



A Comprehensive Overview of The Legacy of Traditional Education in Travancore

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ABSTRACT

In Kerala, the educational scenario is far more advanced than in other states of India. Traditional education provides knowledge and skills that help the younger generations survive and live in that era. In this education system, children acquire knowledge of a pious and religious way of life from elders within the family or society and many art forms and skills from mere observation and listening to experienced people. This article attempts to give an insight into the unique characteristics of traditional education and to concede that almost all changes in the field of education were initiated by temples, underscoring their pivotal role in the historical development of education. Most of the learning happened in temples, providing ample facilities to run educational institutions in their precincts. The study suggests that the present educational system may embrace the recognised methods utilised by traditional education.

Keywords: Traditional education, Salai, Cattar, Kuvalayamala, Sabha Mutts, Trichur, Upanayana, Travancore

Introduction

Kerala, one of the Indian states tucked in the South West corner of the peninsula, is unique in its achievement in several respects, such as reducing poverty, increasing life expectancy, and improving gender equality. However, the most significant among them is educational development. Although thinkers have come up with many definitions of traditional education, all definitions point to the universal development of individuals. The word '*vidya*' is derived from the word '*vid*', which means '*knowledge*'. All training to acquire knowledge is educational. As per thinkers of ancient India, education is the third eye of a person. It gives him insight into all affairs, removes darkness and shatters the illusion. The future of humanity depends very much on the cultural, scientific and technological developments which evolve from the centres of educational institutions. The traditional educational system of Travancore has unique characteristics and qualities which were not found in the ancient education system of any other country in the world. Education in ancient and medieval Travancore was strongly religious in its orientation. Its main objective was the transmission of religious knowledge and its values. Hence, the values inculcated by traditional education were religious and individualistic. The educational system in Travancore is as old as the Sangam age. Travancore had a high level of education during the Sangam epoch. In that age, education was universal, and there was a high level of literacy.¹ The literary works of the Sangam age mention that all people, irrespective of sectarian or sex considerations, were entitled to complete education. Communities such as kuravas, parayas, panas, vetas, and others were held in high esteem by the kings and nobles. The Panas were even superior to the Brahmins of the day in their cultural and intellectual accomplishments.² Female education was reasonably popular among all classes of people during the Sangam age.

Salais

Temples became centres of cultural activities and educational institutions after the 8th century, leading to social changes and advancements in art, architecture and education.³ Temple culture led to significant social changes, with temples becoming institutions governing people's social lives and epicentres' socioeconomic relations.⁴ Educational institutions in medieval Travancore were crucial to the temple complex, as they played a significant role in the social and cultural life of the people⁵ and Vedic schools were established alongside

temples in various regions. These temple educational institutions, known as *salais* or *gathikas*, were based on Brahminic - Sanskrit traditions.⁶ Elamkulam Kunjanpillai suggests that the Buddhists may have influenced the establishment of educational institutions in the temple premises and the desire to spread knowledge throughout the country. In the 9th and 10th centuries, there were five salais including Kanthalursalai, Parthivapuramsalai, Moozhikulamsalai, Thiruvallasalai and Srivallabhaperumchala.⁷ A few subsequent inscriptions refer to the salais of Sukapuram, Thirunelli and Kottarakkara.⁸ Admission criteria included studying mimamsa, vyakarna, purohitya, not possessing land and producing a certificate from five cattars confirming the authenticity of the submitted records.⁹ The students are referred to as '*chattar*', so the bhattas could be regarded as teachers.¹⁰ Based on their subjects and qualifications, teachers were paid in the form of land, cash and kind.¹¹ These educational institutions intended to promote Brahmanical tradition,¹² and all philosophies were taught, including Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and very interesting lokyata or charka philosophy [which is a materialistic school].¹³ Salais was established during the Sangam age in southern Travancore under the Ay rulers, who were generous patrons of education.¹⁴ The Parthivapuram copper plate of Ay king Karunanthdakan describes salais as 'padashala'¹⁵ for Brahmin Vedic scholars, proving that members had military training and bore arms. It also describes the foundation of a salai for 95 chattar based on the model of Kandalursalai.¹⁶ A Jain work written by Udyothanasuri, titled "Kupalayamala," from 779 A D, describes the fame of salai.¹⁷ The hero of Kupalayamala encountered Sarvachattanamadam, an ancient university on the southern coast of India, which is believed to be kandalursalai, according to most historians.¹⁸ The Prakrit term Sarvachattanamadam means a school where all sciences are taught.¹⁹ The 15th century work Ananthapuravarnana contains a direct reference to kandalursalai. In the lines '*kandiyumchelvummikkakandalurshalakanalam*', will join the Valiyasala Mahadeva temple, which holds the trinity consecration of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.²⁰ The legend of the temple is that the Chera, Chola and Pandya fought at the candour, and all three kings were killed in the said battle. Their queens performed sati on the pyres where their dead bodies were cremated, and the idols of the temple consecrated in the said pyres.²¹ The mutilated inscriptions of Rajendra and Ravivarama in the temple testify eloquently to its antiquity.²² This fragmentary inscription containing a portion of the historical introduction of the Chola king Rajendra Chola I is engraved on the slab stone in the Mahadeva temple at Chalai, a suburb of Trivandrum.²³ The 11th-century Chera Chola war led to a decline in sales, possibly due to a decline in students' character and calibre. Many abandoned intellectual pursuits and focused on military training, possibly due to the downfall of the second Chera empire.

