

GURU-ŚIṢYA PARAMPARĀ: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON SACRED KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION IN INDIAN THOUGHT

***Faruk Abdulla**

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21055124>

Abstract

The Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā (teacher-disciple tradition) is one of the oldest and most sacred traditions of Indian knowledge System. The Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā isn't just an old tradition—it's the living soul of Indian knowledge System. This tradition is about way more than sharing information or teaching a set of skills. Here, learning actually changes you. It shapes your mind, your behavior, even the core of who you are. Its roots reach back to the Vedas and Upaniṣads, but the bond between Guru and disciple doesn't belong to any single time or classroom. The Guru stands for wisdom itself, coming to life as a person right in front of you. The disciple has to show up humble, disciplined, and truly eager to learn. When these two meet, it isn't just about lessons. It's a relationship built on deep trust, where knowledge is sacred—something to guide you toward discovering your true self and, finally, finding liberation.

In this paper, I will discuss the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā in the context of Indian epistemology where knowledge, morality, and practice are closely intertwined. Its strength in philosophy, arts, sciences, and spiritual practices is indicative of pedagogy based on oral delivery, dialogue, and experience, and which identifies knowledge as a divine, changing power that constructs the individual and the society. Comparing it to the modern system of education where the market and utilitarianism paradigms are prevailing, the Guru-Śiṣya tradition provides teachings on learning value-based, mentorship, and holistic development. A revisiting of it redefines education as a way of awakening, moral responsibility, and whole-integrity growth, and knowledge as a sacred wisdom.

Keywords: Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā, self-realization, liberation, mentorship, utilitarian paradigms, sacred wisdom

**Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj*

1. Introduction

The Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā—the teacher-disciple lineage—sits at the heart of Indian intellectual and spiritual life. It's not just any educational method; it stands out across civilizations. What makes it so different? Learning here isn't just about facts or skills. Instead, wisdom gets passed along in a way that shapes you inside and out—ethically, spiritually, and intellectually. In modern classrooms, knowledge often turns into something you can buy or sell, just a resource for jobs or exams. The Guru-Śiṣya tradition refuses to shrink learning down like that. Here, knowledge (vidyā) isn't just information you pick up. It's something you live, something that transforms you over time, thanks to a deep, ongoing connection with your teacher (Dasgupta, 1991, pp. 49–55).

The Guru is not just worshiped as a teacher or a disseminator of information, then, but as the embodiment of the knowledge that has been realized and the living connection in a divine lineage. In that regard, the Guru is a kind of mediator between the truth that is revealed and the ignorance of human beings, which is an archetypal role of one who has made his way to the realization and can therefore guide others. The disciple (Śiṣya), on his part, is not merely a passive recipient, but a participant in the learning process whose learning must have the following qualities;

humility (*śraddhā*), disciplined receptivity, devotion and moral preparedness (Radhakrishnan, 1953). This is not a transactional but transformational education, a sacred relationship (*sambandha*), where knowledge is given as a gift (as an act of grace) and not as information.

This paper takes a close look at the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā by diving into its roots in Indian ways of knowing, its teaching methods across philosophy, the arts, and sciences, and its power to keep going through oral tradition and lived experience. The study also tackles the tough issues inside the tradition—think hierarchy, authority, and who gets left out. It explores how the Guru-Śiṣya model has been reimagined for the modern world. By weaving these threads together, the discussion shows why this approach to learning still matters. The point isn't just professional know-how. It's about holistic, value-based, relational education that aims for self-realization (*ātma-jñāna*) and liberation (*mokṣa*) (Panikkar, 1999, pp. 64–66). The tradition's classical roots and modern challenges both get their due, making the case that the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā still speaks powerfully to what education can really be.

