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Pedagogical Insights From *Upaniṣads* For Modern Education System

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Abstract:

In ancient times, our country *Bhārat* was famous for its rich heritage and was an international hub of learning centres. Education was imparted by *gurukulas* and *viśwavidyālayas* using a variety of teaching methods and practices. These teaching methodologies, which have been in practise for centuries, have provided time-tested frameworks for knowledge transfer from one generation to the next. The ancient Indic texts, *Upaniṣads*, contain many references of the pedagogy of that era. With the advent of technology in the modern era, there is a remarkable shift in the field of education with the latest trend being e-learning. In this paper I have explored the relevance of the Upanishadic pedagogical approach in the modern educational system.

Keywords: Pedagogy, *Upaniṣads*, *Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā*

INTRODUCTION

Teachers bring more than curriculum mandates into the classroom. The teaching methods used by them determine how effectively the knowledge gets transferred to the students. The pedagogy they use is shaped by their training, personal learning experiences, beliefs, societal aspects and the school environment.

The term pedagogy originates from the Greek word ‘paidagogos’, meaning “to lead the child.” Historically, it referred to a guide, or a slave, entrusted with supervising a child’s education and moral development, acting as a disciplinarian rather than a teacher.

Pedagogy is distinct from teaching. It is not merely the act of instruction but reflects societal values and beliefs about what constitutes effective learning. In other words, pedagogy is more than leading. It is a shared journey with students, empowering and supporting them as they

progress. It is about creating meaningful and transformative learning experiences for learners of all ages.

Robin Alexander, in *Essays on Pedagogy*, explains this term as follows – “It is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command to make and justify the many kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted.” (Alexander, 2008). Mary James and Andrew Pollard state: “pedagogy expresses the contingent relationship between teaching and learning and does not treat teaching as something that can be considered separately from an understanding of how learners learn” (James & Pollard, 2011)

The ancient Indic method of learning was memory-based learning and knowledge was imparted through oral tradition. The focus was on attaining physical, moral, spiritual, emotional and intellectual knowledge for well-rounded and integrated development of the individual and the society. This system of education was teacher-centric and the pedagogy was inherently interactive.

UPANIṢADS AND THE GURU-ŚIṢYA PARAMPARĀ

The four *Vedas* form the earliest body of Indic scriptures and serve as a valuable source of knowledge. Each of the *Vedas* is further subdivided into four sections. The first section is called *Samhitā*, the second one is *Brāhmaṇas*, the third one is known as *Āraṇyakas* while the fourth section is *Upaniṣads*. *Upaniṣads* are philosophical foundational text focussing on the knowledge of Ultimate Reality.

The word *Upaniṣad* is derived from the prefixes ‘upa’ meaning ‘nearness’ and ‘ni’ meaning ‘down’ and the root ‘śad’ meaning ‘to sit’. The literal meaning of the word is ‘to sit down near’ that conveys to sit near the *guru* to acquire spiritual knowledge. Here spiritual knowledge refers to *Ātmavidyā*, that is, “knowledge of the self”, and *Brahmavidyā*, “knowledge of *Brahman*” and their connection, equivalence, and unification. The *Upaniṣads* primarily aim to awaken the student's inner potential and joy of inquiry, rather than simply imparting factual knowledge.

There were more than 1000 *Upaniṣads* but presently around 108 *Upaniṣads* are considered prominent. *Jagadguru Śankarāchārya* identified ten *Upaniṣads* as principal *Upaniṣads*. They are- *Īśāvāsya*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitreya*, *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*.

These *Upaniṣads* provide innumerable insights into the pedagogy of ancient *Bhārat*. The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* is the ancient *Bhāratīya* tradition of passing knowledge from a *guru* (teacher) to a *śiṣya* (disciple) through a sacred bond of mentorship and trust. This *paramparā* is described in *Taittirīyopaniṣad* (1-3) as follows:

आचार्यः पूर्वरूपम् । अन्तेवास्युत्तररूपम् । विद्या सन्धिः । प्रवचन सन्धानम् ।

ācāryaḥ pūrvarūpam . antevāsyuttararūpam . vidyā sandhiḥ . pravacanam sandhānam

Translation:

“The teacher is the previous/first letter. The student is the latter/next letter. Knowledge is the junction. Instruction/teaching is the link. This is the meditation with regard to knowledge.”

