Indian mental concepts on children and adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

In this article mental concepts mean views, thoughts or attitudes about a subject and the subject is children and adolescents (hereafter children unless specified). The mental concept also could be about various aspects of childhood and adolescence (hereafter childhood unless specified). For example, children’s conception, birth, physical and psychological growth and development, education, place in family and society, discipline, laws, rights as well as physical and mental disorders and their treatment could be the subjects of the mental concepts. By Indian, we mean people of, or people living in the Indian sub-continent since the political map of India has been changing with time. In the present times, this would mean several countries. We also have to think of a reference time, which could be any time from the earliest historical time to the contemporary modern time. In India, various types of people have lived in different kinds of geographical terrains and in diverse cultures since ancient times. For example, tribes in North East are different from tribes living in Central India or Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Their thinking and attitudes may be different from each other. A large part of Indian population has lived in villages, but this is changing fast. In India, people have different languages and religions. Religion may contain and also affect mental concepts about children. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism originated in India. But Islam, Christianity, and Parsee religion originated outside India and these may have influenced the mental concepts of childhood among their adherents. Politically too, India as we know it today, is a recent phenomenon. India was under British domination until 1947. There have been rapid changes in India socio-culturally and economically since independence. Western influence on Indian culture, sciences, and literature has only increased and not decreased since independence. Indian mental concepts about children in these above diverse contexts could also be different. Furthermore, the contemporary Indian mental concepts cannot be called entirely Indian because of a significant Western influence. There is an additional problem of

Ancient Indian mental concepts of children and adolescents are very similar to the contemporary modern concepts. The ancient concepts were based on a very positive regard for the children’s development, education and future independence, adult role and contribution to society. Children were wanted and considered precious. The children were categorized in to 4 different varnas based on their intelligence, abilities, merit and aptitude and educated accordingly, away from their home, at Gurukuls. They had universal right to education. Girls received attention equal to boys. The boys were expected to earn their livelihood, while the girls were expected to be homemakers. Graduation of the young person at the end of education and return to home marked the emancipation from adolescence. Children’s physical and mental health and its disorders were given due attention. Aetiology and treatment of physical and mental disorders was in accordance with the overall scientific development of those times.

Key words: Indian mental concepts, children, adolescents

ABSTRACT

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absence of Indian writings on this topic. To the authors’ knowledge, how the children have been conceptualized in India and how have these concepts evolved in relation to the above contexts has not been researched in India. Hence, it is very difficult to do justice to all the above aspects of Indian concepts of childhood in this article.

Therefore, we decided to be selective. To gather information, we have chosen Manusmriti, a Hindu scripture, dated somewhere between 1500 BC and 500 AD, as an indigenous source of information about Indian mental concepts of children (IMCC). It is to be noted that “vedas” are the most ancient and authoritative of vedic corpus. Other Hindu scriptures refer to the vedas in support of their views. Manusmriti does the same. Use has also been made of Hindu (including medical) writings from various sources to gather these concepts. Hinduism is selected as a religion since it is ancient and indigenous. IMCC derived from Manusmriti are ancient and cannot be called current concepts. A brief reference has also been made to ancient IMCC in Jainism and Buddhism.

As is true of all history, the significance of ancient IMCC is that these help us to understand the current, modern Indian concepts, and their evolution from and continuity with the ancient ones.

ABOUT CHILDREN IN MANUSMRITI

The sanskars
Manusmriti says that 16 “sanskars,” that is proper rituals, should be done for humans beings. Sanskars should be done for and since the time of conception, during pregnancy, at birth, during childhood, adulthood, old age, and at death because these are beneficial for this and future lives. Of these, 12 are for children and cover a period from conception, pregnancy, birth, childhood and adolescence, and entry into adulthood. The “sanskars” not only instil good qualities in a child but also remove bad habits. These are described briefly as follows:

1. Garbhadhan Sanskar: Even before a child is conceived, Manusmriti says, adults desirous of having a child should conduct themselves in the prescribed manner to conceive a healthy child. Veerya (sperm) should be given properly for fertilization.

