



The Oral Tradition in the Education Cluster of Kerala – Some Pedagogical Illustrations Based on Modern Pathways

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Abstract

Ancient Indian educational institutions placed significant importance on the oral tradition. Kerala has a long history of using the oral tradition as the foundation of its educational pedagogy in all fields of knowledge. The system's robust educational policy places a lot of emphasis on the teacher-student bond. By implementing certain innovative and indigenous methods, Kerala's oral heritage has developed a distinctive approach to education that enhances students' cognitive capacities. In an educational system, students' cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional intelligence must be preserved or enhanced. A system of teaching and learning that is morally and ethically grounded must be the core of any concept of education. Different disciplines like Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kathakali, Ayurvedam, Jyotisam, and Ganitam are studied through oral transmission methods, which are used as common tools in the Kerala method of education. The educational methodology can be traced back to the Vedic chanting education system of Kerala, which has a strong and systematic pedagogy in the teaching-learning process. In the present study, the unique methods in the Vedic chanting tradition and in Kūṭiyāṭṭam have been analyzed using modern educational strategies.

Introduction

Vedic literature contributed greatly to knowledge about the educational concepts of that age. This paved the way to understanding the methodologies of ancient Indian systems of wisdom and the pedagogical approaches developed by them. Vedic literature includes different categories of education systems. The Samhita portion of the texts from the period of Vedic literature established a knowledge system that motivated rational and logical thinking. The Yājñika tradition presents a clear picture of the Vedic age. The post-Vedic age introduced a distinct form of Vedic education that concentrated on the practical applications of Vedic hymns across numerous fields. Furthermore, the disciplines that emerged in ancient India employed different strategies for teaching and learning, all centered around Vedic literature. Most of these disciplines were aligned with Vedic resources, which led to a subtle conflict between Vedic and non-Vedic teachings. Nevertheless, the educational approach remained deeply rooted in the Gurukula system. This was the nature of education in ancient India, or the pedagogical practices of ancient India. This document endeavors to examine the historical educational frameworks alongside the Kerala model of Vedic education within a contemporary framework.

Literature Review

Rathi K.N and Dr. Ampili Aravind (2015) state that the main aim of Sama Vedic education, according to the Kerala style of oral tradition, is to preserve and transmit the oral tradition of Sama Veda.

K. Vijayakumari (2018) states that oral tradition has been one of the important sources in the construction of history, but the dominant sources, such as written sources, have always undermined its importance.

Methodology

Memorizing methods, the Katapayadi system, Bhutasankhya, versification of treatises, in-depth analysis, and summarising methods are the most attractive and significant features of this system. To implement this education, textual resources are strictly withheld from the student. This justifies monitoring by the preceptor, who is also capable of engaging in different disciplines at a time. Intellectual ability has been strengthened to a great extent through the system. The positive and negative impacts of the oral transmission of education have also been taken into consideration.

Education System in the Vedic Age: -

The Vedas, especially the R̥gveda, explore the importance of *knowledge* in several hymns. The explanations given by Vedic Ṛṣis explain the core concept of knowledge. According to them, knowledge and the knower had different dimensions in terms of social status. Several hymns explain the importance of knowledge. The R̥gveda gives respected status to teachers and includes a hymn dedicated to them. There is an abundance of hymns that illustrate the essence and importance of knowledge, yet there is no clear depiction of an educational system or a pedagogical explanation of the teaching-learning process. Post-Vedic literature contains much more. It reveals a sublime relationship between the student and the tutor or mentor.

The word **Guru** or Ācārya has been explained in different ways.

अधीतिबोधाचरणप्रचाराणात् आचार्यः।

आचारं ग्राहयति आचिनोत्यर्थां आचिनोति बुद्धिमिति वा आचार्यः। (Nirukta 1.2.2.)

