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## **The Role of Children in Preserving Indian Cultural Heritage**

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## Abstract:

India is blessed with the glorious prodigies who have shaped the minds of youth from ancient times. The Indian culture has been preserved and reinforced by the inspiring stories of such young prodigies like Dhruva, Prahallada, Ashtāvakra, Nachikaeta, Eklavya, Arjuna, and many more. They are the promoters of the culture that we have inherited. The example that these ancient children have set have inspired thousands of great people and nurtured the children of all following ages.

However, with the increasing influence of foreign cultures and means of communication, our children are more acquainted with the western idols and kept aloof from the native role models. However, the morals taught by these children have potential enough to spread over the world and influence the whole world to make the future generations wiser and more cultured. This paper is an attempt to bring in light the inspiring characters of ancient children who contribute strongly in upholding the culture and heritage of our country.

**Keywords:** Indian Prodigies, Ancient India, Indian Culture, Heritage of India, Indian Role Models, Children of India, Indian Mythology, Child Development

## Introduction:

India is one of the countries known to be the cradle of civilization (Maisels, 1993) which is still in existence. Indian civilization is known to be flourishing with wealth and knowledge when the other parts of this world did not even learn how to cook and leading barbarian lifestyle. *Manusmriti* notes.

एतद्देशप्रसूतस्य सकाशादग्रजन्मनः ।

स्वं स्वं चरित्रं शिक्षेरन्मृथिव्यां सर्वमानवाः ॥ (2/20/139: Manusmriti)

This verse conveys that people from all over the world may learn their duties from the scholars of this country. Of course, India is blessed with the glorious prodigies who have shaped the minds of youth from ancient times. The Indian culture has been preserved and reinforced by the inspiring not only by the great sages, kings, scholars, women, poets and thinkers but also by the inspiring children who led such a life that is still remembered and told to newer generations as a lesson to learn. The stories of such young prodigies like *Dhruva*, *Prahlāda*, *Ashtāvakra*, *Nachiketā*, *Eklavya*, *Arjuna*, and many more have their own contribution in reflecting the Indian culture and maintaining the glorious heritage. They are the promoters of



the culture that we have inherited. The example that these ancient children have set have inspired thousands of great people and nurtured the children of all following ages. However, today's generation is somehow unaware of the characters like Aaruni, Ashtāvakra, or Nachikaeta. The new media keeps them busy with Shinchan, Doraemon, Pokemon or Scooby-Doo. It's our responsibility to make our children aware about our real heroes. Let's have glimpses of some of the known kids who have a very strong claim in upholding the national heritage and cultural values.

## 1. Uddālaka:

Āruni or Uddālaka or Uddālaka Āruni is an illustrious Upanishad sage. Āruni was one of Ayodha Dhaumya's disciples, along with Upamanyu and another named 'Veda' (Mbh 1.3). Āruni was known as Āruni of Panchala since he was from the country of Panchala. According to the Mahabharata (MBh 1.3), Aruni's Guru Dhaumya Muni requested him to observe water running through a certain field one rainy night. When Āruni arrived, he discovered that the field had been broken by water, which was moving away from its intended path. Āruni attempted everything he could to stop the water, but he couldn't. Āruni had no choice except to lay down on the breach and use his body to stop the water from flowing. As a result, Āruni did not return to the Ashrama. Later that morning, Dhaumya Muni and his students arrived on the scene in pursuit of Aruni. Dhaumya was very delighted with Āruni and granted him the title Uddālaka after observing his dedication and sincerity. Later on, Āruni became well-known as Uddālaka Aruni.

The value that we learn from the character of Āruni is great dedication, obeisance to the Guru, selfless service and sincere efforts.

## 2. Ashtāvakra:

According to mythology, the sage Āruni, who is referenced in the Chhāndogya Upanishad, ran a school (Ashrama) where the Vedas were taught. Along with Aruni's daughter Sujātā, Kahoda was one of his students. Kahoda married Āruni's daughter. She became pregnant, and her unborn child regularly heard the Vedas being chanted and learned how to recite them correctly. According to one version of Ashtāvakra's stories, his father was once reciting the Vedas but made an error in tone. The foetus (child in the womb) talked from the womb to his father, telling him about errors. As a result of his father's rage, he was cursed to be born with eight deformities, earning the name 'Ashtāvakra.'



