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Reviving the Guru-Shishya Parampara: Indian Knowledge Systems as Pedagogy in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes on robust integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in higher education to facilitate multi-disciplinary, holistic and experiential learning. However, Institutional activities at most Indian universities tend to limit IKS to merely teaching content, with little attention to the underlying pedagogical frameworks. This paper explores the epistemological, psychological and pedagogical revival of a traditional model of mentorship, the *Guru- Śiṣya Paramparā*, which is highly relational and experiential in today's university environment. The classical texts and modern educational theories are used to compare the Indian *Pañcakośa* (five-treasures) developmental model with the Western cognitive models (Piaget, Vygotsky, Freire). Most importantly, this paper also tries to document the continuity of this pedagogy to the modern times in the form of *Śreṇīs* (guilds), tribal *Ghotuls* and *Ustād-Shāgird* traditions etc., even after regular challenges during pre-colonial and colonial periods. Drawing on some of the modern-day variations, for instance clinical medical residencies and (STEM) apprenticeships, the paper reflects and proposes transferable strategies for the institutionalization of the *Guru-Śiṣya* ethos in an academic credit system.



Keywords: guru-shishya parampara, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), higher education, experiential learning, mentorship, holistic education, decolonizing education.



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INTRODUCTION

The Crisis of Modern Pedagogy and the NEP 2020 Mandate

Higher education in the 21st century is being materialised under the industrial and neoliberal paradigm. Universities across the world and especially in India have been converted into credential institutions only. High student-to-faculty ratios, highly disorganized curricula, and highly standardized, quantitative-based assessment systems are characteristics of this setting. This transactional model of education has resulted in two crises. The first one is the skill gap, i.e. the university graduates without any synthetic reasoning abilities. The second issue is a growing psychological crisis among pupils in form of deep alienation, anxiety and directionlessness. In most educational settings, the students are regarded as mere consumers than active participants of the overall process of behavioral elevation.

As part of the structural response, the systemic pedagogical issue in India has been brought to the fore under NEP 2020. The policy seeks to change the mindset from discipline-specific education to multidisciplinary and holistic education for overall development of human capacities, including - intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional and ethical ([Government of India, 2020](#), p. 36). The IKS is one of the aspects of this systemic change that has been discussed. However, the focus of most of the scholarly and administrative activities has been on the question of oncological integration i.e. – how traditional disciplines can be integrated into the current curriculum.

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Instead, it is more pertinent to focus on transforming the knowledge and pedagogy by embedding the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into both the curriculum as well as the teaching process.

So, this paper aims to explore the possibility of solving the problems of conventional pedagogy in higher education through the structuring of this model's relational basis. To investigate this, a critical analysis of tradition will be carried out, a comparative analysis will be carried out with education psychology in the world, and an investigation will be carried out regarding the disintegration of tradition and the prevalence of tradition in the colonial period. Lastly, the purpose of this analysis is to suggest a model that is easily accessible for applying intensive mentorship in today's university context.

Epistemological Foundations and Cognitive Frameworks

In order to apply the *Guru-Śiṣya* model to the modern university system, one must have some understanding of the epistemological foundations of this model. The concept of education in ancient India was not only employment oriented, rather it was a lifelong transformative process based on the awakening of intellect, ethics and spirituality. From this basic philosophy, knowledge has been divided into two separate yet fully complementary realms, shown in Mundaka Upanishad (1.1.4) as - 'द्वे विद्ये वेदितव्ये इति ह स्म यद्ब्रह्मविदो वदन्ति परा चैवापरा च' (*Dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma yadbrahmavidō vadanti parā caivāparā ca* - "there are two kinds of knowledge to be acquired, the *Aparā Vidyā* and the *Parā Vidyā*") (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 672). In this sense, *Aparā Vidyā* is knowledge about the material world, in other words – it is secular and temporal knowledge in forms of physical sciences, mathematics, and language etc. On the other hand, the *Parā Vidyā* is higher spiritual realisation.

In the *Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā*, these two were not differentiated, and it was believed that one would have to learn seculars well as ascetic skills. This is not the same as the education provided in the modern education system, where knowledge is presented in the form of facts and information that is memorised, and reproduced on paper in exams. The ancient educational system has been based on the three stages of cognitive activity described in Brhadāranyaka Upanishad (2.4.5) as – *Śravaṇa* (active, receptive listening), *Manana* (critical, logical reflection), and *Nididhyāsana* (experiential internalization). *Samvāda* (dialogic inquiry) was the pedagogy of Core of the *Manana* stage. The structure of Upanishads is entirely based around dialogues between the *Guru* and *Śiṣya* which demanded active cognitive participation of both.

