

Indian Knowledge System and New Education Policy 2020

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a paradigm shift in India's education scenario, marking the country's third major educational framework. The policy aims at integrating the wisdom of ancient India with the practices of contemporary education for the holistic development of the learners, multidisciplinary learning, and value-based education. This paper explores the enduring legacy of India's rich traditional Knowledge system originating from the Indus valley civilization and Vedic era, epitomized by the Gurukul system, which emphasized spiritual self-realization and holistic development. The New Education Policy 2020 aims to seamlessly bridge India's timeless cultural heritage with the rigorous demands of 21st-century education. India is changing its strategic course to get back its historical pride as a leader in global education by mixing contemporary technical innovation with traditional wisdom and values. This provides an educational model that reconciles unique cultural identity with universal principles.

Key words: *Indian Knowledge System, Gurukul system, Indigenous knowledge, British invasion, New Education Policy, Holistic development, Vishwa Guru*

"न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते ।"

India has a rich traditional cultural and knowledge system. The use of stone tools in the prehistoric era heralded the beginning of innovations. As nomadic people started settling in one place and their knowledge evolved, new inventions emerged. Over time, their instruments evolved; tools that were originally used for animal hunting began to be adapted for agricultural purposes. The invention of the wheel was a massive turning point that completely changed the course of human history. In a similar vein, as humans began to use bronze, their habitat, culture, and surroundings evolved as well. This progression marked the beginning of true civilization—one of the most significant being the Indus Valley Civilization.

The earliest Indian knowledge system was symbolized by the intricate and undecipherable writing system of many pictographic signs used

on seals and ceramics from the Indus Valley Civilization. It has not been deciphered, yet intended to communicate some concepts and meanings (Wheeler, 1968, pp. 107-108). The Harappan civilization demonstrated one of the best town planning systems of ancient times, as revealed through archaeological remnants (Thapar, 2002, pp. 79–88).

"The brick constructions of Harappa show that in northwestern India, people had substantial knowledge of measurement and geometry" (Sharma, 2008, p. 311). This era represents the beginning of the lengthy proliferation of indigenous knowledge that continued through the classical Vedic eras. Thus, Indian civilization stands at the core of a distinctive indigenous knowledge system that shaped Indian culture, which is recognized worldwide. The ancient system of India was centred on the study of Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, Dharmasutras, etc. Renowned scholars such as

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Aryabhata, Patanjali, Sushruta, Varahamihira, Brahmagupta, Chanakya, Madhava of Sangamagrama, Panini, Gautama, Sankardev, Gargi, Thiruvalluvar, etc. had remarkable contributions in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine and surgery, architecture, yoga, fine arts, etc. "A Gupta inscription of A.D. 448 from the Allahabad district suggests that the decimal system was known in India at the beginning of the fifth century" (Sharma, 2008, p. 248). The guilds played an important role in the economy as they were the centre of technical education. "Knowledge of mining, metallurgy, weaving, dying, carpentry and suchlike would have been maintained by the relevant guild" (Thapar, 2002, pp. 257). The ship industry dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Initially, ships were used for the trade and later played an important role in naval warfare as well (Basham, 2002, pp. 130,131). These achievements greatly enriched human knowledge and continue to influence the world. In initial times, knowledge was imparted orally. Throughout the ages, it was passed down from one generation to the next. In the oral culture of knowledge, the scholar has a library in his mind, which processes the information at a very high speed compared to the scriptal mode, where the information is first transferred to the mind through the senses (Kapoor, 2005). This enormous amount of knowledge has been preserved orally and recorded on leaf manuscripts. The actual meaning remains intact when it is written down. If it had not been recorded in written form, its real meaning and context could have been lost (Abhyankar and Kelkar, 2025). It continues to flow in this way from its origins to modern times. With the passage of time, the languages and scripts evolved in different regions and religions. India's historical stature as a Vishwa Guru is deeply rooted in its Vedic intellectual value. When analysing ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas are the primary and authoritative source

emphasizing the profound interconnectedness between the individual, society, nature, and the spiritual realm (Das, 2024). Vedas come from the root "Vid," meaning "to know."

सत्तायां विद्यते ज्ञाने वेत्ति विन्दते विचारणे.

