

Governance and Administration of Education in Ancient India: A Study on Vedic and Buddhist Education Systems

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Abstract

Ancient India possessed a rich, high-quality educational framework tailored to the needs of its time, earning widespread historical appreciation. The education of the Vedic and Buddhist eras has gained special status in ancient Indian civilisation. In that time, the education system was not only enriching the Indian public life and social system, but also had a special influence outside India. The educational management and administration of that time played a special role in running the education system. The institutional concept of educational administration in the Indian education system also originated from this time. This research paper has mentioned detailed information about the structure, effectiveness and impact of educational administration in the ancient Indian education, namely Vedic and Buddhist education systems. The Gurukul system in the Vedic period, many Buddhist monasteries and educational institutions like Nalanda, Takshashila (Although historically rooted in the Vedic tradition, Takshashila also adapted to the institutional shifts of the Buddhist era), gave a unique dimension to the Indian education system. The well-organised, well-controlled and democratic education administration had a special contribution to the smooth running of all these educational institutions. Every aspect of the management of educational institutions, i.e. student admission, curriculum, teaching, role of students, supply of necessary materials for education, infrastructural aspects, financial supply and state influence, etc., was specially controlled and observed, which was considered an essential part of the management of any education system.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Education, Educational Administration, Vedic Education, Buddhist Education, Nalanda, Takshashila.

Introduction

Ancient India holds a special place in the history of world education. The education system that developed, especially during the Vedic (1500 BCE - 500 BCE) and Buddhist (600 BCE - 600 CE) periods, was not just a centre for the dissemination of knowledge; rather, it was a holistic system designed to develop character, morality and self-realisation as well as practical life skill education. The influence of this school of thought, led by the Vedic Gurukuls and the famous Buddhist monasteries like Nalanda and Takshashila was not limited to the Indian subcontinent but also enriched philosophical thought and cultural exchange in different parts of Asia. This long-standing tradition proves that the quality of education provided at that time was highly advanced and relevant. However, the philosophical depth and content of this education

system have often been discussed, but the administrative structure and management system behind it have not received much attention.

The present research paper aims to enlighten the functions and role of educational administration of that time for the extraordinary success and longevity of the Vedic and Buddhist educational systems. This article shows that these ancient systems were different from modern institutional models, fully encompassing all the basic functions of contemporary educational administration, such as strategic planning, financial management, human resource development, curriculum development, and social engagement.

This paper first explores the role of the Guru as the supreme administrator of the Gurukul in the Vedic period, highlighting the system's financial self-reliance and its unique approach to personalised curriculum and assessment. Then examines the transition into the formal administrative systems of the Buddhist era. By dissecting the governance of renowned institutions like Nalanda and Takshashila, this study reveals a well-organised structure characterised by rigorous admission processes, democratic principles, and complex financial management on ancient Indian Education System.

Educational Administration in the Vedic Period

In the Vedic education system, students used to go and study in the residence of the Guru under his supervision, and education was free from the control of the king or authority. There was no formal, well-regulated, and organised educational administration or regulatory body in the Vedic education. However, in the education system under the Guru, he himself used to perform his duties as an administrator, and at the same time, he used to implement certain rules or regulations in his institution.

Even though there was no formal educational administration, it used to carry out activities such as art, infrastructure, teaching, evaluation, etc., keeping in mind the needs of the society, and various rules and regulations established by the society, which worked as a hidden administration (indirect administration). The Gurukul education system was residential, and the teacher was responsible for providing and managing the accommodation, food, medical treatment, etc. of the students along with their education. As an administrator, the Guru performed all those responsibilities. In the context of the present time, the functions and responsibilities of any educational administration can be highlighted through the functions of the Gurukul.

Planning and goal setting

Although there was no written and specific plan mentioned in the initial phase of education in the Vedic education system, the goals and plans of education were determined keeping in mind certain issues due to the changing needs of education and contemporary social needs. The main purpose of education was self-realisation and the development of religious knowledge and consciousness. Although there were no formal administrative goals and roadmap in Gurukul education, the age of the students and the prevalent caste system of the society were given priority, and the education was imparted in such a way that the students could progress in their future lives. However, in the Sutra period, the academic goal and roadmap were conducted in a more organised and controlled manner. Starting from the admission of students, teachers, curriculum, evaluation, etc., were managed and monitored in a specific planned manner.

