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A Qualitative Historical Review of Educational Paradigm Shifts in Pre-Modern Sri Lanka (Prehistoric Settlements to c. 1505 CE)

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Abstract

The current literature on pre-modern Sri Lanka has discussed monastic establishments, preservation of the Pali literature, and the colonial educational reforms, in few cases in isolation. Remains to be answered is a systematic, long-term rebuilding of how the mechanisms of knowledge transmission changed over different historical periods between prehistoric oral to script-based monasticism to the institutionalization of the Pirivena system within one analytical paradigm. The paper will attempt to fill in such a historiographical gap by characterizing it using qualitative historical analysis of primary textual documents, namely, the Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa chronicles with supplementation by evidence of early Brahmi epigraphic sources, archaeological evidence in prehistoric and monastic settings, and critically analyzed secondary historiography. Thematic and chronological analysis was employed in a combination with cross-source triangulation to determine three consecutive but overlapping periods of education between about 125,000 BCE and c. 1505 CE. In the study the pre-modern education in Sri Lanka could not be reduced to religious education but instead was the inclusion of grammar, logic, medicine, and administrative knowledge. The article provides a historiographical based reconstruction of the long-term pedagogical transformation, criticizes reductionist explanations of pre-modern learning in Sri Lanka and identifies the island as part of wider scholarly South Asian intellectual communities.

KEYWORDS

pre-modern education; Sri Lanka; knowledge transmission; pirivena system; educational history; monastic universities; institutionalization.

Introduction

Education has served since times immemorial as the major tool through which civilizations maintain continuity, pass cultural values and instill intellectual growth. All societies have their educational systems thrive under the influence of the wider social, religious and political changes (Giddens, 1990). The pre-modern traditions of knowledge were very paramount in influencing the institutional structures and intellectual networks in South Asia. Sri Lanka offers a very interesting case study to long term educational analysis as the country was characterized by the long history of its continuity, monasticism and inclusion into transregional networks of Buddhist intellectuals (Arsecularatne, 2014; Perera & Silva, 2023).

The pre-modern period in this paper is categorized as that before arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 and includes prehistoric settlements and proto historic developments and the classical and late medieval kingdoms that lead to the Kotte period. The archaeological indications are that people began to live in Sri Lanka around 125,000 years ago and the ancient technology of the so-called Balangoda Mann, (2014) was characterized by highly developed cognitive and

technical abilities (Deraniyagala, 1992; Mendis, 2020).

Although such primitive communities lacked formal education institutions, any exchange of survival knowledge, ecological information along with symbolic communication speaks of structured intergenerational learning systems. These forms of knowledge transmission are similar to the anthropological conceptualization of pre-literate societies, where the social practice is involved in the educational process, as opposed to the institutional education (Barth, 2002).

A radical change came in the third century BCE, when there was the introduction of the Brahmi script and Buddhism. Early inscriptions also include epigraphic evidence, which shows the growing literacy and the institutionalization of religious life (Paranavitana, 1956). The formation of the monastic centers like the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri was a major move towards the relaxed oral passing of knowledge as the structured scholasticism. These changes are what Jaspers, (1953) refers to as the so-called axial changes, which were the periods when the intellectual and ethical systems appeared in a state of deep institutionalization. In Sri Lanka, preservation of doctrines, commentary and reproduction of texts supported more and more organized practices of pedagogy (Berkwitz, 2004).

The current research in educational history of Sri Lanka has focused tremendously on the institutional and religious aspects. In particular, Gamage (2016) has studied doctrinal orthodoxy in terms of monastic centres, and Deraniyagala (1992) has recreated prehistoric settlement and technology using archaeological evidence. Colonial past (Strathern, 2009) is another area where the changes in education during Portuguese, Dutch and British rule have been discussed (Bretfeld, 2012). Regardless of these resources, no political economy has methodically stolen the oral knowledge structures of prehistoric societies, the invention of the literacy of script, and the institutionalization of learning of the middle ages into one comparative analysis scheme. This gap forms the historiographical gap which is the focus of the current study. More specifically, there is little research that places oral systems of prehistory, early written script formation and institutional solidification in medieval times into a single frame of analysis.