2. Philosophical and Epistemological Foundations Knowledge in Indian Epistemology: The Indian epistemology does

not diminish learning to cognitive acquisition but envisages it as a holistic and transformational process. The concept of *vidyā* extends beyond informational knowledge to encompass wisdom that reshapes the knower's very being. Philosophical schools such as *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā* meticulously classify valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*)—including perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), and authoritative testimony (*śabda*). Of these, the role of *śabda* in the Guru-Śiṣya model stands out as a unique one, since it justifies the passing of truth by the words of a liberated teacher. The speech of the Guru, both based on scriptural continuity and personal realization, is not simply an opinion, but an epistemically valid and binding source of knowledge (Dasgupta, 1991, pp. 76-83). Unlike Western empiricism where knowledge is verified mainly over the outside and sensual experience, the Indian system favors the power of realized experience mediated by the Guru. This forms the Guru-Śiṣya relationship as an essential epistemological form, in which oral, dialogical, and experiential learning becomes justified in the larger intellectual tradition.

The Upaniṣadic Model of Learning: The dialogical engagements depicted in the Upaniṣads exemplify the typical Guru-Śiṣya relationship surpassing the intellectual

discussion. An example is the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that indicates that real knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) goes beyond conceptual categories and requires existential surrender and a state of meditative receptivity. Similarly, the teaching of Uddālaka Āruṇi to his son Śvetaketu in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* epitomizes the insistence that realization is attained not by theoretical speculation alone but by internalizing the Guru's insight into the oneness of reality (Olivelle, 1998). Even the etymology of the term Upaniṣad (which literally means sitting next to the teacher) expresses the spatial, ethical, and spiritual closeness that is necessary to transmit anything. This proximity is not merely physical but is symbolic of modesty (*sraddha*), devotion and surrender, which constitute the environment of transformative learning. In this sense, the Upaniṣadic pedagogy is opposed to transactional approaches to education, but it upholds a relational and religious process.

Education as Liberation: The most fundamental belief in the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā is that education is intended to lead to liberation (*mokṣa*), rather than professional or utilitarian progress. Knowledge is esteemed only insofar as it liberates the aspirant from ignorance (*avidyā*) and reveals the self's unity with the cosmic principle (*brahman*). The Guru in

this perspective is not a transmitter of some abstract doctrines but the embodiment of the truth which in the process of transmitting the disciple is the passageway through which he/she comes out of the bondage into the freedom. The name of Guru itself is figuratively an indication of the remover of darkness, representing 'gu' (darkness) and 'ru' (remover) (Radhakrishnan, 1994, pp. 45-52,134-137). The Guru removes ignorance and enlightens the disciple, thus helping him, or her to move out of finite into the infinite, and out of the partial knowledge to the full realization. This radical orientation also places education as a religious trust and existential vocation and not as an economic or utilitarian business thus distinguishing the Indian epistemological paradigm with most of the contemporary frameworks.

3. Pedagogical Dimensions: Embodied and Holistic

Gurukula System: The gurukula model epitomized immersive, holistic pedagogy. The Guru also lived with disciples, who usually did household chores as well as studying. This system dissolved the distinction between education and life and made intellectual activities part of ethical training, community life and service (Altekar, 2009). This type of model did not only develop intellectual prowess but resilience, humility, and moral integrity.

Oral and Dialogical Pedagogy:

Knowledge was mostly passed orally by recitation, memorization and dialogue. This was opposed to rote learning and included gradual steps, which were listening (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and contemplation (*nididhyāsana*). The dialogical approach (as observed in the Upaniṣadic interactions) helped to make the disciples an active participant in acquiring knowledge, thus developing a critical thinking skill in addition to devotion.

Training Across Domains: The Guru-Sisya tradition did not remain a philosophical and spiritual one; it influenced various realms:

- **Philosophy:** lineages preserved Vedānta, Yoga, Nyāya, and Buddhist traditions.

- **Arts:** classical music and dance relied on oral apprenticeship (*riyāz*), emphasizing discipline, emotion, and devotion beyond technique (Banerji et al, 2017).