These are the etymological interpretations of the term Ācārya, which illustrate the role of a teacher in ancient India. The approach to the teaching-learning process is elucidated here. The stories of नचिकेतस्, उत्तङ्कः, etc., explain the pedagogy of that age. The story of Jābāla and Satyakāma also illustrates the teacher-student relationship. Most of the Upaniṣads begin with students' questions to teachers about the truth. Thus, the students are observed and examined with a deep and intense level of scrutiny. Here, the teacher holds full power and authority in the student's life and education. He can decide how the student should be taught. This was the methodology of the Upaniṣadic age.

Different Traditions of the Vedic Education System: -

The post-Vedic period enriched the educational methodologies of different streams of disciplines. The key objective of education was to pass on values, skills, and social practices. This helps the student to survive in a society without any obstacles. The goal of *vidyā* – education - is to instil and develop a value-based mindset (dharmabodham) right from a young age, at the worldly level (laukika), which can be achieved through the study of *aparā vidyā*. Students should have a deep knowledge of all the disciplines, such as Vedāṅgas, Purāṇam, Nyāyam, Mimamsā, and Dharmaśāstram. Here, the concept of education is bound to the Vedic texts-

अङ्गानि वेदाश्चत्वारो मीमांसा न्यायविस्तरः।

पुराणं धर्मशास्त्रञ्च विद्या ह्येताश्चतुर्दश ॥ (विष्णुपुराणम् 3.6.28)

According to Indian tradition, the four Vedas, the six Vedāṅgas (Śikṣā, Kalpa, Vyākaraṇa, Nirukta, Jyotiṣa, and Chandas), and the Upāṅgas (Mimāṃsā, Nyāyaśāstram, Purāṇam, and Dharmaśāstram) are the main resources. The study of these texts is considered to be the cream of education. In the Indian educational context, the study of the Veda is commonly understood as the study of the chanting of Vedic texts. This chanting tradition dates back to very ancient times. The oral tradition of Indian pedagogy has always emphasized chanting. Not only the Vedic texts, but also the Vedāṅgas, Śāstra texts, and other works, have been studied through chanting or memorization. The oral tradition has been kept alive through the chanting tradition. Vedic chanting has been considered the main duty of Brāhmaṇas, who were the guardians of education. So, they developed different methodologies to foster culture and establish the teaching-learning process.

Kerala Tradition of Vedic Education:-

Like other parts of India, Kerala has a rich past in the history of the Vedic tradition. The chanting tradition of the Vedas in Kerala reveals a very distinctive practice in chanting and in teaching-learning methods. Moreover, the exponents of Vedic culture have exerted a marvellous influence on the social history of Kerala. The ritualistic culture has been deeply rooted in the extensive Vedic culture. A meticulous examination of diverse platforms, such as classical arts, religious performances, folklore traditions, and classical instrumental performances, reveals the rudiments of Vedic culture as an undercurrent. As far as Kerala's Vedic tradition is concerned, the teaching-learning methods reveal a diverse and varied style. The accent, the hastamudras, and the influence of colloquial pronunciation are the characteristic features of Kerala. Compared with the other states of India, Kerala's chanting tradition has occupied a prominent place in the oral method of teaching. They strictly follow the learning-by-heart system to an extreme level.

Teaching Learning Methods

Kerala Brahmins, i.e., *Nambūtiris*, were taught the *Samhitapāṭha* at their own homes and, for their more extensive, advanced learning of Vedic recitation, were admitted to advanced Vedic learning centers, i.e., *Pāṭhaśālas* like *Brahmasvam Maṭham*. The teaching of the Veda commences at an auspicious time soon after the *upanayana*, which in common parlance is called

“*ottu tuṭaṅgal*,” i.e., initiation into the chanting of the Veda.

On the first day, the pupil is made to chant only one *sūkta*. To ensure that the pupil can chant *udāṭṭa*, *anudāṭṭa*, and *svarita correctly*, the guru uses his hand to move the head of the pupil in tune with the chanting of each *svara*. When a pupil is introduced to a new *sūkta*, he is helped to learn it by splitting each hymn into *pādas*. Each *pāda* is to be chanted thrice. On the second day, the pupil is made to chant the first *sūkta* three times before he is asked to chant a new *sūkta*. Then, the pupil is made to chant the second *sūkta* thrice. This is how the process goes on until the fifth day. By then, the pupil would have completed chanting the first *sūkta* fifteen times.

