



Research Paper

Beyond the Gurukul: Reassessing the Relationship Between Religion and Education in Ancient India: A Historical-Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

Ancient India developed one of the world's earliest and most influential traditions of learning yet the relationship between religion and education is often reduced to the image of the Gurukul here. That picture tells only one part of the story. Educational practices grew within different religious traditions, including Vedic, Buddhist and Jain communities etc., each of which shaped ideas about knowledge, teaching, moral life with the purpose of learning in its own way. The result was a rich educational landscape, although access to knowledge was not shared equally across society. This gap deserves closer attention. This paper attempts to examine how religion influenced educational thought and institutions in ancient India while questioning the tendency to treat the Gurukul as the single model of ancient learning. It asks how different religious traditions shaped educational aims, teacher-student relationships, curriculum and methods of instruction and how these ideas were connected with wider social structures. This study adopts a qualitative historical approach based on documentary analysis and comparative interpretation. Primary sources like Vedic and Buddhist texts, are read next to modern historical and sociological scholarship and the evidence is interpreted through insights drawn from historical sociology and the sociology of education. The findings suggest that ancient Indian education was neither uniform nor limited to religious instruction. Instead, it brought together ethical training, intellectual inquiry and practical knowledge within many institutional settings. At the same time, educational opportunities reflected existing social hierarchies. By offering a historical-sociological reading of these traditions, this paper fills an important gap in current scholarship and contributes to broader debates on religion, education and knowledge systems in India.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Education, Religion, Gurukul, Buddhist Education, Sociology of Education, Guru-Shishya Tradition, Knowledge Systems

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I. Introduction

India has long been recognized as one of the world's oldest centres of learning where education developed alongside philosophical reflection, religious practice and social life. Long before the rise of modern universities in different parts of country, knowledge was produced and transmitted through Gurukulas, Buddhist Viharas, Jain monastic institutions, temple schools and centres of higher learning such as Takshashila and Nalanda. These institutions differed in their organization and intellectual orientation yet they shared the belief that education should shape both the mind and conduct of the learner. It mattered deeply. In ancient Indian thought learning was closely tied to ideas of *dharma*, ethical behaviour and the pursuit of wisdom, although practical subjects such as medicine, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, statecraft and agriculture also formed part of the curriculum in different periods. Religious traditions therefore influenced educational aims but they did not define education in a single or uniform way. The Vedic tradition placed strong emphasis on preserving sacred knowledge through the Guru-Shishya relationship whereas Buddhist institutions encouraged debate, critical inquiry and systematic reasoning within organized monastic universities. Jain centres likewise connected education with ethical discipline and self-control. These differences remind us that ancient Indian education developed through interaction among many intellectual traditions rather than from one isolated model. The historical record reflects

this diversity through literary texts, inscriptions and archaeological evidence all of which indicate that learning took place in different institutional settings and served both spiritual and worldly purposes (Alam, 2024; Rao, 2019; National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2024).

Even so, much of the existing literature continues to present ancient Indian education through a narrow lens where the Gurukul is treated as the defining institution and religion appears as the only force behind educational development. That interpretation leaves an important gap. It overlooks the educational contributions of Buddhist monasteries, Jain learning centres and regional institutions that developed different methods of teaching and different ideas about knowledge, authority and public life. It also tends to describe ancient education as a single, stable system although historical evidence points instead to gradual change, regional variation and ongoing debate between religious communities. Some modern writings further romanticize the past by suggesting that education was equally available to everyone or that it focused only on moral and spiritual growth while paying much less attention to social divisions based on caste, gender and occupation that influenced access to learning. These interpretations make the history harder to understand because they compress many centuries into one simple narrative. Historical scholarship has increasingly questioned such assumptions by showing that educational institutions changed over time and responded to wider social, political and economic conditions, rather than remaining fixed across the ancient period (Rao, 2019; Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Pradhan et al., 2024).

This paper addresses that gap by asking how religion shaped educational philosophy in ancient India without assuming that religion alone determined educational practice. It explores the ways in which Vedic, Buddhist and Jain traditions understood the aims of education, the role of teachers, methods of instruction and the relationship between learning and society. Another question follows naturally as where did these traditions converge and where did they differ? The study also considers the extent to which education functioned as a religious activity while serving broader social and political purposes including the preservation of cultural traditions, the training of administrators and the transmission of intellectual authority. Finally, it examines the common misconceptions that continue to shape present understandings of ancient Indian education particularly the assumption that the Gurukul represented the whole educational landscape or that educational institutions developed independently of changing social conditions. These questions matter today. They allow a more balanced understanding of how knowledge systems emerged, interacted and evolved across different religious communities instead of viewing ancient education as a single cultural tradition that remained unchanged for centuries.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between religion and education through a historical-sociological perspective that brings together educational history, sociology of religion and the sociology of knowledge. Rather than describing each religious tradition separately, the article compares their educational ideas and institutional practices in order to understand how different beliefs shaped learning while responding to changing social realities. It also evaluates dominant historical narratives that continue to influence public discussions of ancient Indian education and asks whether these narratives accurately represent the available evidence. The analysis draws on qualitative historical research using primary religious texts alongside recent historical and educational scholarship allowing different sources to be read together instead of in isolation. That approach keeps the discussion grounded in evidence while leaving room for critical interpretation because educational institutions reflected both ideals and social realities, and those two did not always move in the same direction. The paper therefore argues that ancient Indian education should be understood as a dynamic tradition shaped by dialogue, adaptation and contestation across religious communities offering insights that remain relevant to current discussions on value education, knowledge traditions and educational philosophy in India.