Further, the biases that existed during pre-modern education in Sri Lanka are mostly identified as religious. Although it is a fact that Buddhism influenced institutions and educational priorities purely by the structure of institutions, it can be argued that education was about more than doctrinal teachings. Grammar, logic, medicine and astronomy were some that the monastic centers studied. Record-keeping and administrative literacy are also evidence of more extensive socio-political tasks of schools (Canagarajah & Liyanage, 2012). The collapse of pre-modern education as religious training is a danger that might cause one to overlook its intellectual heterogeneity and civilizational value.

The article thus attempts to address a serious gap in historiography by providing a long-term analysis of history of changing educational paradigm of pre-modern Sri Lanka. Instead of seeing prehistoric, early historic and medieval periods as discrete periods, the exploration of prehistoric periods views the eras as parts of an active process of change. In the context of this research, an educational paradigm is considered to be a ruling, historically located mode of knowledge transmission influenced by the dominant social, institutional and

technological demands. The paradigm shift is identified as the qualitative change of at least two of three dimensions the medium of transmission (oral, written, institutional), the organizational structure that promotes learning (kinship-based, monastic, hierarchical), and the knowledge that is passed down (survival, doctrinal, multi-disciplinary). The guiding questions are: How did the transmission of knowledge shift between oral survival-based learning and institutionalized monastic learning? What socio-religious forces triggered paradigm shifts? And how did institutional consolidation influence the intellectual and administrative order more broadly?

The main point put forward here, in both instances as an interpretation based on the available historical evidence, rather than a claim of an absolute nature, is that the development of education in pre-modern Sri Lanka went through three discernible stages, an oral, experiential formative of prehistoric communities; a script-mediated, monastery-centred formative of the introduction of Buddhism and the Brahmi script; and an institutionalised. Each stage can be explained as an adaptive reaction to the technologic alteration, institutionalization of religion and alternating processes of state formation. This further is also argued, based on evidence of monastic curricula, that the definition of pre-modern Sri Lankan education as involving religious instruction alone is a form of analytical reduction that masks the intellectual richness of pre-modern Sri Lankan education.

This article has put together the synthesis of primary textual materials, epigraphic materials, and contemporary historiography to create a portrait on long-term change in the education setup in Sri Lanka and bring out the peculiarities of the educational paradigm in pre-modern Sri Lanka.

Methods

The proposed study will use a qualitative historical approach of research design as it investigates the historical development of educational paradigms in pre-modern Sri Lanka. The historical research attempts to recreate and explain historic phenomena by systematically relating documentary and material evidence based on contextual cognition as opposed to generalizing through trial or experiment (Carr, 1961; Tosh, 2015). Since educational history can be viewed as interpretative, it becomes suitable to use qualitative approach in order to investigate changes in the knowledge transmission and the institutional development over a long period of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study relies on the primary, as well as secondary sources. Primary sources were chosen on a basis of two factors: they were directly relevant to knowledge transmission, or to the educative practice in pre-modern Sri Lanka, and they had to be available on scholarly edition or authorised translations. Principal sources include the chronicles of Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa in the critical edition of Geiger (1912), inscriptions on early Brahmi caves published by Paranavitana (1956), archaeological records of Balangoda-culture sites published by Deraniyagala (1992) and surviving traditions of monastic literature. Inclusion of secondary sources was done based on peer-reviewed publication, disciplinary authority in Sri Lankan historiography, and direct involvement with the educational or institutional history of the era. Such sources offer narrative, material, and institutional evidence of educational practice in the three specified phases.