The above verse from *Taittirīyopaniṣad* illustrates the structured learning process which was the foundation of the timeless *guru-śiṣya* tradition of knowledge transfer. The *ācharya* (*guru*) is the ‘foundational pillar’ and comes before the disciple because the educational system cannot thrive without the guiding presence of an *ācharya*. *Ācharya*, in Sanskrit, means a person who not only possesses deep knowledge but guides students by their own exemplary conduct (*ācharan*). The term used for the student or the disciple in this verse is *antevāsī*, which literally means one who lives near the end/boundary. In this context, this referred to a student who stays near or in the house of their *guru*. The term *antevāsī* beautifully captures the essence of the *guru-śiṣya* tradition - one who dwells near the teacher, not just physically but mentally and spiritually. This proximity creates an ecosystem of continuous learning. The above verse further states that knowledge (*vidyā*) acts as a bridge between the *guru* and *śiṣya* and through the personalized discourses (*pravachanam*) the transmission of knowledge takes place.

This profound verse from the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* encapsulates an eternal framework of knowledge dissemination that has been the cornerstone of *Bhāratiya* education for millennia.

PEDAGOGY IN UPANIṢADS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The *Bhāratiya* system of learning does not focus only upon theoretical teaching but emphasizes a multi-pronged approach that include concentration, meditation and then reflect upon what is taught and learnt. The process includes *śravaṇam* (listening), *mananam* (reflection), *nididhyāsanam* (doing and learning by practise), *grahaṇa* (to grasp), and *dhāraṇa* (to retain).

This system of learning also believes that student don’t learn from the teachers alone. Learning happens when we reflect and introspect, when we collaborate with other students and learning strengthens with time (experience).

आचार्यात् पादमादत्ते पादं शिष्यः स्वमेधया ।

सब्रह्मचारिभ्यः पादं पादं कालक्रमेण च ॥

ācāryāt pādām ādhatte pādām śiṣyaḥ svamedhayā

pādām sabrahmacāribhyaḥ pādām kālakrameṇa ca

Translation:

“One fourth from the teacher, one fourth from own intelligence,

One fourth from classmates, and one fourth only with time.”

The above verse illustrates that the Upanishadic pedagogy is holistic and inquiry-based. The emphasis is on reflection, interactive sessions, dialogue, experimentation, self-realization, and application. Such multi-pronged approach to learning fosters critical thinking and a deep understanding of reality rather than mere information transmission.

The Key Aspects of Upanishadic Pedagogy:

(i) Teaching with illustrations: Any concept that is taught by giving examples is understood better by the students. They can easily grasp the concept and remember it for a longer period of time. We find many references of ‘teaching with illustrations’ in the *Upaniṣads*.

Chāndogyopaniṣad contains a dialogue between a father and *guru*, *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni*, and his son and disciple, *Śvetaketu*. To explain how food becomes the mind in individuals *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* first describes the process of how butter can be obtained from curd, which is easier to visualise and grasp.

दधः सोम्य मथ्यमानस्य योऽणिमा स उर्ध्वः समुदीषति तत्सर्पिर्भवति ॥ ६.६.१ ॥

एवमेव खलु सोम्यान्नस्याशयमानस्य योऽणिमा स उर्ध्वः समुदीषति तन्मनो भवति ॥ ६.६.२ ॥

dadhnaḥ somya mathyamānasya yo'ṇimā sa urdhvaḥ samudīṣati tatsarpirbhavati ॥ 6.6.1 ॥

evameva khalu somyānnasyāśyamānasya yo'ṇimā sa urdhvaḥ samudīṣati tanmano bhavati ॥ 6.6.2 ॥

Translation:

“When curd is churned, the finest part of it rises to the surface. That becomes butter. O Somya, in the same way, the finest part of the food that is eaten rises to the surface and becomes the mind.”

Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad contains a reference wherein *Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya* uses following three illustrations to explain that no particular objects are perceived in the waking and dream states apart from *Brahman*:

स यथा दुन्दुभेर्हन्यमानस्य न बाह्याच्छब्दाच्छक्नुयाद्ग्रहणाय, दुन्दुभेस्तु ग्रहणेन—दुन्दुभ्याघातस्य वा—शब्दो गृहीतः ॥ ४.५.८ ॥

sa yathā dundubherhanyamānasya na bāhyāñchabdāñchaknuyādgrahaṇāya, dundubhestu grahaṇena—dundubhyāghātasya vā—śabdo grhītaḥ ॥ 4.5.8 ॥

Translation:

“As when a drum is beaten one cannot distinguish its various particular notes, but they are included in the general note of the drum or in the general sound produced by different kinds of strokes.”

