

# Ancient India and Inclusive Education

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**Abstract** Ancient India thus remains a flexible and still fully unexplored terrain that cannot be simplistically branded as rigid and casteist or apathetic to women when it comes to equality in education and inclusion in society. Again various evidence shows that it would be wrong to assume that ancient Indic traditions were outright supporter of women's education and holistic inclusion. The culture in ancient India and the evolving trends were volatile and chequered and calls for more intensive and extensive studies. This paper aims at exploring the ambiguous developments related to the education of the so called lower castes and how the age old theory of a rigid caste system and rigid norms against inclusion of women in India, that gave rise to social exclusion is practically not absolute and remains a grey zone to be brought under the scanner. In fact this paper attempts to bring to the forefront the instances that reveal that ancient India was more inclusive in philosophy and practice than its western counterparts.

**Keywords:** inclusion, education, women, caste

The ethics of Indian education are rooted in the rural society of the Vedic period which itself developed from a semi-nomadic pastoral to a village-based agricultural way of life. Even when towns began to emerge in the 6th century B.C. and played an ever growing role as centers of administration and commerce, the rural ethic remained and was even strengthened with the solidification of the caste system. After all, the vast majority of Indians lived and live to this day in villages. In contrast, we can observe in Greece a transition from the ethic of the aristocracy (as voiced in the Homeric epics) to the peasant values of Hesiod and finally the ethic of the city-state (polis). We see the importance of laws in their city states, with the formulators of these laws considered as the educators

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of the citizens. In India, the stable caste organization in the villages was more important than a state that often lacked stability—in fact, according to Jean Baechler, this instability was the very reason for the development and long-term stability of the caste system. This paper aims at exploring the ambiguous developments related to the education of the so called lower castes and how the age old theory of a rigid caste system and rigid norms against inclusion of women in India, that gave rise to social exclusion is practically not absolute and remains a grey zone to be brought under the scanner. In fact this paper attempts to bring to the forefront the instances that reveal that ancient India was more inclusive in philosophy and practice than its western counterparts. The Brahmin in India has always been considered as the ideal teacher, at least within the context of Vedic study: “But a Brahmin is authoritatively remembered as a teacher,” i.e., prescribed in the *smṛiti*. While all male members of the three upper social orders (*varna*) share the duties and privileges of study, sacrifice, and charitable giving, only the Brahmins are entitled to teach, receive gifts, and conduct sacrifices for others; Kshatriyas have the additional role of protecting all created beings, Vaishyas shall pursue agriculture, trade, animal husbandry, and money lending. The Arthashastra calls these duties and privileges the “functional identities, specific roles” (*sva-dharma*) of these three classes.

But there are indications that others than Brahmins, at least occasionally, taught the Veda. “A non-Brahmin who has studied the Veda and [yet] does not shine should explain these *caturohitr* litanies,” is said in the Yajurveda, and even a Brahmin may learn the Vedas from a Kshatriya or vaisya if no Brahmin teacher can be found. “The rule for [times of] distress is that a Brahmin [may] study under a teacher who is not a Brahmin; [the student shall] walk behind and obey [the non-Brahmin teacher]. When [the course] is completed, the Brahmini.e., the former student) is senior.”

There are several episodes in the Sacred Books of the East by Max Mueller and the Upanishads where Kshatriyas appear as teachers of Brahmins, but the topics are esoteric interpretations of the ritual and problems of philosophy, not the teaching of Vedic texts. Thus in Sacred Books of the East by Max Mueller, XI 6, 2, 5–10, King Janaka teaches the Brahmin Yajnavalkya his interpretation of the *agnihotra* ritual and “Thenceforth Janaka was a brahmin.” King Ajatasatru teaches the Brahmin Gargya in Brihadaranyaka Upanishads II 1, 1–20 and Katha-Upanishad IV 1–20 about the Self, and several renowned Brahmins approached, like young students with kindling in their hands, king Asvapati in *Sacred Books of the East*, X 6, 1, 1–11 and Chandogya Upanishad

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V 11, 1–24, 5 for his instruction on the “Fire in all men” and the “Self in all men.” There was a sentiment on both sides that this relationship was odd. When several Brahmins proposed to challenge King Janaka to a theological disputation (*brahmodya*), Yajnavalkya cautioned: “We are Brahmins, and he is a member of the ruling class. If we were to vanquish him, whom should we say we had vanquished? But if he were to vanquish us, people would say of us that a member of the ruling class has vanquished Brahmins: do not think of this!” Then Yajnavalkya followed the departed king to ask him for his insight privately. On the other hand, a king could feel ill at ease too. Approached by the Brahmin Gargya with kindling in hand and with the words: “I want to study with you,” King Ajatasatru hesitated for a moment: “That would go against the grain, that a Brahmin would go [as a disciple] to a Kshatriya [thinking:]: ‘He will teach me brahman.’” Then nevertheless he accepted Gargya and taught him. Still, the instances are few. One has to ask, how realistic the image of a philosopher king was. Historical kings like Asoka, Bhoja, and Harsa (and later Akbar) participated in the cultural and literary events of their time; but it is anybody’s guess how much of the intellectual work was done for them by their courtiers. Flattering a ruler and attributing one’s own work to him was routine at princely courts.

