

Guru as an Academic Leader in Vedic Tradition: A Review

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Vedic literature from the Indian Subcontinent does not use the phrase ‘academic leadership’ or any other terminology precisely equivalent to this; still, rishi-munis , gurus, and even some kings with passion for knowledge, who provided the environment for exploration and dissemination of knowledge and wisdom can be considered as academic leaders in true sense. In this line, this article reports the review results on the concept of educational leadership depicted in Vedic literature. For this purpose, we explored writings on Vedic wisdom tradition and philosophy, mainly in Google Scholar, using the keyphrases “academic leadership in Vedic literature,” “education system in India,” “Sanatan philosophy,” “Hindu education system,” “Gurukul education,” and “education system in Mithila.” The review results revealed that academic leaders were selected based on practical expertise and specialization in content knowledge, particularly skills, knowledge, character, moral values, perseverance, and gratitude. Academic leaders were father figures, a source of inspiration, role models, and much more. Besides, leaders were characterized by honesty, devotion, and trust, and they had a passion for education and dedication to the profession with a desire for the quest for eternal truth. At current times, when the selection of leadership in academia is based on non-academic influence, such as political inclination, nepotism, and favoritism, neglecting leadership qualities and performance, particularly in Nepal and many

other countries, the article provides valuable insights into academic leadership.

Keywords: Vedic philosophy, Hinduism, gurukula, Indian subcontinent, Mithila, Nepal

Introduction

Western knowledge constructs mainly induce different educational leadership models prevalent in academic discourse, whereas the Eastern Vedic knowledge system and wisdom traditions are less explored, focusing on academic leadership. The Sanatan system is related to Vaidhika or Vedic dharma, which refers to “the religion of perfect knowledge” (Banaras Hindu University [BHU], 1904, p. 2). The Eastern Vedic knowledge system has a whole scheme of knowledge governed by philosophy (BHU,1904). To lead the goal of life, Vaidhika Dharma presumes a need for influential leaders who can, in any difficult circumstances, retain balance, think clearly, and are farsighted and could accomplish the goals at hand through the right actions. All these ideas clarify that Sanatan dharma is about religious practice and the philosophy of life under a good leader’s guidance and support. Different Sanatan Hindu literature and scriptures such as the Vedas, Purans, Upanishads, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Sankhya philosophy and other philosophical writings express such life philosophies.

The Hindu scriptures and philosophical books written approximately 5000 to 2500 years ago and practised in the then Indian Subcontinent were at the centre of educational activities. Even today, the scriptures are quoted in academic dialogues. The Subcontinent also had its unique educational model, also considered the Sanatan Hindu system of education that mainly covers the Gurukula system of education and hermitage

educational practice. Hermitage educational practice was the means for life transformation since education could lead an individual through the interaction of the self with nature in the quest for enlightenment. So, the educational practices under the supervision and grace of the teacher leader required personal guidance and a self-directive approach from the pupil's side, too. Therefore, the inward method of the teacher, the spirit of his life and work, was even more important than what he revealed in a formal educational setting (Wijesinghe,1987).

At this pretext, the research explores the notion of academic leadership practised in the Eastern part of the world since antiquity, exploring the characteristic features of leadership that can potentially be applied in the modern context. Therefore, this review article aims to explore the lessons from the Sanatan Hindu literature relevant to current academic leadership practices. As leadership significantly impacts and shapes the culture of any educational institution and individuals, as Soni and Trivedi (2018) point out, leaders require spiritual integrity to lead a group of people effectively. Furthermore, "it is important for a leader that his actions should speak louder than words, the ethics demonstrated by him should be high, and should show respect and compassion to others" (p. 5) as followers learn more from his actions than words. Such leadership lessons from Sanatan Hindu literature will turn guiding principles into academic leaders in the present context.