The source criticism was employed at all points. Such works as the Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa were read and interpreted as monastic texts representing interests and views of the Theravada sangha, and not in the interests of historical objectivity. It was by such chronicles alone that claims were made, and where there was a chance, these are also subjected to the test of epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Each phase was identified by a material or institutional change that could be identified by chronology as the chronological limits; the prehistoric period is defined as beginning with the habitation of the first humans through the introduction of the Brahmi script (c. third century BCE); the early historic period runs between that time and the centralization of monastic institutions at Mahavihara and Abhayagiri and the classical-medieval period extends to the Portuguese arrival

The analysis of data was done using thematic and chronological analysis. The thematic analysis was operationalized by coding the primary and secondary source material on three dimensions based on the definition of the paradigm above; medium of transmission, organizational structure, and scope of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2018). Coding was first done on each source type (chronicle, inscription, archaeological report) and subsequently cross tabulated between source types across periods (Denzin, 1978). Ordering coded evidence between the three identified phases was done through a chronological analysis allowing one to compare how each dimension evolved over the course of time and helping to identify transition points between paradigms.

To assess the ideological orientation of textual narratives and inscriptions, content analysis was used (Krippendorff, 2018). Interpretative reliability was enhanced through triangulation: when chronicle accounts were consistently confirmed by archaeological data and epigraphic evidence, the interpretation was given as comparatively safe, and when a claim was only the support of a single type of source, such interpretation was rendered with a clear warning. There were also contradictions between the types of sources addressed openly, rather than through the privileging of one of the sources over the other. Such a multi-layered interpretive framework helps the study develop the educational paradigm over the three-sequential phases without compromising the methodological clarity.

Result and Discussion

Oral Foundations: Prehistoric Knowledge Transmission

Archaeological records reveal that the Balangoda culture occupied Elizabeth Island over 125,000 years ago, and skeletal remnants and microlithic artefacts show that they had significant cognitive and technological advancement (Deraniyagala, 1992; Mendis, 2020). It is imperative to begin with that this evidence does not straight away record the practice of education. What comes next is then a reconstruction of likely practices in the transmission of knowledge, based upon archaeological speculation and anthropological analogy, rather than an assertion that there was any formal schooling in either an institutional or other sense of the term during the given timeframe. No formal schools existed, but it is indicated that there were intergenerational and structured learning activities in the context of community settings.

To make microlithic tools, it took precision, both in the choice of materials and in the series sequence. The

relative uniformity and multi-generational nature of such artefacts indicate that transfer of such skills was by demonstration and imitation, and not achieved by reinvention (Deraniyagala, 1992). This understanding is well backed by the anthropological evidence of other similar pre-literate cultures where immediate transfer of skills by way of guided participation is adequately accepted (Barth, 2002). Ecological twilight information on hunting techniques, food-gathering tactics, environmental acclimatization were also most probably possessed and reproduced in oral teaching, observation, and group participation. Although verifiable by means of the archaeological record alone, they are in line with general evidence and with cross-cultural trends in pre-literate modes of knowledge.

It can also be observed that symbolic communication facilitated the early knowledge preservation. Even in the absence of explicit textual evidence, material culture and ritual evidence indicate that the process of cultural transmission had a fundamental component in the form of memory and narrative. Literacy was not the lack of systematic knowledge on the contrary, structure was framed by kinship ties and community functions. Skills became integrated into social positions with knowledge being closely related to subsistence patterns.

This stage is construed in this case as a form of an early educational approach that is oral, experiential and communal based. It was practical and survival-related. Although it was not democratic and institutionalized as in later times, it laid the cognitive and culture bases upon which latter stages drew upon. More importantly, the oral mode mnemonics and repetitions were not entirely overtaken by subsequent script-based scholarship but had persisted in shaping the pedagogical habits in the monastic era, especially in the manner of canonical recitation.