2. Punsavan: This is done for birth of child when the signs of pregnancy appear or in 2nd or 3rd antenatal month.

3. Seemantonnayan: This is done in the 4th month of antenatal period and is for the stability of the foetus.

4. Jaatkarm: This is done at birth before severing the cord in which the newborn is made to lick small amounts of ghee (clarified butter) and honey.

5. Naamkaran: Here the child is named on 10th, 12th postnatal or any other good day.

6. Nishkraman: The child is taken out of the house for a stroll in fresh air in 4th month or thereafter.

7. Annprashan: The child is fed easily digestible tasty food consisting of pulses and cereals.

8. Mundan or Chudakarm: Here head is shaved at 1st or 3rd year of birth.

9. Upnayan: This is done at the time of taking the child to his guru or “acharya” who accepts the child for education at his Gurukul (hostel) and does his “yagyopaveet.”

10. Vedaarambh: While living with guru the child learns “vedas” and other quality education.

11. Keshant: Haircut at the beginning of puberty or adolescence.

12. Samavartan: This is graduation at the completion of education and the young person leaving Gurukul for his home. It marks the end of adolescence and beginning of young adulthood.

Children’s education, guru, student, and varna
All the children must be educated regardless of their gender or family. This is done first at home by the family and later when they are ready, at Gurukul by the aachaarya. Male children go to male guru (aachaarya) and Gurukul while the girls to female aachaarya and Gurukul. All children are born “shudra” without education and proper sanskars. When they are assessed, educated, and their aptitude tested by the aachaarya they are assigned a vocation or profession or “varna.” Those who are highly intelligent and suitable for higher studies and teaching others are assigned to “brahman” varna. Those who are physically strong, powerful, and brave have valour are assigned “ksatriya” varna and those who have the ability to enrich and accumulate are given “vaishya” varna. Those who are healthy and strong, with a good nature, and inclination to serve, but without any special abilities are assigned shudra varna. Shudra require fostering and protection. All children must study. Education is “swaddhyay” which means studies, learning vedas, doing “sandhyopasana” (pray by reciting and meditating on “gayatri” mantra at times when day and night meet) and doing “agnihotra” (rituals in which fire is lighted). Vedas are not taught to shudra.

Going to guru or aachaarya and getting education of vedas is considered so important that a human is considered born a 2nd time (“dwij”; Rigveda mantra 1/149/5 says “YAHE DWIJANAMA”-DIWI means second; JANAMA means birth), first time being the biological birth. This second birth is considered far more important because it enables one to achieve “brahmagyan” through swaddhyay, the ultimate knowledge, which frees (‘moksh’) one from the misery of the cycle of rebirths. The biological birth gives human only a body which is perished at death.

It is the duty of all parents to send their children to guru’s Gurukul for education. Not doing so is punishable by the king.
Parents may desire a particular varna for their child and name him accordingly. There is advice in Manusmriti on how to name a brahman, kshattriy, vaishya, or shudra child and a female. But it is the guru who will ultimately decide upon the child’s varna depending upon his intelligence, qualities, merit and aptitude. The varna system is not rigid and the assigned varna is not final. A dwij (brahman, kshattriy, vaishya, or shudra), if his conduct is unworthy, may become “patit” (fallen from his position, shudra). The reverse may also happen and a shudra through learning and good deeds may become a brahman. Similarly, there could be changes between bhraman, kshattriy, and vaishya varnas.

A child thought to be suitable for brahman varna is ready for upnayan at age 8, a kshattriy, at 11, and a vaishya, at 12. If the parents wish, the child may begin earlier at ages 5, 6, and 8, or latest by ages, 16, 22, and 24 respectively. There is no Upnayan after these ages and one will be in shudra varna.

All children, whether rich or poor, from high or low families, are to be treated alike. Everybody must live, eat, sleep, dress, bathe, study, pray, and conduct himself similarly. There are specific instructions in this regard. There is a dress code for brahmans, kshattriyas, and vaishyas, and shudras. Everybody must beg for his food from specified sources only, but in case it is not available, there is a provision of obtaining it from other sources. Boys must beg for their food. Girls are not required to beg.