Amidst the widespread criticism of the selection procedure of academic leadership in the global and Nepali contexts, mainly influenced by political inclination, nepotism and favouritism, the article also provides a clear message for the selection of leadership. This criticism of the selection procedure is prevalent even in the United States as Gmelch and Buller (2015), in their seminal text *Building Academic Leadership*

Capacity, argue that the appointments in higher education leadership are political, and very few are found to have formal leadership education. Further, Kouzes and Posner (2008) argue that what people most look for and admire in a leader is constant which are honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring. These propositions of a leader's qualities are the needs for influential leaders. Vedic philosophy believes that effective leadership requires behaving to merit the respect, loyalty, and obedience of those being led. It shows that Vedic philosophy or the Sanatan belief system has kept the concept of education and leadership a prominent factor for the human world.

Therefore, the primary concern of this review article is to highlight significant trajectories of leadership that could be applied in academic sectors so that modern educational leaders could conceptualize the basics of Sanatan academic leadership practices and try to reform their practice. For that purpose, articles on Sanatan and Vedic philosophies were searched in Google Scholar using the keyphrases such as “academic leadership in Sanatan literature,” “education system in India,” “Sanatan philosophy,” “Hindu education system,” “Gurukul education,” and “education system in Mithila” to explore on academic leadership, its categories, and the fundamental values to adapt in the leadership arena. During the reading process, important contents relating to educational leadership were highlighted, coded, categorized, and thematized to develop a coherent narrative review article.

This observation of the discussion over leadership in Satana literature has drawn basic representing categories or the characteristic features of academic leadership as a father figure with honesty and trust who is an ideal role model to follow who possesses good character, devotion, the quest for truth, and passion for education, who is also a motivator, empathetic and

can be a trustworthy guide. The categorical discussion focuses on the selective mode and fundamental values of academic leaders that we could adopt from the Sanatan education system and Vedic philosophy. The thematic concentration of the article begins with the significant norms to focus on the selection procedure for academic leadership.

Selection Criteria for Academic Leadership

Primarily two significant criteria – cognitive skills and behavioural merit – provided a basis for selecting academic leadership during the Sanatan period. Furthermore, gurus and rishi-munis, who were also the academic leaders of the Gurukul possessed practical expertise and specialization in content that may be exclusive of academic degrees but required methodological expertise in Gurukul educational practice. Significant criteria for recruitment were “skills, knowledge, character, moral values, mindset, level of patience, intimacy with students, willingness to train to perfection, perseverance of results and loving and caring attitude to students” (Soni & Trivedi, 2018). Once they were selected, they used to take full responsibility for the students’/ followers’ future with an open heart as they considered imparting knowledge as their primary dharma (Kashalkar-Karve, 2013; Soni & Trivedi, 2018). Since the teacher leader is regarded as the primary source of the practical and supreme knowledge system, it is believed that the teacher needs to have benevolence that leads to different virtues in a leader like compassion, beneficence, patience, appreciativeness, and kindness (BHU, 1904). Hence, the leadership selection process is very particular and can also have great lessons for modern academia. The following categories further represent the characteristic features or defining criteria of academic leadership in the Indian Subcontinent during the Sanatan period.

Leaders as Father Figures

Academic leadership in Sanatan literature is portrayed as a father figure, and the learners are always focused on pursuing the teachers with teachableness and obedience. Disciples remained serviceable and careful not to offend their guru as they regarded the guru as the father in the highest sense (BHU, 1904). The disciples' respect towards their guru showed that the academic leaders earned the highest regard and were responsible toward followers. The educational leader in Sanatan scriptures is presented as a guru, a counsellor, a father figure, an ideal hero, a source of inspiration, and a personality with divinity integrated (Mlecko, 1982). Among these representations, gurus as father figures are the most important; Manu Smriti explains guru is the one who gives the knowledge of the Veda that ensures eternal rewards both in this life and after death. Furthermore, the Sanatan Dharma projects the father figure to identify any leader with the satvik identity accurately. The sloka [stanza] of the Bhagavad Gita highlights that the governor or leader should treat the public like a father in all situations.

