



INDIA'S EDUCATIONAL ESSENCE AND ITS INTERACTION WITH THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

India as a country has undergone several changes and it has developed its own unique form of education throughout history. Classical Indian education in its ancient era could be traced back to the Vedic Ages, followed by a rise of Buddhist learning centres. Education in Medieval India was also influenced by Islamic education during the Delhi Sultanate period which later blended into a Persianate form of education. The early modern period witnessed the advent of the Europeans, Westernised education was initiated. Sustainability and education can be amalgamated to form something which has the potential to suit everyone. Swati Lal points out that Rabindranath Tagore, after observing the Indian education system for nearly fifty years established Shantiniketan where he established Sriniketan, an ashram school and Viswa Bharati, an international university. He created a style of learning in an aesthetic form of education. The uniqueness of this type of education is set out to be an example for promoting environmental awareness. India has now stepped into the age of Digitalization and the education sector is no exception. With the help of government initiatives such as Digital India, SWAYAM, and DIKSHA aimed to reach students in remote and rural areas. Education during the Covid 19 pandemic has heavily relied on digital medium. Despite having the aim to deliver quality education to all, it has also highlighted the unavailability of gadgets due to economic conditions. This paper would be aiming to show a brief evolution of Indian education system in order to better understand the potential it has to incorporate its unique essence with the rapidity of Digitalization.

Keywords: Education, Indian Environmentalism, Digital India, Sustainability

Introduction

Education has been ever been an evolutionary process all around the world and it is still a work in progress since it is coming up with novel ideas in order to make this sector more effective. This paper provides a concise overview of the educational developments in India, briefly touch upon the traditional Indian education system having a rich and diverse history that spans several millennia, evolving from the early Vedic period to the medieval era. The Indian subcontinent has been home to a variety of educational traditions, including oral transmission, institutionalized learning, and religious schooling. Stepping into the British Raj education in India took a turn, transitioning into a more Westernized model. This paper would also be taking up on the subject of continuance of Western education with the setting up of formal educational institutes with traditional educational institutes existing parallelly during the British Raj. The incorporation of a Westernized way of education in India and its standardized acceptance would be discussed.

The main focus of this paper would be focusing on a more sustainable approach towards education by adhering to the example of the Tagorian model of Shantiniketan and the advent of Digitalization of Indian education system during the post-covid years, tackling with the questions of the twenty-first century and my own insight on how it could be blended together and implemented into mainstream education.

A Brief History of Education in Ancient and Medieval India

It is essential that Indian educators and students get to understand the roots of their education system. Education in ancient India was deeply rooted in the religious and philosophical traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. There is definitely the orientalist gaze upon, however, it is also vital to know the ideals and the defects that were also a part of the education system during ancient India. During the Vedic period (1500–500 BCE), the Gurukul system was the primary mode of education. In this system, students (shishyas) lived with their teachers (gurus) in residential schools, often located in forested areas (Mookerji, 2016). The curriculum included subjects such as Vedic literature, philosophy, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, and warfare.

Altekar states that ancient Indian educators prioritized character development. The Vedas were considered as revealed; therefore, their preservation was of fundamental significance; nonetheless, orthodox philosophers like Manu declare without doubt that a person of high character with a sense of Vedic knowledge is favoured above someone who is well-versed in all three Vedas yet has unclean practices. Vedic learning, philanthropy, and sacrifices are meaningless to those of doubtful character. Purity in thinking and behaviour is essential for spiritual advancement (Altekar, 1933). However, it can be observed that the qualifying criteria for formal education was restricted only to upper-caste men. Only the three 'twice-born' (upper) castes, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas, while excluding the Sudras and women from the domain (Singh, 2013).

With the emergence of Buddhism around the 6th century BCE, monastic institutions became centers of learning. Universities such as Takshashila and Nalanda flourished between the 4th century BCE and the 12th century CE (Mookerji, 2016). Takshashila, considered one of the world's earliest universities, offered diverse subjects, including medicine, law, military science, and economics (Altekar, 1944). Nalanda University, established in the 5th century CE under the Gupta Empire, attracted scholars from various parts of Asia and specialized in Buddhist studies along with secular disciplines such as logic, linguistics, and mathematics.

