

# International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 2393-8870

www.ijarm.com

(A Peer Reviewed, Referred, Indexed and Open Access Journal)

DOI: 10.22192/ijamr

Volume 11, Issue 6 -2024

Review Article

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2024.11.06.003>

## Relevance of Ancient Educational System in Contemporary Society

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### Abstract

There is a popular thinking that ancient educational system is not of much relevance in today's environment. We are witness to great revolutions in the field of science and technology especially in the last 50 years. Internet has changed the shape of today's society. On the one hand, we are happy that technological advancements have greatly improved the standard of living in our country. However, we are not sure if the quality of life has improved in this process. We have so many problems confronting us every day. The quality of leadership is not very good in our country. We do not seem to find credible alternatives to our lives, education, governance and society at large. Our youngsters are not motivated enough, they don't have the skills of creativity, innovation and do not demonstrate extraordinary performances in the chosen fields. At this juncture, relevance of ancient educational system is being seen. The challenge of contemporary society can be effectively faced and landscape can be changed by adopting our age old forgotten ancient practices of educational system.

### Keywords

Ancient Educational System,  
Contemporary Society,  
Leadership Traits,  
Qualitative Management,  
Vedantic Texts.

### Introduction

India is the largest democracy in the world and 6th largest country in the world and one of the most ancient and living civilizations (at least 10,000 years old). It has an ancient tradition of education. The world's first university was established in Takshsila in 700 B.C. Indian mathematicians introduced the zero, the decimal system and the method of multiplication.

Education is highly regarded in India. States control the school system, though the Central Government provides financial assistance and planning. Primary school is free and officially compulsory between the ages of 6 and 14, after which students pay for education.

Higher Education in India has evolved in divergent and distinct streams where each stream is monitored by an apex body, indirectly controlled by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The universities are mostly funded by the State Governments. However, there are a good number of Central universities, which are maintained by the Union Government and because of relatively large funding, they have an economic edge over others. The engineering colleges and business schools in the country are monitored and accredited by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) while medical colleges are monitored and accredited by the Medical Council of India. Apart from these, the country has some engineering, management and medical education institutions which are directly funded by the Union Government.

### **Ancient Educational System**

The modern India has its roots in the ancient educational system; a system that promoted personal growth through creating awareness about self and attainment of pure bliss. The ancient system aimed to provide education to make people know their culture and value system. Cultural values promoted wisdom and, thus, built responsible persons.

Ancient education was based on religion. Education system was regulated by religion. It was viewed as a means of self realisation or salvation. It aimed to enhance knowledge of a person rather than just developing his physical senses. There was an intimate relationship between the teacher and students which started with a religious ceremony called upanayana (new birth).

According to the value system propounded by Hinduism, Moksha or spiritual emancipation is the ultimate goal of life. For this purpose, the ancient Hindu culture was divided into four major phases of life called the ashramas. There were four major ashramas. They were Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanprastha and the Sanyasa ashrama.

Each ashrama signified a particular relevant phase of life and the duties and obligations one was supposed to fulfil.

India has a rich tradition of learning and education. These were handed over generations to generations through oral or written medium. The highly esteemed Vedas that existed for nearly 2000 years before they were known in India guide our present lives.

The knowledge of acoustics enabled ancient Indians to orally transmit the Vedas from generation to generation. Institutional form of imparting knowledge came into existence in the early centuries of the Christian era. The approach to learning was to study logic and epistemology. The study of logic was followed by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. One of the most important topics of Indian thoughts was pramana or means of reliable knowledge. Regarding institutional form of education, the first was the guru-sishya system.

According to sacred texts, the training of the Brahmin pupil took place at the home of a Brahmin teacher. The first lesson taught to the student was the performance of Sandhya and reciting of gayatri. The family functioned as a domestic school, an ashrama or a hermitage where the mental faculties of the pupils were developed by the teacher's constant attention and personal instruction. Education was treated as a matter of individual concern. It did not follow the method of mass production applicable in industry. The making of man was regarded as an artistic and not a mechanical process. The aim of education was developing the pupil's personality, his innate and latent capacities. This view of education as a process of one's inner growth and self-fulfilment evolved its own techniques, rules, methods and practices.