II. Literature Review

Ancient Indian education has generally been understood as a system that sought the complete development of the learner rather than the simple transmission of information. The idea appears consistently across studies of Indian educational history, although scholars explain it from different perspectives. Learning was expected to shape intellectual ability, moral conduct and personal discipline through continuous interaction between the student, the teacher and the wider community. It was a lifelong process. The Gurukul became the best known symbol of this educational tradition because students lived with the Guru and learned through observation, dialogue, reflection and everyday practice instead of formal classroom instruction alone. Yet reducing ancient education to the Gurukul overlooks the wider educational landscape that existed across the Indian subcontinent. NCERT describes ancient education as a balanced process that integrated physical, intellectual and spiritual development while cultivating truthfulness, humility and responsibility towards society (NCERT, 2024). Historical studies similarly argue that education was closely connected with *dharma*, self-study and character formation while practical subjects such as medicine, grammar, astronomy, mathematics and political administration gradually became important parts of the curriculum (Pradhan et al., 2024). Recent scholarship also emphasizes that religious institutions functioned not merely as centres of worship but as spaces where knowledge, ethical values and collective identities were produced and transmitted across generations. Mitra's (2025a) sociological study of the ascetics of Kashi illustrates how religious communities continue to preserve systems of

knowledge through everyday practice and institutional discipline suggesting that this close relationship between religion and education has deep historical roots rather than being limited to formal educational institutions. Together, these studies suggest that ancient Indian education cannot be understood solely as religious instruction because intellectual inquiry, ethical development and practical knowledge evolved together within many institutional settings.

Religion nevertheless remained central to educational development although its influence differed across traditions. This diversity deserves greater attention. Within the Vedic system, education aimed to preserve sacred knowledge while preparing individuals to fulfil their social and moral responsibilities through the Guru-Shishya tradition. Buddhist education moved in a different direction by expanding organized monastic learning and encouraging observation, debate and logical reasoning allowing institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila to develop into internationally recognised centres of scholarship. Jain educational philosophy likewise placed ethical discipline at the centre of learning but emphasized non-violence, restraint and self-control as the basis of intellectual development. Islamic educational institutions later introduced Maktabas and Madrasas where religious instruction existed next to mathematics, medicine, astronomy and literature while Christian missionary schools combined religious education with printed textbooks, structured curricula and modern institutional organization. These traditions did not develop in isolation. They interacted continuously responding to changing political authority, regional cultures and social needs while influencing one another in subtle ways (Alam, 2024; Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Pradhan et al., 2024). Comparative sociological research further supports this view. Mitra (2025b), drawing upon Louis Dumont's distinction between the sacred and the profane, argues that Indian religious traditions should be understood as symbolic systems that organize social life in different ways rather than as uniform cultural categories. This perspective is particularly useful because it highlights both the shared ethical concerns and the distinctive educational philosophies that developed across Vedic, Buddhist and Jain traditions instead of treating ancient Indian education as a single religious model.

The relationship between teachers and students occupies a central place throughout the literature, although educational authority differed across institutions and historical periods. The teacher was expected to guide, mentor and embody the moral values that education sought to cultivate. In the Vedic tradition, the Guru or Acharya represented both intellectual authority and ethical leadership while the Upadhyaya usually specialized in teaching particular branches of knowledge. Buddhist institutions assigned a similar responsibility to the *Bhikkhu*, yet authority increasingly rested upon scholarship, debate and intellectual ability rather than inherited social status. Jain educational traditions likewise viewed teachers as moral exemplars whose personal discipline carried as much importance as their knowledge of religious texts. Learning therefore developed through sustained personal interaction instead of impersonal instruction. At the same time historians acknowledge that educational authority often reflected wider social structures particularly during the later Vedic period when caste increasingly influenced access to formal learning and teaching positions (Bhatia, 2015; NCERT, 2024; Pradhan et al., 2024). Recent sociological work extends this discussion by arguing that religious authority often becomes a form of symbolic power through which knowledge gains legitimacy and social acceptance (Mitra, 2026). Such an interpretation draws attention to the relationship between education and power, suggesting that educational institutions not only transmitted knowledge but also shaped ideas about who had the right to teach, interpret sacred texts and define legitimate knowledge within society.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond describing educational institutions and has begun to question the assumptions that dominate popular narratives about ancient Indian education. Among the most influential contributions is Rao's (2019) critique of what she describes as the myths surrounding Indian educational history. She demonstrates that the belief that ancient education relied entirely on oral transmission overlooks extensive manuscript traditions, inscriptions and written scholarly works. Likewise, the assumption that colonial education completely displaced indigenous institutions ignores historical evidence showing continuity adaptation and interaction between old and new educational systems. Rao also challenges the romantic image of the Gurukul as a universal educational model by demonstrating considerable regional diversity and unequal access to learning. These arguments have encouraged historians to view educational development as a changing historical process rather than a fixed civilizational achievement. Contemporary discussions increasingly connect these historical debates with questions of secularism, value education and the National Education Policy 2020 which seeks to engage with Indian knowledge traditions while promoting multidisciplinary learning, ethical development and critical thinking (Alam, 2024; Vasimalairaja, 2020). Even so, an important gap remains. Most studies continue to examine Vedic, Buddhist or Jain educational traditions separately, concentrating on descriptive historical accounts instead of analysing how religion, knowledge, authority and social structure interacted across different traditions. Recent sociological studies on inequality, symbolic exclusion and religious institutions (Mitra, 2019; Mitra, 2026) demonstrate the value of interpreting education through broader sociological concepts yet these perspectives have rarely been applied systematically to ancient Indian educational history. This paper addresses that gap by bringing together educational history, the sociology of religion and the sociology of education within a comparative framework. Such an approach provides a richer understanding of ancient Indian education while avoiding both romantic celebration and overly simplified historical narratives.

III. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the relationship between religion and education in ancient India requires more than a historical description of educational institutions. Historical records explain how Gurukulas, Buddhist Viharas and Jain monastic centres functioned but they do not fully explain why these institutions became socially influential or how they shaped people's beliefs, behaviour and ideas about knowledge. Theory helps answer those questions. It provides a way to connect educational practices with wider social processes. This study therefore adopts Émile Durkheim's sociology of religion and education as its primary theoretical framework while drawing on Max Weber's ideas about authority and knowledge, together with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power. These perspectives complement one another because each highlights a different dimension of education, and together they make it possible to understand ancient Indian educational traditions as social institutions that produced knowledge while also maintaining moral values, social authority and cultural continuity.

Durkheim's work provides the central framework because he viewed both religion and education as institutions that create and preserve social solidarity. Education, in his view, was not simply the transmission of information from one generation to another. It was a process through which society reproduced its shared values, moral rules and collective identity. This idea is especially useful for understanding ancient Indian education where learning was closely connected with *dharma*, ethical conduct and community life rather than individual achievement alone. The Guru-Shishya tradition, Buddhist monastic education and Jain learning all sought to shape behaviour alongside intellectual development, although they differed in their philosophical foundations. Moral education stood at the centre. Students were expected to acquire discipline, respect for teachers and responsibility towards society and these values were reinforced through everyday practices rather than classroom instruction alone. Durkheim's concept of the collective conscience therefore helps explain why educational institutions became important mechanisms for preserving religious traditions while strengthening social integration across different communities (Durkheim, 1912/1995).

Durkheim's perspective, however, does not fully explain the diversity of educational traditions that developed across ancient India or the differences in authority among them. Weber offers another way of looking at the same historical material. His sociology of religion focuses on how systems of belief shape intellectual traditions, forms of authority and the legitimacy of knowledge. That perspective becomes particularly relevant when comparing Vedic, Buddhist and Jain educational institutions because each tradition established different criteria for recognizing legitimate knowledge and different forms of educational authority. Vedic education largely grounded authority in sacred texts and the Guru's position within established religious traditions while Buddhist institutions increasingly emphasized debate, rational inquiry and scholarly discussion as ways of validating knowledge. Jain educational thought likewise linked authority to ethical discipline and spiritual practice rather than inherited social status alone. These differences reveal that educational authority was historically negotiated instead of remaining fixed across all religious communities. Weber's distinction between traditional authority and forms of intellectual legitimacy therefore provides an effective framework for examining how religious beliefs shaped educational organization while allowing room for institutional change and philosophical debate (Weber, 1922/1978).

Bourdieu extends this discussion by showing how education also reproduces social relationships through culture and symbolic power. His concepts of cultural capital and symbolic legitimacy help explain why access to education was never equally distributed across ancient Indian society despite the high value placed on learning. Knowledge carried social power. Mastery of sacred languages, ritual practices and philosophical texts became forms of cultural capital that distinguished educated groups from others and strengthened existing social hierarchies. Educational institutions did not merely preserve religious ideas; they also contributed to the reproduction of social privilege by determining who could acquire valued knowledge and who could teach it. At the same time, Buddhist monasteries and other learning centres created alternative spaces where intellectual authority depended more heavily on scholarship and debate, although social inequalities were not entirely absent there either. Bringing Durkheim, Weber and Bourdieu together therefore allows this study to examine ancient Indian education from complementary perspectives. Durkheim explains education as moral and social integration, Weber illuminates the relationship between religion, authority and intellectual traditions and Bourdieu demonstrates how educational institutions shape the distribution and legitimacy of knowledge within society. Taken together, these theories provide a balanced framework for analysing ancient Indian education as both a cultural tradition and a social institution.

IV. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design because the central objective is to understand how religion shaped educational thought and practice in ancient India rather than to measure historical trends through quantitative data. The study is interpretive in nature and is grounded in historical sociology which allows educational institutions to be examined within the broader social, cultural and religious contexts in which they developed. Historical evidence does not speak for itself. It requires careful interpretation because educational

ideas were produced in different periods by different religious communities and for different social purposes. A qualitative historical approach is therefore appropriate for exploring the relationship between religious beliefs, educational philosophy and institutional development across Vedic, Buddhist and early classical India. Instead of treating educational traditions as isolated systems, this approach examines how they interacted with wider processes of social organization, moral regulation and knowledge production over time.