- **Sciences:** Ayurveda, astronomy, and metallurgy were transmitted through apprenticeship, privileging embodied practice and observation (Wujastyk, 2003).

Embodiment of Wisdom: The Guru was not just a teacher he or she was the knowledge itself. By being close to the Guru, the disciples received not only intellectual material but also moral behavior, discipline and spiritual perspective. This pedagogy is

conjunctive to the concept of learning by doing, not learning by teaching.

4. Resilience and Adaptation Across History

Survival Through Oral Transmission:
The Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā proved to be very strong during the time of political instability and institutional breakdown. The decline of great centers of learning, the most celebrated of them being Nalanda University in 1193 CE, did not put off the spread of knowledge. Although the annihilation of libraries indicated the disappearance of enormous body of texts as repositories, the spirit of Indian knowledge systems remained due to the oral tradition enshrined in Guru-Siṣya relationship (Choudhury, 2006). Unlike purely text-based systems, where knowledge can vanish with the destruction of manuscripts, the Indian tradition emphasized *smṛti* (memory), *śruti* (oral transmission), and embodied practice. Disciples did not just learn philosophical doctrines, scriptures, but also ritual practices, chants, and interpretative methods. This guaranteed the continuity of the generations, in which the living presence of the Guru was a type of 'mobile university', where wisdom could not be destroyed due to the fragility of written archives (Sen, 2014, pp. 58-60). Contextual adaptation was also possible through such oral resilience since teachings could be

adapted to new contexts without losing their fundamental principles.

Artistic and Spiritual Resilience:

Outside of the philosophical schools, the Guru-Śiṣya paradigm thrived in areas like music, dance and spiritual practice. The Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā is a core of training in both Hindustani and Carnatic traditions used in Indian classical music (Gundlupet, 2016). Apprenticeship under a single Guru—often spanning decades—fosters not only technical mastery of *rāga* and *tāla* but also internalization of the Guru's artistic sensibility, discipline, and ethos. A Guru is more than a method-teacher, a conservator of forms of taste, who communicates small nuances, which are ineffable in notation. Similarly in traditions of non-dualism, including Advaita Vedānta, the impartation of the non-dual knowledge depends on the physical presence of the Guru to melt the ignorance of the disciple through *upadeśa* (instruction) and *dr̥ṣṭānta* (illustrative insight) (Deutsch, 1969, pp. 92-94). The Bhakti movements were also a source of resilience with saints and teachers devising easy to follow ways of devotion, through continuity in the form of oral hymns and songs, and group practice. Such dimensions of art and spirituality depict the flourishing of the Guru- Śiṣya model, as a form of experiential and interpersonal, as opposed to being institutionalized.

Adaptations in Modernity: Indian education was dramatically transformed by the colonial experience. The British reforms asserted institutional learning, written tests and uniform curricula at the expense of the small-scale Guru-Śiṣya model (Viswanathan, 1989). Universities and conservatoires brought structure and access, allowing greater involvement with social groups, though this was at the expense of depth and individual mentorship. To a great extent, this framework was still preserved in the postcolonial India, whereby professional and technical training started to gain centrality. Nevertheless, the Guru-Śiṣya spirit still evolves. Empathy to authenticity in the performing arts has seen master-disciple residency and training under gurus remain paramount. The modern hybrid model online masterclasses in music, yoga or philosophy, seek to combine the individualistic culture of the Guru-Śiṣya bond with the mass management of contemporary mediums (Davesh Soneji, 2012). Although the digital space cannot perfectly replace the hands-on experience of Guru-living, it still enlarges access and democratizes education. The innovations indicate that tradition is not destroyed, but it is changing and bargains between its divine heritage and the requirements of the modern educational ecosystems.