The medieval period (8th - 18th century CE) saw significant changes in the Indian education system with the arrival of Islamic rule. Under the patronage of the Delhi Sultanate (1206 - 1526) and the Mughal Empire (1526 - 1857), new educational institutions, such as madrasas and makhtabs, were established. These institutions primarily focused on Islamic theology, Arabic, Persian, and subjects such as mathematics, medicine, and philosophy (Habib, 2013).

The medieval period also witnessed the continuation of Hindu educational traditions, particularly in temple schools and pathshalas, which focused on Sanskrit learning and subjects such as Nyaya (logic), Vedanta (philosophy), and Dharma shastra (law) (Thapar, 2003). During Akbar's reign (1556 - 1605), educational policies were more inclusive, with a greater emphasis on rational sciences and translations of Sanskrit texts into Persian (Richards, 1996).

While higher education flourished in centers such as Delhi, Agra, and Banaras, primary education remained informal and was often limited to the privileged sections of society. Women's education was generally restricted, though there were exceptions, particularly among royal families and certain religious groups.

Therefore, it could be that that education in ancient and medieval India was a complex and evolving institution which was thoroughly influenced by religious, socio-political, and cultural developments. The transition from Vedic and Buddhist centers of learning to Islamic madrasas and pathshalas emphasize on the adaptable capabilities of Indian education. This would further help us to understand the shift of education from an Indianized form to a Westernized formal education system introduced in the colonial period under the British Raj.

The Indian Education System During the Colonial Times

The colonial education strategy might be considered to have started in 1792 with a remark made by Charles Grant, adviser to Lord Cornwallis, then governor general. Grant advocated for the diffusion of European knowledge via the medium of English language. Macaulay's ideas, which emerged some three decades later, were heavily influenced by Charles Grant. Prior to the 1830s, no consistent educational system existed. The function of the general committee of public education, created in 1823, was limited to supporting and regulating government institutions. The general committee, for its part, was firmly split into two groups: Anglicists and Orientalists (Kumar, 2007). The universities established were centered on the structure of London University – which depended on examining and granting degrees. Even the entrance examinations and college teaching were conducted in English. In colleges, vernacular languages soon were the target of exclusion from the first arts (FA) and then BA courses eventually in 1864. The Hindu College set its educational structure in this respect. The mandatory English language not only became a sense of 'pride' but it was responsible for overshadowing every other subject there was. Kumar also highlights the aspect of systematic exclusion of vernacular languages replacing them with a heavy and mandatory imposition of English (Kumar, 2007).

Madhu Singh points out at the distinction between indigenous learning cultures and formal learning and knowledge systems acquired from colonial periods. These two 'Indias' largely represent the socio-cultural context that existed in India at the beginning of the nineteenth century and persisted throughout the time of British administration. Singh also shows the continuance of such a difference that still continues, where only a minority of people are exposed to formal education on the contrary to those in the remote areas (Singh, 2013). The Indian education system before the Colonial Age remained more or less unchanged and seldom updated for about 2500 years but Naik opines that the foundations for a formal educational system was laid down by the British administrators in the 19th century. However, he also points out that the British aimed at educating the class of people who could be used as interpreters, thereby never really having much knack to make literates out of the masses (Naik, 1977).

However, it is important to be noted that the 'Oriental gaze' in education, highlighting how Western academia has historically depicted Eastern societies as inferior, exotic, and static. This perspective reinforces colonial power structures, shaping curricula that misrepresent Eastern knowledge and cultures as subordinate to Western rationality. Such biases persist in educational discourse, marginalizing non-Western epistemologies while privileging Eurocentric narratives (Said, 1977).

Singh goes on to argue that the advent of primary Westernization has had the greater impact on individuals who attended new educational institutions, adopted professions, worked in the bureaucracy, and engaged in trade, commerce, and industry in major and emerging cities. There are also concerns in connection to a certain level of continuity between the traditional elite and the

new or Bilingual, English-educated elite, and the role the latter played in reinterpreting Indian ideas, customs, culture, and history in reaction to European criticisms (Singh, 2013).