स यथा शङ्खस्य ध्यायमानस्य न बाह्याच्छब्दाच्छक्नुयाद्ग्रहणाय, शङ्खस्य तु ग्रहणेन—शङ्खध्वस्य वा—शब्दो गृहीतः ॥ ४.५.९ ॥

sa yathā śaṅkhasya dharmāyamānasya na bāhyāñchabdāñchaknuyādgrahaṇāya,
śaṅkhasya tu grahaṇena—śaṅkhadhmasya vā—śabdo grhītaḥ || 4.5.9 ||

Translation:

“As when a conch is blown one cannot distinguish its various particular notes, but they are included in the general note of the conch or in the general sound produced by different kinds of blowing.”

स यथा वीणायै वाद्यमानायै न बाह्याञ्छब्दाञ्छक्नुयाद्ग्रहणाय, वीणायै तु ग्रहणेन—वीणावादस्य
वा—शब्दो गृहीतः || ४.५.१० ||

sa yathā vīṇāyai vādyamānāyai na bāhyāñchabdāñchaknuyādgrahaṇāya, vīṇāyai tu
grahaṇena—vīṇāvādasya vā—śabdo grhītaḥ || 4.5.10 ||

Translation:

“As when a *Vīṇā* is played on one cannot distinguish its various particular notes, but they are included in the general note of the *Vīṇā* or in the general sound produced by different kinds, of playing.”

(ii) Interactive classes: The interactive method of teaching can build cognitive abilities of the students like thinking, attention, memory, soft skills etc. Even abstract concepts like *Brahmavidyā* become easier to understand when the teacher encourages active participation of the students in the learning process. *Upaniṣads* contain numerous references where *guru* and *śiṣya* are engaged in active dialogue while learning a concept

- *Yājñavalkya* and *Maitreyī* – *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*
- *Uddālaka-Āruni* and *Śvetaketu* – *Chāndogyopaniṣad*
- *Varuṇa* and *Bhṛgu* – *Taittirīyopaniṣad*
- *Yama* and *Nachiheta* - *Kathopaniṣad*
- *Pippalāda* and his six disciples (*Sukeshā, Satyakama, Gargya, Kausalya, Bhargava, and Kabandhi*) - *Praśnopaniṣad*

(iii) Aphoristic Method (The *sūtra* system): This method has been widely used in the later philosophical treatises as well. In this approach the knowledge principles, which have intricate and profound meaning, are compressed into small aphoristic sentences which are easy to memorise. They enable efficient and impactful expression of thoughts in any context.

For example

- *ahaṃ brahmāsmi* – *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*
- *tat tvam asi*– *Chāndogyopaniṣad*
- *satyameva jayate* - *Mundaka Upanishad*.
- *brahma satyaṃ jagat mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ* - *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*

(iv) Experimenting: As the famous saying goes– “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand”. All educators recognise the usefulness of practical experience and understand that the most effective way of learning is through observation and experiment. Learning through practical experience is a very common feature in Upaniṣadic pedagogy as well. *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* has contains many references where *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* practically demonstrates various concepts to *Śvetaketu* some of which are given below

- *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* uses a seed to demonstrate the concept of the subtle, unmanifested or *avyakta Brahman* from which the entire universe manifested. *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* asks *Śvetaketu* to bring a banyan tree fruit and break it. It contained a very miniscule seeds. He asks *Śvetaketu* to split open the seed and check what is inside. On splitting the seed *Śvetaketu* finds nothing inside except some jelly like substance. *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* then explains that while from your point of you there is practically nothing in the seed, however, this apparently non-existent something that is there inside that little seed becomes this vast tree which is in front of you.
- In another instance, to explain that *Brahman* is omnipresent even though we cannot perceive it, *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* asks *Śvetaketu* to bring salt and mix it with water. He asks *Śvetaketu* to taste the upper part of the water. It was salty. He, then, asks *Śvetaketu* to taste from the middle and bottom layers. The water there was equally salty. *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* then tells him that just as salt is present in all parts of the water but we don't see it, similarly, just because we do not see *Brahman*, that doesn't prove it does not exist.
- In yet another instance *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni* depicts the nature of mind through an experiment. He orders *Śvetaketu* to fast for fifteen days. During that period, *Śvetaketu*'s memory is lost. Then he advises *Śvetaketu* to resume the intake of food. Thereafter, he regains his memory. *Ṛṣi Uddālaka-Āruni*, explains to *Śvetaketu* that while a large part of the food is excreted, the some part is used as energy by the body, and the very subtle part becomes the mind. Hence even though mind is formless, it is made of food.

