

Traditions in Transition: Gurukul vs. Buddhist Education Systems

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Abstract:

This article examines the distinctive educational paradigms of the Gurukul and Buddhist education systems in ancient India, highlighting their philosophical foundations, institutional structures, and pedagogical methodologies. The Gurukul system, rooted in the Vedic tradition, emphasises personalised, residential learning aimed at holistic human development and character formation through moral education. In contrast, the Buddhist education model promotes an egalitarian and institutionalised approach centred on universal enlightenment and compassion. While both systems share the overarching goal of fostering profound human development, they differ significantly in their accessibility and philosophical underpinnings. Through a detailed and nuanced analysis, this paper synthesises scholarly material to elucidate the complexities and interrelations of these two influential educational frameworks, ultimately demonstrating their enduring impact on contemporary educational discourse and policy.

Keywords — Gurukul education system, Buddhist education system, Holistic human development, Guru-Shishya bond, Moral education, Institutionalised learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ancient India was home to a rich and varied intellectual tradition that laid the groundwork for complex educational systems. Within this landscape, two prominent models, the Gurukul and the Buddhist education systems, emerged as foundational pillars of learning. The Gurukul system, deeply rooted in the Vedic period, represented a traditional model of personalised, residential education. In parallel, the Buddhist system, developed in the wake of the Buddha's teachings, introduced a more institutionalised and universal approach to knowledge dissemination. While both traditions coexisted and even influenced later centres of learning, such as Nalanda and Takshashila, they were fundamentally distinct paradigms (Nath, 2022).

This article provides a detailed, multi-layered analysis of these two systems, moving beyond superficial similarities to explore their core philosophical principles, institutional structures, pedagogical methodologies, and, most critically,

their social and cultural contexts. The objective is to synthesise scholarly material to construct a nuanced, authoritative account suitable for academic inquiry, highlighting key areas of convergence and divergence.

The central argument of this analysis is that while both the Gurukul and Buddhist systems shared a common, overarching goal of holistic human development, their profound differences in philosophical underpinnings and social accessibility created two distinct, and in some ways, oppositional, educational frameworks (Layek & Sil, 2021). The Gurukul system was a model of intimate, residential mentorship, intrinsically tied to the Vedic tradition and serving a specific, hierarchical social structure. In stark contrast, the Buddhist education system was an egalitarian and institutionalised model driven by the goal of universal enlightenment and compassion, representing a revolutionary shift in educational access and philosophy.

II. GURUKUL SYSTEM

A. Core Philosophical Principles and Objectives

The Gurukul system was a traditional Indian educational model with its origins in the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions. Its foundational philosophy is centred on the pursuit of *Brahma-Vidya*, or the knowledge of the divine, as a path to a higher truth. The ultimate objective was the holistic development of the student, encompassing intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth. Education was not merely about the accumulation of knowledge but was a means for profound character formation and the inculcation of core values. Students were taught to live by principles such as *dharma* (righteousness), *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence), and *seva* (service). The search for knowledge was inextricably linked to a search for moral principles, a concept considered so fundamental that, without religious guidance, education was seen as incomplete (Das, 2025). This integrated approach to learning, which blends academic rigour with moral and ethical grounding, is actively being revived in contemporary educational discourse and policy, such as India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

B. Institutional Structure and the Guru-Shishya Bond

A defining characteristic of the Gurukul system was its residential nature, where students, or *shishyas*, lived with their teacher, or *guru*, in the same house or hermitage, often located in a natural or forested setting. This immersive environment allowed for a constant, 24/7 immersion in learning, which fostered discipline, focus, and detachment from material distractions.

The cornerstone of the entire system was the *Guru-Shishya* relationship. This bond was a "keystone", a "sacred" and transformative connection that went far beyond the mere transmission of facts. The guru was not just a teacher but a guide, mentor, and spiritual leader entrusted with shaping a student's entire moral, intellectual, and spiritual life. This intimate, one-on-one mentorship allowed the guru to provide highly personalised instruction, tailoring the curriculum to the unique aptitude and temperament

of each student, a feature that stands out when compared to modern educational models with large student-teacher ratios (Bhatia, 2025).