That Vaishyas could be teachers as well is evident from the story of the story of Raikva Sayugva, a man of uncertain but probably low social standing, who instructed King Janasruti Pautrayana; the gifts and attention lavished on this rather repulsive philosopher may be intended to show the power of philosophical thought rather than as a historical statement on the social conditions of the time. The situation was very different when it came to technical and practical instruction. Blacksmiths, chariot-makers, and medical practitioners were presumably always trained by experienced practitioners of their craft, often the father, but the oldest texts are silent on this point. The dharma sutras and the later technical manuals of various professions give the expected details. One skill that is extensively covered in our sources is the training in the use of weapons and military and political strategy. Since ruling and fighting were the special domain of the Kshatriyas, it is probable that they were also the primary teachers of young warriors and rulers. But the strong role assigned to Brahmins is surprising. Brihaspati and Sukra, the mythical priests (*purohita*) of the gods (Brihaspati) and the demons (Sukra) are recognized as the founders of political science, and the most famous teacher of military art in the epics is the Brahmin Drona who had learnt some of his weapon skills from the Brahmin Rama Jamadagnya (Parasurama) and whom Bhishma appointed as the teacher of the young men of his clan. Drona used his military skills to defeat the

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Panchala king Drupada and conquer half of Drupada's kingdom for himself, with Ahicchatra as his capital. A military career is permitted for Brahmins in the dharma sutras in times of distress, and the Arthashastra quotes authorities who consider Brahmin troops the best, but in the end ranks them below well trained Kshatriyas or large masses of Vaishyas and Sudras. Actually Brahmins as military commanders and kings are well attested throughout Indian history: the SurigaPusyamitra, the army chief of the last Maurya, made himself king, and Krisnadeva Raya, the great Vijayanagara king, preferred Brahmins in many military positions.

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The pupils in general education are usually the young members of the upper three classes called *arya-s*, but there are a few odd statements that include the sudras. Vajasaneyi-samhita XXVI 2 "As I shall tell this beautiful speech to the people, to the Brahmin, the member of the ruling class, the Sudra, to the *driya*, and the own school..." has been taken by some as referring to Sudras studying the Veda; but it only says that the preceding stanza may be applicable to all people. The Mahabharata once urges the Brahmin to "teach all four classes, putting the Brahmin first," but this sentence may not refer to the teaching of the *sruti* at all-Sankara, in fact, sees here only a reference to the teaching of *itihasa and purana*. Mimamsa-sutra VI 1, 27 quotes the opinion of Badari, that Sudras are not precluded from maintaining the sacred fires (as most authorities hold): the injunction that a Brahmin shall start the fires in spring, a Kshatriya in summer, and a Vaishya in fall does not imply, in his opinion, an intent to exclude Sudras who are not mentioned. Indeed, some Srutasutras have the *rathakara* start the fires in the rainy season. The context would mark the *rathakara* ("chariot maker") as a Sudra. Sankara (on I 3, 3 8) concedes that Vidura and Dharmavyadha, paragons of wisdom and knowledge in the Mahabharata though sudras by birth, have acquired knowledge and gained liberation-but they reached these goals by virtue of karma gained in previous births, not through the study of the Veda. The oral instruction—and absence of manuscripts—guaranteed Brahmin control of education (except in the crafts): they decided who could study and what.

Several modern Indian scholars have suggested that in the past girls could be initiated to Vedic study like boys and that their exclusion was a later gradual development. Women were required partners of their husband in many Vedic rituals, and not as silent as is often assumed; occasionally the wife even played an independent role. It does not follow that, as Mookerji asserts, "Women were then admitted to full religious rites and consequently to complete educational facilities." Even her husband, the patron of the offering (*yajamana*), may

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not be competent in matters of the Vedic ritual that is conducted by Brahmin priests, and even less is demanded of the wife. Women were allowed to conduct minor rites, especially in the absence of their husband, and they were, at least in some instances, familiar with the required mantras. It is true, that some hymns of the Rigveda are attributed in the Anukraman to female authors. But some of these women just happen to be mentioned in the hymn or are speakers of a stanza in a dialog hymn, e.g. Lopamudra in I 179 and Apala in VIII 91, others are mythological figures or purely priestly abstractions, such as the goddess Indrani or the ApsarasUrvasi or the sacrificial ladle, called “the wife of Brahman” (*juhubrahmajaya*). Yajnavalkya had two wives: Katyayani who knew only what women know, and Maitreyi who could proclaim the Brahman. As he was about to leave home and become an ascetic, he instructed Maitreyi at her request in his philosophy and answered her questions. Maitreyi is not otherwise reported as participating in debates. The names of Gargi, Maitreyi and a few other women are respectfully recited along with a galaxy of renowned male Vedic authorities by scholars in their daily tribute (*tarpana*) to gods, seers, ancestors, etc.