The need to ask questions is also mentioned in the Bhagavad Gītā (4.34) – 'तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया' (*Tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā* - "Learn the truth by approach, by asking questions, and by rendering service") (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 169). The intellectual curiosity constituted the heart of the *paramparā*, and this is evident from the blend of *paripraśna* (relentless questioning) with *sevā* (humble service). It was a very strong theoretical discussion, which was inter-woven with *Svādhyāya* (self-study) and strictness in applied sciences. For example – In the Caraka Saṃhitā (Viṃśa Sthāna, 8.14) it has been stated that a medical student should be taught how to make medicines under the guidance of senior physician (Sharma, 1981). Moreover, the Suśruta Saṃhitā (Sūtra Sthāna, 9) outlines a very structured course of experiential learning, i.e. – the students should practice surgery on gourds and watermelons before moving on to a real person (Bhishagratna, 1907, p. 71).

Historical Continuity, Medieval Synthesis, and the Colonial Rupture

It is historical fallacy that the *Guru-Śiṣya* pedagogical model was lost with the ancient *Gurukul*. In fact, the *paramparā* never really went away, but rather it decentralized, integrated with the new cultures that came in, and became an integral part of the socio-economic system of the Indian subcontinent right up to the 19th century.

The Medieval Synthesis: *Ustād-Shāgird* and *Śreṇī* Networks

During the medieval period, the basic tenets of the Indian traditions interacted with Islamic traditions of the *Ustad-Shagird* and Sufi *Pir-Murid*. This interaction was most clearly evident in the *Gharānā* system of the Hindustani classical music and arts, where knowledge was transmitted mainly through the experiential methods and was highly relational. Also, this *paramparā* flourished as the mainstay of the Indian economy via the *Śreṇī*. During this period, the preservation and transfer of the complex crafts of *Aparā Vidyā*, such as metallurgy, pottery,

carpentry, architecture, and weaving of textiles etc. Was through family enterprises, where apprentices would reside and work with the master craftsman, learning through absolute immersion.

Similarly, the embedded and informal modes of teaching and learning of the tribal (Adivasi) communities in India need to be included in the definition of authentic definition of IKS. For instance, like many other Adivasi communities, the Muria Gonds of central India had an indigenous youth dormitory called *Ghotul*. The *Ghotuls* were centers for recreational activities as well as community generational-knowledge sharing in which older adolescents trained younger ones in agricultural techniques, ecological conservation and community values through experiential learning. These were highly effective and decentralized systems of community learning. (Elwin, 1947)

Pre-Colonial Reality: The Surveys of Buchanan and Adam

The best evidence of the continuity of this decentralized, mentorship-based education is found in the British colonial records of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 'The Beautiful Tree' (1983), Dharampal has tried to present a picture of the indigenous Indian education from official records of British administrators like Thomas Munro of Madras, and William Adam of Bengal. Indeed, according to Adam's report of 1835, almost every village had a decentralized center of learning – as there were about one lakh village schools (*Pathshalas* and *Makhtabs*) in Bengal and Bihar alone, (Dharampal, 1983, p. 18).

Similarly, the detailed socio-economic surveys conducted by Buchanan (later Buchanan-Hamilton) in the districts of Patna, Gaya and Shahabad between 1807 and 1814 provide a detailed account of this remaining *paramparā*. Buchanan recorded the presence of *Tols* centers of Sanskrit learning in logic, law and astronomy). In addition, he noted that the *gurus* (or *pandits*) of these *Tols* not only taught their pupils but also provided food and shelter from their own property or from community donations (Martin, 1838: 132–135). The old moral code that - knowledge is never to be sold - was firmly entrenched and the relation between teacher and disciples was not transactional but based on a lasting commitment.

The Colonial Rupture: Macaulay's Minute

This large, relational and decentralised mentoring system was destroyed by the British colonial policies in the mid-19th century. The watershed occurred in 1835, when the famous Minute on Indian Education was penned by Thomas Babington Macaulay. Macaulay rejected all Indian epistemological traditions and argued that the state should provide financial support for the teaching of English to make a class of administrative clerks (Macaulay, 2019). Further, Wood's Dispatch of 1854 was followed by an extremely bureaucratic and centralized Department of Public Instruction.

The British basically abolished the organic *Guru-Śiṣya* systems by imposing a centralized grant-in-aid system based on the sole criterion of a fixed curricula and written exams. The *Guru* lost his place in the community as a respected member, lost his holistic perspective on mentoring, became more of a poorly paid and powerless government servant accountable to the colonial inspectors. The concept of *Samvāda* (dialogue) was dropped and factory model classroom was introduced. This is the pinpointed colonial break point that causes the major issues of the present Indian higher education system, such as alienation, rote learning and the psychological distance of the students from the teacher.

Western Pedagogical Paradigms in Contrast

When examined in the framework of the dominant Western educational paradigms, this historic *paramparā* has a much more comprehensive ontology of learning compared to dominant western educational philosophy. The current way of learning in the university is best described as banking education (Freire, 1970) in which the teacher deposits information and facts into the students' passive minds, without attempting to start dialogue with the students or having the students' reflection. The banking model has completely undermined the age-old need of *paripraśna* and the problem-solving approach of traditional *Pathshalas*.