The research is based on documentary analysis and comparative historical interpretation. Documentary research is particularly suitable because the educational institutions examined in this article belong to historical periods where written texts remain the primary source of evidence. These texts are interpreted within their historical settings rather than being treated as timeless descriptions of educational practice. Comparative historical analysis makes it possible to examine similarities and differences among Vedic, Buddhist and Jain educational traditions while recognizing that each emerged under distinct religious and social conditions. Textual interpretation also plays a central role because religious and philosophical texts often combine normative ideals with descriptions of educational practice requiring careful reading to distinguish educational principles from social prescriptions. This approach allows the study to move beyond simple description and develop a historically grounded interpretation of how religion and education influenced one another across different intellectual traditions.

The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources to ensure historical depth and analytical balance. Primary sources include the *Rigveda*, *Upanishads*, *Dharmasutras*, *Manusmriti*, *Tripitaka*, *Jataka* literature and *Arthashastra*, together with the travel accounts of Fa-Hien and Xuanzang whose observations provide valuable descriptions of educational institutions, monasteries and centres of learning in ancient India. These sources represent different religious and intellectual traditions and therefore allow comparison across diverse educational settings. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, NCERT publications on the ancient Indian education system, university modules on teacher education, historical studies of Indian education and recent interdisciplinary work such as *Religion and Education in India* (Alam, 2024). Reading these materials together helps balance traditional historical narratives with contemporary scholarship and provides multiple perspectives on the relationship between religion and education (Alam, 2024; NCERT, 2024; Rao, 2019).

Purposive sampling has been used to select texts and historical materials that are directly relevant to the research questions. The selection was guided by three considerations like historical significance, educational relevance and representation of different religious traditions. Not every available text has been included because the purpose is not to compile an exhaustive catalogue of ancient literature but to examine sources that have shaped educational thought and practice in influential ways. The analysis follows four complementary methods as thematic analysis, historical analysis, comparative analysis and interpretive content analysis. Together these methods allow educational ideas to be organized around recurring themes while remaining sensitive to historical context and textual meaning. The analysis focuses on educational aims, the role of teachers, curriculum, concepts of knowledge, the influence of religion, institutional organization, pedagogical methods and questions relating to caste, gender and social inclusion. Looking at these themes across different traditions makes it easier to identify both shared educational values and important differences that are often overlooked in generalized accounts of ancient Indian education.

The scope of this study is limited to the Vedic period, the Buddhist period and the early classical phase of Indian educational development where religious institutions played a central role in organizing learning and preserving knowledge. Later medieval educational developments are referred to only where they provide historical continuity or useful comparison. This boundary keeps the discussion focused. Like all historical research, the study has certain limitations. It does not include archaeological fieldwork or material evidence gathered through excavation, and the analysis depends primarily on textual and documentary sources many of which reflect normative ideals rather than everyday educational practice. Some primary texts were written over long periods and underwent later revisions making precise historical interpretation difficult. The study also concentrates on the major educational traditions of ancient India and does not examine every regional or local variation. Despite these limitations, the use of diverse textual sources, comparative historical analysis and sociological interpretation provides a strong foundation for understanding how religion shaped educational institutions, knowledge systems and moral life in ancient India.

Religion and Educational Philosophy in Ancient India

Religion shaped the educational philosophy of ancient India in profound ways yet it did not produce a single educational system or one shared understanding of knowledge. Each religious tradition developed its own view of why education mattered, how knowledge should be acquired and what kind of person education should produce. These differences reflected wider philosophical beliefs about human life, moral responsibility and the nature of society. Even so there were also important points of convergence. Education was generally viewed as a lifelong process that required discipline, ethical conduct and close interaction between teachers and students. Knowledge carried moral responsibility. The Vedic, Buddhist and Jain traditions each contributed distinctive

educational ideas that later influenced the development of Indian intellectual life, although they differed in their methods, institutional structures and social outlook (NCERT, 2024; Pradhan et al., 2024).

The Vedic educational tradition emerged from the belief that knowledge was closely connected with *dharma* and the pursuit of *moksha*, the highest goal of human life. Education was therefore expected to shape both conduct and understanding. It was never viewed simply as preparation for employment or economic advancement. Learning began with the *Upanayana* ceremony and continued within the Gurukul where students lived with the Guru participated in everyday work and learned through recitation, observation and continuous practice. This residential arrangement encouraged strong personal relationships between teacher and student allowing education to become part of daily life rather than an activity confined to formal lessons. The curriculum centred on the Vedas, Upanishads, grammar, philosophy and ritual knowledge yet it gradually expanded to include astronomy, medicine, mathematics, agriculture, music and statecraft as society became more complex. Character formation occupied a central place in this system because students were expected to cultivate truthfulness, humility, self-restraint and respect for social obligations. These moral qualities were regarded as essential for acquiring knowledge not merely desirable personal traits. At the same time, historical evidence suggests that access to Vedic education became increasingly restricted during the later Vedic period as caste distinctions hardened, limiting educational opportunities for many sections of society. The educational ideal was therefore accompanied by social boundaries that shaped who could participate fully in institutional learning (NCERT, 2024; Bhatia, 2015; Pradhan et al., 2024).

