NEP 2020: A Shift Away from Colonial Education Policies and the Revival of IKS based Holistic Learning towards Viksit Bharat

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, completing five years of its implementation, is a milestone achievement of the Indian education apparatus which is on a path of rapid transformation. The ubiquitous impact of this demi-decade old policy (NEP 2020) is visible in the transformative steps being taken at the institutional level in India. The NEP 2020 has turned the academic and national sentiment around to break away from the colonial era educational mandate that served the interests of British colonizers in prioritizing English and western centric education that, over a period of time, buried the popularity and achievements of Bharat's languages, cultures and knowledge system. The NEP 2020 amends these historic violations of cultural and knowledge sovereignty of Bharat, by developing a system that values Indian languages, catchall education, and revival of Indian Knowledge System (IKS). In this context, this review paper, traverses the educational landscape of India as NEP 2020 completes five years of implementation. In doing so, the paper examines the quintessential Indian approach to education, as existed in pre-Islamic and pre-colonial eras, the core principles of which resonate with the salient aspects of the NEP 2020. This exploration further guides us to set futuristic agenda for Indian education system.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian knowledge tradition adopts a holistic or integral approach to knowledge which is seen as multi-layered and interconnected as opposed to modern educational systems, which tend to be fragmented or compartmentalized with breaking down knowledge into isolated disciplines or parts. The Indian approach, by considering spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and material aspects together, provides a comprehensive understanding of reality. The *gurukuls* and *pathshalas* served as the backbone of Bharat's educational system, and were "the watering holes of the culture of traditional communities" (Dharampal, 1983, p. 18). This tradition of learning was disrupted first by the invasions that the subcontinent faced and then due to the prolonged colonial experience from 18th century onwards. When the British established their control over the subcontinent in the 18th and 19th centuries, they introduced the Western education system, which emphasized English language instruction and formalized curricula. Further, it was Lord Macaulay's *Minutes on Indian Education* (1835) that tightened the screws and ultimately bludgeoned the traditional educational set up in India to irreversible decline. Macaulay devalued well-established Indian learning practices and methods as ancillary, and upheld English education that would produce English-speaking clerks to serve the British authority. Indian educational scenario, before the advent of the British, was vibrant and varied and multidimensional to encompass oral traditions of teaching like *ācārya-kulas*, temple schools, renowned universities, ashrams, pathshalas etc. Emerging rural landscape held education and training of young members of the society a venerable endeavour aimed to preserve the sacred knowledge texts (*āgama*) and consuetudes (*sampradaya*). These networks of knowledge were fatally disrupted due to the onslaught of British colonial policies.

The colonial legacy of anglicized education system continue to adumbrate the policy making in the education sector in independent India as well. This colonial legacy, still, informs the persisting illustration of cultural and social prejudices in school and higher education textbooks, and study material. It has remained an unresolved challenge, for the longest time in independent India, to reclaim the true spirit of the illustrated Indian education system that achieved the fine balance between, and integration of spiritual and scientific temperaments, ethical and pragmatic principles and much more. It is only with NEP 2020, that the education policy

makers have been able to address this concern. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a pivotal moment in the country's education reform journey. A core focus of the NEP is to overhaul the education system to ensure that it is more inclusive, flexible, and holistic in nature.

In this context, this perspective paper traces the achievements of NEP 2020, as it completes five years, to explore its salient features that are in alignment with the core educational and civilizational principles of Bharat from time immemorial. The paper is divided into five sections beginning with introduction of the idea and framework followed by curating a detailed theoretical understanding of the contemporary educational landscape of India with NEP 2020 in effect. Subsequently, a detailed discussion of salient features of NEP 2020 connecting it to IKS based learning is presented followed by setting futuristic agendas for the Indian education system. The paper ends with concluding the discussion. This paper is the byproduct of the ICSSR-sponsored Major Project[1].