## Features of Ancient Educational System

The features of ancient educational system are as follows:

- ) Teaching was done in gurukuls. It was free from Government control and students used to stay in gurukuls away from their homes.
- ) The focus was more on studying logic and value system rather than pure streams of academics.
- ) The Vedanta school of thought was followed to focus on logic. There was a close link between the religious texts and learning.
- ) The teacher and students lived like a family in the ashrama or hermitage and the teacher gave personal attention to develop the mental abilities of the students.
- ) The students devotedly obeyed their gurus (teachers).
- ) Education was not considered as a method of mass production industry. It was treated as a matter of individual concern.
- ) The making of man was considered as an artistic and not a mechanical process. The aim was to develop innate qualities of a person and promote his inner growth.
- ) Education followed the process of Sravana, Manana and Niddhyaasana. Sravana means listening to the truth from the teacher. Students learnt through hearing and not just reading the books. Manana means the student thinks on the meaning of the lessons imparted by his teacher orally. Niddhyaasana means complete comprehension of the truth by the student so that it results in self realisation.
- ) There was much more to learning than just building skills. Nurturing human values was more important than just imparting technical knowledge.
- ) The relationship of teacher and student started with a religious ceremony called upanayana (new birth) and the education that began with this system was called 'Brahmacharya'. The main duties of a brahmachari were vedic study, service to the teacher or guru, and purity of mind and body.

## Objectives of Education in Ancient India

The ancient educational system had the following objectives:

1. **Piety and righteousness:** It aimed to make the student a useful and pious member of society. Religion had an important role to play in the lives of students. Teachers were primarily priests and the students performed religious rituals during the beginning and continuance of their educational course. They offered daily prayers to develop piety and righteousness of the mind.
2. **Formation of character:** The focus was not just on intellectual attainments. The ancient educational system aimed at complete development of human beings: intellectuals along with purity of life, thoughts and habits. It sought to develop moral feelings in a man to enable him control his vicious feelings.
3. **Development of personality:** It promoted in a person the feeling of self-respect, self confidence and self-restraint. Students were taught to use their powers of discrimination and judgment. It has produced personalities who are still considered as part of our heritage.
4. **Develop civic and social duties:** Students were inspired to be responsible and useful members of the society. They observed social obligations and civic duties on their own without any government interference. Rise and fall in the government had nothing to do with social life in the villages. People were not self centred but were always conscious of their social duties.
5. **Promote social efficiency and happiness:** The ancient educational system contributed to the general progress and happiness of society by predetermining the occupation of different sections of society. Different branches of arts and professions were promoted and the caste system restricted occupations and trades to specific families. This led to specialisation and increased the efficiency of people engaged in different trades.

**6. Preservation and spread of national heritage and culture:** The Hindu civilisation and heritage was transmitted to future generations through education. It preserved the sacred vedic texts and forwarded them through generation to generation. Even today, these text are the proud privilege of Indian heritage.

The ancient culture primarily preached religion more than economics, social or political areas of knowledge. Knowledge was gained not for the sake of knowledge but was a means to attain salvation or self-realisation - the means for highest end of life (mukti).

The worldly difference of soul and Absolute (Brahma) is false. We should work to purify our inner senses and gain the Absolute. People think soul is different from Absolute because of ignorance and illiteracy. The Upanishads teach the way of self-realisation and salvation so that people destroy their ignorance that is the amidcause of worldly sufferings and realize the oneness of souls and the Absolute. This will free people from the cycle of life and death

### **Relevance of Ancient Educational System in Contemporary Society**

The importance of ancient educational system does not negate the importance of modern educational theory. It makes us responsible to use our traditional knowledge systems to build our business houses and nations together. We relate the modern practices to traditional systems to develop a modern education system based on values and quality. The ancient system has given the modern system a means for sustainable and quality living. In the contemporary society, people have lost their sense of command and direction and the relevance of ashrama system is realised, as it can direct every man and inculcate in him a sense of understanding and direction to tune his life, leading to emancipation of the soul.

There is a popular thinking that ancient educational system is not of much relevance in today's environment. We are witness to great revolutions in the field of science and technology

especially in the last 50 years. Internet has changed the shape of today's society. On the one hand, we are happy that technological advancements have greatly improved the standard of living in our country. However, we are not sure if the quality of life has improved in this process. We have so many problems confronting us every day. The quality of leadership is not very good in our country. We do not seem to find credible alternatives to our lives, education, governance and society at large. Our youngsters are not motivated enough, they don't have the skills of creativity, innovation and do not demonstrate extraordinary performances in the chosen fields.

In such a situation, what do we expect from our ancient educational system dated several thousand years ago. We have doubts that it has anything to offer to address these problems. There is a general perception that it has a lot to offer in terms of religious pursuits, philosophical discourses and to think about higher forms of life. But they are not relevant in solving the kind of problems that we face today. However, this perception is wrong. The contemporary management system has learnt a lot from our ancient system.

Two important principles define the concept as contemporary viz.

- I. It should be related to current day living.
- II. The principles being put to practice should be able to solve today's problems.

Management is a universal subject. Management principles are utilised by all business and non-business institutions. A householder as head of the family, a teacher in educational system, a professional working in the public system, even a non-profit organization needs sound principles of management to ensure that his efforts provide useful benefits to the society at large.