Buddhist educational philosophy developed in a different direction while retaining the belief that education should transform the individual. Its primary concern was not the preservation of revealed knowledge but the cultivation of wisdom through observation, reasoning and disciplined inquiry. The change was significant. Buddhist monasteries gradually evolved into organized centres of learning where monks and lay students studied philosophy, logic, medicine, grammar, linguistics and political thought alongside religious teachings. Institutions such as Nalanda and Vikramashila became internationally known because they welcomed students from different parts of Asia and encouraged scholarly discussion across intellectual traditions. Debate occupied an important place within Buddhist education because truth was expected to emerge through careful reasoning rather than unquestioned acceptance of authority. Teachers acted as guides and mentors yet their authority depended largely on learning and intellectual ability instead of inherited status. Buddhist education also displayed greater openness towards social mobility than the later Vedic tradition although complete equality was never fully realized in practice. Monastic discipline remained strict, requiring commitment, ethical conduct and collective responsibility, but the educational environment created more space for critical inquiry and independent thinking than is often associated with traditional religious education. Knowledge, in this tradition, became both a path towards liberation and a means of understanding the human condition through experience and reflection (Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Pradhan et al., 2024).

Jain educational philosophy shared with Buddhism the belief that ethical discipline formed the foundation of learning yet it developed its own distinctive educational outlook based on non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-control and personal responsibility. Education was closely connected with spiritual purification, requiring learners to regulate their desires, speech and actions before claiming genuine understanding. Inner discipline came first. Teachers encouraged rigorous study, reflection and memorization, although equal importance was attached to everyday conduct because knowledge without ethical practice was considered incomplete. Jain educational institutions also contributed to the preservation of language, literature, mathematics and philosophy demonstrating that religious learning extended well beyond ritual instruction. The emphasis on *anekantavada*, the doctrine that truth can be understood from different perspectives, encouraged intellectual openness and careful reasoning while discouraging absolute claims to knowledge. This philosophical position provided space for dialogue without abandoning religious commitment. Compared with the Vedic tradition, Jain education paid less attention to ritual performance and placed greater emphasis on ethical living, personal restraint and respect for all forms of life. These ideas influenced educational practice by encouraging self-discipline rather than external control as the basis for intellectual growth (Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Alam, 2024).

A comparison of these educational traditions reveals both shared foundations and important differences. All three regarded education as a process of personal transformation rather than the simple accumulation of information and each expected learners to develop moral responsibility alongside intellectual ability. The teacher occupied a respected position across traditions, although the basis of educational authority differed. Vedic education relied heavily on the Guru's custodianship of sacred knowledge, Buddhist institutions increasingly emphasized scholarly debate and rational inquiry, while Jain education linked authority to ethical discipline and spiritual practice. Their curricula also reflected different priorities. Vedic institutions focused on preserving sacred texts while gradually incorporating practical subjects, Buddhist centres encouraged broader intellectual inquiry across many disciplines and Jain education integrated philosophical reasoning with moral self-discipline. Social inclusion varied as well. Buddhist institutions generally displayed greater openness to learners from different backgrounds whereas Vedic education became more closely associated with caste based restrictions during the later period. Jain institutions occupied an intermediate position stressing ethical commitment over ritual status

while remaining shaped by broader social realities. These similarities and differences demonstrate that ancient Indian education cannot be understood as a single religious system or a uniform philosophical tradition. Instead, it developed through dialogue, adaptation and intellectual exchange among diverse communities, each contributing in distinctive ways to India's educational heritage.

Beyond the Gurukul: Multiple Educational Traditions

The Gurukul occupies a central place in popular discussions of ancient Indian education. School textbooks, public debates and even academic writing often present it as the defining educational institution of the ancient period. This image is familiar but it is incomplete. Historical evidence suggests that learning in ancient India took place through many institutions that differed in purpose, organization and intellectual orientation. Religious communities, royal courts, urban centres, temples and professional groups all participated in the production and transmission of knowledge. The educational landscape was therefore much broader than the Gurukul alone. Recognizing this diversity does not reduce the importance of the Guru-Shishya tradition; rather, it places that tradition within a larger network of educational institutions that evolved over many centuries and responded to changing social and political conditions (Pradhan et al., 2024; Rao, 2019).

The Ashram represented one important form of education, particularly during the Vedic period where students lived with the Guru in a relatively simple environment that encouraged disciplined living, self study and close personal guidance. Learning extended beyond the memorization of sacred texts because daily activities such as collecting firewood caring for animals and participating in household work formed part of the educational process. Life itself became the classroom. Yet this model existed alongside other institutions that served different educational purposes. Buddhist Viharas gradually developed into organized monastic centres where education was conducted collectively rather than within small residential households. As Buddhism expanded, some of these Viharas grew into Mahaviharas, large residential universities supported by royal patronage and international scholarly networks. These institutions attracted students from India, China, Korea, Tibet and Southeast Asia, creating environments where philosophical debate, linguistic studies, medicine, astronomy and logic flourished next to religious instruction. Their existence demonstrates that higher education in ancient India extended well beyond the residential Gurukul and increasingly adopted organized institutional forms (Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Bhatia, 2015).