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is a vast repository of knowledge and wisdom that is immensely relevant in the present context, and offers opportunities to synthesize new knowledge in the light of this accumulated wisdom. Thus, the relevance of introducing and familiarizing the young generation with this vast knowledge tradition that serves multiple purposes. The preserved knowledge of the living traditions of Bharat defines the identity of its people, their social practices and the norms that govern their way of life. At the same time, the "prevailing knowledge and the literary traditions play a significant role in shaping the culture of the society" (Mahadevan, 2022, p. 7) which, if interrupted, can create disruptions and distortions. The IKS based learning has been the cornerstone of education in India for the longest time with universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila, foundational gurukuls, parishads and temples as centres of learning catering to the large number of students from India and other countries. Education in practical skills and crafts was often transmitted within families or through guilds. These weren't formal institutions with set curricula but rather apprenticeship systems where skills were passed down through generations of practitioners. However, they were crucial for the economic and social fabric of Bharat. The courts of kings were also important centres of learning and patronage. These educational institutions highlight the rich and multifaceted landscape of learning in ancient India. They played crucial roles in preserving, advancing, and disseminating knowledge, shaping the intellectual, cultural and societal fabric of the time.

However, with changing socio-political conditions, this system gradually declined due to various historical shifts, including the Islamic invasions. While the impact wasn't uniform across the subcontinent or a sudden annihilation, the invasions significantly disrupted the traditional systems of learning in several ways. One of the primary impacts was the destruction of educational infrastructure. The disruption of patronage also played a crucial role. *Gurukuls* traditionally relied on the patronage of local rulers, wealthy individuals, and the community for financial and material support[2]. With the establishment of Islamic rule in various regions, this traditional patronage often shifted or diminished. The eventual decline was a more protracted process, further accelerated by later colonial policies that favoured Western education systems[3].

Education, in the colonial period, was characterized by English ideals, and English language became the dominant medium of instruction. The British education system focused on producing clerks and administrators who would assist in running the colonial government; promoting Western ideals and literature, side-lining traditional Indian knowledge; and establishing a hierarchical system where English-educated Indians were placed above their vernacular-educated counterparts. These changes resulted in a growing divide between the English-educated elite and the rural population, who continued within Indian education system or remained uneducated due to lack of access to the new system.

Macaulay played a central role in introducing English education in India through his infamous *Minutes on Indian Education* (1835). His policies significantly altered the traditional Indian education system, leading to the decline of local institutions like *gurukuls* and *pathshalas*. Macaulay had an extremely prejudiced view of India's education system. In his Minutes, he dismissed centuries of Indian scholarship, arguing that traditional knowledge rooted in Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian texts, was of little practical use. He infamously declared that "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." (p. 358). This statement epitomized his Eurocentric bias, and disregard for India's vast intellectual heritage, which included advancements in mathematics, medicine, astronomy and philosophy. While Macaulay's reforms introduced modern education to India, they were also heavily criticized for their elitist and exclusionary nature. Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore later condemned this system for creating a generation of Indians who were disconnected from their roots.

Furthermore, the post-colonial period in India marked a significant shift in educational policies as the country sought to rebuild its education system after gaining independence. These reforms addressed macro challenges that impeded right to education, gross enrolment ratio, and persisted attendance deficit, and lack of vocational training etc. Apart from these macro challenges, it is the state of cultural hibernation of Indians that none of the previous education policies addressed. Thus, NEP 2020 becomes the most transformative policy that has built connections between national progress and cultural rootedness as a prerequisite for achieving the *Viksit Bharat@2047* mandate.

The National Education Policy 2020 is a visionary blueprint that outlines pre-emptive guidelines and principles towards managing knowledge accumulation, technological innovation, ubiquitous internet, globalization, scientific breakthroughs, online hyper activity, AI utilization, and other associated factors. In this context, NEP 2020 caters to the need to re-structure the current education system in India which traces its roots back to the British-era structure. While some view British-era structure of education as a beneficial development for introducing a standardized approach to education in India, others have also critiqued its limitations and disconnect from India's cultural and historical context (Joshi & Gupta, 2017, p. 103). NEP 2020, therefore delivers a comprehensive framework for elementary education to higher education as well as vocational training in both rural and urban India that decolonises the extant system of British education.

ARTICLE

IKS@NEP 2020: A DISCUSSION

One of the most promising aspects of the NEP 2020 is its potential to reintegrate elements of India's traditional, holistic educational system—embodied by the *Gurukul shiksha parampara*—into the modern framework. The ancient centres of learning, were characterized by personalized instruction, a deep connection between teacher and student, and an emphasis on character development, life skills, and the integration of spiritual and intellectual growth. The NEP while aiming for the holistic development and extending the reach of education readily acknowledges that the guiding light for the policy is the rich heritage of ancient Indian knowledge. It further elaborates upon "the pursuit of knowledge (*Jnan*), wisdom (*Pragyaa*), and truth (*Satya*) that was always considered in Indian thought and philosophy as the highest human goal" (NEP, p. 4). Through the lens of the NEP 2020, these features could inspire a reimagining of contemporary education, aiming to foster well-rounded individuals who excel not only in academic pursuits but in emotional, moral and social aspects as well.