There is the insistence on cleanliness. A regular daily routine is insisted upon. One must rise before sunrise. One must respect food, feel and express happiness while eating it, and not overeat. One must observe specified manners properly.

Rules for “brahmachari” (or “brahmacharini in case of female”) are that he should be in control of his senses (“jitendriy”) because indulgence of even one sense can spoil “brahmacharya.” Sexual continence is considered very important and incontinence is seen as corrupting and spoiling brahmacharya. One is advised to keep away from women because they have the power to corrupt a male student and spoil his brahmacharya. He should salute the teachers, seniors, elderly, and learned. He should perform their service. He must bathe and be clean, pray, and do sandhyopasana and agnihotra and learn vedas. He should sleep alone and be sexually continent. He should give up, umbrella, shoes, sex, anger, greed, desires, fears, grief, jealousy, and animosity and enmity, music, dance, and singing. He should also give up wine, meat, perfume, necklace (ornaments), sour and spicy food, and violence to all living beings. He must not gamble, speak ill of others, tell lies, stare at women, harm others, take shelter of others, and accumulate material possessions like food.

A brahmachari must be pure, otherwise, he does not get any benefit of learning vedas. A student is considered worthy of being taught if he is intelligent, friendly, and capable of receiving education, serves his guru, has knowledge and can impart it to others without malice or deceit. He should have money for paying gurudakshina (fees) at the time of samavartan, and think of welfare of others. Family members and relatives should be taught.

The student should have curiosity. He should ask questions and desire to learn. If one wants to learn genuinely and has no money to pay for it even then he should be taught.

Guru is one who has knowledge of vedas and imparts this knowledge to his students. He must have a good moral character. He is revered more than biological father because he imparts knowledge of vedas. The student must not listen to anything against his guru.

Manusmriti says that student must salute his guru. Guru’s Gurukul should be away from village or city. A student may feel nervous before his guru. This may be controlled by the student saluting his guru and guru returning the salute and addressing the student and asking him to be seated. Guru then asks the student to begin his study. Student after receiving the permission and direction from guru begins by pronouncing “Om,” the name of God, to orient himself to his studies.

Education is given highest status and even a child with knowledge can teach his elders and father and is given more respect than them. It is said that knowledge, and not white hairs, should get respect. A learned person is more respectable than a king.

**COMMENT**

The above account of ancient Hindu IMCC shows that children were considered precious in India since ancient times. They were wanted and considered the future of nation. Therefore, their being healthy, intelligent, well mannered, prosocial, well educated and skilled was considered very important. They were deemed to run the society as adults and therefore their education, training and socialization was in accordance with the social structure and functioning, i.e., varna “vyavastha” (categorization and organization). A society may be understood to have need of intelligentsia, warriors and protectors, administrators, businessmen, craftsmen, and of those rendering services. Therefore, children had to be educated and trained accordingly depending upon their intelligence, capacities, and aptitude. This is broadly the same as contemporary thinking about children except that now there is no varna vyavastha and it is not the teachers who decide upon a child’s career or profession but the parents and the child himself.

It is to be noted that varnas were not hereditary or by birth. These were assigned on the basis of the child’s intelligence,
temperament, merit and aptitude by the teacher for his education, training, and future occupation and role. Varna vyavastha was flexible and not rigidly fixed. Up and down vertical mobility, change from one varna to another was possible.

Children’s education was given paramount importance. Formal education was institutionalized. All children were required to study. Parents could be punished by king for holding them back from education because children belonged to nation as much to parents and were considered societal asset.

It may be said that in ancient India, children were thought about even before they were conceived and when pregnancy occurred, attention was paid to its stability and continuation as is shown by the rites during pregnancy. Birth, naming the child, weaning away from breast milk (liquid diet) and starting semisolid diet were all given due attention. This is important from child’s health point of view and so is the child being taken out for a stroll after 4th month of birth. Shaving of the head occurred more than once during childhood but the explanation of full hair on head heating up the mind does not make sense. What is more important is that the young child was spoken to gently and with clear pronunciation, and was taught good habits and moral values. Formal education started not before age 5, and at different times for different varnas. Brahmans were given the longest period of study.