(v) Repetition or Revision: Repetition plays a major role in cementing the learning. This method of teaching, which can also be called as ‘Revision’, should not be confused with rote-learning. In rote-learning you memorise a concept through repetition without necessarily understanding the underlying concept. In ‘repetition’, the same concept is explained from multiple perspectives. This approach helps students understand the concept thoroughly.

- In *Brhadāranyakopaniṣad*, *Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya* uses three different illustrations to explain the same concept that ‘no particular objects are perceived in the waking and dream states apart from *Brahman*’. He explains it using (i) sounds made when a drum is beaten, (ii) sounds made a conch is blown (iii) sounds made when *Vīṇā* is played.
- In *Chāndogyaopaniṣad*, the *māhāvākya* ‘*tat tvam asi*’ has been repeated nine times. Each time the relationship between the individual self (*jīva*) and the supreme consciousness (*Brahman*) is explained using a different context.

(vi) Reductio-Ad-Absurdum: In this method of learning we prove the falsity of a premise by showing that its logical consequence is absurd or contradictory.

- In *Taittirīyopaniṣad* the true Self-Identity is explored using the concept of five sheaths (*Pañcakośas*). Each of the sheath is so real that we start associating our identity with that sheath. *Taittirīyopaniṣad* explores each sheath one by one and argues why our true identity cannot be equated to that sheath. It sequentially analyses all the five sheaths, negates each one of them, and finally leads us to our true identity.
- The *neti – neti* approach used in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* or *Kenopaniṣad* to relate to the concept *Brahman* is also a good example of this approach of learning.

(vii) Collective Participation – Seminar: *Upaniṣads* also contain many references of collaborative learning where *sahādhyāyīs* (fellow-learners) exchange knowledge, ideas, and opinions to enhance their collective knowledge base.

- In *Chandogyaopaniṣad* there are references where sages like *Pracinaśala*, *Satyayajña*, *Indradyumna*, *Jana*, and *Budila* gathered to discuss about *Brahman*.
- *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* contains references of discussions that took place in the court of King *Janaka*, under the leadership of *Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya*, which touched upon almost every subject relevant in spiritual life

CONCLUSION

All the methods of learning mentioned above are appropriate for effective learning even today. We find their variants being used in the modern education system, some consciously and some unconsciously. We need to pay focussed attention and design methodologies to adopt the Upanishadic pedagogy for current times.

There is a definite global mind shift in favour of student-centric education system from teacher-centric education system, yet, the different aspects of Upanishadic pedagogy listed above are still relevant. As we navigate digital transformation in education, this ancient wisdom reminds us that while technology can enhance learning, it cannot replace the transformative power of dedicated mentorship. The *guru-śiṣya* tradition offers timeless insights that are relevant to the modern education, such as:

- Personal connection drives deep learning.
- Proximity (physical and mental) accelerates growth.
- Knowledge transfer is as much about character as content.
- The teacher-student relationship is sacred and irreplaceable.

The future of education lies not in choosing between tradition and modernity, but in understanding how timeless principles can guide us toward more meaningful and effective learning experiences.

While the traditional *guru-śiṣya* system is distinct from modern classrooms, Upaniṣadic pedagogy offers valuable and timeless insights for contemporary education. Its principles emphasize that learning is not just about transmitting information but about awakening curiosity, fostering critical thinking, and nurturing a learner's potential for discovery. Integrating elements such as dialogue, inquiry-based learning, and personalized attention can help make modern education more holistic, transformative, and highly engaging. Thus, the Upaniṣadic pedagogy is timeless and undoubtedly serves education system of any generation.

Brief Profile of the Author:

Dr. Anupama Ryali is a faculty in Sanskrit and has 19 years of teaching and research experience. Her expertise is in Sanskrit and Vedic Literature, Aesthetics, Linguistics, Indian Knowledge Systems, and allied subjects, and Indic Research Methodology. She has published many books, e-readers, book chapters, research papers, articles of inter-disciplinary subjects in reputed and peer-reviewed national and international research journals and conference proceedings.

As a Sanskrit Scholar, she has a quest for Sanskrit and inter-disciplinary research and teaching. She would like to extend all her strength and energy in the field of Sanskrit, as a field expert, in paving a way to have easy and comfortable access for appreciation of the Indian literary legacy. She worked as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow-U.G.C., in the department of Sanskrit Studies, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, where she developed a Sanskrit e-text of Śiśupālavadha of Māgha (Pūrvārdha), which is available at <http://scl.samsaadhanii.in/scl/>

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