Takshashila and Nalanda illustrate this institutional diversity particularly well. Although both are frequently described as ancient universities, they developed under different historical conditions and followed different educational models. Takshashila functioned as an urban centre of learning where students sought instruction from renowned scholars rather than enrolling in a centralized institution with a fixed curriculum. Teachers specialized in subjects ranging from grammar and philosophy to medicine, military science and political administration allowing students to pursue advanced study according to their interests and abilities. Nalanda, by contrast, emerged as a highly organized Mahavihara supported by Buddhist monastic traditions and royal patronage. It possessed libraries, residential facilities and structured systems of instruction that attracted scholars from across Asia. Chinese pilgrims such as Xuanzang and Fa-Hien described these institutions as vibrant intellectual communities where rigorous discussion, public debate and scholarly exchange shaped educational life. Their accounts suggest that ancient India possessed internationally connected centres of higher learning whose influence extended far beyond religious education alone (Pradhan et al., 2024; Alam, 2024).

Educational activity also flourished outside residential institutions and monasteries. Temple schools became important centres for teaching religious literature, language, philosophy, music and the arts particularly in southern India where temples functioned not only as places of worship but also as centres of cultural and intellectual life. Urban learning developed alongside commercial expansion as merchants, scribes and administrators required practical knowledge of accounting, law, languages and trade. Royal academies supported scholars working in literature, philosophy, astronomy and political thought because rulers viewed learning as an important source of administrative strength and cultural prestige. Professional guilds likewise contributed to education by transmitting technical knowledge, craftsmanship and occupational skills from one generation to the next through apprenticeship and practical experience. These forms of learning rarely receive the same attention as the Gurukul, yet they reveal that education served economic, administrative and artistic purposes alongside religious and philosophical ones. Knowledge moved across institutions. It was not confined to one educational setting.

The question of women's education further illustrates the complexity of ancient Indian educational traditions. Evidence from Vedic literature indicates that women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi participated in philosophical discussions and acquired advanced learning suggesting that educational opportunities existed for at least some women during the early Vedic period. Later historical developments, however, appear to have narrowed these opportunities as social restrictions became more pronounced. Buddhist traditions admitted women into monastic communities through the establishment of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*, creating new possibilities for religious learning, although access remained shaped by institutional and social limitations. Jain traditions also recognized the educational role of women within monastic life particularly in preserving religious literature and

ethical teachings. These examples indicate that women's education cannot be described through a single historical pattern because opportunities varied across religious traditions, historical periods and social groups. The evidence remains uneven. Nevertheless, it challenges the assumption that formal education in ancient India was exclusively a male experience.

Taken together, these educational institutions demonstrate that the Gurukul formed only one component of a much richer and more diverse educational tradition. Ashrams, Viharas, Mahaviharas, temple schools, urban centres of learning, royal academies and occupational guilds all contributed to the preservation, creation and transmission of knowledge. Their educational aims often overlapped, yet their institutional structures, curricula and social reach differed considerably. Viewing ancient Indian education through the Gurukul alone therefore obscures the complexity of its intellectual history. A broader perspective reveals an educational civilization characterized by institutional diversity, philosophical dialogue and continuous adaptation rather than a single, uniform model of learning.

Religion, Society and Educational Inequality

Ancient Indian educational traditions are often remembered for their philosophical depth and moral ideals yet they were also shaped by the social structures within which they developed. Religion influenced educational goals, but it also affected who could gain access to knowledge who could teach and whose learning was considered legitimate. This relationship was neither simple nor uniform. Educational institutions reflected the values of their respective religious communities while responding to existing patterns of social organization particularly those related to *varna*, gender and occupational status. Knowledge carried authority. From a sociological perspective, education functioned not only as a means of personal development but also as an institution through which social relationships were maintained challenged and sometimes reshaped. Looking at ancient education through this lens makes it possible to understand both its intellectual achievements and its social limitations (Rao, 2019; Pradhan et al., 2024).

Within the later Vedic tradition, educational opportunities became increasingly connected with the *varna* system. Access to formal learning, especially the study of the Vedas, gradually came to be associated with the three upper *varnas* while Shudras and many other social groups remained outside these institutional arrangements. Religious authority reinforced this pattern because sacred knowledge was viewed as something that required ritual eligibility as well as intellectual ability. This relationship between religion and education illustrates what Bourdieu describes as the reproduction of cultural capital, where access to valued knowledge strengthens existing forms of social power. Education therefore became both a cultural resource and a marker of social distinction. Durkheim's view of education as a mechanism for preserving collective values helps explain why such arrangements were accepted within the moral framework of the time yet Weber reminds us that educational authority also rested on religious legitimacy, making knowledge inseparable from questions of status and social recognition. Educational ideals promoted moral discipline and intellectual growth, but opportunities remained unevenly distributed across society (Bourdieu, 1986; Weber, 1978).

