



# Holistic Learning in India: Historical Roots and Contemporary Revival Through NEP 2020

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## ABSTRACT

*The evolution of holistic and multidisciplinary education in India has been a dynamic journey, with its roots in the ancient Gurukul system and culminating in the principles articulated in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This paper explores the historical context of holistic education in ancient India, examining the transition towards multidisciplinary education over time. The Vedic era's educational framework was profoundly holistic, focusing on the complete development of an individual's physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacities. The curriculum was diverse, encompassing sciences, arts, humanities, and practical skills. The Buddhist era continued this comprehensive approach, combining secular subjects with religious teachings and introducing innovative teaching methods. Medieval India saw the coexistence of Gurukuls and Madrasas, each contributing to the holistic and multidisciplinary educational landscape. However, the British colonial period marked a shift towards a Western-centric, compartmentalized system that prioritized rote learning and utilitarian goals. The NEP 2020 represents a deliberate initiative to revitalize Indian education by drawing upon its ancient heritage while integrating contemporary requirements. The policy advocates for a flexible, multidisciplinary curriculum, experiential learning, and the integration of values and ethics. This research highlights the cyclical nature of India's educational journey, returning to its foundational principles to create well-rounded individuals equipped with both ancient wisdom and modern knowledge.*

**Keywords:** Holistic, Multidisciplinary, Vedic, Buddhist, Gurukul, Madrasa, National Education Policy 2020.

## 1.INTRODUCTION:

### 1.1.Holistic and multidisciplinary education:

Holistic and multidisciplinary education represents an educational paradigm that fosters comprehensive personal development encompassing intellectual, emotional, social, and physical dimensions by integrating knowledge across various disciplines to address complex, real-world challenges. This approach seeks to

cultivate individuals who are well-rounded, critical thinkers, adaptable, creative, and proficient in collaboration, thereby dismantling traditional academic silos to equip students for a dynamic world.

### 1.1.1.Holistic education:

**Focus:** Emphasising the comprehensive development of individuals beyond mere academic achievement.

**Goal:** To enhance students' intellectual, emotional, social, and physical well-being.

**Outcome:** Fosters character, values, and life skills in conjunction with knowledge.

### 1.1.2.Multidisciplinary Education

**Focus:** The dismantling of disciplinary boundaries and the integration of diverse fields of study.

**Objective:** To cultivate a more comprehensive and interconnected understanding of the world.

**Outcome:** Prepares students to address complex problems that necessitate solutions from multiple perspectives, thereby fostering creativity and innovation.

#### 1.1.2.1.Key Benefits:

- **Enhanced Problem-Solving:** Equips students to approach challenges with a broader perspective.
- **Adaptability:** Develops the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.
- **Critical Thinking and Creativity:** Encourages innovation by linking ideas across disciplines.

**Preparation for the Future:** Assists students in preparing for emerging occupations and complex societal challenges.

- **Lifelong Learning:** Cultivates a habit of continuous learning and engagement with new information.

### 1.2. Significance of Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education:

Research indicates that multidisciplinary education enhances problem-solving skills and creativity (Wong, 2018). Integrating knowledge from various disciplines empowers students to tackle complex societal issues.

Education has consistently been integral to societal development. In ancient India, education transcended the mere dissemination of knowledge, embracing a holistic approach aimed at the comprehensive development of individuals. Holistic education fosters intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions, thereby promoting a well-rounded personality. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India builds upon this foundation, advocating for a multidisciplinary approach to education that preserves the essence of holistic learning. This paper examines the evolution of holistic and multidisciplinary education in India, culminating in the principles articulated in NEP 2020.

### 1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW :

**Sharma, R. (2010).** In the paper, “The Ancient Indian Education System: A Historical Analysis”, stated that the Gurukul system, prevalent during ancient times, is a testament to holistic education. As described by Sharma, this system emphasized learning through experience, moral values, and community involvement.

**Mishra, A. (2011).** In the study “Significance of the Gurukul System of Education in Ancient India”, pointed out that the curriculum of ancient India encompassed various disciplines, including mathematics, the arts, philosophy, and physical education, with a focus on character building.

