MEDIEVAL PERIOD OF THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Complete Study Notes | History of Education in India

Scope of the topic: These notes discuss the major educational developments in India during the medieval period, including indigenous and traditional learning institutions, the influence of Islamic education, and the contributions of the Delhi Sultanate, Mughal rulers and regional centres.

1. Introduction

The medieval period in Indian history is generally understood as the period between the early medieval centuries and the beginning of modern colonial rule. Its exact dates vary according to historians and the region being studied. For the study of Indian education, the period is often discussed broadly from around the eighth century to the eighteenth century. It included the rise of regional kingdoms, the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire and several other regional powers.

Education during this period was not organised under one uniform national system. Different communities and regions maintained their own institutions and traditions of learning. Traditional Hindu and other indigenous centres continued to function, while maktabs and madrasas developed as important institutions of Islamic education. Education was supported by temples, monasteries, mosques, rulers, local communities, scholars and private teachers.

The medieval period therefore represents a phase of continuity as well as change. Older forms of learning continued, while new languages, subjects, institutions and methods of scholarship expanded through cultural interaction and royal patronage.

2. Main Features of Medieval Indian Education

- **Religious influence:** Education was closely connected with religious traditions. Hindu learning often took place in pathshalas, tols, gurukulas and temple-associated centres, while Islamic education was provided through maktabs and madrasas.
- **Decentralised organisation:** There was no single central authority controlling all educational institutions. Local teachers, religious bodies, communities and rulers played important roles.
- **Teacher-centred learning:** The teacher or scholar held a respected position. Personal guidance, explanation, memorisation, discussion and debate were common methods.
- **Patronage:** Rulers, nobles, wealthy individuals, temples, mosques and charitable endowments supported learning in different ways.
- **Language diversity:** Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and various regional languages were used for teaching, scholarship, administration and literature.
- **Limited access:** Access to formal education varied according to social position, gender, location, economic circumstances and the type of institution.
- **Practical and scholarly learning:** Along with religious studies, learners could study literature, grammar, logic, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, law, administration, crafts and other subjects depending on the institution.

3. Indigenous and Traditional Institutions of Education

Traditional educational institutions did not disappear during the medieval period. They continued in many parts of India, although their condition and organisation differed from region to region.

3.1 Pathshalas

Pathshalas were traditional schools found in many parts of India. They were often run by individual teachers with support from local communities, parents or patrons. They provided basic instruction to children, particularly in reading, writing, arithmetic and practical knowledge required for everyday life and occupations. The language of instruction generally depended on the region.

3.2 Tols and Chatuspathis

Tols, also known in some regions as chatuspathis, were centres of advanced Sanskrit learning. They were especially associated with scholars and students who pursued higher studies. Subjects included Sanskrit grammar, literature, philosophy, logic, law and religious texts. They were often supported by learned teachers, local patrons, land grants or religious institutions.

3.3 Gurukula Tradition

The gurukula tradition, which had roots in earlier periods, continued in some regions. Students lived with or near the teacher and received instruction through close personal contact. Learning could include religious texts, moral discipline, language, philosophy and other subjects according to the teacher's expertise and the student's background.

3.4 Temple and Monastic Centres

Temples and monasteries continued to serve as centres of learning in several regions. They could provide facilities for religious instruction, manuscript preservation, debate, music, philosophy and other branches of knowledge. Some institutions received grants or donations from rulers and local benefactors.

3.5 Regional Centres of Learning

Important centres of scholarship existed in different parts of India. Varanasi (Kashi) remained a major centre of Sanskrit learning. Nadia in Bengal became known for studies in logic and Sanskrit scholarship. Mithila was also associated with traditional learning. These centres attracted scholars and students from different regions.

4. Islamic Education in Medieval India

The establishment and expansion of Muslim political powers in different parts of India encouraged the growth of institutions associated with Islamic education. These institutions played an important role in religious instruction, language learning, scholarship and the preparation of people for administrative and legal responsibilities. Islamic education in India was not identical everywhere; its curriculum and organisation varied across periods and regions.

4.1 Maktabs

A maktab was generally a basic school, often connected with a mosque or local religious community. It provided elementary education, especially to children. Learners were taught to read the Qur'an, along with basic literacy and, depending on the institution, writing, arithmetic and elementary religious knowledge. The teacher was commonly known as a *mu'allim* or teacher.

4.2 Madrasas

A madrasa was an institution of higher learning. Madrasas provided advanced instruction in Islamic religious sciences and, in many institutions, other scholarly subjects. They were often supported by rulers, nobles, wealthy donors or charitable endowments. Students could study with recognised scholars and, in some cases, receive residential facilities or financial assistance.