Girls were also educated as were boys but in a separate school and by female teachers. There was therefore, no bias against the girls’ education and ancient Indians were progressive in this regard. The boys were expected to beg their food perhaps in preparation for their future role as a provider for the family and earner of livelihood. The girls were taught the same way as the boys, but they were not expected to earn livelihood and therefore, not required to beg. This must also have protected them from possible molestation. They were expected to be skilled homemakers.

The students were taught how to behave and use proper manners. They were advised to acquire positive qualities like truthfulness, cleanliness and give up bad habits like being aggressive, jealous, vindictive, greedy or lazy. These remind one of modern psychiatric interventions of teaching life skills to school children to empower them and enhance their abilities, and prevent emotional behavioral and conduct disorders.

It was recognized from the earliest times that a guru should be knowledgeable and of sound moral character. Similarly, who can be a deserving and good student was also described. How should children study was also described. By pronouncing Om (God’s name) student could orient his attention towards studies.

Children (their families) were required to pay for the education in form of guru “dakshina” at the end of their education. However, those deserving but poor and desirous of studying could learn free.

It was recognized that to focus on education and reduce the distraction quiet and solitude are required. The Gurukuls were therefore built away from villages and cities but not so far that begging for food would be difficult. Indulgence of bodily senses was prohibited lest they distract the student away from his studies. Distractions of sexual nature were especially frowned upon and for boys any undesirable contact with females was strictly prohibited. There was a great emphasis on conservation of veerya (semen) and its loss was considered particularly detrimental. This thought has survived till now and is described by many young people as the root cause for their sexual, physical and mental difficulties.

**JAINISM AND CHILDREN**

In Jainism[2] (about 500 BC), there are no special provisions or concepts for children. It is said that the Jain tenets should be taught to children from an early age so that they may follow Jainism successfully as adults. These tenets are as follows:

- **Ahimsa** (non-violence): Jains are taught not to harm any human, animal or even plants or anything, which has life in it. Therefore, they are asked to follow vegetarian diet and that also with many restrictions. They are asked to even drink only filtered water. Honey and alcohol should also be avoided.
- **Satya**: They should speak truth and also not advise anybody to speak lie.
- **Asteya**: One should not steal.
- **Brahmacharya**: One should be faithful to the spouse.
- **Aparigraha**: One should be detached from material things. One should restrict needs and avoid collection of excessive material possessions.

They are also taught to donate to the needy people. Four types of donation have been described-food, knowledge, medicines and protection. Food should be given to hungry, underprivileged persons like orphans and widows. Opening schools, distributing books and teaching is advised as is taking care of sick people and giving them medicines and protecting people from dangers.

It can be seen that the above are not very detailed concepts in relation to children.
**BUDDHISM (ABOUT 500 BC)**

**Life rules for children**

A child should serve his parents. He should think that they have fostered me and now I will foster them. I will fulfil my obligations to them. I will continue the family tradition and make myself worthy of inheritance. Parents express their love for the child in various ways, protect him from evil, and inspire him towards good deeds, and make him capable of earning his living. At a suitable time, they get him married and hand over his inheritance.\[3\]

**Life rules for disciples**

A disciple should respect his teachers. He should rise from his place and salute them. He should be enthusiastic about his studies and should pay special attention to them. He should personally serve his teacher because a teacher loves his students and teaches them whatever he has himself learned. The teacher teaches him skills and crafts. The teacher praises the disciple before his friends and companions. The teacher always thinks about safety of his disciple.

**Life rules for girls**

Buddha preached that a girl should work hard, be well organized and soft spoken, rise before their husband and sleep after him, learn and help him in his profession, respect and welcome husband’s parents, relatives and religious persons, whoever visits her home, give them (the guests) seat and food. She should nurse the sick to health. She should mind the servants and take care of them. She should conserve the earnings of her husband.

It can be seen that the above Jain and Buddhist concepts are not very detailed in relation to children. Overall, they say what has been said in Manusmriti.