5. Critical Tensions

Authority and Hierarchy: The hierarchical structure of the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā, though instrumental in instilling discipline and reverence, also introduces risks of authoritarianism. The widely quoted story of *Ekalavya* who was forced by Droṇācārya to cut off his thumb as *gurudakṣiṇā* - is a representation of the risks of unchecked power and the possibility of exclusion in the light of social hierarchy (Hiltebeitel, 1990). This episode, although symbolic, also helps to elucidate a larger structural issue: absolute dependence of the disciple on the Guru leads to the imbalance of power which may be abused. There are contemporary criticisms that blind obedience when exaggerated above critical dialogue can contribute to elitism, inhibit creativity and prevent autonomy of the learners (Kakar, 2002). The same mechanism that has been keeping respect and devotion, therefore, can be turned into a place of vulnerability.

Dynamism and Divergence: There is never continuity in the Guru-Śiṣya system, but a system of reinterpretation and innovation in the dynamism of the Guru-Śiṣya system. The followers tend to make the teachings of the Guru relevant to their new situations, which results in the development of sects, schools, or other practices. This living vitality of the tradition can be traced in this dynamic quality, which guarantees its applicability through

generations. It also however presents the danger of fragmentation since reinterpretations can take a very different path to original intentions (Flood, 1996). Indicatively, different schools of philosophy like Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita Vedānta, all purport to have an identical lineage but are radically different in their metaphysics and soteriology. This plurality ability shows how enriching the system is and how challenging it is to maintain a consistent lineage.

6. Romanticization in Modern Context

The modern-day scholarship cautions against blindly exaltation of the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā as a pain-free replacement of modern-day education. Although the model has a lot of insight into mentorship, holistic growth, and value-based education, its weakness cannot be ignored. In the past, the tutelage of the Guru was limited in terms of caste, sex, and social status, making the whole society inaccessible to a considerable part of it (Rege, 2006). Besides, hierarchical models have authoritarian traits that may perpetuate inequalities when blindly transferred to the current framework. Romanticization, in turn, obstructs the necessity of the reform: the adaptations of the present time should keep the spirit of discipline and closeness and introduce the protective measures of inclusivity, responsibility, and critical thinking.

7. Contemporary Relevance and Reimagination

The Guru-Śiṣya tradition still holds great significance today, especially when exploring more holistic and human-centered education models. At the core of this reimagining is Value-Based Education. This tradition emphasizes developing inner virtues such as humility, self-discipline, respect for knowledge, and social responsibility. In stark contrast, modern education systems often focus on productivity and employability driven by market demands. By placing values at the center of teaching, we can bring back the moral aspect of education. This approach shapes learners not just as professionals with skills but as individuals who are ethically grounded and contribute positively to society (Swargiary, 2025).

Mentorship as Relational Pedagogy is deeply connected to the Guru-Śiṣya relationship, serving as an impressive forerunner to today's mentorship systems. This traditional model moves beyond simple teacher-student exchanges by focusing on lasting connections, trust, and a comprehensive development of the learner in every aspect—mind, heart, and spirit. Nowadays, universities and companies understand that true learning thrives within relationships that not only motivate but also guide and challenge over extended periods (Behl & Pattiaratchi, 2023).

But there are Ethical Safeguards needed to re-invent this model. The hierarchical system that once empowered respect and subservience have the potential to recreate authoritarianism and marginalization when not controlled. The modern adaptations need to actively incorporate the elements of dialogue, consent, and inclusiveness. Equality between genders and the accountability of the institutions are especially important to prevent when the reverence historically given to the Guru is turned into a mask of abuse or injustice (Excelsior, 2025).

Lastly, the Tradition and Technology meet bring about new possibilities of adaptation. The rise of online education, digital platforms and global networks enables the spirit of personalized apprenticeship to move beyond geographical constraints. The richness of Guru-Sisya tradition can be maintained and Guru-Sisya model can be extended to larger groups by hybrid models in which online teaching is enhanced by immersive in-person mentorship. Although technology cannot substitute the existential closeness of residing with a Guru, it might serve as a medium, and wisdom traditions can be democratized to a globalized, interconnected world (Statetimes editor, 2024).