Script and Religious Institutionalization

Introduction of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is customarily traced to the third century BCE, the regency of King Devanampiya Tissa and is linked with the Mauryan missionary Mahinda. Some analytical distinctions between two closely interconnected yet different developments need to be made: the religious change of the spread of Buddhism, and the literacy change of the introduction and use of the Brahmi script. The two are both known to have come into use in the third century BCE and further, but they had varying mechanisms and their use is supported by varying types of sources. Some of the first Brahmi cave writing inscriptions, formulated by Paranavitana (1956), are inscriptions of offerings to the monastic community, showing that a literate lay and monastic community was starting to emerge. The inscriptions are the clearest epigraphic evidence of the increasing literacy; the inscriptions do not record what education entailed but do testify to the institutional situation and then where written knowledge was first put into use.

The foundation of monastic compounds like the Mahavihara and Abhayagiri produced organized settings in which doctrines are studied and scholars trained. These schools institutionalized learning by memorization of canonical texts, exegesis and disciplinary ordinances. Such periods of religious and intellectual synthesis, according to Jaspers (1953) are termed axial transformations, where systems of ethicality, as well as philosophical traditions, become institutionalized. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist teaching had to be preserved systematically under pedagogical organization which promoted the reproduction of texts and their interpretation as well.

Accounts like the Mahavamsa detail the support of royalty in monastic bodies and go on to highlight the

importance of upholding the integrity of doctrines (Geiger, 1912). Although these texts indicate the monastic views, they still indicate the growing complexities in the educational practice. The monasteries were also a storehouse of textual knowledge not just a seat of spiritual discipline. The memorization and recitation enforced continuity with the earlier oral traditions, despite the growth of literacy (Bhikkhu, 2010).

Besides, there is an indication that education was expanded beyond religious doctrine. Monastic curriculums also took grammar, logic and medical knowledge and this was an indication of intellectual ambition at large (Gamage & Setunga, 2010). The textual standardization and tradition of commentary supported by script enabled intellectual control and consistency of dogma. This time is therefore a pivotal paradigm change of the decentralised oral system to a structured institution based on script. Education was being more structured, hierarchical and connected with the religious authority, which became the birth of formalized scholastic culture in Sri Lanka.

Institutional Consolidation: The Pirivena System

It is during the period between the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa that the education structures developed into an organized Pirivena system. Pirivenas were schools of higher learning that were run as residential monasteries where new recruits were given graded compartmentalized education under senior monks. The economic stability was guaranteed by royal patronage, which provided an opportunity to continue scholarly activity (Gamage, 2016). The administration structure gradually assumed a more hierarchical structure that was characterized by religious discipline and administrative structure (Karunaratne, 2010).

It is during this time that the curriculum became broad based. Gamage and Setunga (2010) report that in Pirivena curricula, in addition to Buddhist canonical texts, there was instruction in Pali grammar (with texts such as the Kaccayana grammar) and Sanskrit composition, rhetoric, formal logic (hetuvidya) and Ayurvedic medicine

(bhesajja). The presence of hetuvidya a systematic study of logical argumentation indicates interest in pan-Indian intellectual traditions. According to the Ayurvedic medicine teaching, Pirivenas prepared people to do more than in the monastery and enter social and administrative life. This multiplicity establishes that education was not stringent to spiritual education but involved intellectual specialisation that is highly multi-disciplinary in nature.

The sociological theses of institutionalization emphasize the ways in which repetitive actions are made to solidify into organizational systems that are stable (Eisenstadt, 2000). An example of such process is the Pirivena model: all the pedagogical routines, codes of discipline and decrees of curriculum were formalized and preserved throughout the centuries. Authority was vested to the teacher and the students were developed through the stages of learning. This institution displays a change in the disorganized early monastic education towards the stabilized system of education.

The meaningfulness of this consolidation is further made out by comparative perspectives. Buddhist education centers were located globally, in monastic universities like the Nalanda in India (Schopen, 2004). The Sri Lankan institutions were also engaged in the same transregional networks which meant their involvement in an intellectual exchange as well as receiving one. The tradition of textual commentary, physical reproduction of manuscripts and pedagogical discussion also supported the image of Sri Lanka as a seat of Buddhist learning.

