Knowledge Transmission in Pre-Colonial India: A Historical Overview

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An important feature of traditional Indian education has been the preservation and dissemination of knowledge across the entire spectrum of society. It is well known that before the institution of British colonial education in the middle of the nineteenth century, India had its traditional systems of knowledge transmission that flourished across the length and breadth of this land. Yet, the extraordinary variety of the modes of knowledge transmission has not received much scholarly attention. Furthermore, historical evidence showed that education was accessible to all social classes. All communities participated in the education system since both students, and teachers came from a wide variety of castes. Surveys undertaken by the British in the early nineteenth century revealed that almost every social class of Indian society, from the *mali* (gardener) to the *kurmi* (agriculturist) was educated. While this suggests that probably no one was denied access to basic education, it also points to a deeper principle of decentralized Indian education. This means that education in India was not just restricted to 'Indigenous' or 'native' schools (in the sense that we generally understand this term) and that education in almost all disciplines especially the 64 *kalas* including sculpture, pottery, dance, drama, music, etc. was conducted in various avenues such as temples, family homes, workshops, etc. These avenues or modes of knowledge transmission were not merely physical spaces that accommodated teachers and students but functioned as subtle carriers and repositories of knowledge. For instance, being the custodians of ancient knowledge traditions and practices, select families and *jatis* were the primary modes through which knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the next. No wonder that a strict discipline and code of conduct was maintained to guard the knowledge of specific art forms that were the preserve of families. Owing to this background, my paper will discuss various examples of knowledge transmission about a wide range of Indic knowledge systems including dance, drama, pottery, and Ayurveda.

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Colonial Surveys of Indigenous Education

Much of the historiography on Indian education focuses on formal and mainstream institutions; hence, the role of social and religious institutions such as temples, families, *jatis*, and guilds, as repositories of traditional knowledge systems have not received sufficient attention. In the early nineteenth century, the British colonial government ordered a systematic survey of indigenous education in India.[1] The colonial surveys revealed that such indigenous 'schools' and 'colleges' flourished in entire India. In Bengal and Bihar, for instance, surveys conducted by William Adam showed that there were over 1,00,000 'village schools'.[2] In Madras, Thomas Munro remarked that 'every village had a school', while in Bombay, there was hardly a village that did not have a school.[3] Overall, the colonial surveys revealed the existence of a vast network of 'village 'schools' where basic numeracy, reading, and writing were taught to children, as well as a large number of 'colleges' or 'Sanskrit institutions' for higher learning were reported for a variety of disciplines including Grammar, Logic, Law, Astronomy, Samkhya, and so on. For instance, the district collectors of Madras presidency reported a total of 1094 "colleges" with a total of 5,431 students.[4] This was just the tip of the iceberg, for a larger number of students were being taught privately in family homes. For instance, the collector of Masulipatnam observed that Brahmins taught their children 'either in colleges or elsewhere in their respective houses'.[5] In Malabar, the number of students being taught at home was reported to be 1,594 and in Madras district, as many as 26,963 scholars were receiving tuition at home.[6] No wonder that Dharampal estimated that the number of

'privately' trained scholars was perhaps 'several times the number of those who were receiving such education institutionally.'[7] It is evident from these observations that a major gap in the existing literature on traditional Indian education is that the discourse has been largely limited to institutions. Furthermore, because traditional knowledge in the arts and crafts was transmitted orally and in diverse informal environments, the colonial surveys hardly mention any institutions for music, dance, drama, arts, crafts, and so on. The surveys only mention that the training of "dancing girls" who were traditionally dedicated to temples was managed privately. The collectors of Masulipatam, Madura, and Coimbatore reported that the number of such female students was 33, 105 and 82 respectively.[8] In fact, family based *Gurukuls* rarely figured in the colonial surveys because the officials were only interested in surveying institutions and in recording the written, formal, and institutional modes of knowledge transmission. Moreover, in the post-enlightenment era, the European mind gave precedence to "scientific" disciplines as compared to the arts and cultural disciplines. This paper attempts to fill this historiographical gap by examining a wide range of educational modes that have rarely been seen as modes of education as compared to 'schools' and 'colleges.'