8. Conclusion

The Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā is not merely a method of pedagogy, it is a

civilizational spirit in which education is epistemic, ethical and transformative. In contrast to contemporary regimes where learning is often measured in terms of measurable skills and market preparation, this tradition sees education as a sacred process of self-realization, where the Guru initiates the disciple to a level of intellectual understanding towards awakening of the self. Its continuity, through times of the decay of ancient universities, colonial interferences and the emergence of standardized education, reveals its flexibility as a living practice and not a fixed remnant of the past.

However, it is these same characteristics that made it so strong (hierarchy, reverence, and exclusivity) that show its weaknesses. Historical moments like the one in which Ekalavya was excluded also remind us that the very structures that helped in cultivating devotions and discipline can also reinforce inequities. Such critical engagement thus requires that the tradition is not idealized as a viable alternative but is challenged in terms of its weaknesses especially with regards to caste, gender and authority.

The Guru-Śiṣya model provides an understanding of the pressing urgency of value-based education and mentorship in the modern environment, based on trust, discipline and personal guidance. Simultaneously, reimagination needs to

incorporate nets of inclusiveness, responsibility, and dialogical transparency. Forms Hybrid forms, digital platforms with immersive residencies, are indicative of how to maintain depth and increase accessibility. This integration of tradition and innovation reaffirms that education should resume its nobler mission of developing not just skilled professionals but also responsible, awakened and liberated human beings who can be ethical leaders in a fractured world.

References

- Altekari, A. S. (2009). *Education in Ancient India*. . Delhi: Isha Books. (Original work published 1934).
- Banerji, A., Kedhar, A., Mitra, R., O'Shea, J., & Pillai, S. (2017). Postcolonial pedagogies: Recasting the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā. *Theatre Topics*, 27(3), 221-230. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676252>
- Behl, M., & Pattiaratchi, C. (2023). Relevance of the Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā to modern-day mentorship. *Oceanography*, 36(1), 20-29. <https://doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2023.111>
- Choudhury, S. (2006). Reconstructing the history of Nalanda University. . *India International Centre Quarterly*, 33(2), 115-132.
- Dasgupta, S. (1991). *A history of Indian philosophy (Vol. 1)*. . Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Daves Soneji, D. (2012). *Unfinished gestures: Devadāsīs, memory, and modernity in South India*. . Chicago: University of Chicago Press. .
- Deutsch, E. (1969). *Advaita Vedanta: A philosophical reconstruction*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Excelsior (2025, May). Re-visioning Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā. *Daily Excelsior*. <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/re-visioning-guru-shishya-parampara/>
- Flood, G. (1996). *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gundlupet, S. (2016). Continuity and change: The Guru-Śiṣya relationship in Karnatic classical music training. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 3(2).
- Hiltebeitel, A. (1990). *The ritual of battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kakar, S. (2002). *The guru: Psycho-spiritual perspectives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, pp. 93-96; Chāndogya Upaniṣad, pp. 147-152)
- Olivelle, P. (1998). *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated text and translation*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, pp. 93-96; Chāndogya Upaniṣad, pp. 147-152)
- Panikkar, R. (1999). *The intrareligious dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The principal Upaniṣads*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

- Radhakrishnan, S. (1994). *The Principal Upanishads*. London: HarperCollins India.
- Rege, S. (2006). *Writing caste, writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Sen, S. (2014). Oral traditions and the survival of Indian knowledge systems. *Journal of Indian History and Culture*, 21, 55-72.
- State times. (n.d.). *Guru-Shishya Parampara - holistic development and modern adaptation*.
- State times. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://statetimes.in/guru-shishya-parampara>
- Swargiary, K. (2025, July). The Future of Indian Education: Integrating Ancient Wisdom and Modern Innovation Post-NEP 2020. Medium.
- Viswanathan, G. (1989). *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wujastyk, D. (2003). *The Roots of Ayurveda*. London: Penguin.

=====