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The gender roles were volatile in ancient India as evident from the reference to a pregnant king in the Mahabharata. Yuvanashva, a childless king, accidentally drinks the magic potion meant to make his queens pregnant and gets impregnated himself. DevduttPattanaik, in his mythological novel titled *The Pregnant King*, makes references to characters and incidents in the Kurukshetra as well as the Ramayana to narrate the intriguing implications of gender subversion. Such tales from the Indian epics examine gender roles, the blurring of lines between parental duties and the malleability of Dharma to fit a given situation. Various renditions of epics like the Ramayana too reveal an intriguing paradigm shift in portrayal of women like Sita. If Sita in ancient Indian epic Ramayana composed by sage Valmiki endures the excruciating pain of living in deep forests and exhibits supreme moral strength and uprightness by praying for succour in her mother’s lap and enters the depths of the earth in form of “patalprabesh”, Tulsidas’s Sita in *Ramcharitmanas* is not shown in this light. Many scholars have commented on the sudden ending to the Tulsidashi Ramayana. Valmiki’s Uttar Kānd goes into great detail about Sita going into the forest, as a result of disapproving gossip of the citizens of Ayodhya, during the rule of Ram over Ayodhya. Sita asks mother Earth to receive her and Ram leaves His human form and returns to His celestial abode. Tulsidas decides not to mention these at all. Tulsidas refers to Sita as enduring enough pain throughout the Manas and so ends his retelling at a relatively happy moment. It is said that there are some

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Vaishnav devotees who will only recite the — of the Manas, as this is seen as the happiest period of Ram and Sita's lila on earth.

Among the many lesser-known sub-stories in the Mahabharata is one told by the sage Lomasa to the exiled Pandavas, about a king named Yuvanashva who accidentally gets pregnant, later revealed that it was no accident but by design by the ghosts of 2 young boys who were burned alive by the King at the stake

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There is a rite for a father who wishes: "May apandita daughter be born to me, may she go the full [length of] life." Mookerji, Altekar and Ram Gopal take pandita in a narrow (and more modern) meaning and speak of "a learned lady" and "a scholarly daughter," but "smart, shrewd" fits the context better. This chapter of the Upanishad offers two of the earliest attestations of the word. In the preceding sentences, and in the one that follows, there are rituals for a father who desires a son who can recite one, two, three, or all the Vedas; the last one is also called "pandita, famed, and going to assemblies." In the case of the daughter, nothing is said about the Vedas: the wish is merely that she will be pandita and have a long life. In a previous passage, Yajnavalkya tells KaholaKausitakeya, how a Brahmin can become truly a Brahmana by passing through contradictory stages: "Renouncing the state of a pandita the Brahmin shall be like a child; renouncing the state both of a child and *apandita* he [shall be] a *muni* ('sage')." In the Chandogya Upanishad, a roughly contemporary text, UddalakaAruni impresses, with a simile, on his son Svetaketu the necessity of having a teacher: A man has been taken blindfolded from the province of the Gandharas, released in a deserted area, and he wandered aimlessly around. "Now, if someone would remove his blindfold and tell him: 'In that direction is Gandhara, go in that direction!' he would go from village to village asking [for directions], being *pandita* and understanding, and reach Gandhara." In the same way, it is suggested, a student will be helped by a teacher, *pandita* here clearly does not denote a "learned" man, but a man with the necessary information and his wits about him, and similarly the *pandita* daughter is not a "learned" daughter in any technical meaning, but an intelligent girl. A report states that women were educated in a coeducational setting. In Bhavabhuti's drama Malatimadhava (act I after stanza 10) the Buddhist nun Kamandaki refers to the time when she was a fellow student of Bhurivasu and Devarata together with scholars from all quarters, and in his drama Uttaramacharita (act II after stanza 3) Atreyi was said to be educated in Valmiki's *asrama* together with Kusa and Lava, the two sons of Rama. There are also legends about Kahoda and Sujata, Ruru and Pramadhara, implying coeducation. These narratives by

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late authors (Bhavabhuti lived in the eighth century A.D.) are romantic images of an idealized past, actually even the distant past within the time-frame of a previous mythic aeon. They do not prove institutional coeducation at the authors' time, and they cannot be considered proof for the centuries before them in the absence of supporting evidence. We cannot, perhaps, rule out some degree of joint education of brothers and sisters in a family, with the father or a close relative as the teacher.