Variety of Modes of Knowledge Transmission

In pre-colonial India, knowledge was not confined to a few great centers or universities. There was no monochromatic way of education and no single model of learning because no central agency or board had a monopoly. On the contrary, there were a variety of avenues where learning was acquired. There were temples, *mathas*, *pyals*, *pathashalas*, *ghatikas*, *tols*, guilds, and the traditional family homes of artists and craftsmen. One could learn anywhere, whether it was in the village *pathashala*, or the square or the hermit's hut. Furthermore, knowledge could be acquired at any time whether it was by listening to the local tales and poems in the village baithak-khana or by hearing the episodes of Ramayana and Mahabharata in house verandahs, shops, or temples. There were popular forms of education including dance, drama, and story-telling through which traditional wisdom was passed down from one generation to another. Indeed, traditionally handed skills, folk arts (including drama), harikatha (particularly for the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavata Purana), story-telling (Panchatantra, etc.), and other forms of oral literature were popular media for education. Thus, every song, drama, text, and theatre was an exercise in education, and knowledge was not transmitted only through *pathashalas* and *gurukulas*.

Royal Courts and Palaces as Centers of Education

There are numerous historical instances of royal courts and palaces housing and generously supporting eminent scholars. One prominent example of this kind is the *Kotunnallur Puttan Kovilakam* or, the group of palaces at Kotunnallur in Kerala. According to the biography of one of the scholars who resided there from 1894 to 1898, there were "three hundred students" studying a wide range of subjects from *kavya* (poetics) to *nyaya* (logic) to *Vedanta* (one of the six systems of Indian philosophy), ayurveda (medicine), *Jyotisha* (astronomy), *Silpa* (architecture), *Sangita* (music) and *Abhinaya* (gestures in acting and dancing).[9]

Homes as Modes of Knowledge Transmission

Since ancient times, the home of the teacher called variously *ashrama*, *gurukul*, or *pathshala*, has been the "center of education".[10] The family homes of scholars and traditional artists were avenues where people congregated from far-off places to learn from them and sometimes stayed for long periods. A prominent example is the *illams* of Kerala where astronomy and mathematics were taught. The only surviving form of Sanskrit drama in India is the *Kutiyattam,* also popularly known as *Kuttu*. It is performed mainly in the temples of Kerala and the actors of this drama are called *Chakyars*. Each temple has traditionally assigned the rights to specific families to perform this art. Originally, eighteen *Chakyar* families preserved the knowledge of *Kutiyattam* since the time of King Kulasekhara who ruled from c. 845 – 870 CE. Because this art was transmitted through the family-based system, each family gathered experience and expertise in certain acts and also had their "own repertoire of plays in which they specialized."[11] The fact that family homes were the places of education is evident from the account of eminent actor Ammanur Madhav Chakyar who famously remarked that his family home itself was called *Madhom*, which in other words means a *Gurukulam*.[12]

Similarly, in his well-researched book titled *Silpa in Indian Traditions,* R. N. Misra has noted that "family and the homestead had ever remained the hub of artists' training, with home serving as a school as well as the workshop where father and other elders of the family would assume the role of a *guru* for younger members of the family."[13] Let us take the example of pottery.

"The children of potters", as Huyler observed, "learn the craft at an early age. Raised in an environment infused with terracotta production, they know little else. From their earliest memories, their experiences revolve around pottery, its commission and production, and its

trade or sale. Their home is a studio; their playthings are the clay itself and the implements of pottery making. As toddlers they receive no formal training in the craft; they simply learn by imitation. Watching their parents, older siblings, and other relatives, they learn to shape the clay into forms and to paint designs on discarded potsherds. As they grow older, they are assigned simple household tasks that teach them some of the basics of the trade. Usually, between the ages of eight and fifteen, boys begin to use the wheel. Some potters give their sons small potting wheels on which to learn. On the first day, a boy uses the wheel, his family celebrates by offering incense and confections to the spirit of the wheel. The females in the family, besides learning all of the household duties required of a potter's wife, are trained to clean and prepare the clay, slip and paint the terracottas, help with the firing, and sometimes mold vessels and/or sculpt figures. The apprenticeship of a potter can take years, beginning with learning to throw the simplest forms, such as *deepas* (lamps). His highest ideal is to perfectly copy the vessel and structure prototypes of his family."[14]