On the sixth day, the pupil is made to chant the first *sūkta* as *anta* or *ardharca*, i.e., joining the *pādas*, which he is asked to repeat thrice. The pupil is made to practice chanting the second *sūkta* as *anta* on the seventh day. Thus, on the sixth day, the pupil should chant the first *sūkta* as *anta* three times, the second to fifth *sūktas* as *pāda* three times, and he is introduced to a new *sūkta* on the same day. This process goes on until the tenth day. From the eleventh day onwards, the pupil is asked to practice all five *sūktas* in order, ten times, in the presence of the guru.

This method is continued for five full days. After this, the process goes on with the pupil chanting all the *sūktas* five times for five days and thereafter three times for three days. By now, the pupil would have learnt by heart the *sūktas* he has repeated so far. It must be noted that the pupil is introduced to two or three new *sūktas* on each day of learning, depending upon his comprehension ability. He is also asked to practice the *sūktas* he has already memorized each day.

A pupil can attain mastery over the Samhita only if he practices it every day from dawn to dusk, without any break. The guru devotes himself physically and mentally while teaching his pupil, realizing that only then can he guide his pupil along the path of Vedic learning. This method can help an intelligent and diligent pupil to memorize one or two *astakas* over a span of one or two years. If this process continues, a pupil can complete his course of study in four or five years. This method of teaching more than ten thousand hymns will certainly strengthen the bond between the teacher and the taught.

After the completion of *samhitapāṭha*, the learning of *padapāṭha* begins, which is an advanced study of Vedic recitation. For the learning of *padapāṭha*, the student has to be introduced to a strict regimen that comprises the chanting of *samhitapāṭha* of one *varga* five times and *padapāṭha* of the same *varga* also five times. This process is repeated. A student who has thoroughly mastered the *samhitapāṭha* will have mastery over the *svaras* too. Thus, a student practices the *padapāṭha* himself, guided by *hastamudras*, in the presence of his guru. An intelligent student will be able to complete the *padapāṭha* of one chapter in one day. On the next day, a new chapter is taught in the same way, and the previous portion is repeated. The study of *padapāṭha* can thus be completed in four or five months. According to Vedic scholars, once a student has learned the *padapāṭha*, he will attain a thorough knowledge of the *samhitapāṭha*. When he repeats the learning of *padapāṭha* in the same way, he will also attain thoroughness in *padapāṭha*.

Role of Hastamudras in Chanting of the Veda:-

From time immemorial, hasta mudras have been used by Kerala Brahmins – Nambuthiris - in Vedic recitation. The function of hastamudras is to avoid ambiguity when reciting samhitāpāṭha. Moreover, a pupil of the Vedas, who is normally a child of ten or eleven years of age, may not be aware of Sanskrit grammar and its usage. When he is taught the Vedas with hastamudras, the samhitāpāṭha and padapāṭha will become much clearer and more intelligible. Ambiguity in accentuation is also clarified with the help of hastamudras. E.g., in the samhitā portion, “अजोषावृषभंपतिम्”, the word अजोषा may be dīrghavisarga or dīrghānta. Here, the hymn's meaning is not taught to the pupil at that age. For dīrghavisarga and dīrghānta, different mudras are used. Hence, the problem can be solved with the help of hastamudras; i.e., the ambiguity in identifying the correct word can be resolved.

Vedavikṛtis:-

Numerous methods exist for safeguarding the chanting tradition of the Vedas. The four Vedas possess distinct techniques for ensuring the accurate preservation of the texts, including their literature, pronunciation, and accent. These techniques represent the principal approaches for students to enhance their chanting proficiency.