His father, *Kahoda*, once went to *Janaka*, the old monarch of Videha, in search of riches for his family. Scholars of *Janaka's* court defeated him in debates, and as a result, he was submerged in water. When *Sujata* learned of her husband's drowning, she kept it a secret from her child. As *Ashtāvakra* grew up, he studied everything there was to know about his curse and father. Then he invited his mother to accompany him to see King *Janaka's* enormous sacrifice i.e. *Yagya*. He was denied entry to the royal sacrifice since only learned Brahmanas and Kings were permitted, and he was only 10 years old. He was allowed to enter because of his mastery of the art of speaking, which astonished the King with the knowledge he held. There, he challenged the scholars of *Janaka's* court to a debate. He overcame them in knowledge and he asked the monarch if he may face the same fate as the scholars, who used to cast Brahmanas into the water. The scholars then disclosed that he is *Varun's* son and that the reason he drowned those Brahmins was for a ritual that his father has been doing for twelve years and for which a huge number of Brahmins was required. By that time, the ceremony had been completed, and all of the Brahmins he had drowned had been set free. His father was so impressed with his kid that he asked him to take a bath in the '*Samangā*' river on his way home. All of *Ashtāvakra's* defects were cured when he emerged from the river.

The moral lesson that we learn from this child is studiousness, thirst and pursuance of knowledge, great confidence, respect for elders, tolerance, clarity of vision and many more.

### 3. *Nachiketā*:

*Nachiketā* was the sage *Vājsharavas'* 10-year-old son when the sage once resolved to perform a yagna in which he would give away all of his possessions as a sacrifice. He gave away all the Old and sick cows during one phase of the yagna. Seeing this, the small boy inquired of his father as to whom he would be given away, since he was the father's greatest asset. Because the father was preoccupied, he did not respond, but when he was constantly questioned, he instinctively replied that he would offer his son to *Yama*, the Lord of Death. As a result, *Nachiketā* headed towards *Yama's* house to uphold his father's word, while his father wept as he realized what had happened.

The young boy waited at the door without food or water because *Yama* was not at home. When *Yama* returned, he was enraged that a young Brahmin had been made to wait and offered the child three boons as an apology. *Nachiketā's* first wish was for his father not to be upset with him, which he received right away. The truth about the sacrificial fire was the second boon. The fire, *Yama* explained, was a metaphor of



knowledge. There is fundamental schooling, such as learning how to light a fire. Then there's perception knowledge, which is knowing that fire produces light and heat. The third type of knowledge is inferential knowledge, which is knowing that fire can be controlled and used or that it can be destructive. The third boon was about the knowledge of what happens after death. *Yama* offered him all wealth, but the small kid was just interested in learning about death. Every cause has an effect, and every effect has a cause, declared the Lord of Death. The soul does not die or give birth. Thus, Nachiketā became the boy who knew death as a result of this knowledge and returned to his father.

Nachiketā teaches us to be truthful, honest, non-greed, selfless and sincere. He demonstrates patience, selflessness, thirst for knowledge, tremendous confidence, and thinking for all.

#### 4. *Bhakta Prahlāda:*

Prahlāda was a great Vishnu devotee and the son of the demon Hiranyakashipu. When he was studying along with other students in the Ashrama, he used to preach to his fellow students, as mentioned in Shrimad Bhagavat, that ..

कौमार आचरेत्प्राज्ञो धर्मान्भागवतानिह ।

दुर्लभं मानुषं जन्म तदप्यध्वमर्थदम् ॥ ŚB 7.6.1

It means, “One who is sufficiently intelligent should use the human form of body from the very beginning of life, in other words, from the tender age of childhood, to practice the activities of devotional service, giving up all other engagements. The human body is most rarely achieved, and although temporary like other bodies, it is meaningful because in human life one can perform devotional service. Even a slight amount of sincere devotional service can give one complete perfection.” (Source: Bhaktivedanta Vedabase)

His proud father, on the other hand, hated Vishnu because, owing to a blessing from Lord Brahma, he believed himself to be the only true God. He tried a variety of tactics to kill Prahlada, but Vishnu always intervened and saved him. Hiranyakashipu was murdered by Narasimha, the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu, after his final attempt on Prahlāda's life.



The moral lesson that we learn from the character of Bhakta Prahlāda is devotion to the truth and the Almighty, great patience, and faith in the God.