Curriculum

There was no fixed curriculum in the Gurukul system. Lessons were imparted on subjects useful for the

future of certain societies and castes. In the case of curriculum construction, there was no uniformity in the curriculum for all. According to the caste system of that time and the work assigned to individuals for each caste, different curricula were written and taught accordingly for Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras (Mal & Sarkar, 2023, p. 250). And this rule was followed properly, which proves that even though there was no external written regulatory body in the field of education, the mutual customs of the society played the role of educational administration and the Gurukul or educational institutions acted as the administrative heads. In the Vedic era, the curriculum was not imposed on the students. Students got the opportunity to get an education according to their needs. The Guru as an Administrator devised, managed and controlled the curriculum, and it also took a more controlled form in the Sutra period. After the admission of students, the Upanayana ceremony was held, keeping in mind the pre-determined educational goals. In this Upanayana ceremony, the age of the students was also determined according to their caste (Kumari, 2018, p. 1).

Student Admission and Evaluation

The Guru would decide whether a student would be admitted to the Gurukul or not, and would organise specific programs at the beginning and end of the students' education and recognise the students according to their acquired knowledge. In this period, student admission also varied from one caste to another.

Maintaining Discipline

In Vedic educational institutions, establishing discipline was not a separate institutional function, but was in fact a part of the Gurukul system itself, which was entirely dependent on the absolute authority of the Guru, albeit a paternalistic authority, and the development of inner character. The control of the environment was based upon the Guru's strong personal authority, and the Guru was not merely a teacher, but also a spiritual father; therefore, discipline was enforced through a relationship of honour and duty, not through coercion or the fear of punishment (Mookerji, 1947, p. 58).

Teacher Recruitment and Remuneration

Although there was no specific recruitment process for the appointment of a teacher, the position of Guru was achieved through scholarship, sadhana and social recognition in the Vedic and Sutra periods. Usually, when a person became self-sufficient in knowledge, conviction and character through the acquisition of knowledge, practice and study as a disciple, he could establish a Gurukul and gain social recognition. However, certain criteria were set to become a Guru, and one had to acquire scholarly knowledge, self-control and moral character. After receiving education in the Guru's house, senior students got the opportunity to teach junior students in the absence of the Guru or by order of the Guru, thereby increasing their teaching ability (Tripathi, 2023, p. 2).

There was no method of financing education at that time. The Guru or Acharya performed this duty as part of their social responsibility (Mookerji, 1947, p. 202). However, in the Gurukul of the Sutra period, there is a mention of teachers' teaching in exchange for money. The teachers who took remuneration for their teaching were known as Upadhyaya (Mookerji, 1947, p. 202). After completing their education, students used to pay Guru Dakshina to their Guru by donating crops, cattle, land-based wealth, etc., to the extent of their ability (Dixit et al., 2025, p. 1138). However, there was no definite rule that this Guru Dakshina always had to be a monetary donation.

Autonomy and Governance

In the Vedic and Post-Vedic eras, the education system and administration were free from any external influence. The construction of educational institutions, Gurukuls and their activities did not require political approval and discipline. However, the king usually provided security for the gurukul and sometimes provided financial assistance, without interfering in the institution's internal autonomy.

However, in the Sutra Period, it is seen that the king had special control over the Gurus. Specific rules had to be followed in the discipline of the students. For giving physical punishment, the Guru could only use a rope or a cane (Dutta et al., 2011, p. 27). If he used anything else, he would have to suffer the royal punishment. This proves that even though there was no external control in the education system, the king had a special influence and domination as an administrator. “As a rule, the pupil shall not be punished corporally. If no other course is possible, he may be corrected with a thin rope or cane. If the teacher strikes him with any other instrument, he is liable to punishment by the King (i.e. under the law)” (Mookerji, 1947, p. 201).

Community Engagement

Although there was no institutional structure like the present day, there was an inseparable relationship between education and society in the Vedic period. In the Vedic period, the Gurukuls provided socio-economic support for the conduct of education, and there were various relationships between the society and the Gurukul. Social norms and traditions were expanded through education. Keeping that objective in mind, the society and the Gurukul came forward to help, and later, the educated people enriched the society. Also, keeping in mind the daily life and needs of the society, Gurukuls not only emphasised the practice of scriptures but also on practical education, such as agriculture, technical, and various vocational work, which helped the students gain practical experience, and as a result, maintained good relations with the environment, community, and educational institution or Gurukul.

Financial Management

Education was totally free in the Vedic period. Teaching was considered a sacred act, and teachers or Gurus would teach their students without payment. Students used to collect donations from the society through almsgiving, which provided for their daily living and the necessities of life in the Guru's house. In addition, spontaneous unconditional donations from kings and various financially wealthy individuals kept the education system running.

Educational Administration in the Buddhist Period

Governing Bodies

In the Buddhist education system, there were specific or responsible Governing Bodies; this Governing Body was completely independent, and had no influence from any king, influential person or social organisation. In Nalanda, senior teachers elected through internal elections by the various sangha took charge as the head, called Kulapati or Mahasthavira. In this case, the elected person acted as the head and controlled the activities of the councils subordinate to him (Apte, 1950, p. 32). And the various institutional activities and programs, such as student admission, curriculum control, distribution of teachers' work, taking exams on time, preserving manuscripts, copying writing styles, building construction, financial supply or income from food, clothing and medical facilities and their allocation, etc., were performed and

administered by the persons appointed from each of them according to their responsibilities (Apte, 1950, p. 32).