जटा माला शिखा रेखा ध्वजो दण्डो रथो धनः ।

अष्टौ विकृतयः प्रोक्ताः क्रमपूर्वा महर्षिभिः ॥

This verse propounds the eight types of Vedavikṛitis, namely: *jaṭā*, *mālā*, *śikhā*, *rekhā*, *dhvajah*, *dandah*, *rathah*, and *ghanah*. These are widely practiced in most parts of the country. Among these, *jaṭāpāṭha* and *rathapāṭha* are popular in Kerala. When a student completes two or three years of Vedic learning, *padapāṭha* is gradually taught. Meanwhile, he also practices *jaṭā* and *ratha*. Over time, he will be able to understand and chant the *jaṭāsvara* and *rathasvara* with their specific features. In addition to this knowledge, after the completion of *samhitā*, he should practice the *padam*, *kramam*, *jaṭā*, and *rathah* as an advanced course of study. These methods of chanting will help the student attain greater and greater proficiency in chanting Vedamantras. Moreover, he will be able to chant any portion of the *samhitā*, even with the mudras. Thus, a true scholar of Vedic recitation can store in his mind as many mantras as an encyclopedia does. This path of education has spread to the other disciplines established in Kerala since ancient times. The continuity of the system has never been broken by the intermingling or development of the different disciplines. This continuity has been analysed here through some other examples of oral tradition, such as Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Tantra Tradition and Ayurveda.

Oral Traditions in Classical Art Forms of Kerala:-

Kerala has a unique tradition in all its performing arts, emphasizing collective participation across various types of performances. Bharathamuni also mentions that the unity of performances in nāṭya and the caturvidhābhīnaya of an actor should be achieved through the correlations of *svara*, *atodya*, and *abhinaya*.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam

The legacy of Kerala art forms is significantly influenced by the oral tradition. Art forms like Kūṭiyāṭṭam have a deep-rooted learning strategy, which is blended with caste, life, and art. These three factors are bound together in a circle, and the art form has been preserved through the livelihood of the actor. It is a highly stylized form of Sanskrit theatre, combining acting, music, dance, and elaborate rituals enacted in temples. The word "Kūṭiyāṭṭam" conveys the meaning of the collective performance of actors and accompanying artists with a deep connection to religious practices and community life.

According to Dr. Kunjunni Raja, the actor (the caste also) has been named Cākyār in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which may have been influenced by the Buddhists, who highly promoted the performing arts. (Nāṭyakalpadrumam – pg no -ixv). Regarding Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the Cākyār family is fully integrated into the traditional livelihood roles. They regard the *arangettam*, the children's first stage appearance, as the turning point in their lives, akin to a Brahmin boy's upanayanam. A Cākyār youth can undergo his upanayanam after completing his arangettam. A Cākyār's life is therefore defined by the performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and he is supervised by his guru—likely his father or uncle—from an early age, as a necessary part of life. Children from the Cākyār and Nambyār households are always groomed to be performers. The three authorities of the performance are Cākyār, Nambyār, and Naṅgyār. As vital components of the temple ritualistic order, these families are highly regarded by society for their authenticity of performance.

A Cākyār boy will train for the essential parts of Abhinaya through the daily routine of his childhood before his arangettam. This method of training has its own beauty in the cultural and linguistic domains. The preceptor tries to teach him the *vācika* part of Kūṭiyāṭṭam by engaging him with some slokas. According to the student's capacity, after his *arangettam*, he has to study the Anguliyanka of Ascaryacudamani, which is considered the sacred text of Cākyār vamsa. After the student has undergone the learning strategies and internal techniques of Anguliyanka, he will be capable of performing any difficult part of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. He will be a master of all the rituals and performing techniques of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. This is the most significant style of learning. Nāṭyakalpadrumam illustrates the pedagogy of a Cākyār and Naṅgyār in their childhood.

Practice methods for Cākyār and Naṅgyār:-

1. Early in the morning, around 3 AM, after washing the face and feet, recite ślokās in ragas like śrīkaṇṭhi, ārtan, and poranīru.
2. Sit on the ground (paṭinjirikkuka) and move the eyes, eyebrows, and cheeks. These are the initial exercises.
3. Practice maintaining a downstay position. Keep both legs apart, push the heels forward, and lower the buttocks without moving the body. Ensure the knees do not touch each other, maintaining a gap between them. It is customary to place a stick between the knees. Practice this for at least five minutes at a time, gradually increasing to an hour daily.