It is also to be noted that the influence of Christian missionary education in India was multifaceted. However, British colonial authorities first opposed missionary activity, owing to existing Roman Catholic influences and rising atheism in Britain. Missionary education acted as a stimulant for the Hindu elite, resulting in religious counter-propaganda that created Indian nationalism. This cultural opposition prompted a resurgence of Hindu philosophy, which combined Western secular ideas with Indian customs. Indian intellectuals adopted and reinterpreted Western education within their religious framework. This confluence inspired political and social movements, hence shaping India's contemporary identity (Subramaniam, 1979).

Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of Education

Rabindranath Tagore, was a most beloved poet, philosopher, and above all a staunch educationist who revolutionized educational thought in India and beyond. He envisioned an education which was deeply rooted in humanism, naturalism, and an emphasis on creativity and freedom. Tagore strongly opposed the rigid, examination-oriented education system imposed by the British in colonial India and sought to create an alternative that nurtured individuality, imagination, and a holistic approach to learning. His vision of education perhaps stemmed from his own childhood memories when he was admitted to the Norman School at the age of seven, which left an everlasting scar on his memories of school due to the upsetting language of a teacher, and its general cold and artificial atmosphere (Mukherjee, 2021).

His contributions to education, particularly through the establishment of Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati University, remain relevant today. This essay explores Tagore's philosophy of education, its implementation, and its relevance in contemporary education. Tagore's school, Brahmacharyashram, was founded in 1901 in the rural area of Santiniketan, distant from the metropolis of Calcutta, based on the concept of an old hermitage (asrama). It was later renamed Patha Bhavana. He aimed to build the school in a natural setting on a large plot of land (Bhattacharya, 2013).

Tagore's educational philosophy was shaped by his personal experiences, literary pursuits, and deep appreciation for nature and humanistic values. Basu says, "Unintelligent memory work and cramming became the order of the day, and 'notes' and 'cribs' flooded the educational bazaar and the intellectual market" (Basu, 1947) which resonate with Tagore's own rejection of rote learning and encouragement of creative learning.

A key aspect of Tagore's educational philosophy was learning in close connection with nature. He believed that the traditional classroom setting was restrictive and stifled a child's natural curiosity. Instead, he advocated for an open-air education system where students could interact with their environment. This approach was implemented at Santiniketan, where students learned under trees and engaged in activities such as gardening, singing, and drama (Tagore, 1929). According to Tagore, nature stimulates the imagination and cultivates a sense of wonder, which is essential for intellectual and emotional growth. Swati Lal argues that Tagore's concept of a shortsighted vision of life, influenced by financial prosperity, leads to a lack of understanding of reality and a focus on externals. In contrast, "personal man" cultivates connections that transcend quantifiable aspects of existence (Lal, 1984).

Tagore emphasized the all-round development of a child – physical, mental, moral, and spiritual. He rejected the narrow focus on academic achievement and promoted an education system that encouraged music, art, literature, and sports alongside formal subjects (Sen, 2001). This holistic approach aimed at nurturing well-rounded individuals who could contribute meaningfully to society.

Tagore was a firm believer in the unity of mankind and advocated for internationalism in education. He sought to create a global learning environment where students could appreciate different cultures and worldviews. His Visva-Bharati University, founded in 1921, was envisioned as a global center of learning where Indian and Western traditions could merge to promote mutual understanding and universal humanism. Tagore's philosophy thus transcended national boundaries and emphasized the interconnectivity of all human beings.

The relevance of Tagore's educational philosophy continues in today's world, particularly in addressing the limitations of standardized education and fostering creative and holistic learning. His methodology laid emphasis on self-expression and exploration that aligns with modern education systems that prioritises critical thinking and creativity. He envisioned the "harmony" of learning in tune with the environment lays stress on the need for promoting a sense of environmental awareness and sustainability through education. Tagore's education system could also be expanded beyond India, thereby giving it a touch of global humanism and intercultural learning aimed at promoting peace and worldwide collaboration in today's world. Tagore's philosophy in holistic development is reflected in the incorporation of arts, physical education, and mindfulness into main curriculum that somewhat incorporates ancient India's sense of true education associated with the focus on mindfulness.

Is Digitalization the new Development?