विन्दतेविन्दतिप्राप्तौश्यन्तुक्श्रमेषुविदंक्रमात्॥

The root 'vid' is used in the sense of existence (as 'vidyate'), knowledge (as 'veti'), and deliberation/consideration (as 'vinte'). It is also used in the sense of attainment/acquisition (asvindateorvindati). This specific meaning of the root—knowledge—is what gives us the word "Veda," which literally means "knowledge" (Jha, 2004, p. 44) or "sacred," representing vast repositories of Indian knowledge. It is regarded as the pinnacle of wisdom. The Delphian Oracle responded to Socrates' question, "What is the highest knowledge?" by saying, "Know thyself." Here, "self" refers to the true Self rather than just the ego. Since the earliest Vedic era, the same notion of the true Self has been exalted throughout India (Abhedananda, 1905). In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna defines true knowledge as knowing one's inner self and comprehending one's body, soul, and God. The beliefs, traditions, and values of the Indian knowledge system depict the duties towards self as well as towards individuals, society, the environment, and the cosmos. Vedanta, the philosophical or rational part of the Vedas, presents self-knowledge as the highest goal of human life. Self-knowledge is the ultimate aim of existence, according to Vedanta, the traditionalistic part of the Vedas. This requires reflecting on important questions such as who we really are, where we come from, and what happens to us after death. However, most people are unable to find answers to them because their minds remain occupied with the everyday concerns of the material world.

Traditional Indian disciplines like Ayurveda, yoga, and Vastu Shastra embody a holistic

philosophy centred on achieving harmony both internally and with the natural world. This perspective emphasizes the profound connection between the individual soul (*atma*) and the universal consciousness (Parmatma). Ayurveda transcends mere medicine; it is an ecological philosophy that integrates human life with the surrounding flora and fauna (Manohar, 2005). In a similar vein, yoga bridges the spiritual and mental divide, fostering holistic health. Ultimately, a vibrant body houses a resilient mind, which in turn reflects a healthy spirit. The early Vedic period was followed by the emergence of 108 Upanishads; they are the ultimate philosophical sections of the Vedas. The words "upa" (near), "ni" (down), and "shad" (to sit) imply a student sitting devotedly near a guru in order to gain secret or esoteric knowledge (Pallival, 2006, pp. 43-44). It emphasizes the world and oneself. These schools of thought brought new developments and interpretations to the original Vedic teachings, leading to a diversification of Indian knowledge and philosophy. The six auxiliary disciplines known as "Vedangas," or the limbs of the Vedas, are destined to ensure the appropriate preservation, language, practice, and interpretation of the Vedas. They supplement the correct understanding of the Vedic knowledge (Chakraborty, 2024).

Holistic development has additionally been addressed in the ashram system. Its four stages—Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa were dedicated to balancing different facets of society. In the first stage, knowledge accumulates through disciplined education; in the second, it is applied through social responsibility; in the third stage, it gradually withdraws from worldly attachment and concentrates on spiritual practice; and in the final stage, which is devoted to self-realization and liberation, it detaches itself from worldly affairs (Jha, 2004,

p. 63). It marks the transition from social integration to a soul's quest for the infinite. Thus people went closer to forests or nature to live simply and meditate where they studied plants and discovered their healing properties, thus developing the science of Ayurveda. Ayurveda believes that human health depends on the balance between the body, mind, and nature (Manohar, 2005). The interaction between nature and living organisms developed a healthy ecosystem. Therefore, a healthy ecosystem helps maintain this balance. The figurines of the Mother Goddess stood as profound symbols of earth's life-giving energy and fertility. One widely recognized seal emphasizes nature as the source of all "creative power" by demonstrating a plant growing from a woman's womb (Sharma, 2008, p. 43). Human survival is contingent upon the survival of nature. Representing human survival is inextricably linked to the survival of the natural world. Recognizing this interdependence, early civilizations flourished on the banks of rivers, complementarily embracing their environment.

The Rigveda depicts Saraswati as a goddess. However, in the post-Vedic period, the Ganga became known as Mother Goddess, and various trees and plants, such as pipal, vat, shami, and tulsi, are also revered, as are herbs like grass. Because of their therapeutic qualities, all of these are treasured and adored (Sharma, 2008, p. 43). The Charaka Samhita lists multiple plants and herbs that were used to make medications. The method of pounding and combining the plants gives us a glimpse into the advanced understanding of chemistry and ancient Indian medicine. "For the cure of ailments, the ancient Indian physician relied chiefly on plants, for which the Sanskrit word is 'oshadhi,' and as a result, medicine itself came to be known as 'aushadhi.'" (Sharma, 2008, p. 201).

