thinking):

The art of *Manana*, also known as the method of reflection and analysis further solidifies the understanding gained through *Śravaṇa*. In the very famous work of Swami Vidyāranya known as *Pañchadaśī*, the principle of *Manana* is defined as the deep exploration of all possibilities of a particular hypothesis through rigid logical reasoning and analysis.⁵ At the time of listening to the teachings of *Ācārya*, certain points may not be fully understood or lingering doubts may arise. For clarification and resolution of any doubts or confusion, the method of *Manana* is utilised.

Nididhyāsana (The art of Focusing):

Nididhyāsana, the technique of applying or practicing what is learnt through the earlier steps, is recognized as the concluding step in Gurukula's learning. As defined in the commentary of *Vākyasudhā* by Brahmānanda Bhārati reapplying our thinking along the same line of thought while removing any dissimilar thoughts is called *Nididhyāsana*.⁶ The art of learning through applying one's knowledge is seen in the implementation of the principles of Dharma like Brahmacharya etc. in and through the daily schedule of Gurukula.

Structure of the current education system in India:

The structure of education in India following British colonization mirrored some aspects of the format of education in Britain. The current school system in India has four levels: Lower Primary (ages 6 to 10), Upper Primary (11 and 12), High (13 to 15), and Higher Secondary (17 to 18). The curriculum is largely the same

till the end of high school for all states with the exception of regional changes in the mother tongue. Furthermore, the school education system follows various streams including CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) and ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education). In addition to these, there are a handful of private schools and state schools that prefer to move away from the normal education system and implement innovative methods of learning.

The modern structure of education unfortunately places prominence on the financial aspect wherein higher-quality infrastructure with a low student-teacher ratio and better international opportunities are given to those who can afford to pay high school fees. The two major examinations occur after ten years of schooling and again at the end of twelve years. These two occasions put significant pressure on children and many times the preparation for the study is done rigorously only in time for exams. This type of exam pressure and study pattern extends beyond secondary school to tertiary education also.

The Gurukula approach in modern education:

In today's fast-paced and developing world, we have access to large quantities of data at our fingertips. However, the cost of this is seen in the attention span of students in this current generation. There is a great need to implement new techniques to refocus this new generation of children. Modern education not only demands considerable effort on the part of students but also teachers. The attitude of the *Ācārya* in Gurukula can be transposed to current-day teachers. The ideal teacher as described in a very well-known verse highlights that a teacher is one who studies deeply his field of learning and ingrains in his students the lessons while himself being a role model and an honest representative of his field of study.⁷

We need not look further than our own past traditional methodologies, in the form of *Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana*. With increasing coursework and shorter timelines, students may see great benefits in using the six-point model of listening as described earlier. Similarly, with an emphasis on a scientific approach to learning, students may also see great contributions to their reasoning skills by the art of *Manana* principles. In addition to term papers and coursework, there are various examination modules based on practical applications of course material. The technique of *Nididhyāsana* also provides a strong foundation for allowing students to manifest their theoretical understanding into practical application.

Conclusion:

The Gurukula system of ancient India, founded on the three core disciplines of *Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana*, offered a holistic approach to education that integrated attentive listening, deep reflection, and practical

internalization of knowledge. In contrast, the present Indian education system largely follows the British model, emphasizing formal curricula, standardized examinations, and infrastructure, often at the cost of genuine understanding and character building.

Despite its strengths, modern education faces challenges such as short attention spans, exam pressure, and limited practical application. The ancient methods particularly the six-point model of *Śravaṇa* for better absorption, *Manana* for logical analysis and doubt clearance, and *Nididhyāsana* for transforming theory into practice remain highly relevant today.

By integrating these traditional learning techniques with contemporary pedagogical practices, the education system can become more effective, balanced, and culturally rooted. Reviving *Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana* will help bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern needs, producing students who are not only knowledgeable but also focused, analytical, and ethically grounded.

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Foot Note

1. काकचेष्टा बकध्यानं श्राननिद्रा तथैव च। अल्पाहारी गृहत्यागी पञ्च विद्यार्थिलक्षणम्॥
2. ज्ञानं स्वानुभवः शान्तिः वैराग्यं वक्तृता धृतिः। षड्गुणैश्वर्ययुक्तो हि भगवान् श्रीगुरुः प्रिये॥ (श्रीस्कन्दपुराण उत्तरखण्ड, गुरुगीता (2.172)
3. षड्विधलिङ्ग - उपक्रमोपसंहारौवभ्यासोऽपूर्वता फलम्। अर्थवादो-पपत्ती च लिङ्गं तात्पर्यनिर्णये॥ वेदान्तसारः (P.N. 161)
4. श्रवणं नाम षड्विधलिङ्गैरशेषवेदान्तानामद्वितीये वस्तुनि तात्पर्या-वधारणम्। वेदान्तसारः (P.N. 158)
5. युक्त्या सम्भावितत्वानुसन्धानं मननं तु तत्। पञ्चदशी (1.53)
6. विजातीयप्रत्ययशून्यसजातीयप्रत्ययप्रवाहलक्षणम्। वाक्यसुधा 25 (P.N.26)
7. आचिनोति हि शास्त्रार्थमाचारे स्थापयत्यपि। स्वयमाचरते यस्मादाचार्यस्तेन कथ्यते॥ विचारसागरः - तृतीयस्तरङ्ग टीप्पणी (P.N. 69)