4.3 Khanqahs and Sufi Centres

Khanqahs were centres associated with Sufi teachers and spiritual communities. Their main purpose was spiritual instruction and the practice of Sufi traditions, but they also contributed to moral guidance, discussion, cultural exchange and the spread of learning. Their educational role differed from that of a formal madrasa.

5. Curriculum and Subjects of Study

The curriculum of medieval educational institutions depended on their purpose, tradition, location and level of study. It is useful to distinguish between the subjects commonly taught in traditional Sanskrit centres and those emphasised in maktabs and madrasas, while remembering that actual curricula could overlap and vary.

5.1 Subjects in Traditional Indigenous Institutions

- **Religious and philosophical studies:** Vedas and other religious texts, philosophy, ethics and systems of thought.
- **Language and literature:** Sanskrit grammar, poetry, literary works and regional languages.

- **Logic and debate:** Reasoning, interpretation, discussion and philosophical debate.
- **Mathematics:** Arithmetic and other mathematical knowledge, depending on the centre.
- **Science and medicine:** Astronomy, astrology and traditional systems of medicine in some centres.
- **Practical knowledge:** Accounts, agriculture, crafts, music and occupational skills in certain local settings.

5.2 Subjects in Maktabs and Madrasas

- **Qur'anic studies:** Reading and understanding the Qur'an.
- **Religious sciences:** Islamic theology, traditions (Hadith), jurisprudence (Fiqh) and interpretation.
- **Languages:** Arabic, particularly for religious scholarship, and Persian, which became important in administration and literary culture.
- **Grammar and literature:** Study of language, writing, poetry and prose.
- **Logic and philosophy:** Reasoning and philosophical subjects in advanced courses.
- **Mathematics and astronomy:** Included in the curriculum of some institutions.
- **History and administration:** Subjects useful for scholarship and, in some settings, government service.

6. Medium of Instruction

There was no single medium of instruction in medieval India. The language used depended on the institution, region and subject. Sanskrit remained important in traditional Hindu scholarship. Arabic was central to Islamic religious learning and scholarship. Persian became a major language of administration and court culture under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rulers. Regional languages were also used in local teaching, literature and religious movements.

The growth of Persian and regional literary cultures contributed to interaction among different linguistic communities. Translation and interpretation also helped circulate ideas across languages.

7. Methods of Teaching and Learning

Teaching methods were influenced by the subject, the teacher and the institution. Common methods included:

- **Oral instruction:** Teachers explained lessons and students listened, repeated and discussed them.
- **Memorisation:** Learners memorised verses, passages, definitions and important texts. Memorisation was particularly important in the study of religious and classical works.
- **Reading and writing practice:** Students practised scripts, copying, composition and written exercises.
- **Explanation and interpretation:** Teachers explained texts, meanings, grammar and concepts.
- **Discussion and debate:** Advanced learners took part in scholarly discussions and debates, especially in philosophy, logic and theology.
- **Individual guidance:** Students often received instruction directly from a teacher or scholar.
- **Apprenticeship and practical training:** Certain skills and occupations were learned through observation and practice under an experienced person.

8. Education under the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate, which lasted from 1206 to 1526, included several dynasties such as the Mamluk (Slave), Khalji, Tughlaq, Sayyid and Lodi dynasties. During this period, maktabs and madrasas expanded in areas under Sultanate influence. Rulers, nobles and religious patrons supported scholars and institutions, although the scale of support varied.

- **Growth of madrasas:** Madrasas developed as centres for higher Islamic learning and the study of religious and scholarly subjects.
- **Support for scholars:** Some rulers and nobles provided grants, stipends, buildings or other forms of assistance to teachers and students.

- **Persian in administration:** Persian gained importance as a language of government and official communication, increasing the value of Persian literacy for administrative work.
- **Learning in local traditions:** Indigenous institutions and regional centres continued alongside institutions supported by Sultanate elites.
- **Variation across rulers:** Educational patronage was not uniform; it depended on the interests and policies of individual rulers and local conditions.

Illustrative example: The Tughlaq period saw the development of educational and religious institutions in Delhi and other centres. Firoz Shah Tughlaq is remembered for supporting institutions, scholars and public works. His patronage formed part of a wider pattern in which some rulers used endowments and grants to support learning.

9. Education under the Mughal Empire

The Mughal Empire was established in 1526 and became one of the most influential political powers in Indian history. Mughal rulers and members of the royal family supported scholars, libraries, translation projects and educational institutions to varying degrees. Education continued through madrasas, maktabs, traditional centres and private instruction.