Most of the problems related to developing countries can be traced to bad management practices of their administrators. The contemporary relevance of ancient education provides guiding outlines for smooth functioning

of management in every sphere of life. This does not, however, mean that ancient education has no application other than management. Sanskrit has a rich repository of knowledge that can be used in the area of classical science including mathematics, astronomy, health etc. Ancient literature has considerable opportunities from which we can draw useful lessons for our day-to-day living Management.

### **Qualitative Management through Ancient Educational System**

Our ancient literature, which is written in Sanskrit illuminates us about management principles. The following principles and the contemporary relevance of ancient educational system highlights the relationship between the two:

#### **I. Creativity promotes view points:**

Management is the ability to visualize a big picture and ability to be creative in addressing various issues that we confront. When a manager develops skills of being creative and visualizes a big picture, then he realizes the need for systematic approaches to problem solving. This includes a sense of keen observation, empirical understanding of events, classification, coding, generalization and verification.

The first requirement of a good manager or a leader is his or her ability to think creatively and imagine a big picture for the organization, which he or she leads. One of the serious deficiencies noticed amongst Indian managers is that they are not adequately creative. The quality of management is not satisfactory amongst Indian managers today. Why do our managers not exhibit adequate creativity in discharging their duties? What are we missing? Where should we look for nurturing our creative skills? Who are the most creative people on the earth etc. are some of the questions that need answers. However, when we look back, we feel convinced that our ancestors believed in thinking big. We had a glorious past and our ancestors were masters in these principles of management. This is substantiated by the fact that the essence of the Vedic thought and Hinduism promotes diversity

as a way of life. This virtue indicates creative talent of a society. The modern organisations have welcomed the concept of diversity. People from all castes and races work in the same organisation and contribute to its productivity.

The greatest contributions from our Rishis and ancestors is in the form of Eighteen Mahapuranas, six each covering Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. There is the greatest possible creative narration of the two Itihas as: Ramayana and Mahabharata. We also have a legacy of rich mythological stories. They represent expressions of creativity in great works of our ancestors. We believed in the value of being creative, understanding reality by approaching it in different ways, expressing the idea in different ways, recognizing the need for communicating ideas differently for different sets of people. All these values are required by a good practitioner of management today. Our ancestors have cherished these values of creativity. Any of the ancient works such as Upanishads or Gita reflect our ability to provide unique mechanisms of knowledge representation. The modern managers have taken a lot from these teachings. However, they have much more to learn to become excellent managers.

**II. Thinking big helps achieve big things:** The second important attribute of management is that developing these skills leads one to perform exceptionally well and develop great insights into problems and solutions. Why should managers think big? Great achievements, great performances and great level of satisfaction are possible when managers desire to achieve the dream and motivates the person to carry forward his vision in achieving that goal. Though our managers have moved towards the path of thinking big, unfortunately, we do not find many youngsters today who exhibit this attribute. We have lot to learn from our past as far as thinking big is concerned. There is a description of the radiance of Lord Krishna in the Gita equated to the light emerging out of thousand sunrises at the same time. This indicates not only creativity but also the ability to think big. When the atom bomb was exploded by Robert Oppenheimer and his team, he uttered verses from Bhagavad Gita.



He said the light that emerged out of the explosion reminded him of the thousand rising Suns as described in the verses. How many Indians would relate their experiences in life to such expressions found in ancient Scriptures and Vedantic texts. We hardly think about the work done by our ancestors. Perhaps, we are not even aware of what we have in our Sanskrit Scriptures.

Our ancestors even said that to think of smaller things in life means pursuing mortal issues. To them, thinking big is an expression of immortality. The evidence to our ancestor's ability to think big is their approach towards mathematics and the number system in particular.

### III. Attitude towards learning as a way of life:

The third attribute of good management is attitude towards learning as a way of life. It prepares the person to develop systematic approaches toward work. Over the years, several management schools world over are trying to impart these attributes amongst managers. Our ancestors developed frameworks to understand complex ideas in life to create superior knowledge. They developed deep insights into observed phenomena and developed several principles in science, mathematics and astronomy. It was possible to develop these skills by understanding the concept of learning as our ancestors practiced. In the modern management, Peter Senge created a learning organisation which all business organisations strive to become.

The concept of learning as practiced by our ancestors about 1000 years ago divided learning into four quarters. These are as follows:

- ✓ The teacher can teach only one fourth of the knowledge.
- ✓ One fourth learning comes from emphasis on self-reflection and thinking. Self-thinking and internalisation of those ideas develops learning.
- ✓ One fourth learning comes from group activities. With this aim, most of the business schools and corporate entities develop team exercises and promote the opportunities for learning. This has come from the ancient

system where brahmacharis in gurukuls used to sit together and collectively discuss the subject matter.