4. While maintaining the low stance, rotate the palms upwards and downwards, curl them into fists, and rotate them in circles. Sometimes, slokas are also recited during this exercise.
5. After completing these footwork exercises, begin the *nityakriyā* (daily routine). Other kriyas are not taught until the student can perform the *nityakriyā* flawlessly on his own.

Once the *nityakriyā* is perfected, the kriyas or performing manuals of Aṅgulīyāṅkam, Mattavilāsam, and other *kriyās* are taught. However, even while learning these kriyas, it is mandatory to perform the *nityakriyā* once daily.

Ilakiyattam:

This involves learning the movements and expressions, adapting them to the character's nature, including footwork variations, body sways, and rhythmic actions synchronized with the *ślokās* (verses). It also includes acting out the meaning of the verses, depicting scenes like the moon, trees, and birds.

Subsequent Activities: This section mentions activities like "Purappāṭu" (procession), "Kesāḍipādam" (head-to-toe observation), and "Koppaniyikkal" (making of the costume), along with practicing special performances.

Further Training: After mastering the physical exercises, the focus shifts to learning "*rasābhinayam*", understanding the mudras (hand gestures) for *ślokās*, and other related skills.

After finishing these methods of training, the actor should gain mastery over eye, hand, and body coordination, and voice modulation with accurate pronunciation. Once this is achieved, they can learn "Aṅgulīyāṅkam" and "Mantrāṅkam". This helps them memorize the acting styles and the dialogues for the jester. Additionally, the study of Sanskrit should begin early. Gradually, they should master poetics, rhetoric, logic, and other scriptures to achieve scholarship.

Eye Exercise Methods

Sitting down, apply ghee to both eyelids and massage. While holding the upper eyelids firmly upwards with the fingers, the guru should instruct the student to practice eye movements, focusing on the guru's hand movements without shifting his gaze. Once the eyes are wide open, the hands no longer need to hold them. There are twenty-one types of eye exercises based on the movements of the eyeballs. If one practices in this way and succeeds according to the guru's conviction and advice, one will become an extraordinarily talented performer in the art.

Practice methods for Nambyār:-

Likewise, the Nambyār boy is also trained for proficiency in the *mizhāvu*, the major instrument in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. This instrument has been treated as a Brahmācāri, which has all the ceremonies of a Brāhmaṇa (*śoḍaśasamskāras*) except the Vivāha ceremony.

The structural relation between the artistic and Vedic education system

The above-mentioned methods of learning the art represent a continuation of oral transmission methods used in the Vedic chanting tradition of Kerala. The learning methods of *śloka*s and their detailed analysis in terms of the semantic and syntactic features of language can be connected to the structural analysis of the Vedic education system. These experimental methods are extensions of jaṭāpāṭha and rathapāṭha. In synchronisation with the Vedic education system, the oral tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam has paved a unique pedagogical path in the history of educational systems. This approach not only preserves ancient knowledge but also fosters a deep understanding of linguistic intricacies. By integrating performing art with educational practices, learners engage in a holistic experience that enriches both their intellectual and cultural appreciation.

Conclusion

Kerala has a unique method of oral practice in each and every system of education. The Vedic and non-Vedic cults have developed harmony in the pedagogy of every distinctive discipline, and the oral tradition has complemented education policies enriched by the system. Artistic performances like Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kathakali, and the auxiliaries of the same system are also enhanced by the diverse features of oral tradition. It has developed systematic and strong sustainability in the intellectual, physical, mental, and emotional balance of the learner. The colonial education system has disrupted the continuity of Kerala's highly systematic and elegant system of oral tradition. The grossly neglected oral tradition of Kerala has a concrete educational philosophy, and the incorporation of the system will enrich the strength of the learner to a great extent in the modern scenario.

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