



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH THE AGES

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies on early childhood education indicate a positive effect on the child's cognitive and social development. The Mozambique study infers that preschool education improves cognitive and fine motor development, leading to higher school readiness levels, significantly increasing the primary schools' enrolment. A Chicago based research demonstrates that economically backward children with early childhood experience are better prepared for school entry. Reviewing the effects of early childhood education in three continents, Berger claimed that early intervention enhances children's capacity to learn, improving their later elementary school performances. However, the positive results of early childhood education observed worldwide are not evident in India. The Indian Early Childhood Education Impact Study and the ASER 2019 Early Years revealed that the four and five-year-old children are far below the required cognitive and language domains, the preschools severely academic and concentrate heavily on teaching 3R's. The extreme academic burden on the children led to the prevalent assumption that westernised preschool education may not be suitable for the Indian condition. Hence, the conservatives advise the schools to get back to the Vedic *Gurukula* system. The current article presents the history of early childhood education from the hunter-gatherers to the Indian colonial era.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood, a period from birth to 8 years, is a crucial phase in human development. Psychologists have found that 75 per cent of an adult's personality is constructed by six years. Hence, while poets like Wordsworth described the child as 'father of the Man', educationists like John Dewey, Piaget, and Bruner declared the child as the constructor of man¹. Maria Montessori demonstrated how the adult depends on his 'child father' to attain his realisation². The education of such a significant stage is critical as it provides the basis for lifelong learning. Kasper Burger reviewed the studies published from Europe, North America and Asia and resolved that the preschool experience offers children a more favourable start at school, making them persistent in their efforts during the subsequent school years. Besides, Burger noticed that early learning enhances children's capacity to learn, improving their later elementary school performance³. Another research in the

Gaza Province of Mozambique found that the preschool intervention programs improved cognitive and problem-solving abilities, fine motor skills and socio-emotional and behaviour outcomes⁴. The Meta-analytic database of early childhood education program evaluations published between 1960 and 2007, 2007 and 2016 indicate that they (early childhood education programs) significantly decrease the requirement of special education placement and grade retention, increasing the high school graduation rates⁵. Early childhood education's long-term effects are so strong that individuals with preschool experiences acquire higher wages than those without⁶. However, this globally perceivable positive outcome is not evident in early childhood education in India^{7,8}. The Indian Early Childhood Education Impact Study, a longitudinal study of early childhood education's impact on formal schooling, and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) indicate (1) Four and five-year-old children are far below the expectations in cognitive and language domains. (2) Early childhood programs do not have a developmentally appropriate curriculum. (3) Private preschools stress learning the 3R's, making them downward extensions of formal primary schooling.

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In this scenario, conservative educationists often dismiss early childhood education as a Western concept and suggest emulating Vedic education methods. This mistrust among the educators and the parents regarding early childhood education opens up a need to study the early childhood conditions through the ages: the kind of education children of three years received whether there was an education for them or not. The study of Anthropology reveals that children have not changed much 'neurologically and physically in thousands of years. The change is in the way adults perceive children, according to the changes in culture and society'⁹. In this highest technological state of civilisation, children born to the most intelligent and educated parents are no different from primitive children. They still have to learn the human languages, learn to walk, coordinate their physical movements and consolidate their mental abilities. In short, they have to construct the future 21st century Man, the way they did hundreds and thousands of years ago. In this sense, it is essential to study the history of early childhood education to learn how children grew up in early societies, the details of the ways children were cared for, their food habits, clothes, the schools they attended, and the subjects they learnt. This analysis helps us compare it with our upbringing and evaluate early childhood educational methods.

Hunter-gatherer Societies: Knowledge about hunter-gatherer societies is significantly low since they mostly used perishable wood along with stone tools. The hunter-gatherers foraged for food, materials and also for knowledge. Knowledge of the places they lived in, details of plants and animals like which fruit was edible, which caused sickness; how to foresee the seasons were crucial. The parents passed on this information to their children. Unlike the later civilisations, hunter-gatherers hunted only one day in three days and gathered roots and fruits for three to six hours daily. They had fewer household chores that left them with much time to spend with their children, telling stories, playing or just hanging out¹⁰. Hence, children were close to their parents and shared a strong bond. Mothers carried the young children wherever they went, which provided children with an opportunity to develop naturally amidst nature.

Ancient Egypt: In Ancient Egypt, the mother took care of the child during infancy. She nursed the child until three years of age and carried him/her on her neck; a custom practised to date. In Egypt, neither boys nor girls wore any clothes until they went to school. They spent their time at home playing with their toys. At the age of four, the schooling would start with a proper costume, i.e., a girdle¹¹. At the age of four, the upper-class children were sent to the palace, where they were trained along with royal children for warfare or to become scribes in government departments. In middle-class families, fathers took charge of educating their sons. Sometimes children from humble backgrounds could enter schools and pursue an academic career¹².

