Education in Ancient Indian Civilization

Like China, India is an ancient civilization. River valley civilizations flourished on the banks of India’s Indus River at Mohenjo-daro and Harrapa from 3000 B.C. to 1500 B.C. India’s educational history reveals a general pattern of intrusion by invaders, followed by a cultural clash with the indigenous people, and then the restoration of sociocultural equilibrium. In this cultural equilibrium, the invaders were absorbed into India’s culture while at the same time the indigenous people borrowed some of the invaders’ ideas.¹

Among India’s early invaders were the Aryans, ancestors of India’s Hindi-speaking majority, who conquered India in 1500 B.C. and imposed their rule over the indigenous Dravidian inhabitants. They were followed by the Muslims, who established the Mughul dynasty in the thirteenth century. Then, in the eighteenth century, the British gained control over India.

Cultural changes introduced by the Aryans exerted powerful social and educational influences that continue even today. The Aryans introduced their religion, Hinduism, and their highly stratified social order, the caste system.²

Hinduism, a powerful cultural force in India, incorporates a wide range of religious beliefs and elaborate rituals. Hinduism emphasizes transmigration of souls—a person’s soul experiences a series of reincarnations, and that person’s position in the cosmic scale depends on how well he or she performs duties and rituals. Reincarnation ends only when a soul reaches the highest spiritual level and is reabsorbed in Brahma, the divine power.

The four original castes were Brahmins, priest-educators; Kshatriyas, rulers, judges, and warriors; Vaishyas, merchants; and Shudras, the farmers. At the bottom of the caste system were the untouchables, who performed the most menial work. Social mobility did not exist. People stayed in the caste into which they were born, and learned their duties and roles by imitating parents and other adults. Schooling was reserved for the upper castes, primarily the Brahmins. By outlawing caste-based discrimination, modern India has imposed an “affirmative action” for lower caste members. However, like racism in the United States, discrimination still exists.

— Vedas
— Schools and teaching
— Mughuls
— English entry

Evolution of Indian Education

Education in India reflects the general historical pattern of assimilating different cultures. Earlier schools reflected cultural changes brought by the Aryans. Ancient India had the following types of schools:

- **Brahminic schools**, for the priestly caste, stressed religion, philosophy, and the *Vedas*. The Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Upanishads, Hinduism’s sacred religious books, portray the goal of life as a search for universal spiritual truths. The quest for truth, Indian educators believe, requires disciplined meditation. Contemporary transcendental meditation and yoga follow these ancient Indian principles for finding inner spiritual truth and serenity.

- **Tols** were one-room schools where a single teacher taught religion and law.

- **Court schools**, sponsored by princes, taught literature, law, and administration.

Hindu educational philosophy, emphasizing religious purposes, prescribed appropriate teacher–student relationships. The teacher, an *ayoha*, was to encourage students to respect all life and to search for truth. Students were to respect teachers as a source of wisdom, and teachers were to refrain from humiliating students.³

The Mughul dynasty, established after the Muslim invasions, introduced the Islamic religion and Persian and Arabic philosophy, science, literature, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, art, music, and architecture.

By the time the English entered India in the late eighteenth century, India’s schools were conducted either by Hindus or Muslims or by smaller sects such as Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis. Only about 10 percent of India’s children, mostly boys, attended. Hindu higher schools, conducted by Brahmans, emphasized religious literature, mathematics, astronomy, and Sanskrit grammar. Muslim schools, called *madrassahs*, were attached to mosques and emphasized grammar and the Koran.⁴

When the British established their colonial rule in India, they encountered an ancient civilization with many languages and religions. The British, valuing English more than India’s tongues, made English the official language for government and commerce and established English-language schools to train Indians for positions in the British-controlled civil service.

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Refocus

How would you answer the first five questions if you were asked to summarize education in ancient India? What similarities and differences exist in the Indian and American approaches to cultural pluralism?

India’s Contribution to World and Western Education

Ancient India’s legacy to the world is its example of how education can help a civilization endure over the centuries. Through cultural assimilation and readaptation, Indian civilization has survived to the present. In today’s climate of rising ethnic and religious tensions, India continues to face profound challenges in assimilating and respecting diverse cultures. The United States and other culturally pluralistic nations face similar challenges. India’s situation reveals how caste, like racism in the United States, was once perpetuated by society and indoctrination but is now being corrected through educational processes. You, as a teacher, will probably be challenged by your students’ diversity. How will you use multiculturalism as a means of promoting cultural diversity in your classroom?