

## **Education in India since Ancient Times**

### ***Some Salient Features***

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Knowledge is power. In human hand, it also tends to grow and, at the same time, flow naturally. These two features of knowledge have lent continuity and progress to the human civilization. A double-edged weapon, knowledge, thanks to these features, can also be a means of destruction of the human life. For this reason, potency and flow of the application of knowledge need to be checked at times in the interest of human civilization. A latest example in this respect is the technology of cloning of human beings.

History shows that the control of knowledge has not always been guided by the idea of common human interest. Group interests have often inspired moves to deny the benefits of knowledge to large general populations. The Ekalabya episode depicts this best in Indian history. It is true that the hegemonic social groups of the society were able to control knowledge and its system to deny large masses for the large part of history. But this is also a fact that the social forces, generated by historical developments, unshackled the hegemonic hold. For this reason, one finds it hard to agree with the British colonialists' and Western Christian missionaries' common view in the nineteenth century that the Indian knowledge system had been a 'stagnant cesspool'.

A cursory look into the system of knowledge and its discourse in ancient India suggests stringent system of control of knowledge by the upper classes. The Indian advances in the field of philosophy, grammar and so on were, no doubt, spectacular. But such knowledge was systematically confined to the privileged few. The way was the oral method, of mnemonic kind and the use of sanctified language of Sanskrit. The knowledge was, thus, stored and preserved in few humans as living books and in a medium that was not the people's language. Interestingly, as one can sense from Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, writing was in common use for day-to-day business of life. The inscriptions of Emperor Ashoka on pillars and rocks for public education and guidelines for social and moral life are examples in this

regard. The imposition of control was equally seen in the area of technical knowledge. Powerful trade guilds reserved individual or group expertise as well-guarded 'trade secrets'.

These mechanisms of control of knowledge were, however, not full-proof. Nor were they workable against various social, political and technological developments. In ancient India, there were *paribrajakas*, who acted as the carriers of knowledge from the sages, often based in forests or their outskirts, to the society. Directly or indirectly, they contributed to the making of a climate of questioning of the hegemonic social set-up, giving rise to the rise of Buddhism and Jainism.

The protest religions, especially Buddhism, promoted languages like Brahmi and Prakrit against Sanskrit as the vehicle of knowledge and education. The Vedic centres of learning, known as *gurukulas*, conducted by individuals or small groups of individuals in the forest abode, were now replaced by institutionalized centres of *viharas* and *mahaviharas* or universities such as Nalanda, Taxila and Vikramsila, where scholars came from far and wide, including from abroad. Buddhism, further, promoted the culture of writing. The art of writing progressed and contributed to the rise of large repository of manuscripts at *viharas*. The existence of a vast collection of books in the library of Nalanda was concrete example of it.

Brahminical revivalism in the late ancient period suppressed many of the above developments. But the rise of Islam in the medieval era rehabilitated some of the trends under Buddhism. The religious policy of Akbar especially created a sense of Hindu-Muslim harmony, giving impetus to the making of new knowledge in areas like music and science (especially astronomy, for instance, observatory at Jaipur). Persian and Arabic emerged as the literary languages. Islam also encouraged the culture of writing. The art of writing or calligraphy, and along side painting, became popular pastimes of those who had the leisure for aesthetics. The culture of writing promoted the culture of manuscript collection by individuals. The well-known Khuda Baksh library at Patna is the legacy of this culture.

All was, however, not well with the medieval system of knowledge and education. The system was under the hold of the Muslim elite and the Indian upper classes who had opted for Persian education for the prospect of new opportunities in the government. While higher education flourished, popular education or lower level of education remained vocational and most

elementary. The upper classes did not allow the higher learning flow down to this education. There was, thus, a marked gap between the two levels of education.

The Moghul system of Persian education was live down to the early nineteenth century. This was because the British colonialism largely continued with the Moghul system of administration. By that time, Persian education had nurtured a powerful class of Indians. Thus, in 1835, when the British government wanted to replace it by English education as part of a new imperialist strategy to control India for colonial exploitation, Persian education reckoned as the first enemy. This reflects in the sharply critical remarks of the well-known note of T.B. Macaulay (enunciating English education) on Persian.

The same sections of Indians who had reaped the benefit of Persian education now found new opportunities of employment and concomitant upper social status. A wrangle for English education ensued which continues to this day. English education today is synonymous with quality education. The Indian upper class which has established a strong hold over it has adopted different ways to retain its grip. This has successively aborted implementation of the government policy of educational democratization, announced from time to time.

From ancient to modern times, one may conclude, the Indian system of education was not really static, as it has generally been portrayed. The educational history is marked with dynamic strategies of controlling the system by certain privileged classes at various phases. Simultaneously, however, social forces have been at work, relaxing the hold in different ways and allowing access to wider social groups.