Towards the Middle Ages Pirivena system had become the most widespread learning system on the island. It represented an adult educational paradigm with a combination of ethical education, intellectual discipline and institutional stability. The unification of this system reflects the summation of centuries-long changes which started with the prehistoric oral knowledge transmission system and underwent the changes with the intervention of the script and religious institutionalization. (See table 1).

The discussion below gives the impression that the

Table 1. Phases in the Evolution of Educational Paradigm in Pre-Modern Sri Lanka

Period	Mode of Knowledge Transmission	Institutional Structure	Educational Characteristics	Paradigm Type	Primary Evidence Base
Prehistoric (c. 125,000 BCE – 3rd BCE)	Oral, experiential, imitation	Informal kinship-based	Survival skills, microlithic technology	Communal-Oral Paradigm	Balangoda microlithic sites (Deraniyagala, 1992); anthropological analogy (Barth, 2002)
Early Historic (3rd BCE onwards)	Oral + Script-based	Monastic centers (Mahavihara, Abhayagiri)	Canonical study, memorization, early literacy	Script-Religious Paradigm	Brahmi inscriptions (Paranavitana, 1956); Mahavamsa (Geiger, 1912)
Classical–Medieval	Textual + Institutional	Pirivena system	Grammar, logic, medicine, astronomy	Institutional-Scholastic Paradigm	Gamage (2016); Gamage & Setunga (2010); monastic literary traditions

Table 2. Comparative Features of Sri Lankan Pirivena and Nalanda

Feature	Sri Lanka	Nalanda
Institutional Type	Monastic-Pirivena	Monastic-University
Curriculum	Pali, Sanskrit, Logic, Medicine	Buddhist Philosophy, Logic, Medicine
Patronage	Royal	Royal
Transregional Role	South Asia & Southeast Asia	Pan-Asian

historical evolution of education in pre-modern Sri Lanka cannot be fully explained either in an institutional or a religious perspective. This discovery overlaps with, but also builds on, available scholarship in particular respects. The value of the Pirivena system as an institutional type has been determined by Gamage (2016), though the author focuses on the conservatory aspect of the system as opposed to its multi-disciplinary approach to the curriculum. Diversification in the curriculum has been reported by Gamage and Setunga (2010), although it is not placed in the long-term term of development. The value of the current paper is that it offers such a trajectory, demonstrating how the institutional and curricular features of the Pirivena system can be explained only as a result of the process that started with oral transmission in pre-historical times, and vicariously evolved due to the two-fold influence of Brahmi literacy and Buddhist institutionalization.

The prehistoric period depicts that even before the advent of literacy, there was a hidden social process of education in an experiential form of learning, community survival (Deraniyagala, 1992; Barth, 2002). A significant change in epistemology began with the introduction of Buddhism and Brahmi script in the third century BCE and was critical. Writing was useful in preserving, standardizing and broadening perception of knowledge (Paranavitana, 1956). This transition was linked to enhanced axial tendencies that Jaspers (1953) indicated to, in which the institutionalization of ethical and philosophical systems occurs at stable systems.

Nonetheless, the narrowing down of pre-modern Sri Lankan education to monastic religiosity blinds the intellectual scope of the pre-modern education. Evidence of curriculum in monasteries suggests that grammar, logic, medicine and astronomy were part of the curriculum (Gamage and Setunga, 2010). Such diversification means that these educational institutions worked on the spiritual training, along with the intellectual specialization. The Pirivena system further consolidates such an integration since hierarchical instructions and order of the curriculum have become formalized (Gamage, 2016). All these features reveal institutionalization strategies identified in the sociological theory to the effect that the pedagogic repetitive recurrent behaviors are encircled in structures of long term duration.

In addition, educational institutions in Sri Lanka were not solitary institutions. The fact that they were able to interact with the larger South Asian intellectual communities makes the island to be parted with trans-regional intellectual interactions as much as places such as Nalanda (Seneviratne, 2008). Evidence of textual transmission, a culture of commentary and scholastic debate is all evidence of the possibility of a regionalized knowledge economy rather than a completely localized religion (Jazeel, 2013).