## 5. Shravana:

Shravana was a poor adolescent assisting his parents on a pilgrimage to all of India's sacred sites. He was carrying them in two baskets slung over his shoulders because they were old and blind. Shravana is killed by a misdirected arrow shot by Prince Dasharatha while crossing the forests of Ayodhya. He begs Dasharatha to carry water to his thirsty parents even as he dies.

Shravana is the embodiment of kindness and loyalty. The virtues of compassion and taking care of one's parents are some of the values that we learn from Shravana. The name of Shravana is now a symbol of great care of parents.

## 6. Dhruva:

Dhruva's story is well-known. Son of Suniti, the elder wife of King Uttanpada who also had another queen Suruchi whom he loved more due to her beauty. The jealous and possessive queen didn't allow Prahalad to sit on the lap of his father like his younger brother and son of Suruchi, Uttama. Dhruva, in order to obtain his father's love leaves his home at the tender age in search of the God. Narada found Dhruva and was impressed by his perseverance and so, taught him how to survive in the woods. He also taught him how to worship Lord Vishnu by repeating the mantra "Om Namō Bhagavathe Vasudevaya." Dhruva prayed in the wilderness for months and encountered numerous challenges. He even ceased to eat. He sang the mantra in adoration of God with every breath. Finally, Lord Vishnu appeared in front of him, pleased with his resolve. He granted Dhruva not only his father's love, but also a permanent spot as a pole star in the sky after he died.

Dhruva is an example of great perseverance, determination and firmness. One must learn not to move from one's determination like Dhruva. The pole star too doesn't move from its place.



## 7. Ekalavya:

Ekalavya was a little child who lived in the forest with his tribe. His life's ambition was to become the world's greatest archer. When he asked to become Drona's student, he was turned down due to his poor birth rank. Despite this, Ekalavya sculpted a statue of Drona and practised archery in front of it until he was a master. Drona, on the other hand, was concerned that a tribal lad might overtake his finest student, Arjuna, when he met him and learnt of his achievements. As recompense for learning under his name, he requested that Ekalavya give his own right thumb. Ekalavya sliced off his right thumb and offered it to Drona without asking, and as a result, he was unable to become powerful. The moral lesson we learn is hard work, respect and dedication, especially for teachers and instructors.

## 8. Arjuna

Drona, the Guru of Pandavas and Kauravas, taught them various war skills when they were young. He himself was a great warrior and an excellent archer. Drona wanted to put his pupils to the test, so he hung a toy bird from a tree and told everyone to shoot their bows at its eye. When he asked what they could see, the other Pandavas gave a variety of responses, such as the bird, the leaves, the tree, and so on, and he was disappointed. Only Arjuna declared he could see nothing except the bird's eye, and he said it without missing a beat. Drona was pleased with Arjuna's performance and requested that he shoot. The bird's eye was neatly pierced by Arjuna's arrow.

The moral lesson we learn from the story of Arjuna is absolute focus and determination. Children must know exactly what they want and working towards and what is their goal.

## Conclusion:

These children have provided us with such role models that we need not see anywhere else for any guidance. Adi Shankaracharya was inspired by the character of Nachiketā, so much that when his father was on death bed, he was very clear about the immortality of the soul. Swami Vivekananda once said, "If I get ten or twelve boys with the faith of Nachiketa, I can turn the thoughts and pursuits of this country in a new channel" Plant in your heart the faith of Nachiketa." Not only the ancient children, India has a long history and if we make a search, we may find a number of such role models in every era including middle age and modern times. If we move forward towards medieval period of Indian history, we find many children who



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made a big difference at the tender age. Nivrutti, Gyaneshwar, Sopan and Muktabai were siblings who reached to the pick of knowledge at a very young age. Gyaneshwar created *Gyaneshwari Gita* at the age of thirteen years and this creation of him is a greatest landmark in the Marathi literature as he interpreted SHrimad Bhagavad Gita in Marathi language in the form of Ovis (a literary form of verse in Marathi). These four children contributed deeply in strengthening the cultural heritage to a great extent.

So, we have such great role models to follow, however, with the increasing influence of foreign cultures and means of communication, our children are more acquainted with the western idols and kept aloof from the native role models. We must make sincere attempts to make the stories of these ancient children available to our current generation as there is no doubt that the morals taught by these children have potential enough to spread over the world and influence the whole world to make the future generations wiser and more cultured.





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