Ancient Greece: Sparta and the Athens of ancient Greece had different views on education. In Sparta, a committee of elders checked whether every newborn infant met the required physical standards. The babies who did not meet the expected physical standards were exposed to die. The approved infants were taken back home to be brought up by the mother until they were seven years old. At home, the parents took care of the children and taught Homer's epics: the Iliad, the Odyssey, and other songs. The mothers instilled acts of bravery like not being afraid of the dark, not being afraid of being alone and

fundamentals of discipline. While girls stayed at home, helping the mothers, boys went with their fathers to clubs and learnt how to play with peers, engaged in rough play without inflicting pain and listened to the discussions. They could see the hardships of their parents and understood the way of life.

The mothers trained Spartan girls at home. Their education was limited to producing healthy offsprings. However, Spartan girls enjoyed greater independence than any other place in the Greek world and went through a rigorous physical training program to train their bodies to bear healthy babies. In Athens, children were viewed as 'future bearers of their culture and civilisation'. Hence, utmost importance and attention were given to their education and training. They were a source of pleasure, joy and comfort to their parents. Nevertheless, Athenians practised infanticide and exposed the newborns they thought were weak to regulate the population's size and quality¹³.

Athenians believed that the mind and body of the child could be trained. Therefore, their education system was sophisticated. Hippocrates, Plato and Aristotle have discussed the stages of development. Hippocrates identified seven stages of development: infants – birth to 7 years; child – 7 to 14 years; adolescent – 14 to 21 years; youth – 21 to 28 years; man – 28 to 49 years; elderly man – 49 to 56 years; and old man – between 56 and death, which is almost similar to the present stages of development. Plato considered children to be gullible and easily influenceable. He advised the mothers to swaddle the baby. According to Plato, in the first stage, i.e., birth to three years, the child had to be carried by the nurse. Children at this age will not use any comprehensible language but make only noises. The second stage, three to six years, was meant for playing with other children. He insisted the children of this age be punished mildly, neither to degrade nor to enrage them. Plato had noticed that the children grow taller in this age than any other age. Both boys and girls lived together under the supervision of the mother or the nanny at home. Six years onwards, boys and girls lived separate lives, and formal education would begin for boys outside the home. Few girls were also included in formal education.

As per Aristotle, two, five, seven and fourteen years were critical. He recommended that children drink more milk and play a lot till they were two years old. From two to five years, the children were advised to play and get prepared for adult activities. A guardian monitored the games boys played and the stories they listened to. Aristotle also knew the effect of other languages on children. Hence, he advised not to allow children to attend comedies or dramas with indecent language. The Athenians believed that both nature and nurture worked together, and each had a role to play. Instead of wondering which is better, they accepted the children as they were and provided support and education needed for their development. The formal schooling, which began at seven during the Hippocrates period, was reduced to 6 years by Plato, and further reduced to 5 years by Aristotle.

Ancient Rome: By the age of Rome, the value of children was reduced. Romans saw children being physically and mentally weak. They believed that children could not think and plan anything rationally, cannot differentiate right from wrong and cannot judge. Quintilian, a Roman rhetorician, identified three stages of development. They are birth to three years, three to seven years and seven to adolescence. Quintilian observed that

the children learn to speak in the first three years. Hence, they advised appointing a nurse who could 'speak properly and set good example. He advised that the children between 3 and 7 years should often be amused and praised. The child should not be assigned tasks that are too difficult. Once the child crosses seven years, he must be sent to the school where instruction was tailored to the individual student. While Quintilian was the first to introduce parent education¹⁴, St. Augustine insisted that children should not be punished as it only hampers their learning.

Middle Ages and Renaissance: The beginning of the middle ages was called the "Dark Ages". It was a period of grotesque wars, scarce resources, violent diseases and epidemics. Historians like Lascardes, Hinitz, Hanawalt, and Aries have written extensively about the children's conditions and their miserable childhood in the middle ages. While Lascardes and Hanawalt state that the number of children surviving to maturity was one in three, even in the upper-class families. Further narrating tragic fire accidents he pointed out that 54% of the children below one year died in accidental fires. Besides, infanticides were common, making the period between 400 and 1400 undoubtedly gruelling for the children. Diseases like pox, sweating sickness, flux, plague etc., had increased the infant death rate from 27% to 33%. People were fearful of allowing the child to crawl in the cold, filthy outdoors of London. Hence, they considered that Swaddling was the safest means of protecting children¹⁵.