Curriculum

In the Buddhist education system, curriculum construction was conducted in a well-structured and well-controlled manner. In Buddhist monasteries or universities of that time, people associated with well-structured educational administration and experienced educators created the curriculum with emphasis on the all-round development of the students, i.e., spiritual, moral, and career-oriented aspects. Students were allowed to acquire special expertise in a particular subject according to their own skills and ability to acquire knowledge, which gave a unique dimension to the education curriculum of that time. In addition, the administration and the responsible persons of the educational institution paid special attention to whether the curriculum was being implemented properly.

Admission

General admission was free in Buddhist monasteries or universities, while admission in Takshashila was free for the time being, but Shudra or Chandal had to pay a fee (Apte, 1950, p. 39). In the matter of subject selection, importance was also given to the choice of students, and students could acquire knowledge in a democratic framework. However, for admission to Nalanda University, the student had to prove their previous knowledge, and a certain entrance test would ensure their admission in the university. Hiuen Tsang mentions that the admission test was quite difficult; usually, two or three out of ten students could pass it (Kumar, 2011, p. 69).

Teaching and Teacher Recruitment

In this regard, teacher appointments within the monastic structure were well organised. Any person who wanted to become a teacher had to become a monk first. Only skilled monks who showed deep knowledge and teaching skills could become teachers. Most of the time, this was done by serving as apprentices to senior monks and usually required practical teaching under the supervision of experts. Teachers were also assigned to different categories like Acharya and Upadhaya (Shastri, 2022, p. 198). One fundamental administrative task was managing endowments, usually in the form of land or entire villages, donated by royal patrons to provide for all material needs (especially food, room and board) of the residential monks (Altekar, 1944, p. 119).

Teacher as an Administrator

In the Buddhist education system, teachers were responsible for teaching as well as education administration and enjoyed complete autonomy in their work and decisions. As an Administrator, they took the final decision in setting the time limit for the course, conducting it, selecting or rejecting students and managing the daily operations of the institution (Apte, 1950, p. 9).

Maintain Discipline

Discipline was observed with special importance in Buddhist educational institutions. Students, teachers and other persons performed their own duties properly and the principal of the institution monitored and controlled their activities. Punishment was also given for any wrongdoing in the pursuit of knowledge. However, the Senior Monk was the head of the overall control of the educational institutions. Educational

administrators also worked hard to ensure students' self-restraint, moral conduct, and a peaceful community necessary for education and spiritual growth (Si & Rai, 2024, p. 92).

Financial Management

In the Buddhist education system, education was free from all charges. Usually, no money was taken from the students. However, substantial financial resources were required to sustain these large institutions, for which educational institutions kept in contact with local people and also received grants from the king. Sometimes the king would help with money from his treasury, allocate or donate some part of the income of his kingdom for the management of education. However, in Buddhism, there were certain specific rules regarding accepting gifts or money in Buddhist monasteries or viharas. Monks were not allowed to accept gold, silver or anything valuable, and it was considered a serious crime (Bhikkhu, 2013, p. 188).

Control of States

Buddhist monasteries or universities independently managed and controlled the education system. The decisions of the institutional authorities in all areas of curriculum, infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and admission were of utmost importance. However, in the case of Taxila, there was a special political influence. With the change of political power, various rules of Taxila changed (Kiron & Nasrin, 2025, p. 211).

Conclusion

The research paper demonstrates that the ancient Indian education system of the Vedic and Buddhist eras was capable of providing high-quality education suitable for the era, and its influence continues to have a special impact on the education system of later India. In modern education, the special ideology of the Vedic and Buddhist eras plays a special role in maintaining the uniqueness of culture and public life. In the uniqueness of the ancient Indian education system and in making a lasting impact on Indian society, the administrative role of the then education, along with philosophical knowledge, is particularly noteworthy.

Although there was no institutional educational infrastructure on the administrative side during the Vedic era, later in the Sutra period, the institutionalised administration began, and in the Buddhist era, it took a more controlled and well-structured form and managed the education system, evidence of which we find in universities like Taxila and Nalanda. In the Vedic period, the Guru, as an administrator, performed the administrative duties of his institution, the Gurukul, efficiently, and in Buddhist educational institutions, every administrative task, from admission of students to infrastructure, recruitment, management, etc., was handled smoothly with the help of a well-regulated educational administration system. In addition to ensuring the autonomy of the institutions, it has helped in the overall development of education, meeting the needs of society and industry, and achieving the overall goals of society.

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