Since 1947, educational planners in India have worked to ensure equal educational opportunities, enhance standards, and expand facilities despite limited resources. (Naik, 1979) During the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a phenomenal change from offline class system towards a more digitalized way of learning. With educational institutes shutting down, the online forum seemed to be a more sustainable and reachable. There was a significant increase in the number of online courses and digital classrooms. However, it came to be a doubled-edged sword. On one hand digitalization meant a scope for borderless form of education, a

universality on its own but it paved way towards problems that in my opinion effected two sorts of students- (1) School students, especially the ones in primary section and (2) Students who could not afford devices and internet facilities at home during the pandemic. This section would be highlighting on government initiatives and their implementation.

The India Report on Digital Education 2021 summarises the many initiatives conducted by the Education departments of States/UTs, highlighting the substantial efforts to promote digital education throughout the country. The paper delves into remote learning initiatives in India and emphasises the efforts of the Ministry of Education and its agencies to promote digital education. The report attempts to record and aggregate all efforts undertaken by state/UT education ministries, and it is a strong indication of the government's involvement in digital education (Afnan, 2023).

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) provides online portals and educational channels, such as Direct to Home TV and Radios, to support students' learning. During lockdown, students use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, Telegram, YouTube Live, and Facebook Live for online learning. (Jena, 2020).

According to the 'India Report Digital Education' (Ministry of Education, July 2021), the DIKSHA initiative India's 'One Nation: One Digital Platform' for School Education. The Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) portal and mobile app, developed by the Ministry of Education, has a vast collection of eBooks and e-Contents published by state/UT and national organizations. The SWAYAM site provides Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to help bridge the digital divide and deliver excellent education to students across India for high school students along with students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate courses ranging from social science subjects to engineering and so on (Jena, 2020). Swayam Prabha DTH channels are designed to help and reach folks who do not have access to the internet. Under the one class: one TV channel PM eVIDYA plan, 12 Swayam Prabha channels will be dedicated to school education. Regular live interactive sessions on these channels with experts via Skype give opportunities for viewer and expert involvement. The Department of School Education and Literacy has collaborated with private DTH operators such as Tata Sky and Airtel to show instructional video programming, increasing the reach of these channels. Under the PM e-VIDYA program, NCERT also initiated a pilot run of using DTH channels to distribute class-specific curriculum-linked content, which began on September 1, 2020 (Ministry of Education, July 2021).

According to recent reports, the Government of India has allocated ₹1.48 lakh crore for education, skilling, and employment. This includes major increases in digital learning, technical education, and teacher capacity development efforts. (S. Kumar, 2025) The Union Budget 2025 could be set out to promote digital education, including AI-powered learning, internet expansion for remote schools, and multilingual e-books. The AI Centre of Excellence will receive ₹500 crore, while BharatNet will improve internet connectivity in government schools. New National Centres for Digital Skills and enlarged Atal Tinkering Labs are intended to stimulate innovation. Despite these attempts, obstacles such as limited device availability, insufficient teacher preparation, and infrastructural shortages remain. Experts advocate public-private collaborations and policy changes to maximized effect (Education, 2025).

Conclusion

The theme of Indian Education system is a vast and unique one which has undergone several processes of evolution throughout history. It is safe to say that the current education system is still on its way to develop itself through either government, non-government, or private endeavours into its domain. The approach for the collaboration of Education with Digitalization took off during the pandemic times when everything that normal life knew shut down. Thereby, exposing the true capabilities of the Internet to connect, impart and educate a wide range of populace, not only in India but also throughout the world. This aspect of Education's digitization evolution truly highlights its actual potential to propagate a sense of universalism without the restrictions of boundaries. In 2020, most of the world could not fully grasp the proper implementation of a sudden digitalization and it is extremely true for the case of India. Teachers and students alike could not comprehend such a drastic change and neither could the students, or even professionals who had to remain unemployed during that period of time (Jena, 2020). There is definitely a huge gap between the remote population and formal education institutes which are mostly city-centered. The "Digital Divide" is quite real, especially in the case of India with the lack of access to digital devices to issues with proper connectivity and infrastructure. It is absolutely essential for Digital Education to reach every nook of India under proper vigilance. It is however true that, with the gradual repetition and initiatives developed by the Government, alongside several NGOs and private companies, it will be possible to incorporate the essence of selective Indian morality mixed with the standardized acceptance of Western framework of formal education Tagorian concept of universality and environmental, awareness into the Digital Age of Education in India.

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