The legacy of Macaulay's educational system persisted long after India's independence in 1947. The Indian education system remained heavily influenced by Western ideals, with English continuing to dominate as the primary language of instruction in schools and HEIs. Traditional knowledge pools rooted in Indian languages and culture, have been devalued for a long time. The western centric model of education has disconnected learners from Indian cultural heritage and has fostered a sense of inadequacy towards familial and community centric *Bharatiya* value system that caters to the holistic growth of the individual and the society. After decades of neo-colonial educational bondage, the pioneer NEP 2020 nips these limitations to promote multilingualism, recognizing the centrality of the mother tongue in imparting education, especially in the early years of schooling. The policy envisions a shift from rote memorization to a more inquiry-based, experiential learning model that encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills. All these aspects further set the pace for preparing a generation of well-rounded citizens with a deeper understanding of themselves, their culture, and the world around them. The NEP's emphasis on critical thinking and creativity mirrors the ideals of the *Gurukul shiksha parampara* wherein *shishyas* were nurtured to develop critical, analytical and creative abilities. *Gurukul* students were given personalized attention, and were encouraged to explore varied subjects ranging from philosophy to mathematics, theology to sciences and many more. The *guru-shishya* relationship in *gurukuls* was highly individualized and ensured that each student's unique strengths were enhanced, and needs were addressed. This is an aspect that the NEP 2020, in its focus on personalized learning and flexible curricula, seeks to reintroduce to the modern Indian education system.

One of the primary features of education in India was the deep and personal connection between the *guru* and *shishya*. The guru acted as a mentor and not just an instructor. The guru provided wisdom along with guidance and support

> ❝ The National Education Policy is significantly important because the present era marks a period of rapid transformation in the realm of knowledge. Due to rapid changes in the knowledge landscape such as ethical shifts in knowledge accumulation, technological innovation, ubiquitous internet, globalization, scientific breakthroughs, online hyper activity, AI utilization, and other associated factors. ❞

to the student throughout their educational journey. This personalized approach ensured that the education system addressed the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs of each individual to foster a sense of holistic development that prepared students to be thoughtful, responsible and compassionate members of society. The NEP 2020 emphasizes the need to instil a strong sense of duty and ethical responsibility in students so as to ensure that they remain grounded in their roles as responsible citizens. This focus on fundamental duties finds a strong parallel in the *gurukul shiksha parampara* where the concept of *dharma* refers to an individual's moral duties, rights, and ethical identity within society. In *gurukuls*, students lived in close-knit communities with their *gurus*, who shaped their character and values. The *gurus* had the opportunity and the required autonomy to closely observe and guide their students. This ensured that they stayed on the right path. This system naturally inculcated a sense of duty, discipline, and respect for societal responsibilities in students.

Furthermore, the NEP 2020 seeks to integrate technology in a way that enhances rather than detracts from the learning process. In contemporary times, technology serves as a tool for personalized learning, allowing students to learn at their own pace, access resources from diverse fields, and connect with mentors and peers across the world. This approach aligns with the *gurukul* tradition, where the learning process was dynamic, individualized, and deeply interconnected with the larger community. Education, in India, was always understood as a lifelong process that extended beyond the classroom and integrated all aspects of life. Students were encouraged to develop practical skills that would serve them throughout their lives. At the heart of both the NEP 2020 and the *gurukul* model is the concept of holistic education which is focussed on personal growth, moral development and the cultivation of character. The NEP 2020 recognizes that students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own learning journeys. In a world that is increasingly interconnected and complex, the ability to contribute positively to society is just as important as professional success.