Sushruta (2nd century A.D.), a famous scholar of Ayurveda, described the method of operating on cataracts, stone disease, and several other ailments. He mentioned as many as 121 surgical instruments. However, the balance between nature and civilization has been destroyed by humans today. A lot of forests are being cut down, which reduces the availability of medicinal plants. This affected the development and practice of Ayurveda and also disrupted the natural ecosystem.

The six schools of Hindu philosophy—Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta—offer various perspectives on reality, knowledge, and spirituality. They collectively serve as the cornerstone of Indian philosophy. Important ideas like Karma (actions) and Moksha (liberation), which teach that a person's acts affect their spiritual development and ultimate freedom, are also highlighted by these ideologies. Hindu philosophy thus directs people toward spiritual enlightenment, moral behaviour, and self-realization. In the Vedas, "karma" refers to the actions a person performs and the results they produce. These actions determine a person's destiny and keep the soul in the cycle of birth and death. This cycle continues until a person achieves Moksha, which is liberation. Moksha cannot be attained without changing one's actions and performing righteous deeds. In the Gurukul system, the Guru guided the Shishya to practice good karma and gain spiritual knowledge. In ancient times, the Gurukul system served as a holistic residential model where students lived with their gurus to have balanced growth across intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Buddhsen, 2025, p. 101). Instead of focusing merely on theory, it emphasized holistic development by instilling humanity, respect, and life skills through a close connection with nature. The varied curriculum comprises the Vedas, Sanskrit, math, and logic.

Yoga was formerly a regular part of daily life. Education culminated in deeply ingrained personal mentoring in addition to theory. As a final gesture of gratitude and respect to their Gurus, Guru Dakshina was offered by students (Basham, 2002, p. 164). In the Mahabharata, Ekalavya showed this devotion by offering his thumb as Guru Dakshina to Dronacharya. This highlights the importance of devotion and sacrifice in the traditional guru-disciple relationship. It further offers insight into a framework for war strategy. The Bhagavad Gita teaches the principle of selfless action, which states that one must carry out their duties as a matter of righteousness completely separated from selfish desires or the pursuit of rewards (Tripathi and Sharma, 2024).

Buddhism and Jainism emerged in the 6th century BC as new religions offering paths to liberation beyond traditional Vedic rituals. Buddhism and Jainism introduced new ways of thinking, new languages for learning, new texts, and new systems of spiritual and ethical knowledge, making spiritual wisdom more accessible to everyone (Buddhsen, 2025, p. 146). Both introduced new languages like Pali and Prakrit, making their teachings accessible to ordinary people. Important texts, such as the Tripitaka in Buddhism and the Agamas in Jainism, contain philosophy, ethics, and rules for spiritual practice. Initially Guru's home was the place to depart the education but during this period monasteries became the centers of learning. (Basham, 2002, p. 164). Together, these religions created new systems of knowledge and founded world-renowned intellectual hubs such as Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramashila, etc., which functioned as premier centers for diverse, multidisciplinary learning and attracted students and scholars from different parts of the world (Buddhsen, 2025, p. 315).

But during the medieval period, invaders sought more than political power but also

destroyed our culture and knowledge system by destroying our ancient knowledge centers (Buddhsen, 2025, p. 316). They enforced their language, culture, and religion. Although India's indigenous traditions and intellectual systems proved resilient, they continued to adapt and flourish throughout this era. The West focused on battles to establish imperialism, but India's development kept rooted in spiritual knowledge and universal values like truth and the concept of brotherhood. This truth-based system cannot be changed by power. Even under foreign rulers, India's spiritual traditions survived and flourished, showing the strength and universality of its knowledge. The Bhakti Movement also strengthened the truth-based knowledge system of India by focusing on inner devotion, universal love, and the connection between the individual and the divine, where foundational texts were translated into the vernacular—such as Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*—to reach the masses. By making complex philosophy a functional, lived experience, the movement made spiritual wisdom both accessible and compassionate, which ensured the "Indian way of knowing" evolved beyond abstract universal understanding into a dedicated practice of serving humanity. This movement made spiritual knowledge accessible to all, breaking caste and social barriers and ensuring that India's truth-based wisdom reached everyone. It transformed India's literary heritage by promoting regional dialects and social equity and emphasizing personal devotion. This shift infused literature with deep spiritual and humanistic ideals, effectively bridging the gap between sacred wisdom and the common person. Sikhism emphasized devotion to one God, service to humanity (*seva*), and equality, spreading the idea of universal brotherhood.