Sabha mutts

By the thirteenth century A.D., the Salais system started to decline, which led to the emergence of a new series of educational institutions known as Vedapatasalas and Sabha Mutts, which were dedicated to religious education that thrived during the early medieval period.²⁴ The Sabha Mutts specifically aimed to educate Namboothiri youth in the Vedas and Sastras. These learning centres were characterized by their residential nature, fostering a rigid exclusivity that rendered these institutions bastions of orthodoxy. Instruction adhered to the traditional Aryan methodologies as outlined in the Dharma sastras. Education, in general, was the monopoly of Brahmins, and they used this to suppress and exploit other sections of the society. Thus, the Brahmins got the opportunity to be spiritually superior. Upanayana marked the beginning of the education of the Brahmin boy and the initiation into the study of the Vedas under the guidance of a teacher.²⁵ It is a kind of rebirth generated by the productive power of knowledge. Upanayana initiated a young boy into Aryan society. The initiation was supposed to occur at the age of eight for a boy born of Brahmin parents, eleven for a Kshatriya and twelve for a Vaishya, the Sudras being excluded from the rite.²⁶ The earliest Sabha mutts were founded at Trichur by Sankaracharya, associated with Sanketam of the famous Vadakkunathan temple. The mutts of Trichur were richly endowed from the days of Sankarachrya and played an essential part in promoting Vedic studies. Besides Trichur, Chovannur, Kumbalam, and Tirunavai also had Sabha mutts.²⁷ It was customary for the great literary men and poets to assemble before the temple adjoining the mutts and conduct literary and scientific discussions. There were two types of Sabha mutts, one for higher religious instruction and the other for liturgical training. It was these mutts that helped evolve the higher levels of Sanskrit education. The students of the mutts stayed on for the duration of the course, covering twelve years, and only at the end did he pay his '*gurudakshina*' or teacher's fee.²⁸ Nine years of the curriculum covered a vast range of intellectual and religious subjects, including the sastras, while the last three years were to be devoted chiefly to authorship of books and participation in controversial discussions and debates held at periodical parishads.²⁹ Academic life in Travancore during the early and medieval ages consisted of literary events, conferences, and proficiency tests held regularly in large cities.

Kalari

The Kalari, an indigenous institution in ancient Kerala, was crucial in the education system. It focused on physical education, while the Salais and Sabha Mutts handled academic aspects. Kalaripayattu emphasizes self-defence through empty-hand fighting, but it serves more as a means to disarm an armed opponent than its primary purpose.³⁰ After initial literary studies, the teenagers undergo physical and quasi-military training, which helps the youth to maintain physical fitness. Mastering kalaripayattu requires excellent mind-body coordination and physical, spiritual, and ethical readiness, which integrates body and mind in action. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai proposed that Kalaripayattu originated from the 11th century A.D. battle

between Cheras and Cholas. However, this theory was questioned and rejected, and the origin of Kalari has lost its ground.³¹ Southern Kalarippayattu, a martial art practiced in medieval Travancore, was primarily led by Nair and Ezhavas. It focused on empty-hand 34 techniques and was closely linked to Tamil Silambam and Sri Lankan Angampore. Rishi Agastya is believed to be the founder and patron saint of southern Kalari. Villages had kalaris attached to temples, with instructors from Kurup, Panikar, or Kaniyan subcastes. Southern Kalari were athletic, with different curriculums and operational techniques, making them considered Dravidian rather than Aryan in origin.³² Kalarippayattu is an ancient traditional system of physical education, culture, self-defence, and martial techniques practised in a sanctified atmosphere to achieve maximum skill in wielding deadly weapons on the battlefield.

Conclusion

Travancore had been a notable centre of education from the Vedic period. The rise of temples changed the social and cultural life of the people. Educational institutions received particular attention as they formed an integral part of the temple complex. As the citadel of higher learning, salais played a vital role in preserving the traditional education in Travancore. After the decline of sales, sabha mutts upheld the conventional Vedic education. Kalari, an art form developed in medieval Travancore among the local chieftains, is an excellent exercise to alert the mind and body. From what we know, the traditional educational system strongly emphasises enabling students to develop holistically- both physically and mentally- to better equip them for life. Travancore's rich cultural traditions served as a foundation, which aided in the country's material development. The spiritual and intellectual facets of life are all-encompassing. Educational policy in medieval Travancore was inextricably linked with religious belief. The Vedas and smritis, which codified the bounds of civil society that Hinduism at the time accepted, served as the foundation for the broad ethos of traditional education. The present education system has a lot to learn from Travancore's conventional educational system, which focuses on connecting learning with the world outside the school. Nowadays, educationalists recognise the importance of traditional education, thereby articulating it with modern education.

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