Nalanda is selected as a comparator not to assert institutional equivalence but to illustrate that the Pirivena system was embedded in a South Asian pattern of monastic educational organization rather than constituting an isolated local development (Wamasuriya, 2019). The structural and curricular characteristics are compared to the features recorded in the mentioned scholarship but are not supposed to refer to direct institutional contact or the same paths. (See table 2).

The above presented findings warrant the understanding that pre-modern Sri Lanka was able to create a historically unique education tradition with three intersecting areas: oral tradition, script preservation, and institutionalization (Pemarathana, 2017). This understanding is pursued as a historically based

reconstruction as opposed to an absolute description because of the discontinuous and ideologically arbitrary character of extant evidence. Though each stage built on and did not entirely supersede the last, a kind of continuity-in-change began to appear that cannot be discussed as easily in linear, progressive lines of educational formation.

Conclusion

The development of the educational paradigm of pre-modern Sri Lanka is indicative of a long-term process of civilization, which is continuity-based, adaptive and institutionalized. Since the experiential and communal knowledge societies of the prehistoric society up to the organized scholastic culture of the Pirivena system education evolved as a reaction to technological, religious and socio-political changes. The archaeological data of the assumed settlements of the early humans shows that the organization in delivering knowledge was in place way before the development of literacy (Deraniyagala, 1992). The third century BCE was the turning point with the introduction of Buddhism and the Brahmi chart towards the preservation in written form as well as the establishment of the organisation (Paranavitana, 1956).

Later unification under monastic institutions created an advanced system of education that incorporated the aspect of morality education, intellectual investigation and specialization. However, unlike reductive approaches in the interpretation of pre-modern Sri Lankan education that have defined it as a religious instruction, historical records have identified curricula diversification, which included grammar, logic and medicine (Gamage and Setunga, 2010). The Pirivena structure was a form of institutional maturity that used the hierarchal organization and the continuity of scholars (Gamage, 2016).

This study demonstrates that educational change in Sri Lanka was not abrupt but stratified: oral traditions coexisted with and informed script-based scholarship, which in turn shaped institutional arrangements. As compared to the research questions identified in the introduction, the research results establish that the shift between oral and institutionalized learning was conjectured by the integration of a new writing technology, a new system of religious organization where the preservation of texts was essential, and the state patronage that accorded the research material stability. The identified paradigm shifts are based on the change in all three previously discussed dimensions of medium of transmission, organizational structure, and scope of knowledge.

A number of weaknesses of this research are worthy of mention. The body of evidence is not equally distributed over time: prehistoric knowledge transmission is recreated on a combination of archaeological guesswork and anthropological conjecture, the early historic and classical-medieval periods are dominated by monastic sources whose institutional biases must be critically characterized (Welikala, 1979). The work is also largely syntactic and not archival, the findings rely on what the rest of the scholarly literature already knows and can be revised as new epigraphic/archeological/textual facts are found (Pinnawala & Sathiaseelan, 2014). Systematic study of palm-leaf manuscript traditions to more accurately reconstruct the content of the curricula would be of interest to the future, as would comparative studies placing the Sri Lankan Pirivena within a broader institutional history in South and Southeast Asia, and the investigation of non-

monastic forms of education, including the one in craft guilds, royal courts, and in villages, of which the current research was not capable (Kuruppu, 1983).

Through the consideration of layered and accredited nature of pre-modern learning in Sri Lanka, the presented paper can lead to better comprehending of the intellectual legacy of Sri Lanka and opposing dichotomies of

traditional and modern educational systems (Pieris, 2010; Samarasekara, 2023). Hopefully, the analytical model constructed here based on medium of transmission, organisational structure and scope of knowledge can be an effective foundation to comparative educational historiography throughout South Asia (Abhayawardana, 2019).

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