“ਨ ਕੋ ਬੈਰੀ ਨਹੀ ਬਿਗਾਨਾ ਸਗਲ ਸੰਗਿ ਹਮ ਕਉ ਬਨਿ ਆਈ ॥”

Prior to the British era, Religion had a significant role in many educational institutions, and this was frequently reflected through these institutions and their mediums of instruction. This made it easier for the British to make English the language of administration, higher education, and power. After 1757, when the British gained power in India, they introduced a modern system based on Western ideas and institutions, promoting the supremacy of Western civilization. On one hand, the East India Company controlled the economy and trade, dominating markets and resources. On the other hand, Christian missionaries tried to influence the religious and social life of the masses, spreading their beliefs through education and community outreach. This combined approach allowed the British to assert both economic and cultural control, reshaping India's society while challenging its traditional knowledge and social systems. On the recommendations of Lord Macaulay, English became the medium of instruction for higher education. He tried to establish his supremacy by claiming that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. Thus, under the banner of civilization, they destroyed our economy, culture, and knowledge system. It led to the fragmentation between modern education and Indian knowledge. They introduced a new education system in 1854. They established a graded academic structure—ranging from vernacular primary schools to English-medium universities—highlighted by the Wood's Dispatch, often called the "Magna Carta of English Education in India." This policy formalized a system that prioritized Western science and literature to produce a loyal civil service, frequently sidelining traditional Indian knowledge.

(Pratheesh, 2024). While it introduced "normal schools" for teacher training and led to the founding of India's first modern universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, it was further refined by the Hunter Commission (1882), which decentralized education, and the Indian Universities Act (1904), which increased government oversight. Ultimately, this system fostered an educated class that organized socially and politically, eventually spearheading the movement for India's independence.

Socio-religious reform movements, particularly the Arya Samaj, introduce past heritage and rich culture to handle contemporary social and religious issues. Swami Dayanand Saraswati promotes the old Indian model of civilization by saying, "Back to the Vedas." Their aim was to dispel ignorance (*Avidya*) and spread knowledge (*Vidya*) (Panwar and Chauhan, 2024). The Mahatma Party (Gurukul Party), led by Swami Shraddhanand (formerly Mahatma Munshi Ram), emphasized the traditional Gurukul system. They stressed a curriculum based exclusively on Sanskrit and the Vedas. Their flagship institution, Gurukul Kangri, was established in 1902 near Haridwar. Thus, the ancient Indian knowledge system can be comprehended through three perspectives: Western education, Aryanization of contemporary education, and the old Vedic education system. Western education introduced modern disciplines. The Aryanization of modern education emphasized reconnecting modern learning with Vedic traditions and texts like the Rigveda. In contrast, the ancient Vedic education system was based on the Gurukul tradition, focusing on holistic and multidisciplinary learning rooted in the Vedas (Farquhar, 1997). In 1893, Swami Vivekananda, in his historic speech at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, brought Indian culture and tradition to the

world stage (Vivekananda, 1893/2015). Mahatma Gandhi, a national leader who had a unique vision for education, which he expressed through his idea of "Nai Talim," or basic education. His educational theory was closely related to moral, social, and economic development; it was not only about literacy. He defined knowledge as "By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in a child and in a man—body, mind, and spirit." (Gandhi, 1937/1968, p. 411) Human values should be instilled in children through education to help them become responsible, engaged citizens. He believed that Indian education in the Western style was undermining India's ancient heritage by insidiously spreading modern ways.

After independence, India took major reforms to modernize and expand its education system through commissions and policies. The Kothari Commission emphasized science and technology education to support development. The national education policies (1968, 1986, and 1992) focused on removing inequalities in education and encouraged vocational training and regional languages in schools. It promoted literacy for all, especially for women and disadvantaged groups and finally the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), which aims to create a modern, flexible, and inclusive education system (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The National Education Policy 2020 superseded the earlier National Policy on Education 1986 (which was modified in 1992). It introduced significant reforms in the Indian education system, focusing on skill development and value-based and holistic development. The Indian knowledge system is the foundational pillar of National Education Policy 2020. NEP 2020 aims to reintegrate our traditional knowledge heritage with the needs of 21st-century learning, fostering a deep understanding of India's rich cultural legacy. The policy also aims to modernize education while preserving

the country's cultural and intellectual heritage. After two centuries, the Macaulay system of education was replaced by an indigenous education system. Prime Minister Narendra Kumar Modi stated, "The NEP 2020 is more than just a reform, stating it is the nation's intellectual renaissance, paving the way for a self-reliant and globally competitive India." He has urged the nation to free itself from the "mindset of slavery" instilled by the Macaulay education system, aiming to replace it with an India-centered framework by 2035" (India Today News Desk, 2025). He further stated that the goal is to develop an education system where Indian youth do not need to go abroad, while also attracting international students to India.