A fundamental aspect of the Gurukul methodology was the integration of learning with daily life. Students were not only taught in a formal setting but also assisted their guru with daily household chores and responsibilities. This was a deliberate pedagogical choice, viewed by scholars as an essential component of education to instill self-discipline, humility, and a sense of service.

C. Curriculum and Subject Matter

The Gurukul curriculum was broad-based and holistic, encompassing both spiritual and secular knowledge. While it centred on religious texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Dharma Sutras, it also encompassed a diverse range of subjects. Students were educated in history (*Itihasa*), logic (*Anviksiki*), and jurisprudence (*Mimamsa*). Practical knowledge was also paramount, with subjects such as medicine (*Ayurveda*), martial arts, astronomy, and agriculture being taught not only through rote memorisation but also through hands-on, experiential learning.

A critical aspect of the Gurukul curriculum was its differentiated approach based on the prevailing social structure. The subjects of instruction were varied "according to the vocational needs of the different casts". For instance, Brahmins studied the Vedas and Vedangas, Kshatriyas were trained in the art of warfare, and Vaishyas were educated in agriculture, trade, and commerce. This feature demonstrates that the Gurukul system was not a uniform, universal model but a highly specialised one that was deeply integrated with the hierarchical social roles and duties of the time. This focus on preparing individuals for their specific social function is a significant point of contrast with the Buddhist system's egalitarian ideals (Rajguru, 2024).

D. Social and Cultural Context

The social accessibility of the Gurukul system is a point of considerable nuance. While one source suggests it was "inherently democratic in its approach", a closer examination of the available evidence reveals a more specific interpretation of

this "democracy." The system was primarily a "special educational system" used to educate "either Brahmins or Kshatriyas". The "democratic" nature may have pertained to the internal dynamics of the *Guru-Shishya* bond, which was based on personalised attention and respect, rather than external accessibility for all of society. Students from "lower classes were refused to get admission" into these Vedic educational schools. This inherent exclusivity is the most profound and critical point of divergence from the Buddhist education system (Bhatia, 2025).

III. THE BUDDHIST EDUCATION SYSTEM

E. Core Philosophical Principles and Objectives

The Buddhist education system was grounded in the teachings of Gautama Buddha, and its chief aim was to achieve a "personality transformation into a highest form of humanity". The philosophical core was the pursuit of wisdom (*paññā*) and compassion, with the ultimate goal being the attainment of *nirvana* (liberation) and "perfect ultimate wisdom" (*Anuttara-Samyak-Sambhodi*). The philosophy was non-dogmatic and aimed to awaken the individual's "innate capacity for wisdom". The methodology for achieving this was a three-fold path: ethics (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and insight (*paññā*). The purpose was not to indoctrinate but to provide individuals with the tools for self-discovery and the removal of ignorance. The final outcome of such an education was an unflinching commitment to work for the betterment of humanity and the alleviation of suffering (Meshram, 2013).

F. Institutional Structure and Methodology

The primary centres of Buddhist learning were monasteries or *Viharas*, which functioned as residential schools where groups of monks and students lived and studied together. Unlike the intimate, often solitary setting of a Gurukul, these institutions could be large-scale centres of learning, such as Nalanda or Takshashila. The methodology was described as lively and rigorous, placing a strong emphasis on discussion, logic, tours, and conferences as a means for students to engage in

critical thinking. A key practice, which directly linked the system's philosophical tenets to its pedagogical approach, was meditation in solitude, which was used to achieve the mental clarity and focus necessary for deep insight (Shastri, 2022).

G. Curriculum and Subject Matter

The curriculum in the Buddhist system was primarily spiritual, focusing on the teachings of the Buddha and the different schools of Buddhism. However, the curriculum was also remarkably diverse and broad-minded. In addition to religious studies, it included subjects such as the four Vedas, medicine, arts, crafts, mathematics, and astronomy. This integration of both spiritual and secular knowledge demonstrates that the system valued a wide range of learning. A notable similarity to the Gurukul system was the provision of vocational training alongside religious instruction (Verhoeven, 2022).