Likewise, the historical reflection of Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the distance between what a learner can do unaided and what they can do with the support of an expert is seen in the *Guru-Śiṣya* and *Ustād-Shāgird*

relationship. Vygotsky's More Knowledgeable Other mainly developed cognitive capacities, however, the mentor in traditional Indian education system was also a guide for *Dharma* i.e. professional and universal ethics. The Western model (e.g., [Piaget's \(1952\)](#) cognitive constructivism) is mainly concerned with intellectual development, whereas the Indian model is based on the very comprehensive framework of the *Pañcakośa* or the five-treasures from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1 – 2.5). This model is one in which the person is thought of as a learner – as an *Annamaya* (physical) body, a *Prāṇamaya* (vital energy) body, a *Manomaya* (emotional) body, a *Vijñānamaya* (intellectual) body, and an *Ānandamaya* (spiritual core) body. Modern university education which emphasizes only the *Vijñānamaya kośa* (intellect) for employability instead of the physical and mental health of the student has been the primary cause of the current mental health issue among students.

Sociological Realities and Democratic Institutionalization

The pedagogical mechanisms behind the *paramparā* are enormous, however, the revival of the *paramparā* uncritically is extremely risky from the socio-historical point of view. Dr. [Ambedkar \(1936\)](#) in his magnum opus *Annihilation of Caste*, has tried to expose the historical structural oppression inherent in the Indian society (section 9). It was his belief that the traditional Indian education system deliberately deprived masses from education to prevent them from understanding themselves. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the revival of the modern university in a democratic republic to be able to separate the pedagogy from its historical sociology.

The spirit of inclusiveness of the tribal *Ghotuls* and skill-based inclusiveness of the artisanal *Śreṇīs* must be taken up in the 'modern *Paramparā*'. Mentorship and academic resources of the university must be democratized to empower under-privileged first-generation learners. The modern university *gurus* should evaluate learners solely on their academic capabilities, constitutional values and ethical curiosity to actively address the historical issues related to knowledge sharing.

The new way of mentoring in a more democratic manner has its own logistical challenge. The modern university system needs a transition towards Cohort Mentorship Model. There should be a few different students (10-15) assigned to each faculty member for the entire period of their studies, when the faculties deliver massive lectures for basic data transfer. In this system, the faculty member would act as a modern *Guru* and lead the students' academics, emotional well-being, and ethical progress unstructured *Samvāda* sessions regularly.

Moreover, the assessment tools also must be transformed entirely to realize this pedagogical shift. The universities are looking to ancient *Nyāya Sūtras* where it is prescribed to have a proper *Vāda* (debate) ([Vidyabhusana, 1921:52](#)) to get rid of the over dependence on the written examination system introduced particularly during colonial era. In modern universities, the system of *Vāda* (oral defense) should be mandated, with less reliance on the written examination. Experiential community-based projects (*Sevā*) and apprenticeships – core of the training system of the *Śreṇī* should be given greater weight in giving academic credits.

Remarkably, its basic mechanics of this modernized *paramparā* is already in existence in some sectors. For example - in the context of the medical residency, medical education is not a technical process that is defined in advance, but a master-apprenticeship system, teaching the art of medicine and the limits of what can and should be done, often in high-stakes situations ([Agarwal et al., 2018](#), p. 82). Likewise, progressive institutions such as Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) are now considering a revamp of the undergraduate courses, and a shifting paradigm towards how students learn through active *Samvāda* with their faculties, during early-stage research apprenticeship programme.

CONCLUSION

National Education Policy 2020 is a once in a lifetime opportunity to decolonise the higher education of India in terms of the content of curriculum, as well as the pedagogy. The *Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā* is not a thing of remote antiquity, but something that has continually developed since the time of the *Upaniṣads*. During mediaeval times, it was a system to hold the Indian economy via *Śreṇīs* and *Ustād-Shāgird* networks, while simultaneously bloomed

as the *Ghotuls* of tribal India. Besides, it was even recorded by colonial administrators such as Adam and Buchanan but later, deliberately dismantled by Macaulay's bureaucracy.

This indigenous learning framework is very complex and holistically complete in comparison with the western models like – experiential learning models of Vygotsky's and Freire's. The *paramparā* is concerned with the root causes of the current academic and psychological crisis among students by emphasizing deep relational mentorship over just transactional teaching, experiential application over rote learning and the holistic growth of an individual that is drawn from the *Pañcakośa* model over narrow cognitive training. However, as mediums of human development, the universities must take heed to the voice of the social reformers such as Ambedkar to ensure social justice. Structured mentorship cohorts, systems of experiential credit, and closing the colonial divide can contribute to re-imagining the university as an active, dialogic body which strives to enrich and free human life.

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CRedit Author Statement / Author Contributions

Pooja Yadav: Conceptualization; Writing – Original Draft; Resources.

Prabhat Ranjan: Writing – Review & Editing; Formal Analysis; Investigation

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