Gender introduced another important dimension of educational inequality. Historical evidence suggests that women participated in philosophical debates during the early Vedic period, and figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi demonstrate that advanced learning was not entirely absent among women. Their presence matters. At the same time, these examples appear to represent exceptional cases rather than the general educational experience of women. As social regulations became more restrictive in later periods, formal educational opportunities for women appear to have declined particularly within Vedic institutions. Buddhist traditions created new possibilities through the establishment of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* allowing women to participate in religious learning and monastic scholarship, although institutional limitations remained. Jain traditions also provided educational roles for women within monastic communities particularly in preserving ethical teachings and religious literature. Even so, access to education continued to depend on social background, religious affiliation and institutional rules. The evidence therefore points neither to complete exclusion nor widespread equality, but to historically changing opportunities shaped by wider social structures rather than educational philosophy alone (Alam, 2024; Bhat & Javaid, 2024).

The relationship between knowledge and power becomes clearer when education is viewed as a social institution rather than simply a religious practice. Religious traditions defined what counted as legitimate knowledge who possessed the authority to interpret it and how it should be transmitted across generations. Yet these boundaries were not fixed. Buddhist educational institutions questioned inherited forms of authority by emphasizing debate, reason and scholarly discussion while Jain philosophy encouraged the idea that truth could be understood from more than one perspective. These intellectual developments widened educational space even if they did not completely remove social inequalities. Inclusion and exclusion therefore operated simultaneously. Ancient Indian education preserved remarkable traditions of philosophy, literature, science and ethics but it also reflected the unequal distribution of educational opportunities across different sections of society. A sociological interpretation does not diminish these achievements; instead, it helps explain how religion, knowledge and social power interacted in shaping educational institutions. Understanding this relationship is essential because it moves

the discussion beyond idealized accounts of the past and presents ancient Indian education as a dynamic system where intellectual excellence existed alongside enduring patterns of social inequality.

Rethinking Ancient Indian Education: Myths and Realities

The history of ancient Indian education is often presented through simplified narratives that celebrate its achievements while overlooking its complexity. Such narratives have emerged from colonial interpretations, nationalist writings and popular educational discourse, each emphasizing particular aspects of the past while ignoring others. The result has been the persistence of several myths that continue to shape both academic discussions and public understanding. These myths matter because they influence how educational traditions are interpreted today. Recent historical scholarship, particularly the work of Parimala V. Rao (2019), argues that many widely accepted assumptions cannot be sustained when examined against textual evidence inscriptions and historical records. A more balanced interpretation does not diminish the significance of ancient Indian education. It makes that history more accurate.

One persistent myth is that ancient Indian education relied entirely on oral transmission. The importance of memorization and recitation within the Vedic tradition is well documented and oral learning undoubtedly occupied a central place in preserving sacred texts across generations. Yet describing the entire educational system as oral ignores a substantial body of historical evidence. India possessed numerous writing systems long before the colonial period and written manuscripts circulated across religious and intellectual communities. Literary works such as the *Upanishads*, *Arthashastra*, *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Aryabhatiya* and Buddhist *Tripitaka* demonstrate that knowledge was recorded, preserved and transmitted through written texts as well as oral instruction. Thousands of inscriptions found across the Indian subcontinent further challenge the assumption that literacy played only a minor role in educational life. Oral and written traditions existed together. Rather than replacing one another, they complemented each other according to the subject being taught, the institution involved and the historical period under consideration (Rao, 2019).

A second misconception portrays ancient Indian education as entirely religious in content and purpose. Religious philosophy certainly shaped educational ideals particularly in Vedic, Buddhist and Jain traditions but the curriculum extended far beyond sacred instruction. Historical sources show that students studied medicine, astronomy, mathematics, grammar, linguistics, agriculture, economics and political administration alongside philosophy and ethics. Institutions such as Takshashila became renowned for teaching statecraft and medicine, while Buddhist Mahaviharas encouraged scholarship in logic, language and scientific inquiry. Practical knowledge occupied an important place. Religious values often provided the ethical framework within which education operated but they did not limit intellectual activity to ritual or theology alone. Similarly, the belief that education was universally available across ancient Indian society also requires careful reconsideration. Educational ideals emphasized moral development and the pursuit of knowledge, yet access to institutional learning remained shaped by *varna*, gender and social status. Opportunities differed across historical periods and religious traditions making it difficult to describe ancient education as either completely inclusive or entirely exclusionary. Social inequalities remained a significant feature of educational life, particularly during the later Vedic period, although Buddhist and Jain institutions created somewhat broader opportunities for participation (Pradhan et al., 2024; Alam, 2024).

A final myth suggests that colonial education completely replaced indigenous educational traditions, leaving little continuity with earlier systems. Historical evidence points to a more complicated process. Colonial educational policies introduced new administrative structures, printed textbooks, standardized curricula and English-language instruction yet they developed alongside existing institutions rather than immediately eliminating them. Temple schools, traditional centres of Sanskrit learning, Madrasas and other indigenous institutions continued to function in many regions adapting to changing political and economic conditions. Educational ideas also moved across systems. Elements of indigenous pedagogy survived through local institutions while modern education incorporated selected aspects of earlier intellectual traditions. This process involved continuity as much as change. Understanding colonial education as a process of adaptation and transformation rather than complete replacement provides a more convincing explanation of India's educational history. Rethinking these four myths therefore reveals ancient Indian education as a dynamic and evolving tradition, shaped by dialogue, institutional diversity and historical change rather than by simple or uniform patterns.