H. Social and Cultural Context

The social and cultural context of the Buddhist education system represents its most revolutionary characteristic. The sources repeatedly highlight that Buddhism emerged in a society struggling with the "supremacy of Brahmanical religion" and a system of "racial discrimination". The Gurukul system's practice of refusing admission to students from "lower classes" provided a direct catalyst for the development of an alternative, egalitarian model.

The Buddhist system was not simply a parallel institution; it was a corrective one. Its core principle of "absolute equality" stemmed from the belief that all sentient beings possess an innate wisdom and the potential for enlightenment. This ideological foundation led to a "revolutionary change in the society" by making education "wide open and available to the people of all walks of life," regardless of "caste, creed, or religion". Furthermore, the choice of Pali as the medium of instruction, the common language of the people, rather than the more exclusive Sanskrit of the Gurukul system, was a deliberate decision to ensure accessibility and make the teachings easily understood by the common populace. This move toward mass education and its rejection of societal

hierarchy make the Gurukul system's exclusivity not merely a point of difference but a core ideological conflict between the two traditions (Wisadavet, 2003).

IV. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

I. Convergence and Divergence in Core Principles

Both the Gurukul and Buddhist systems were united in their belief that education was a means of inner transformation rather than mere intellectual accumulation. They both aimed for the purity of character and the ultimate betterment of the human being. However, the paths they prescribed were fundamentally different. The Gurukul path was deeply intertwined with the duties and societal roles of a specific social structure (*dharma*), guiding the individual toward a life of civic and religious responsibility within a structured society (Dolas et al., 2025). The Buddhist path, on the other hand, sought a more universal, non-dogmatic liberation from the suffering of all beings, with the ultimate goal being to transcend worldly attachments.

J. Structural and Methodological Paradigms

The Gurukul model was an intimate, personalised, and familial residential mentorship, emphasising a one-on-one bond between the guru and the *shishya*. In contrast, the Buddhist system was a large-scale, institutional model with *Viharas* serving as centralised centres of learning that hosted larger communities of monks and students. The Gurukul system relied heavily on oral transmission and experiential learning within a small family unit, while the Buddhist system incorporated more varied methods such as logical discussion and communal tours.

K. The Curricular Divide: Sacred Texts and Secular Knowledge

While both systems blended spiritual and secular knowledge, their foundational texts and religious foci were distinct. The Gurukul curriculum is centred on the Vedas and related scriptures, while the Buddhist curriculum focuses on the teachings of the Buddha and various Buddhist schools. This distinction highlights the separate intellectual

orbits of each tradition. The surprising convergence was in the shared focus on vocational training, demonstrating a pragmatic element in both systems that sought to prepare students for practical life skills (Kumar, 2024).

L. Social Inclusivity: The Most Revolutionary Distinction

The most profound and revolutionary difference between the two systems lay in their approach to social inclusivity. The Gurukul system's inherent exclusivity and its focus on educating specific castes created a society where access to knowledge was a privilege tied to birth. The Buddhist system, in contrast, was founded on a deliberate principle of egalitarianism that was, at the time, a "revolutionary change in society". By opening its doors to all, regardless of caste, creed, or religion, and by using the common language of Pali, the Buddhist system directly challenged the established social order and offered a path to education and spiritual liberation for a wider segment of the population. This ideological conflict is the single greatest point of contrast, defining the unique legacy and social impact of each system (Layek & Sil, 2021).

TABLE I
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GURUKUL AND BUDDHIST EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Parameter	Gurukul System	Buddhist System
Core Philosophy & Purpose	Holistic development, <i>Dharma</i> , and <i>Moksha</i> (liberation)	Wisdom, compassion, and <i>Nirvana</i> (liberation)
Institutional Model	Residential <i>Gurukula</i> (familial, intimate)	Monasteries (<i>Viharas</i>) (institutional, communal)
Teacher-Student Relationship	Personalised, intimate <i>Guru-Shishya</i> bond	Mentorship within a monastic community
Primary Medium of Instruction	Sanskrit	Pali (common language)
Social Accessibility	Restricted, generally limited to Brahmins and Kshatriyas	Egalitarian, open to all castes, creeds, and genders
Curriculum Focus	Vedic scriptures, philosophy, warfare, and arts	Buddhist doctrines, philosophy, medicine, and arts
End Goal	Self-realisation, civic and religious duty	Liberation from suffering, personality transformation