On the other hand, Philip Aries concluded that the medieval world had no place for childhood¹⁶. However, many other researchers like Hugh Cunningham, Nicholas Orme, Joan Acocella and Adrian Wilson criticised Aries for his generalisation and argued that the medieval world did have a childhood but not in a sense that we know of today^{17 18}. Discipline was significant for medieval parents, which often led to abuse, and many children died in the hands of their masters under the name of discipline. Parents believed that more than seven hours of sleep upsets and hurts the blood. Hence, the children were allowed to sleep only for seven hours while the adults could sleep for eight to nine hours¹⁹. According to Aries, the stages of development were (1) infancy – from birth to seven years – It was considered as an age of toys. Children played with hobby horses, dolls, windmills, and birds on leashes; (2) pueritia – from seven to fourteen years – was an age of school; (3) adolescence – from fourteen to twenty-eight. It was the age of love, courtship, knightly sports, feasting and boys and girls walking together; (4) youth – forty-five years was the time for wedding festivities, age of war and chivalry; followed by (5) senectitude – an age of law, science and learning; and finally (6) old age – an age of retired life.

The children were sent to school to learn to read and write Latin. Sometimes reading and writing was taught at home as they did not have too many requirements. If the parents were tutors, the children in wealthy households became literates by 4 or 5 years, and Sir Thomas Elyot thought that children should learn to read and write by seven. Although schooling was started around six or seven years, in the country-side, destitute children had no opportunity to learn until they were adolescents²⁰.

Industrial Societies: The industrial revolution introduced the concept of early childhood education in the world. During the

Industrial Revolution, the women who were homebound until then started working in factories away from home. The factories provided daycare facilities for infants, facilitating women to spend their whole day at the factory. However, children between 3 and 6 were left at home. They were too old to be at daycare but too young to be admitted to school. This situation resulted in either the small children accompanying the older children to schools or older children leaving schools to take care of their younger siblings. Subsequently, schools started new blocks accommodating the younger children and developed a curriculum to prepare them for formal schooling. In colonised countries, some missionaries started Infant schools similar to those of Europe. These were the first early childhood education centres²¹. Hence, early childhood education is viewed as a 'preparation for formal schooling'.

Early Childhood Education in India: Hartmut Scharfe points out that very little is known about children below seven years in ancient India²². Even in a scripture like Mahabharata, the children's references are limited to the birth record, physical attributes, mental qualities and some places where the parents mourn their child's death, like Arjuna mourning Abhimanyu's death describing his play as a child²³. Nevertheless, children were seen as god's gifts and rebirth of an ancestor²⁴. Children were cherished, and there were very few rules for them. Scharfe calls early childhood the "golden age" in the life of an individual. They had no timetable for eating, sleeping, playing or excretion. Children learned all these by imitating the adults around them. Nowhere were the children expected to excel.

Ayurveda divides childhood into five stages – the first stage is called **Garbha** – foetal period; second stage – **Ksheerda** infants from birth to 6 months when they live only on milk. Third, **Ksheerannada** from 6 months to 2 years, where the weaning of milk occurs; the fourth is **Bala** from 2 to 5 years and **Kumara** from 5 to 16 years. Every stage is marked with a special kind of ritual called **samskara**. Sixteen **samskaras** are performed in the lifetime of a person. Four **samskaras** before birth and six from birth to five or seven years old, depending on the child's caste.

After Chudakarma, the eighth **samskara**, Vidyambha **Samskara**, which is different from Vedabhyasa, is performed²⁵. Ambivalent opinions are found whether the schooling was started after Vidyambha or after upanayana. Kautilya's Arthashastra suggests that the students learn the alphabet (lipi) and arithmetic after Vidyambha and study triple Vedas only after the investiture ceremony with sacred thread²⁶. In contrast, T. S. Veliyah, quotes two resources, one stating the children started schooling around three years and the other mentioning the children were sent to school at five²⁷.

Tenth Samskara, Upanayana, is an initiation to the spiritual journey. Until upanayana, the children were at home within the protection of family members. Upanayana is called second birth of the child as the teacher becomes the father, Gurukula becomes his residence for a certain number of years. In other words, it is the end of early childhood. In the beginning, education was confined only to Brahmins. Sometime before 500BC, it was opened to Kshatriya and Vysya varnas. The initiation was performed at different ages for different varnas. For a Brahmin, *Upanayana* the initiation was performed at the 8th year of conception; for a Kshatriya it was at the 11th year of conception and Vysya at the 12th year of conception. In extreme cases, the initiation could be preponed for a year³⁰.