There has been some controversy on the question whether women ever underwent initiation and wore the sacred thread. Several scholars have relied on statements related in recent compendia, the *Smrticandrika* (early thirteenth century) and the *Samskaraprakasa* of the *Viramitrodaya* (seventeenth century). The first is a quotation attributed to Harita: "Women are of two kinds: those who proclaim *brahman* and those who marry immediately. Among them those who proclaim *brahman* [undergo] initiation, kindling of the fires, and begging tours within their own house; of those who marry immediately, when the [date of] marriage is near, somehow some kind of initiation is made and the marriage is performed." These compendia quote also two and a half stanzas attributed to Yama: "In a previous aeon tying of the sacred grass-belt was ordained for girls, and the teaching of the Vedas and making them recite the Savitri. Either their father, paternal uncle or brother taught her-not a stranger. And begging was prescribed in the own house, and she was not to wear deer-skin or bark garments and was not to have matted hair." Both quotations are attested very late, and one of them explicitly says that this custom prevailed in an earlier age and was by implication not valid now.

Katyayana and certainly Patanjali knew female teachers. While Panini IV teaches a suffix-am to denote a female in relation to a man e.g., *Indrni* "wife of Indra" and *acharyani* "wife of a teacher," Katyayana remarks that in the case of *mdtula* "maternal uncle" and *upddhyaya* "teacher" these feminine forms (*matulani* "wife of the maternal uncle" and *upadhyayani* "wife of the teacher") are the preferred forms but that *matulianaupadhyayi* are also correct (varttika 4 *upddhyaya-matulabhyamvd*). Panini rules in a suffix-a (technical name *ghan* III 3 16) after the root 7 "go": *adhyaya*, *upadhyaya*. To this rule Katyayana proposes a supplement, viz., that in the meaning *ofapaana* ("from") additional teaching should be made for a feminine, and that preferably a suffix *HI* should be added. Patanjali explains: "Going [to her] they learn from her: [hence] *upddhyayi*, *upddhyaya* 'female teacher.'" Here the woman does not get her title by her relation to a man but in her own right. There are terms for a Brahmin woman who studies Kasakrtsni's doctrines (who is then called *Kasakrtsna*)

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and possibly for one following the Katha tradition of the Yajurveda (though there is no indication whether that implies real study of the texts; she may merely observe the customs prevailing in that tradition), and there are reports of Buddhist nuns teaching younger nuns and lay people. But there are, oddly enough, no reports of Buddhist nuns teaching after the fourth century A.D., while the teaching by monks continued to flourish for several centuries more.

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Women of the upper classes and certain other women apparently enjoyed some education in all periods of Indian history. Rajasekhara (circa A.D.880–920) makes a statement in his *Kavya-mimamsa* that may hold good throughout: “Women also become poets, like men. For the accomplishment comes together in the soul; it does not consider a female or male distinction. One hears and sees daughters of kings, daughters of high dignitaries, courtesans, and keen wives whose minds are expanded by the works of learning and [who are] poets.” There have been queens who acted as regents for their minor sons or even ruled in their own right, female governors of provinces, heroines that led armies in battle or fought in small bands, and the anthologies preserve some poetry composed by women. The ladies at royal courts played intellectual games involving Sanskrit and Prakrit. All this would not have been possible without education.

Ancient India thus remains a flexible and still fully unexplored terrain that cannot be simplistically branded as rigid and casteist or apathetic to women when it comes to equality in education and inclusion in society. Again various evidence shows that it would be wrong to assume that ancient Indic traditions were outright supporter of women’s education and holistic inclusion. The culture in ancient India and the evolving trends were volatile and chequered and calls for more intensive and extensive studies. However it may be inferred from the above discussion that ancient India had been more inclusive than its western counterparts. When Plato prescribes killing of all deformed or disabled people, ancient India shows deformed Astabakra attaining rishihood, Satyakamjabala- a child of a prostitute being accepted by Rishi Gautama in the gurukul, and the varna system being essentially based on karma or work. As Kane (1974) quotes Bandhayanas rules for a special type of Upanayana or the right of the initiation to the educational studies performed by young people who were “blind, deaf, crippled or idiots”. The modern world ripped with violence and exclusion has a lot to learn from the ancient practices and philosophy that provided subtler understanding of inclusion and a more logically organized society.



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