9.1 Babur (1526–1530)

Babur was interested in literature, history and culture. His memoir, the *Baburnama*, is an important historical work. The early Mughal period did not create a uniform education system, but literary and scholarly traditions continued.

9.2 Humayun (1530–1540; 1555–1556)

Humayun showed interest in astronomy and learning. He is associated with scholarly interests and the establishment or use of a madrasa in Delhi. His reign was interrupted by the rule of Sher Shah Suri, and Mughal political control was restored later.

9.3 Akbar (1556–1605)

Akbar is particularly significant for his interest in knowledge, discussion and cultural exchange. He encouraged the translation of important Sanskrit works into Persian, including the *Mahabharata* (translated as the *Razmnama*) and the *Ramayana*. His court included scholars from different intellectual and religious backgrounds. Akbar's policies encouraged debate and interaction, although educational access remained unequal.

9.4 Jahangir (1605–1627)

Jahangir had an interest in art, nature and literature. Scholarly and literary activities continued during his reign, and the court remained a centre of cultural production.

9.5 Shah Jahan (1628–1658)

Shah Jahan's period is known for major architectural and cultural achievements. Educational institutions and scholarly activities continued, supported by royal and elite patronage in some places.

9.6 Aurangzeb (1658–1707)

Aurangzeb supported Islamic religious scholarship and is associated with the compilation of the *Fatawa-i-Alamgiri*, a major collection of Hanafi legal opinions. Madrasas and religious learning continued under his rule. At the same time, traditional and regional institutions remained active in different parts of India.

10. Contribution of Regional Rulers and Cultural Movements

Educational development during the medieval period was not limited to the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. Regional kingdoms and religious movements also supported learning, literature and cultural exchange.

- **Vijayanagara Empire:** Temples, scholars and centres of Sanskrit and regional-language learning received support in different parts of the empire.
- **Bhakti movement:** Saints and poets used regional languages to communicate religious and ethical ideas to wider sections of society. Their songs and teachings contributed to popular learning and literature.

- **Sufi movement:** Sufi teachers and centres encouraged spiritual instruction, ethical reflection and interaction among communities.
- **Sikh tradition:** The teachings of Sikh Gurus, the growth of Gurdwaras and the use of Punjabi and other languages contributed to religious and community-based learning.
- **Regional literary traditions:** Developments in Bengali, Assamese, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and other languages enriched literary and educational life.

11. Education in Medieval Assam

The educational history of medieval Assam developed within its own political, cultural and religious context. The Ahom kingdom, which began in the thirteenth century, and other regional powers contributed to the growth of learning and cultural institutions. Education was closely connected with religious centres, traditional knowledge, literature and the needs of administration.

11.1 Satras

Satras became important Vaishnavite religious and cultural institutions in Assam, especially following the Neo-Vaishnavite movement associated with Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. They served as centres of religious instruction, devotional practices, manuscript preservation, music, drama, art and community life. Their activities helped preserve and spread Assamese language and culture.

11.2 Namghars

Namghars were community prayer halls and important centres of social and cultural life. They provided spaces for collective prayer, discussion, devotional singing and the sharing of religious and moral teachings. Although not formal schools in the modern sense, they contributed to community education and cultural awareness.

11.3 Traditional Learning and the Ahom Period

Learning in medieval Assam also took place through Brahmanical institutions, tols, pathshalas, religious centres and informal instruction. Knowledge of scriptures, language, literature, astrology, medicine and practical skills was transmitted through teachers, families and specialised practitioners. The Ahom state required trained personnel for administration, record-keeping and other responsibilities.

11.4 Contribution of Srimanta Sankardeva

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) made a major contribution to the religious, literary and cultural life of Assam. Through the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, he used accessible forms of communication such as devotional songs, plays, poetry and community worship. His work helped spread ethical and spiritual ideas and strengthened Assamese language and cultural traditions. His contribution can be understood as an important form of social and cultural education.

12. Women's Education during the Medieval Period

Women's access to formal education during the medieval period was generally limited and varied according to region, community, class and family circumstances. Some women from royal, aristocratic or scholarly families received education at home in languages, literature, religion, music, arts and sometimes administration. Women also contributed to devotional and literary traditions.

Examples of women associated with learning and literary or cultural activity include Gulbadan Begum, who wrote the *Humayun-nama*, and the Bhakti poet Mirabai. These examples show that women did participate in intellectual and cultural life, but they should not be taken as evidence that educational opportunities were equally available to all women.

13. Aims and Objectives of Medieval Education

- **Religious development:** To provide knowledge of religious beliefs, scriptures, rituals and moral principles.
- **Moral training:** To develop discipline, good conduct, respect and a sense of duty.
- **Intellectual development:** To cultivate language, reasoning, interpretation, philosophy and scholarship.