### 1.4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The specific objectives of this research paper are:

To explore the historical context of holistic education in ancient India.

To examine the transition towards multidisciplinary education over time.

To focus on the key features of the National Education Policy 2020 in relation to holistic and multidisciplinary education.

**1.5.METHOD OF THE STUDY:** The study employs a descriptive-analytical method.

**1.5.1.Data Collection:** This paper is based on secondary sources of information. For the current study, information was gathered from various journals, magazines, articles, and websites that deal with the subject matter.

## 2.DISCUSSION:

### 2.1.Evaluation of the Holistic and Multidisciplinary Approach during the Vedic Era:

The educational framework during the Vedic era in ancient India was profoundly holistic, focusing on the complete development of an individual's physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacities. It was also naturally interdisciplinary, encompassing a broad range of subjects beyond mere religious scriptures.

The holistic nature of Vedic education, predominantly imparted through the Gurukul system, is widely recognised as highly effective in cultivating well-rounded individuals.

- **Integrated Development:** The educational framework extended beyond mere academic knowledge (Apara Vidya) and was intricately linked to the ultimate aim of self-realisation (moksha) (Para Vidya). This approach addresses both the material and spiritual dimensions of an individual's life, emphasising the harmonious integration of duty (dharma), prosperity (artha), pleasure (kama), and liberation (moksha).

- **Character Building:** Significant emphasis was placed on the development of character, ethics, and values, such as truthfulness (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-discipline, and respect for teachers and nature. Students internalise these values through daily interactions, close engagement with their guru, and adherence to a disciplined lifestyle (*Brahmacharya*).
- **Physical and Mental Well-being:** Physical education is a fundamental component of the curriculum, encompassing practices such as yoga, meditation, exercises, and martial arts, thereby ensuring a healthy mind and body. This focus on mental clarity and emotional equilibrium enhances the overall learning capacity.
- **Experiential Learning:** Students resided with their Guru and acquired knowledge through practical experience, engaging in household chores, community service, and vocational training, which fostered self-reliance and social skills.



### 2.1.1.Strengths of the Multidisciplinary Nature:

The curriculum was broad and diverse, ensuring students were equipped with a multifaceted skill set relevant to various aspects of life and societal needs.

- **Diverse Subjects:** Beyond the study of the Vedas, Upanishads, and philosophy, the curriculum included subjects such as:
  - **Sciences:** Mathematics, astronomy, medicine (*Ayurveda*), and natural sciences.
  - **Arts and Humanities:** Grammar (*Vyakarana*), logic (*Nyaya*), linguistics, history, music, dance, and other fine arts.
  - **Practical Skills:** The art of warfare (*Dhanurvedya*), agriculture, trade, and animal husbandry were taught to prepare students for their future social and economic roles.
- **Inquiry and Debate:** Teaching methods were oral and interactive, involving listening (*shravana*), reflection (*manana*), and deep contemplation (*nididhyasana*), along with vigorous debates and discussions, which developed critical thinking, problem-solving, and oratory skills.
- **Adaptability:** The curriculum was tailored to the individual needs and aptitudes of the students, and the system produced specialized scholars in various fields, as evidenced by experts like the grammarian Panini and the physician Charaka.
- **Blending of Secular and Religious Education:** Both religious and secular subjects were taught together in the same institutions, showcasing a holistic approach to learning.
- **Prominent Learning Centres:** Esteemed institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila became centres of multidisciplinary study, attracting scholars from around the world and fostering the exchange of ideas.



- **Development of Formal Universities:** The shift from the traditional gurukul system to the creation of universities signified a move towards more organized, curriculum-driven, multidisciplinary higher education.
- **Emphasis on Practical Skills:** Vedic education, for example, combined theoretical learning with vocational training, thus enhancing the practical skills necessary for Aryan society.