In ancient times, in the system of Gurukul, the disciple not only learned holistic knowledge of life but also lived with the guru at his residence or Ashrama, where the guru used to provide quality time to the disciple quenching the thirst for knowledge of their disciple by answering their queries. Thus, Sanatan literature reveals that the academic leaders always kept students at the center and tried to solve their problems (Ramteke et al., 2015). During their stay with the guru, pupils served their guru in their daily chores. Similarly, even in the Buddhist tradition, teachers consider their pupils their children, and pupils should consider their preceptors as fathers (Ramanan, 2007).

This ideal relationship between the guru and the pupil can be further substantiated by referencing the book *Ritual, Knowledge, and Being: Initiation and Veda Study in Ancient India* written by Smith (1986), in which he argues that there were rules which prohibit the relationship between a pupil and daughter of the guru. A physical relationship or marriage between the two was considered incestuous. Pupils thus completely respected their guru as a father, and the relationship between the teacher and the students was that of care, respect, and trust. The association was also personal and intimate, unlike the formal relationship between modern academic leaders and followers (Shelly, 2015; Soni & Trivedi, 2018). However, in this relationship between the guru and his disciple, the guru held power conspicuous by his prestige and influence because of his exceptional knowledge and function.

Honesty, Devotion, and Trust

Though the leader was privileged with power, prestige and influence during the Sanatan period, as an academic leader, the guru provided guidance and knowledge and led followers on the spiritual path with honesty and devotion; in turn, the pupil reciprocated with complete obedience and trust (Mlecko, 1982). For that, the guru explains and interprets the Sanatan scriptures. Besides, the pupils in the Ashrama learned from the guru's life, his daily activities, casual conversation, silence, diet, and his companionship with the guru (Mlecko, 1982). Additionally, the relationship between the guru and the pupils was maintained by what Panini calls a 'vidya-sambandha,' the union between the two through knowledge. This link was as strong as a biological connection between father and son (Smith, 1986).

The devotion is followed as the norm for the pupils to be bestowed with knowledge practices. Pupils honestly serve the

guru in getting involved in the knowledge acquisition process. Pupils perceive the guru as the supreme source of knowledge and wisdom with complete trust. Manusmriti highlights the need for devotion in pupils as a man by digging with a spade obtains water, so he who does service obtains the wisdom enshrined in his guru (BHU, 1987).

As pupils used to live in the house or Ashrama of the guru and acquire knowledge, this system is also known as the Gurukul education system. Etymologically, Gurukula means learning while living with the guru in his house. This kind of teaching-learning developed suavity, intimacy, and complete trust between the two, due to which Shishya showed complete trust and surrendered to the guru. This sense of discipline and cordial relationship between the guru and the pupil is highly revered and widely known worldwide (Kashalkar-Karve, 2013; Rather, 2015). Because of the fatherly care and trust between the guru and the disciples, wholeheartedly devote themselves to and respect him.

Lived Example

During the Sanatan period, academic leaders lived with the ideals cherished by the pupils and communities. Mlecko (1982) quotes Ramdasa, who highlights the positional value of the guru as “without the grace of the Guru, one cannot realize the Self; contemplation and concentration, devotion and worship, would be all useless without the grace of guru.” Guru uplifts the world’s knowledge and virtues and becomes an exemplary force for life, devotion, and understanding. Ramadasa clarifies that such lived examples of a guru’s existence should be reflective as wisdom, dispassionateness, devotion, sadhana, rightful conduct, spiritual awareness, mindfulness, morality, and justice, and the observation of the

meaning constitute the characteristic foundation of a guru. The guru's ideals are connected to the main aim of education, which mainly include character building and exploration of eternal truth. Lived example of a high character set up of the guru provided the best way to develop character and overall development of the pupils. In contrast, pupils followed and applied these ideals according to their capacities. Pupils set their nature through the immediate living example of the guru with traits such as purity, thirst for knowledge, perseverance, faith, humility, submission, and veneration (Radha, 2019; Mlecko, 1982). In other words, these qualities inspired pupils to follow in the footsteps of the guru.