- **Preparation for occupations:** To prepare learners for roles in administration, law, religious service, trade and other occupations.
- **Cultural preservation:** To preserve languages, literature, traditions, manuscripts and systems of knowledge.
- **Spiritual development:** To encourage spiritual understanding and ethical living within different religious traditions.

14. Merits and Positive Contributions

- Traditional centres of Sanskrit and regional learning continued to preserve older bodies of knowledge.
- Maktabs and madrasas expanded opportunities for religious and advanced scholarly education in many regions.
- Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and regional languages enriched India's literary and intellectual traditions.
- Translation projects, especially under Akbar, encouraged cultural and intellectual exchange.
- Libraries, manuscripts, scholarly debates and patronage helped preserve and circulate knowledge.
- Bhakti and Sufi movements communicated ethical and spiritual teachings through accessible languages and cultural forms.
- In Assam, Satras and Namghars helped preserve and spread Assamese literature, devotional music, drama and community traditions.

15. Limitations of Medieval Indian Education

- **Unequal access:** Educational opportunities were not equally available to all sections of society.
- **Limited women's education:** Formal education for women was restricted in many settings, though there were important exceptions.
- **Social restrictions:** Caste, class, gender and community practices could influence who received education and what they studied.
- **Limited institutional reach:** Many rural and remote areas had fewer organised educational facilities.
- **Dependence on patronage:** Institutions could face difficulties when royal, religious or local support declined.
- **Limited standardisation:** There was no common curriculum, system of assessment or uniform educational administration across India.
- **Emphasis on traditional learning:** Some institutions focused strongly on established texts and methods, which could limit the inclusion of newer forms of knowledge in certain contexts.

16. Comparison: Ancient and Medieval Indian Education

Basis	Ancient period	Medieval period
Institutions	Gurukulas, Buddhist viharas, universities and other centres	Pathshalas, tols, temples, monasteries, maktabs, madrasas, Satras and other centres
Languages	Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and regional languages	Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and regional languages
Major influences	Vedic, Buddhist, Jain and other traditions	Continuing indigenous traditions, Islamic scholarship, Bhakti and Sufi movements, and regional traditions
Subjects	Religion, philosophy, grammar, logic, medicine, mathematics and other fields	Religious studies, languages, literature, law, logic, mathematics, administration and regional knowledge
Organisation	Varied institutions, including residential and monastic centres	Decentralised institutions supported by teachers, communities, religious bodies and rulers

17. Overall Assessment

The medieval Indian education system was diverse and decentralised. It included the continuation of indigenous educational traditions as well as the growth of institutions associated with Islamic learning. Different rulers, religious organisations, teachers and communities supported education in different ways. The period enriched Indian languages, literature, scholarship, art and cultural exchange. However, access to education remained unequal, and there was no uniform system available to all sections of society.

18. Conclusion

The medieval period occupies an important place in the history of Indian education. It was a period of continuity, interaction and regional development. Traditional institutions such as pathshalas, tols, temples and monasteries continued to function, while maktabs and madrasas contributed to the spread of Islamic education. The Bhakti and Sufi movements, regional rulers and cultural institutions such as the Satras and Namghars of Assam also played significant educational roles. Although the system had limitations relating to access, equality and organisation, it made lasting contributions to India's intellectual and cultural heritage.

19. Important Terms for Quick Revision

Maktab	A basic educational institution, often associated with a mosque or local Muslim community.
Madrasa	An institution of higher learning, particularly associated with Islamic scholarship.
Pathshala	A traditional school providing basic education in many parts of India.
Tol / Chatuspathi	A centre of advanced Sanskrit learning.
Khanqah	A centre associated with Sufi spiritual life and instruction.
Persian	An important language of administration and court culture under the Sultanate and Mughals.
Satra	A Vaishnavite religious and cultural institution in Assam.
Namghar	A community prayer hall that also served important social and cultural functions.
Razmnama	The Persian translation of the Mahabharata prepared during Akbar's reign.

20. Possible Examination Questions

- Discuss the main features of the Indian education system during the medieval period.
- Explain the role of maktabs and madrasas in medieval Indian education.
- Describe the curriculum and methods of teaching during the medieval period.
- Examine the contribution of the Mughal rulers to education in India, with special reference to Akbar.
- Discuss the development of education in medieval Assam with reference to Satras and Namghars.
- Explain the merits and limitations of the medieval Indian education system.

Note for students: The medieval period covered many centuries and diverse regions. Educational practices were not identical throughout India. Therefore, the institutions, subjects and policies described in these notes should be understood as broad historical patterns rather than as features that applied uniformly everywhere.