However, ordinary people's initiation would occur between 8 and 16 years for Brahmins, between 11 and 22 years for Kshatriyas and between 12 and 24 for Vysyas³¹. Kautilya's and Manu's writings indicate that children below seven years were educated at home in Vedic India. Kalhana's Rajatarangini mentions that Bodhisattva was taught in an elementary school. However, Kalhana was from the 12th century CE, and elementary school was very much part of his society rather than Bodhisattva. It is evident from above that neither elementary nor early childhood schools existed in the modern sense in the ancient world.

All the varnas, including Brahmins, had different occupations and professions apart from learning Vedas like the priesthood. The children of ordinary people worked with their parents and uncles and trained in real life. The children of other guildsmen like carpenters, blacksmith, potter etc., did not go to any school and were trained by their fathers in the actual workshop. As Keay says, "The boy was taught by observing and handling real things, and the father would take great delight in passing on to his son the skill which he possessed. It was not merely a question of actual teaching, but the boy would day by day absorb unconsciously, the traditions and spirit of the particular craft ..."³². They were trained in real-life experiences and by their fathers with love. Here, it appears, the child did not wait for the initiation and started going to his father's workshop and might have learnt the names of the things and their use at a significantly younger age.

Buddhists opened education to all castes, yet the age of school admission was seven years. It was Jain matha (monastery) that reduced the age of school admission to five years. Both Buddhist and Jains provided education in vernacular languages instead of Sanskrit. A 'muktab ceremony' was performed for a Muhammadan prince when he was four years, four months and four days, and then he was handed over to the tutors. The same became a practice with general Muhammadan boys and is in practice even today. The young princes were taught to read and write first in their mother tongue. They were educated in the harem under the guidance of their fathers. A eunuch was in charge of their education. During Muhammadan rule, when a boy started speaking, he was expected to recite Muhammadan article of belief (the kalima), and after that, he was expected to by-heart some selected verses of the Koran at home and around seven years, Koran was learnt through formal instruction in muktab³³.

Girls, as a rule, received no education, and the daughters of Rajput nobles or Zamindars received a limited education. The Purdah system was a hindrance to the education of the girl. The rich and those who could afford it would hire a lady tutor³⁴. Keay quotes William Ward's, words that the Hindu women were unable to teach the first lessons to their children as they were illiterate³⁵. During colonial rule, some private enterprises and Missionaries started kindergarten schools in India as early as 1874. In 1831 Bishop Turner started an infant school in Calcutta for the poor. The school also provided a meal a day for the child. This school did not function for long as Bishop Turner breathed his last in 1932. It appears that many attempts were made to revive the infant school in Calcutta but was in vain. The main reason was the language. Then a Bengali "teacher aide" was appointed to communicate between the children and the English master. These schools usually catered to the needs of newly converted native Christians³⁶.

In 1913 Gijubhai, an eminent lawyer, set to find a school for his son³⁷. He came across and trained his son in the Montessori Method. He got convinced about the Method and started the Dakshinamurti Balmandir pre-primary school in August 1920, borrowing the educational principles from Montessori, Froebel, Dalton and others. Later Tarabhai Modak started Montessori Pre-primary schools in Calcutta. Dr Montessori's visit to India also resulted in many Montessori pre-primary schools in Madras and Ahmedabad. The credit of shaping pre-primary education in India goes to Anne Besant and Rabindranath Tagore. The pre-primary education, which was limited to the missionaries, theosophists and wealthy and higher classes, spread nationwide. For the first time in educational history, the Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education on Post-War Educational Development in India in 1944, which is popularly known as the Sargent Report, emphasised the significance of pre-primary education and stressed the appointment of trained women teachers. Parallel to this, Mahatma Gandhi initiated the 'Pre-Basic Education' for children below seven years³⁸. Wardha scheme of Pre-Basic Education had many merits and demerits and was nurtured like a hot-house plant in a few areas out of devotion to Gandhi. However, the scheme did not make any appreciable impact on Primary or pre-primary Education³⁹.

CONCLUSION

In the ancient civilizations, Egyptian children were educated by their mothers until they were four years old. Later on, fathers were in charge of their education. In Greece, schooling started around five years by Aristotle's time. In the Middle Ages, children went to school around six or seven years. In the Vedic India, schooling started only after the initiation which was around seven years of age for Brahmins and a year or two later for other varnas. The concept of schooling for children below five years came into practice only after the industrial revolution. Thus, early childhood education is new for both the Western and Eastern worlds and results from capitalism and missionaries' benevolence. In the early days, the child was a part of the actual world and had many opportunities to be with people, observe, and learn how to live. Now the conditions have changed; the mothers no more carry their children to the fields or workplaces. The modern world has given rise to modern problems which require modern solutions. Therefore, the child needs a unique means called 'early education' to actively imbibe the environment's elements to construct himself as a future citizen of the present world.

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