Furthermore, apart from explaining the scriptures, the guru revealed the meaning of life as he is the immediate, incarnate example and inspirational source for the students before them, serving students as the role model to follow (Mlecko, 1982; Chandra, 1994). The best leaders are those who not only teach their pupils but also make their disciples worthy citizens possessing ideal virtues. In an ideal educational environment, the teacher becomes a father figure and a role model, as the best way to develop the pupil's character is through the personal example of the high character setup of the teacher leader (Rather, 2015). Add a sentence.

Good Character

As Sanatan education highly prioritized value education, and for them, education was not just the amount of information students received; it valued life-building, man-making, character building and assimilation of ideas received. Sanatan education gave importance to and prioritized such a system through which character is formed, the strength of mind is increased, and intellect is expanded so that disciples can stand on their feet.

And inspiring pupils with such ideals are possible only through living examples in front of them (Radha, 2019; Shelly, 2015). In such a case guru's position is to perform the parent's character with virtuous life values. BHU (1904) notes that Manusmriti presents the guru's position as the parents' position because of his intimacy and his approach to the follower; that is, the guru was expected to expound the texts of scripture and live them in an attractive, lucid, patient and kind manner. Why focus on character in education is that character is the combination of virtues and happiness that is meant for the success story of life. The Sanatan philosophy depicts that "character is that on which lasting success depends" since intellect fails if the person cannot have virtues and happiness. In every walk of life, the character is the most sought-after and trusted, and a man of good character is respected and admired everywhere. (BHU, 1904).

If we look at history, we find a lot of such living examples who inspired us to lead an ideal life with virtues. Viswamitra, the mentor of lord Rama, was a great saint and a role model from whom he developed all the virtues (Mlecko, 1982). Even in the Medieval period, before the Muslim invasion of the Indian Subcontinent, the system of education prevalent was primarily Brahminical and Buddhistic, and both aspired to acquire knowledge and good character (Jha, 2008). Similarly, Vedic education under the guidance of an ideal teacher resulted in a rebirth of the students, an ontological change in the students (Smith, 1986). The Vedic system focuses on the four pillars of educational practices concerning the character-building proposing, "the four pillars of this Gurukul, namely patience, perseverance, perfection and pleasure provide true essence of education to the students" (Soni & Trivedi, 2018, p. 57). Academic leaders must concentrate on and exemplify good character models in educational practices.

However, in the Gita, satvik (attributed to good nature) quality is inferred as a fundamental attribute to make a proper leadership contribution. According to BHU (1904), such satvik quality of a leader, Krishna's main lesson to Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita, is a prominent factor in leading any situation since the satvik leaders are driven by the harmony between the self and the surroundings and are repelled from provoking confrontation or disparity.

Dedication and Passion for Education

Academics in the Sanatan period were highly dedicated to their profession. Dedication is one of the prominent components and values for work ethics in teachers' and pupils' existence as they learn to be honest, persistent, and judicious. Soni and Trivedi (2018) discuss 'self-reliance' as a standard of the pupils by building the capacity to judge, devote, and make significant contributions in the workplace through the knowledge and skills they learn under the guru in Gurukula. They claim that "this system of education teaches dedication, honesty, and perfection in the work" (p. 57). Furthermore, academics in the Gurukula were not driven by any vested interest, monetary considerations, or interest of any other type (Soni & Trivedi, 2018). From this, we can infer how high regard they attest to education. Education was considered a source of illumination and power which transformed one's life, and the role of the teacher in this transformation through their enormous knowledge was crucial (Kashalkar-Karve, 2013; Wijesinghe, 1987). Even Medieval Mithila, the historical region of the Indian Subcontinent that lies in the current Janakpur district of Nepal and its neighbouring area of Bihar, India, occupied a significant position in educational development. Mithila had a brilliant tradition of education since the days of Janak,