### 2.1.2.Challenges and Limitations

Despite its many strengths, the system had significant limitations:

- **Restricted Access:** Educational opportunities were largely limited to specific castes and genders, predominantly favouring the upper classes like Brahmins and Kshatriyas, thus limiting inclusivity.
- **Oral Rigidity:** A heavy reliance on oral traditions and a strict adherence to texts could sometimes hinder creative thinking and lead to inflexible teaching methods in certain contexts.
- **Neglected Mass Education:** The education of the general population and the secular or material aspects of life were sometimes given less priority compared to spiritual education, although practical skills were part of the curriculum.
- **Absence of structured examination system:** The lack of a structured examination system hinders the standardisation of educational quality and the ability to compare learning outcomes across various institutions.

Overall, the Vedic education system is evaluated as a highly sophisticated and effective model for producing well-rounded, ethical individuals, with its holistic and multidisciplinary principles offering enduring insights for contemporary educational reforms.

### 2.2.Evaluation of the Holistic and Multidisciplinary Approach during the Buddhist Era:

During the Buddhist era in ancient India, education was a comprehensive and interdisciplinary system aimed at nurturing individuals intellectually, morally, and spiritually, with the ultimate aim of reaching Nirvana. This system's strengths lie in its curriculum, which combines secular subjects such as medicine, law, and astronomy with religious teachings, and its innovative teaching methods, including debates, parables, and practical training. However, there were limitations, such as access restrictions based on social status and gender, although Buddhism's focus on spiritual equality made education more accessible to women than in the past.

#### 2.2.1.Strengths :

- **Comprehensive curriculum:** The curriculum extends beyond religious studies to encompass a broad array of worldly and practical subjects.
- **Integration:** It combines secular disciplines, such as medicine, arts, crafts, mathematics, astronomy, and law, with spiritual and ethical education.

- **Moral development:** A key objective was character building, emphasizing virtues such as compassion, integrity, and self-discipline.
- **Vocational training:** Vocational training was provided alongside religious education, similar to the Gurukul system.
- **Multidisciplinary institutions:** Esteemed universities such as Nalanda and Takshashila served as hubs of multidisciplinary teaching and research, drawing scholars and students from around the globe.
- **Pedagogical innovation:** Interactive methods: Teaching techniques included oral instruction, debate (*Shastrarth*), imitation, demonstration, and self-study.
- **Accessible instruction:** The use of Pali helped overcome language barriers, making education more accessible to diverse populations.
- **Practical application:** Parables such as the Jātaka tales were used to make complex ethical teachings practical and relatable to everyday life.
- **Emphasis on personal transformation:** The primary aim was self-realization and achieving nirvana, accomplished through a blend of intellectual learning and ethical behavior.

### 2.2.2.Limitations:

- **Social and gender inequality:** Although Buddhism advocates for spiritual equality, access is still affected by social status. Educational opportunities for women were expanded by allowing them to join the monastic order, but they remained limited compared to men, as evidenced by the Buddha's initial hesitation to permit women to join the order.
- **Exclusivity:** Despite the intellectual vibrancy of institutions like Nalanda, access to formal education remains restrictive.

### 2.3.Evaluation of the Holistic and Multidisciplinary Approach during Medieval India:

In Medieval India, education was characterised by a holistic and multidisciplinary approach, integrating intellectual, ethical, and physical growth through the Gurukul and Madrasa systems. Gurukuls promoted a comprehensive method, nurturing character, morals, and spirituality alongside academic subjects such as philosophy, astronomy, and medicine. Madrasas, which were primarily Islamic institutions, concentrated on Arabic and Islamic law but still played a role in the broader multidisciplinary educational landscape. Overall, this era is considered successful in its holistic and multidisciplinary educational approach, despite the differing focuses of the two main institutions.

## 2.4. Evolution of the Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education during the British Colonial Period :

The British colonial education policy, exemplified by Lord Macaulay's Minute of 1835, established a Western-centric, English-medium educational system with the primary aim of cultivating a class of educated Indians to fulfil clerical roles within the colonial administration. This policy resulted in an educational framework characterised by the following features:

- **Compartmentalisation:** Education became segmented into rigid disciplinary boundaries, with minimal emphasis on interdisciplinary integration.
- **Rote Learning Orientation:** The educational focus transitioned from fostering holistic understanding and critical thinking to prioritising rote memorisation and examination-based assessment.
- **Utilitarian Approach:** The system predominantly aimed to produce a workforce for the colonial administration, thereby marginalising traditional Indian knowledge systems, arts, and holistic development.