Family as a Repository of Knowledge Traditions and Practices

Among the most well-known indigenous medical practitioners in the nineteenth century were the eighteen families of hereditary physicians in Malabar, famously known as the *Ashtavaidyans*, who had been originally directed by Parasurama to devote themselves solely to the study and practice of medicine and surgery.[15] They were called *Ashtavaidyans* because they had mastered all eight branches of Ayurveda, namely, *Kayachikitsa* (general medicine), *Balachikitsa* (pediatrics), *Grahachikitsa* (psychiatry), *Vishachikitsa* (toxicology), *Shalyachikitsa* (surgery), *Salakyatantra* (ENT, dentistry and ophthalmology), *Rasayana* (immunology and geriatrics), and *Vajikarana* (reproductive medicine).[16] Furthermore, the accounts of several traditional *Vaidyas* reveal that *Vaidyas* were not trained in some grand institutions but rather in the homes of families that had inherited the art and practiced it for generations. For instance, a traditional account of the era comes from Brahmanand Gupta who hailed from a family of traditional *Vaidyas* in Bengal. He was the son of Kaviraja Bimalananada Tarkatirtha and the grandson of Kaviraja Shyamdas Vacaspati (1864-1934). Gupta notes that in Bengal, the *Kavirajas* (literally, prince of poetics, considering his expertise in Sanskrit treatises), as the physician was called, used to train young physicians in their homes. A similar pattern of education for the *Vaidyas* is mentioned in other contemporary accounts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For instance, the *Ashtavaidyans* of Kerala inform that they were trained at home in the *Gurukula* style.[17]

***Jati*s and Guilds as Carriers of Knowledge Traditions**

The fact that industrial activity in India has been traditionally centered around the *jati* system, which is community-based, is evident from various ancient textual sources especially the Jatakas that use the suffix *kula* (family) or *putta* (son of) for various craft terms. Some prominent examples highlighted by Upinder Singh include "*satthavahakula* (family of caravan traders), *kumbhakarakula* (potters' family), *setthikula* (family of forest guards), *dhannavanijakula* (grain merchants' family), *pannikakula* (greengrocers' family), and *pasanakottakakula* (stone grinders' family). Terms ending in *putta* include *satthavahaputta* (son of a caravan trader), *nisadaputta* (son of a hunter), and *vaddhakiputta* (son of a carpenter)."[18] Kapila Vatsyayan has also noted that "the craft traditions of India have had a long tradition of continuity, both because they were community-based and largely hereditary, and continue to be so."[19] Moreover, the importance of guilds as centers of learning has been further emphasized by eminent historian Radha Kumud Mookerji. He observed that while artisans were instructed in the particular crafts in their homes, "the collective interests of the craft as a whole in a particular area or region were administered by an organization like a guild known as *Sreni*. Each guild laid down its laws for the administration of the interests of the particular craft belonging to it. The guilds were of various kinds like the crafts and were like so many industrial schools. The Smritis [e.g. Gautama, xi, 21] mention the main guilds to be those of 1) Cultivators, 2) Herdsmen, 3) Traders, 4) Money-lenders, and 5) Artisans to which Brihaspati [i, 26] adds 6) Artists (=*chitra-karas*) and 7) Dancers. […] Every industry or craft was self-governing by its *Sreni,* while it was pursued by an individual craftsman as a home or cottage industry, throwing open his home or cottage as a school for the training of apprentices in his craft."[20]

One of the most well-known examples of knowledge transmission in architecture through the mode of the family and *jati* is illustrated by the inscriptions found at the Jagdish temple in Udaipur, built by Maharana Jagat Singh in 1652 CE.[21] The chief architects, or *sthapatis*, of the rulers of Mewar were the Bhangora family who was renowned experts in *Vastusastra* (architecture) and *Silpasastra* (sculpture). Their ancestors hailed from Anhilwara Pattan in Gujarat, and they migrated to Mewar around V. S. 1445 (1388 CE). The Bhangora family "produced the well-known Mandana who built the great Tower of Victory at Chitor and was the author of the Rajavallabha

and many other original treatises on architecture."[22] Another famous example of knowledge transmission in architecture comes from an inscription dated 1495 CE of a temple dedicated to Mahamaya at Ratanpur in Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh. This inscription praises the Kokasa family of architects, particularly the *Sutradhar* Chhitaku, the "able son of Manmatha".[23]