the philosopher king of Mithila, who maintained a galaxy of learned scholars in his court and encouraged learning in various ways (Jha, 2008). Jha (2008) adds that even though “there was nothing like the State Department of Education to coordinate and look after the educational institutions and their activities, the education made remarkable progress under the patronage of the sovereigns, the aristocrats and the well-to-do sections” (p. 1261) of the society. Brahminic knowledge and philosophy flourished only under the realization of historical necessity, patronage, and leadership of kings of the Janak Dynasty. They were involved in educational pursuits in such a way that it resulted in the outburst of intellectual activities. Mainly, Janaka Vaideha, one of the kings of the Janaka Dynasty who possessed a philosophical and inquisitive bent of mind, regularly held conferences inviting the most prominent scholars of the time. Janaka Vaideha and Yajnavalkya initiated Brahmanic knowledge in Mithila, which evolved and flourished here. Yajnavalkya is credited as the author of Shukla Yajurveda (Jha, 2010). Thus, the sustenance and development of Brahmanic knowledge were possible under the leadership and patronage of the Janaka Dynasty.

Motivation, Empathy, and Guidance

An academic leader understands the ethos of the pupils, identifies with them, and motivates and guides them to attain the highest ideals. Highlighting the Vedic education system, even Swami Vivekananda argued,

You cannot teach a child any more than you can grow a plant. All you can do is on the negative side – you can only help. You can take away the obstacles, but knowledge comes out of its nature. Loosen the soil a little so that it may come out easily. Put a hedge around

it, see that it is not killed by anything, and there your work stops. You cannot do anything else. The rest is a manifestation from within its own nature (Radha, 2019, p. 112).

Vivekananda stressed that teachers should inspire and guide pupils by removing the obstacles disciples undergo during the exploration of knowledge. Besides, the guru in ancient education symbolized the art of living and learning (Kashalkar-Karve, 2013). The role of the teacher, thus, is to provide an environment for the awakening of knowledge, during which the guru invokes the spirit of inquiry and guides him (Chandra, 1994). During the exploration of knowledge, a “true teacher immediately comes down to the level of the student, and transfers his soul to the student’s soul and sees through and understands through his mind” (Radha, 2019, p. 113).

Quest for the Eternal Truth

Unlike the modern education system, which aims to develop skills required for the job market, Sanatan education primarily seeks to liberate people from ignorance and help them attain enlightenment. During the period, as education was considered a source of liberation from ignorance and attainment of enlightenment, the role of the teacher during the learning process was considered extremely crucial (Wijesinghe, 1987). Etymologically, as “guru” means “dispeller of ignorance,” first guru or the leader should come out of it; then only the guru can guide others to eternal truth. So, the guru must be the seeker of the truth; then, he can liberate and help attain enlightenment (Mlecko, 1982). Thus, Sanatan education sought to address the holistic development of the pupils to achieve self-fulfilment and spiritual enlightenment and reach the level of a human god. As John Keats popularly states, “Knowledge enormous makes

a God of me,” similar sentiment was expressed in ancient Sanatan texts where Brahmins were deemed “human gods” by virtue of their study and teaching of Vedas (Wijesinghe, 1987; Smith, 1986). In Sanatan Hindu and Buddhist traditions, only an enlightened person could be a guru who could guide students in their pursuit of Nirvana (Ramanan, 2007). Wijesinghe (1987) has elaborated the teacher’s role in leading an individual towards self-directed enlightenment since education was not the mere acquisition of objective knowledge but an aid to self-fulfilment and enlightenment.

Conclusion

This review article indicates that though the Sanatan Hindu scriptures, education system, and philosophy do not directly argue about academic leadership, it has a clear message to current leadership practices for its reformation and improvisation. Amidst the widespread critique against leadership in general and educational leadership in particular, this article provides a clear message for selection criteria that should be based on merit and the qualities of academic leadership. That is, leaders should have a passion for education in the first place. Besides, academics are expected to maintain a harmonious relationship with their followers. To lead the followers or students in the right direction, leaders must demonstrate lived examples to follow, as students learn more from the behaviours of the guru or leader than from their preaching. In short, significant lessons that we can learn and apply are that an academic leader should be honest, trustworthy, loving, caring, empathetic, motivating, and a truth seeker. Leadership must provide a living example that followers can idealize and follow. Leaders walk the talk.

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