NEP 2020 envisions an educational landscape that fosters better learning by providing a free and supportive environment where students develop a sense of fraternity with their teachers and peers. Traditionally, education, in India, emphasized holistic development through meditation, yoga, and practical skills essential for livelihood[4]. Today, it has evolved to include interdisciplinary subjects that equip students with professional and experimental skills necessary for the modern job market. A key feature of ancient Indian education system was its focus on experiential learning, where students apply theoretical knowledge through hands-on practice. The blend of intellectual, practical, and spiritual training ensured that students grow into capable and conscientious individuals (Adhikari, 2023). On the other hand, HEIs face significant challenges in present times, including

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4. *https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/desires-of-a-modern-indian/the-importance-of-the-gurukul-system-and-why-indian-education-needs-it/*

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poorly planned curricula, ineffective instructional methods, and a lack of alignment with national and individual goals. The quality of textbooks and study materials has also deteriorated, further impacting the learning experience. The education of the future will be driven by internet-based knowledge, mobile technology, and artificial intelligence (AI). With AI taking over various sectors such as banking, insurance, and even teaching, the role of human creativity, ethics, and empathy remains irreplaceable. Therefore, education must focus on fostering creativity, independence, self-learning, and self-motivation to ensure that humans continue to excel beyond the capabilities of machines. Modern education has much to learn from IKS based teaching and learning practices. A free and impartial education model is essential in today's world to instil qualities like independent thinking, discipline, respect, social ethics, hygiene, yoga, meditation and creativity. To move forward as a nation, it is imperative to collectively strive for excellence by reclaiming and revitalizing the vast ocean of knowledge that has been part of our heritage. Only then can we build a future where tradition and modernity coexist harmoniously, making our nation truly great again. In today's fast-evolving educational landscape, the principles of IKS based learning, deeply rooted in holistic development and moral values, are being revisited as potential solutions to contemporary challenges (Chouhan, 2016). The philosophical foundation of Indian education system offers profound benefits in shaping character, discipline, and ethical awareness, which are often overlooked in conventional, technology-driven learning environments (Jain, 2015). While theoretical studies in social sciences continue to assess the relevance and feasibility of this integration, specific advancements have been explored. For instance, the application of cloud computing in *gurukul*-based learning models has been proposed as a means of providing accessible, well-rounded education while preserving cultural traditions (Santhi et. al, 2013).

FUTURISTIC AGENDA

NEP 2020 has given a futuristic vision of education in India with emphasis on regulatory and transformative changes in curriculum and pedagogy so as to achieve technology integration, assessment reforms, multidisciplinary learning, holistic development, skill enhancement and integration of IKS in all disciplines. Indian education system needs to invest in the futuristic technologies by bridging the gap between current educational systems and new age demands of the evolving employment sector. This requires, periodic revisions in the school and university curriculums to focus on introducing courses and pedagogies that will upskill and reskill the youth to become a competitive workforce.

At the same time, emerging technologies such as AI, automation, robotics etc. are causing job displacement worldwide, this concern needs to be addressed at the level of curriculum designing for schools and HEIs in India. HEIs, in India, need to update and develop cutting edge and smart educational spaces and pedagogies that help to promote a culture of lifelong learning to tap the full potential of the human capital of the country. The focus should be on investing in emerging areas of study and innovation such as sustainable solutions, renewable energy, semi-conductor research and manufacturing, IT hardware, biotechnology, immersive technologies, edge computing, quantum computing, blockchain technologies and many more.

With these developments in mind, it is imperative that aspirational scope and quotient of different disciplines is enhanced in the contemporary competitive environment. NEP emphasises a return to the fundamentals of IKS while navigating in the global socio-economic spaces. Apart from fostering cultural legacy, IKS underscores cognitive benefits, practical applications of abstract concepts, sustainability solutions and more. An interesting example would be introducing knowledge of the local calendar and Indian astronomy in higher education as it can provide valuable insights into the cyclical patterns of nature, timings of festivals, agricultural cycle and cosmic events. Thus, the focus should be on introducing innovative combination/multidisciplinary approaches so as to improve the aspirational scope and quotient of learning. There is an urgent need to broaden the horizon, in such a manner that the learning stays aspirational for tech savvy and AI proficient future generations of learners.

CONCLUSION

As the world shifts toward AI-driven and digital learning, a pressing question emerges: Can technology truly replace the holistic, human-centred education that *gurukuls* once provided? While digital advancements offer efficiency and accessibility, they often lack the personalized mentorship and ethical grounding that ancient Indian education emphasized. Moving forward, education policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must explore innovative ways to merge these two worlds— ensuring that students not only gain technical knowledge but also develop the emotional intelligence, resilience, and cultural wisdom necessary for a well-rounded future. As NEP embraces the ancient Indian systems of learning, it would not be wrong to say that these systems serve as precursor to modern holistic education, where the focus is shifting back to multidisciplinary learning, values-based education, and experiential learning. One could possibly assume that the integration of traditional wisdom with modern science will ensure that the pursuit of knowledge remains aligned with both material progress and spiritual well-being.

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