

Vedic Education

THE PROSE ROMANCE *KADAMBARI* MAKES a delightful exclusive specification of the features of Rishi Jabali's ashrama, where 'the killing of *shakuni* was confined to the Mahabharata; the expressions of wind, *vayu-pralapitam*, to the Puranas; teeth, *dvija*, fell [only] in old age; inactivity, *jadya*, was seen among sandalwood trees in the woods; the fires, *agnin*, [alone] rested on the earth; [only] the deer, *enakah*, were addicted to music; peacocks, *shikhandinah*, were in favour of dancing; snakes were possessed of hoods, *bhoga*; monkeys were fond of bel fruits—*sriphala*, "Lakshmi's fruit"—and roots had a downward course, *adhogati*.'

Playing on the multiple meanings of Sanskrit terms—vultures are called *shakuni*, a name also borne by the scheming Kaurava uncle; *vayu* is both a deity and the humour responsible for nervous disorders; *dvija* refers both to teeth and to initiates—Banabhatta paints a picturesque image of an ashrama amidst sylvan settings with disciplined inmates, healthy in body and mind, living in harmony with nature and its creatures, and pursuing supra-mundane goals.

This fictional account is probably not very far from the actual realities of the ashramas of Vedic and post-Vedic times—ashramas that were seats of education and culture, both spiritual and secular. The hermitages of such rishis as Shaunaka, Vyasa, and Kanva were virtually forest universities—a whole concourse of ashramas teaching numerous disciplines. These far-famed hermitages attracted scholars, brahmacharins, and rishis from far and near and were the sites of great intellectual and spiritual ferment.

Pursuit of knowledge and wisdom was facilitated by the *gurukula* system, where the homes and ashramas of rishis and scholars were open to stu-

dents for residential study. The mandatory nature of *upanayana*, investiture with a sacred thread from a guru, with its attendant study, ensured that at least among the brahmanas, kshatriyas, and vaishyas both boys and girls received elementary education.

A fundamental principle of Vedic education was tapas. Control and concentration of mind and senses was considered the highest tapas. Concentration, however, is only one component in the training of the will. The other, and equally important aspect, is detachment. The Vedic student had the first lesson in detachment in leaving home to live with the guru's family. The brahmacharya code, which every student abided by, furthered it.

Strict adherence to satya, truth, was another vital facet of Vedic tapas. According to Satyavacha Rathatari of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, truth is all that needs to be cultivated. The great fidelity with which Vedic texts were orally transmitted and their contributing rishis faithfully acknowledged is one evidence of the immense stress laid upon truthfulness and integrity. Honesty in mundane dealings was recognized as the cornerstone which the pursuit of higher truths had inevitably to be based upon.

Vedic study was almost exclusively oral. But mastering the vast corpus of Vedic texts and associated literature was not merely a feat of memory. Regular recitation with stress on correct intonation and phonetic and metrical accuracy provided students with early deep insights into linguistic laws and generative grammar, which is best captured in Panini's remarkably comprehensive and succinct work *Ashtadhyayi*. Diverse ways of recitation of the same text—the *pada*, *krama*, *jata*, and *ghana pathas*, and the like—not only ensured accuracy of transmission of texts from teacher to student but also aided concentration and assisted grasp of metre and

melody. Every Vedic student was thus a poet. But Vedic poetry was no ordinary poetry, and the mantras not merely 'rules without meaning.' Being the product of the deep insights of Vedic rishis into the nature of Reality, they provided students with an orientation to Reality that made values meaningful and life harmonious and goal-directed.

Vedic study emphasized love of learning. Naka Maudgalya of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* asserted that learning and teaching indeed constituted tapas. Acharya Shankara elaborates: 'Learning and teaching are mentioned in all the contexts in order to imply that these two are to be carefully practised even by one who is engaged in all these duties [of a householder]; for the comprehension of meaning is dependent on study, and the supreme goal [emancipation] is dependent on the understanding of meaning.'

This love of learning took students great distances in search of suitable teachers and institutions for study, discussion, and debate. The courts of kings like Janaka of Mithila, Ajatashatru of Varanasi, and Pravahana Jaivali of Panchala were abuzz with discussions on topics ranging from procedures of daily ritual to the knowledge of supreme Brahman. Bhujyu Lahyayani, one of the reputed scholars at Janaka's court, had travelled along with fellow students to the far-off country of the Madras in north-west India. Jivaka, the most reputed Indian physician of Buddha's time, also undertook a similar journey from Rajagriha to Takshashila to study medicine under a 'world-renowned physician'. After having studied for seven years Jivaka asked his teacher 'when his studies might be regarded as completed'. The teacher said, 'Take this spade and seek round about Takshashila a *yojana* on every side, and whatever plant you see which is not medicinal, bring it to me.' Jivaka went about the task with diligence, but could not find a single plant that lacked all medicinal properties. When he mentioned this to his teacher, the latter certified his eligibility for independent practice.

Medical practitioners of Jivaka's time were expected to be 'well-read in the texts of the medical

Shastras (*adhita-shastra*); well up in the imports of the texts studied; skilled in practical work or surgical operations (like *cheda* and *sneha*); full of resourcefulness and originality (*svayamkriti*); possessed of light touch and swift hand (*laghu-hasta*); clean; of an optimistic temperament or cheerful spirits (*shura* or *vishadarahita*); ready with all necessities and materials for treatment (*sajjopaskarabeshaja*); of a resourceful mind; of keen intellect; possessed of professional experience (*vyavasayi*); learned in theory; and devoted to truth and morality.' That Jivaka amply met all these requirements is attested by the anecdotes of his remarkable medical, surgical, and humanitarian accomplishments.

The variety of disciplines available for study is indicated by the many departments present in a full-fledged educational institution of the Mahabharata times. These included: (i) Agni-sthana, for fire worship and prayers; (ii) Brahma-sthana, for Vedic studies; (iii) Vishnu-sthana, for study of *raja-niti*, politics, *artha-niti*, economics, and *varta*, agriculture and trade; (iv) Vivasvata-sthana, for astronomy; (v) Soma-sthana, for botany; (vi) Garuda-sthana, for training in transport and communications; and (vii) Mahendra-sthana and Kartikeya-sthana, for various aspects of military training. Primary education in the late and post-Vedic period was comprehensive. Xuanzang noted that after being formally acquainted with the Sanskrit language through the *Siddham* 'children were introduced at the age of seven to the "great Shastras of the Five Sciences", viz, *vyakarana* (grammar), *shilpasthana-vidya* (the science of arts and crafts), *chikitsa-vidya* (science of medicine), *hetu-vidya* (Nyaya, logic, science of reasoning), and *adhyatma-vidya* (inner science [spirituality]).'

Here is a picture of a society that valued knowledge. The greatest of Vedic treasures was, of course, the knowledge of Brahman, 'knowing which all else is known', gaining which one transcends sorrow, becomes perfectly contented, goes beyond fear, and attains immortality. For providing him with this knowledge, King Janaka gave his entire kingdom along with himself to Yajnavalkya, his teacher. Vedic wisdom was priceless. It remains so even today. 