Grounded on the idea of knowledge as understanding of body and soul, NEP 2020 seeks to shift the focus from delivering academic content to holistic development (Kumar and Kishor, 2024). It emphasizes moving away from rote memorization towards creativity and conceptual understanding. By eliminating the rigid silos between arts and sciences, the policy encourages a multidisciplinary approach that gives equal importance to both vocational and academic skills. Moving beyond a simple exercise to a tool for emotional balance, yoga is also embedded in the curriculum. By adopting this framework, the policy views the student as a whole, focusing on physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth. It allows learners to deep dive into diverse subjects according to their interests, helping them to build a versatile mindset. It places a strong emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach that draws inspiration from the ancient Indian knowledge tradition, where students studied a variety of subjects like mathematics, astronomy, Ayurveda, philosophy, etc. (Abhyankar and Kelkar, 2025). NEP 2020 encourages value-added courses that combine subject-matter

competence with ethical principles. The primary goal is to advance students' general intellectual and moral growth in addition to their academic understanding.

Policy focuses on setting up large, integrated universities inspired by ancient Indian centers of learning like Nalanda and Takshashila, which taught 64 arts with a concept of inclusivity and equality. Another key focus is on ensuring foundational literacy where mother tongue or regional language is used as the primary medium of instruction, particularly in early years, along with high-quality teaching and learning in all languages (MHRD, 2020). The National Education Policy 2020 advocates the inclusion of Sanskrit to provide students access to spiritual, philosophical, and historical texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads. This entails reviving India's traditional knowledge and traditions while also disseminating them through new learning platforms and contemporary technology (MHRD, 2020).

Additionally, ancient India was highly advanced in the fields of craft and technology. The most notable example is the iron pillar located in Mehroli, Delhi. The fact that the pillar, which was made in the fourth century AD, did not corrode during the ensuing fifteenth century is a testament to the artisans' technological prowess. Until nearly a century ago, no iron foundry in the West could produce such a pillar (Sharma, 2008, p. 248). Indian dye craftsmen create a wide range of colours. The basic hues used in India were so lustrous and long-lasting that the beautiful paintings of Ajanta are still intact. Even steel craft was first developed in India in 200 BC, and Indian steel was exported to many countries of the world. Digital initiatives like SWAYAM and MOOCs allow students as well as teachers to pursue courses through e-learning and online modes, helping India move toward becoming a global knowledge hub. The policy also encourages the

translation of educational materials into regional and mother languages to make knowledge more accessible and to revive linguistic diversity. Additionally, growing environmental concerns have led to greater emphasis on environmental studies and sustainable practices within the curriculum. The 5+3+3+4 paradigm replaces the 10+2 structure, emphasizing play-based learning and basic reading in the foundational stage. Furthermore, it re-envisioned the teachers as mentors who employ sound pedagogical practices to guide students towards self-actualization and readiness for real-world competitions (MHRD, 2020). In essence, NEP 2020 draws inspiration from ancient educational traditions while adapting to modern needs, which bridges a gap between India (the modern state) and Bharat (the timeless civilization). It is a strategic move to reposition the nation as a global leader by making education more holistic and culturally rooted.

From the Indus Valley Civilization to the Vedic era and beyond, India has had a rich traditional knowledge system that established a framework for a unique, all-encompassing approach to education, life, and spirituality. The legacy of India's intellect and culture has endured through the periods of foreign invasion and colonial period, adapting and preserving the fundamental values. Striving to blend this old-age knowledge with modern-day education, new education policy 2020 aims to ensure holistic growth, transdisciplinary learning, and ethical growth. By fusing the ancient Indian knowledge tradition with modern-day innovation, India is in an ideal position to reclaim its status as a global leader in information and offer an educational model based on both cultural uniqueness and universal principles. "These rich legacies to world heritage must not only be nurtured and preserved for posterity but also researched,

enhanced, and put to new uses through our education system" (MHRD, 2020, p. 4).

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