V. ENDURING RELEVANCE AND CONTEMPORARY ECHOES

M. Legacy in Modern Indian Education

The principles of both ancient systems are not merely historical artefacts; they are actively informing modern educational policy, particularly in India. The Gurukul system's emphasis on holistic development, character-building, and value-based education is being actively integrated into India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This modern policy explicitly encourages a multidisciplinary and skill-based learning environment, echoing the Gurukul's broad-based curriculum, which stresses ethical reasoning and well-rounded development (Dolas et al., 2025). The sources explicitly link these ancient principles to modern policy goals, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and quality education. The integration of these ancient concepts through modern platforms like SWAYAM, along with policy support from bodies like AICTE, demonstrates a conscious effort to restore balance and purpose to contemporary education, moving beyond a sole focus on career readiness to foster responsible global citizens.

N. Lessons for a Globalised World

Both systems offer powerful lessons for a globalised world grappling with rising academic stress and an overemphasis on economic utility. Concepts such as personalised mentorship, the importance of a strong teacher-student bond, value-based learning, and community living are increasingly seen as antidotes to the dehumanising aspects of modern, standardised education. Furthermore, the Buddhist system's focus on non-dogmatic self-discovery and its connection between wisdom and compassion offers a powerful model for fostering empathy and a desire to benefit the world (Kumar, 2024).

O. Strengths and Limitations for Modern Adaptation

Any modern adaptation of these systems must critically assess their strengths and limitations. The Gurukul system's strengths lie in its personalised mentorship, the development of deep-rooted

ethical values, and its focus on holistic development. Its limitations, however, include a lack of standardised curriculum and its original social exclusivity, which would be antithetical to modern egalitarian ideals. The Buddhist system's strengths reside in its emphasis on reason, self-discovery, and, most importantly, universal access (Dolas et al., 2025). While the monastic model may not be scalable for mass public education, its principles of communal learning and its broad-minded curriculum offer valuable insights.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis reveals that while the Gurukul and Buddhist education systems shared a common aim of cultivating well-rounded, virtuous individuals, they were fundamentally distinct in their philosophical underpinnings and social approaches. The Gurukul system, a traditional model characterised by intimate mentorship, operated as an organic extension of a specific hierarchical social order, typically associated with the varna system of ancient India. This system emphasised the transmission of knowledge within an ashram, where students lived with their teacher and engaged in a curriculum that blended spiritual, moral, and practical education. It served not only as a means to impart traditional knowledge and cultural values but also reinforced social stratification by delineating roles and duties according to caste.

In contrast, the Buddhist education system emerged as a revolutionary and egalitarian paradigm that sought to democratise access to both education and spiritual liberation. Originating in the 5th century BCE, Buddhism emphasized individual experience and direct insight, which transcended the rigid caste classifications of the time. By utilizing the vernacular language spoken by the people, rather than the elite Sanskrit, Buddhist teachings became accessible to a broader audience, paving the way for a more inclusive understanding of wisdom. Monasteries and informal learning communities exemplified this approach, creating spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds could engage in philosophical inquiry, ethical training, and community practice.

Ultimately, the Gurukul system focused on preserving traditional knowledge and maintaining societal structure, while the Buddhist system represented a profound ideological break, advocating for social equality and personal empowerment. The legacies of both educational frameworks endure today; their core principles continue to inform modern educational reforms that aim to foster holistic development, critical thinking, and purpose-driven learning in an increasingly complex, globalised world. Future research should delve deeper into the practical and policy-oriented adaptations of these ancient systems, exploring how their foundational principles can be harnessed to bridge the gap between historical wisdom and contemporary educational needs, thereby enriching the discourses on inclusivity and social equity in the present day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses his sincere gratitude to Dr. Mrityunjay Kaibarta, Faculty of Education at Biswa Bangla Biswabidyalay, West Bengal, India, for his invaluable support in the review of this paper, including his critical insights and academic guidance.

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