**ANCIENT INDIAN HEALTH RELATED AND MEDICAL CONCEPTS ABOUT CHILDREN**

There are descriptions of physical and psychiatric disorders in children in various ancient texts. Vaghbhaṭa’s Astangasangraha\[4\] described medical conditions of children in its first six chapters, including descriptions, causations and treatment. Similarly, Kashyapa Samhita\[5\] also described medical conditions of children. Only a few psychiatric disorders have been identified in children and these are not described in much detail. The common disorders identified were Shiroroga (headache) in which one of the reasons given was emotional factor, Mridakshanana (Pica) eating of mud by children, Shayyamutra (Bed wetting), Dantashabda (teeth grinding). There were also descriptions of some serious disorders like epilepsy (Apasmara) characterized by recurrent loss of consciousness associated with a cry, limb movements, tongue bite, frothing from mouth, and urinary and faecal incontinence. There are descriptions suggestive of psychosis. Such children have been described as having aggression and disorganized behavior like poor personal hygiene and handling their own urine and faeces. Such children are unconcerned with safety and may jump into fire or a well. They may feel burning sensation in body and thirst. They may bleed from orifices. Such illness has been described as untreatable and fatal. Two other conditions described as treatable are suggestive of mood disorders. In one condition, the child has symptoms of increased sexuality, cheerfulness, increased grooming, wearing garlands and of talks of love while in another, they have symptoms like worrying, weeping, feeling anxious and fearful, being very meek, and lethargic, not liking to eat and with dry lips, throat and limbs.

Etiology of these disorders is thought to be either caused by imbalances in body humors or due to external metaphysical reasons. Charaka samhita\[5\] described these body humors as Vata, Pitta and Kapha. These humors remain in balance in a healthy individual. On the basis of certain physical and psychological characteristics three different constitutional types have been described i.e., Vata Prakriti, Pitta Prakriti and Kapha Prakriti, each having predominance of particular humor type. Persons with Kapha Prakriti have been identified as of superior constitution, Pitta Prakriti as medium constitution, while Vata Prakriti as inferior constitution. Similarly, Ayurveda also mentions personality types as Gunas. The three main Gunas are Satva, Rajas and Tamas. Satva has been identified as superior Guna. These trigunas remain in balance and predominance of one decides the personality. Various personality types have been described like seven types of Satvika Prakriti (Brahma, Arsha, Aindra etc.). Satvika personalities have been described as truthful, virtuous, and intelligent with good self control. Six types of Rajasa Prakriti has been identified (Asura, Rakshasa, Sarpa etc.). Rajasa Personality has been described as authoritarian, cruel and intimidating. Three types of Tamasa Prakriti have been described: timid, of low intelligence, and of poor behavior (Pashava, Matsya etc.).

It has been said that psychological disorders are primarily associated with imbalance of Gunas. Metaphysical or external reasons were thought to be possession by spirits or grahas or bhutas. These are supernatural evil forces, which roam the world in search of offerings and victims.

Treatment of such conditions included ayurvedic medicines, sacred rituals like prayers, offerings, wearing special clothes and amulets, chanting of mantras. Other than that it also included special baths, exposure to sunlight (dhupa), fumigation with different types of herbs (Dhuma). Medicines were given in honey or milk or ghee (clarified butter) at different times of the day. Quantities of medicine for children were different from adults.
COMMENTS

Very few psychiatric disorders have been identified in children. It is possible that epilepsy in ancient Indian texts may also have included dissociative disorder. Similarly, possession syndrome was not identified as a disorder because possession by spirits was identified as a cause for illnesses. Temperament was identified separately from disorders. It is interesting to note that internal and external reasons for causation of illnesses were described. External reasons, which we now identify as psychosocial factors, had been attributed to spirits or grahas. Treatment included ayurvedic medicines, fumigations as well as various sacred rituals and chanting of mantras.

Compared to contemporary modern pediatrics and child and adolescent psychiatry the above may seem very simplistic or primitive. However, it must be noted that this was so in keeping with the scientific and technological developments of the ancient times. Ayurved, still survives and so does religious treatment and faith healing. The latter may have very adverse, even fatal, consequences sometimes.

What is important is that given the overall scientific development of the times, illnesses and disorders of children were identified and an effort made to understand and treat them.

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