It is noteworthy that, alongside The Wood's Dispatch of 1854 and various other commissions, a liberal education was advocated, integrating Western scientific knowledge with indigenous cultures. Furthermore, during the pre-independence era, Mahatma Gandhi's Basic education system prioritised the holistic development of children through a multidisciplinary curriculum. However, it was only post-independence that India began to establish a more cohesive educational framework.

## 2.5. National Education Policy 2020 and Holistic Education:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a deliberate initiative to revitalise the Indian education system by drawing upon its ancient heritage while integrating contemporary 21st-century requirements. The NEP 2020 explicitly acknowledges the rich legacy of ancient Indian knowledge as a guiding framework, aiming to reinstate the "knowledge of many arts" approach. The NEP 2020 seeks to reclaim the spirit of holistic education, embedding it within a multidisciplinary framework. The policy encourages a flexible, multidisciplinary curriculum while emphasising skill development, creativity, and critical thinking (Ministry of Education, 2020).

### 2.5.1. Key Features of NEP 2020 Related to Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education:

- **Holistic Curriculum:** The policy advocates for the integration of arts, humanities, sports, fitness, languages, sciences, social sciences, and vocational subjects to foster the comprehensive development of learners in an integrated manner.
- **Multidisciplinary Institutions:** It promotes the establishment of large multidisciplinary universities and colleges, including the transformation of IITs to incorporate more arts and humanities, thereby dismantling rigid academic silos.

- **Flexibility:** The policy introduces flexible curricular structures, multiple entry and exit points, and an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) to enable students to select their learning pathways and accumulate credits across various modes (physical and online).
- **Experiential Learning:** Emphasising experiential, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, and project-based learning methods, the policy seeks to make education more engaging and pertinent to real-world challenges.
- **Values and Ethics:** The policy integrates values, ethics, and cultural learning to cultivate character, social responsibility, and a profound understanding of India's cultural heritage. In essence, the journey towards holistic and multidisciplinary education in India is cyclical, returning to foundational principles after a period of compartmentalisation, to create well-rounded individuals equipped with both ancient wisdom and modern knowledge.

### 3.HIGHLIGHTS:

- Holistic and multidisciplinary education fosters comprehensive personal development across intellectual, emotional, social, and physical dimensions.
- Holistic education emphasizes character, values, and life skills, while multidisciplinary education integrates diverse fields of study.
- Multidisciplinary education enhances problem-solving skills, adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, and preparation for complex societal challenges.
- The Vedic era in ancient India featured a holistic and interdisciplinary educational framework.
- Vedic education focused on integrated development, character building, physical and mental well-being, and experiential learning.
- The Buddhist era curriculum combined secular subjects with religious teachings and utilised innovative teaching methods.
- Medieval India's education was characterized by the holistic and multidisciplinary approach of the Gurukul and Madrasa systems.
- The British colonial education policy led to compartmentalisation, rote learning, and a utilitarian approach in education.
- The National Education Policy 2020 aims to revitalise Indian education by drawing upon ancient heritage and integrating contemporary requirements.



➤ NEP 2020 promotes a holistic curriculum, multidisciplinary institutions, flexibility, experiential learning, and the integration of values and ethics.

#### 4. Conclusion:

The evolution of education in India reflects a rich tradition of holistic and multidisciplinary approaches, from the integrated and value-centred frameworks of the Vedic and Buddhist eras to the comprehensive Gurukul and Madrasa systems of medieval times. Despite the challenges posed by British colonial policies that favoured compartmentalisation and rote learning, contemporary reforms such as the National Education Policy 2020 seek to restore and modernise this heritage. By emphasising a holistic curriculum, multidisciplinary institutions, experiential learning, and the integration of ethics and values, NEP 2020 aims to prepare learners for the complexities of modern society while fostering their intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development in a holistic manner.

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