Temples as Educational Institutions

Many temples housed educational institutions and maintained students within their precincts. The famous Saltogi inscription of Bijapur district of northern Karnataka describes a temple during the reign of the Rashtrakuta monarch Krsna III (939-97 CE) that housed a college with twenty-seven hostels for students from different parts of the country. Temples also served as important educational institutions for scholars, artists, and dancers alike. Be it a Vedic *pathshala* or a *matha*, various institutions of learning were attached to a temple that served as the hub of culture where pandits, architects, sculptors, musicians, and dancers came together for the performance of rituals. Moreover, potters and artisans assembled to prepare pots, vessels, baskets, garlands, conches, idols, and other items used in worship. Some bards or storytellers presented their harikathas in the evenings. Under the Cholas, numerous colleges were endowed by temple charities. In addition, whole settlements or villages of Brahmins (*agrahara*) are dedicated to learning and teaching. Some well-known examples of temple colleges of South India include Ennayiram (patron: Rajendra Chola I)- South Arcot, during Rajendra I): 270 junior students, 70 senior students, 14 teachers, Tribhuvanam (patron: Rajadhuraja Chola I) and Tirumukkudal (patron: Vira Rajendra). Even in the early nineteenth century, William Adam found that in the district of Beerbhoom, the temples of Lord Yama were "frequently used as school-houses" considering that Lord Yama is regarded as Dharmaraja, the deity of Dharma or righteous conduct.[24]

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that Indian knowledge traditions were preserved by the continuity of social and religious traditions. As we have seen, in a vast majority of cases, families, communities, and temples were the repositories and carriers of specific knowledge systems. We saw how the hereditary families of physicians called *Ashtavaidyas* have preserved and transmitted the knowledge of Ayurveda in Kerala. Similarly, the *Chakyar* families were trained in the art of *Kutiyattam* in their family homes. A wide range of places such as family homes, temples, *pathashalas*, etc. functioned as centers of education in the various disciplines of Indian knowledge systems.

Notes and References

1. For instance, the Madras government ordered a survey in 1822. See "Minute of Governor Sir Thomas Munro ordering Indigenous Education: 25.6.1822." In Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, New Delhi: Biblia Impex, 1983, pp. 83-84. The district collectors of various provinces were asked to report on the number of 'schools' for reading and writing, the number of pupils, their castes, the names of textbooks, school fees, and number of 'colleges' where subjects such as 'Theology, Law, Astronomy etc.' were taught.
2. Anathnath Basu, Ed. *Reports on the State of Education in Bengal* (Calcutta University Press, 1941), p. 6.
3. Dharampal, *The Beautiful* Tree, p. 13.
4. See Table titled "Institutions of Higher Learning" in Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, p. 30.
5. Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, p. 31.
6. Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, pp. 36-37.
7. Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, p. 35.
8. See "Caste wise division of female students" in Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, pp. 40-41.
9. Ananda Wood, *Knowledge before printing and after*, p. 95.
10. Kapil Kapoor, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, Vol. IV, pp. 10-13.
11. Mundoli Narayanan, *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing: The Performance Culture of Kutiyattam* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 160.
12. Ammanur Madhav Chakyar, "My Training, My Gurus", in *Special Issue: Kutiyattam, Nos. 111-114* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1994), pp. 141-146.
13. R. N. Misra, *Silpa in Indian Traditions: Concept and Instrumentalities*, p. 65.
14. Stephen. P. Huyler, *Gifts of Earth: Terracottas and Clay Sculptures of India,* p. 31.
15. Some colonial accounts may have misinterpreted *Ashtavaidyas* to mean eight *Vaidyas*. For instance, Burnell noted that "there are 8 *Namburi Brahmans* […] who are called *Ashtavaidyar*, and who are the hereditary physicians of Malabar. A. C. Burnell, *A Classified Index of the Sanskrit MSS in the Palace at Tanjore*, (London: Trubner, 1880), p. 65b.
16. I am grateful to Dr. P. Ram Manohar (Research Director, Amrita School of Ayurveda) for informing me about the connection between Ashtavaidyans and these eight branches.
17. Tsutomu Yamashita and P. Ram Manohar, "Memoirs of Vaidyas: The Lives and Practices of Traditional Medical Doctors in Kerala, India" in *eJournal of Indian Medicine*, Volume 5 (2012), 1–23. Accessed here: - https://amrita.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/memoirs-vaidyas-lives-and-practices-traditional-medical-doctors-kerala-india-6.pdf
18. Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, p. 403.

19. Kapila Vatsyayan, "Fluid Cultures, Frozen Structures", in *Plural Cultures and Monolithic Structures,* p. 203.
20. R.K. Mookerjee, *Ancient Indian Education*, p. 353.
21. See "Jagannatharaya Temple Inscriptions at Udaipur", in *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 24, pp. 56-90.
22. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 24, p. 64.
23. Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi, ed., *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era*, Part II, (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1955), pp. 556-557.
24. Anathnath Basu, ed., *Reports on the State of Education in Bengal (1835 &1838) by William Adam*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1941, p. 236.