Contemporary Relevance

The growing interest in India's knowledge traditions has renewed discussions about the place of ancient educational ideas within contemporary educational policy. This discussion has become particularly visible after the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which encourages multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, ethical development and greater engagement with Indian knowledge systems. The policy reflects an effort to move beyond examination centred education by promoting a broader understanding of learning that values intellectual curiosity, creativity and social responsibility. The connection with ancient educational thought is evident, although it should not be overstated. Ideas such as holistic development, respect for teachers and the

integration of knowledge with ethical conduct have clear historical roots, yet they must be interpreted within present democratic and constitutional values rather than reproduced without critical reflection (Government of India, 2020; Alam, 2024).

One of the most relevant contributions of ancient Indian educational philosophy lies in its understanding of holistic learning. Education was expected to shape the whole person. Intellectual growth, moral responsibility, physical well being and self discipline were viewed as interconnected rather than separate educational goals. This perspective continues to resonate with present concerns about value education, emotional well-being and responsible citizenship. At the same time experiential learning formed an important part of traditional educational practice because students learned through participation, observation and everyday activities instead of depending entirely on formal instruction. Contemporary educational research increasingly supports such learner-centred approaches, suggesting that meaningful learning develops through active engagement rather than passive memorization. Ancient educational traditions therefore offer useful insights into educational practice, provided they are understood within their historical context and adapted to present educational needs rather than treated as complete models for modern schooling (NCERT, 2024; Pradhan et al., 2024).

Ancient educational traditions also highlight the importance of teacher autonomy and ethical responsibility. The Guru, Acharya and Bhikkhu were expected to guide students through personal example as much as formal teaching, and this close relationship between teachers and learners encouraged mentorship instead of mechanical instruction. That idea remains valuable. However, modern education also places strong emphasis on critical thinking, scientific inquiry and equal educational opportunity, principles that require teachers to encourage questioning rather than unquestioned acceptance of authority. In this respect, Buddhist educational traditions, with their emphasis on dialogue and debate, provide particularly relevant lessons for contemporary classrooms. Even so, the historical limitations of ancient educational systems must not be overlooked. Educational access often reflected caste, gender and social hierarchy, and these inequalities cannot be separated from the educational traditions themselves.

For this reason contemporary engagement with ancient Indian education requires a secular and critical interpretation rather than a purely cultural or religious one. Educational values such as ethical conduct, intellectual curiosity, experiential learning and respect for knowledge can enrich present educational practice without turning religious traditions into normative models for public education. This distinction is essential. A secular reading recognizes ancient Indian education as part of India's intellectual heritage while remaining consistent with constitutional principles of equality, diversity and academic freedom. Such an approach allows the past to inform the present without idealizing it, making ancient educational thought a source of reflection rather than a blueprint for contemporary educational policy.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between religion and education in ancient India by moving beyond the familiar image of the Gurukul as the sole educational institution. The analysis shows that ancient Indian education developed through a wide range of institutions, including Ashrams, Viharas, Mahaviharas, temple schools and centres of higher learning such as Takshashila and Nalanda. These institutions differed in their educational aims, methods of teaching and philosophical foundations, yet they shared the belief that education should cultivate intellectual ability together with moral responsibility. That common concern remained remarkably consistent. At the same time, the study demonstrates that religious traditions did not produce a single educational model. Vedic, Buddhist and Jain philosophies each contributed distinctive approaches to knowledge, authority and learning while responding to different social and historical conditions.

The findings also challenge several long standing assumptions about ancient Indian education. The evidence presented in this article suggests that educational practices were neither entirely oral nor exclusively religious in content. Written traditions, scientific inquiry, medicine, mathematics, political thought and practical knowledge formed important parts of the educational landscape. Likewise, the belief that ancient education was universally accessible does not withstand careful historical examination because educational opportunities were influenced by *varna*, gender and broader social inequalities. Similarly, colonial education did not simply erase indigenous educational traditions but interacted with them through processes of continuity, adaptation and institutional change. These findings offer a more balanced understanding of India's educational past by replacing simplified narratives with historically grounded interpretation.

The study also makes a theoretical contribution by combining the perspectives of Durkheim, Weber and Bourdieu to examine education as both a cultural institution and a mechanism through which knowledge, authority and social power were produced and reproduced. This integrated sociological approach helps explain why educational institutions functioned not only as centres of learning but also as spaces where moral values, religious legitimacy and social hierarchies were negotiated. Looking at ancient education through these complementary perspectives broadens the discussion beyond descriptive educational history and connects it with wider debates in the sociology of education and the sociology of religion.

The findings have important implications for contemporary educational policy. Ancient Indian educational traditions continue to offer valuable insights into holistic learning, ethical education, teacher-student relationships and experiential learning all of which resonate with the broader objectives of the National Education Policy 2020. However, these traditions should be interpreted within a secular, democratic and inclusive framework that recognizes both their intellectual achievements and their historical limitations. Future research can extend this discussion by examining regional educational traditions, lesser-studied religious communities, archaeological evidence and the educational experiences of marginalized groups thereby developing a more comprehensive understanding of India's diverse knowledge traditions.

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