- ✓ Our ancestors always believed that learning is a continuous process. However, the management fraternity realized this in 1990's. Continuous learning and researches in new areas adds to another one fourth of the knowledge base.

This learning process creates a learning organisation which develops the capacity to continuously learn, adopt and change.

"People continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expensive patterns are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together."

- Peter Senge

It promotes a superior learning infrastructure similar to ancient centres of learning of Nalanda and Patliputra.

### IV. Ability to manage long-term and short-term conflicts:

Management always faces long-term and short-term conflicts. Managers should have the quality and skills to resolve these conflicts.

An important accounting concept is a going concern concept which assumes that the company will not wind up in near future and that it will continue in the long term future as a going concern. That is why, companies make financial statements (Profit and Loss Account and Balance Sheet) at the end of the year of judge their performance.

This idea comes from our ancient thinking - the doctrine of reincarnation which is the core of Hindu way of living. Hindu mythology believes in law of Karma.

Every person performs good and bad deeds during his life time and it is the net effect of these deeds that he carries with him at the end of his life to

one more reincarnation. This process continues for every life till we are liberated and achieve Moksha.

The modern concept of going concern is a parallel of this thinking. As we have to manage life in a way that we ultimately get liberated, we are trying to deal with the problem of resolving short-term versus long-term conflict. Our ancient literature provides a number of measures to achieve liberation that shape our understandings and culture and which can be applied to management also.

Chapter 13 of Bhagvad Gita explains what Lord Krishna says when he talks about the eternal goal.

"I shall now explain the knowledge, knowing which you will taste the eternal. This is beginningless, and it is subordinate to me. It is called Brahman, the spirit, and it lies beyond the cause and effect of this material world."

**V. Leadership Traits:** An important attribute of good management is having leadership traits. Good management performance is linked to good leadership. Management is, therefore, always in search of good leaders. Good leaders are like captain of a team whose goal is to bring out the best from every team member. It has to conserve human potential. To be efficient, effective and excellent, ethical leadership must have four components: purpose, knowledge, authority and trust. An ethical leader inspires people to do the unexpected, above and beyond the plan.

A question that bothers management today is how to create good leaders. A credible leader is the one who practices what he preaches. Today's management world does not have all the leaders who depict this trait and, therefore, there is absence of ethical leadership. Another area where leadership is lacking is flattery in the corporate world. People do things to get personal and professional favours. This may create good managers but not good leaders. With reference to drawing conclusions from ancient scriptures, Lord Krishna says in Bhagwad Gita, 'You are king; you are the greatest person', etc. and even if somebody

talks against you, even if they completely disagree with you; even if they foul on you, you should not lose your balance. If somebody personally flatters you or if somebody disagrees with you, take it evenly. I agree, if we can find somebody like that, he would be truly great. In another example, he says, this is the greatest requirement for emotional stability. These days, emotional quotient is being tested. So, who is good leader? A leader is somebody who is not emotional. If you do something great; don't lose your balance. Even if you have lost everything; don't lose your balance. You try to know how to keep your nerves. Krishna further says, look at people beyond their group affiliations

Don't see whether he belongs to the opposition group or my group. Look at the objectivity of the whole discussion - great leaders share these attitudes. Krishna says people have all these - such a person is said to have conquered these weaknesses. Good leaders can, thus, be created by following the ancient thinking.

### Summing-up

The above discussion highlights the importance of ancient educational system in today's world. Today's world is lacking in infrastructure for imparting this education and, therefore, people cannot benefit from the ancient wisdom. There can be two ways of promoting the learning of ancient scriptures amongst our young population today:

1. Students at the School and College level should study Sanskrit as a subject and prepare themselves for using the benefits of this language into meaningful and targeted use in their day-to-day and future lives.
2. The professionals should take up learning Sanskrit to bring out meaningful ideas from the ancient scriptures and applying them to their professions.

Finally, we can't negate that effort is required on the part of each one of us as a student, a professional, the policy makers, the government

and as the public. If we understand relevance of this language and learn and put it to use in our daily lives, the day will not be far when we will achieve the glory that we had in the ancient past.

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	Website: <a href="http://www.ijarm.com">www.ijarm.com</a>
	Subject: Education
Quick Response Code	
DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2024.11.06.003">10.22192/ijamr.2024.11.06.003</a>	

### How to cite this article:

Kaushiki Singh. (2024). Relevance of Ancient Educational System in Contemporary Society. Int. J. Adv. Multidiscip. Res. 11(6): 23-30.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2024.11.06.003>