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GURUKULA TO GLOBAL CLASSROOMS: A COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW OF TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN EDUCATION ROOTED IN THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The philosophical architecture of Indian education has historically rested upon the harmonious integration of empirical inquiry (Apara Vidya) and ethical-spiritual self-realization (Para Vidya), forming the intellectual bedrock of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). This systematic review critically examines the philosophical evolution of Indian education across its traditional and contemporary eras, evaluating its structural continuity, colonial disruptions, and revitalized relevance within twenty-first-century pedagogy. Employing a qualitative systematic literature review and inductive-deductive thematic synthesis of 38 authoritative scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and national policy frameworks, the study compares ancient Gurukula and monastic university traditions against modern standardized, examination-centric schooling. The findings demonstrate that traditional Indian pedagogy fostered holistic personality development (Panchakosha Vikas), dialogic mentorship, ecological stewardship (Rta), and rigorous epistemological reasoning (Pramana), whereas colonial interventions imposed disciplinary fragmentation, linguistic alienation, and credential-driven rote learning. Although post-independence commissions expanded educational access, substantive epistemological decolonization remained incomplete until the promulgation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The review reveals that integrating living IKS frameworks—spanning Ayurvedic wellness, contemplative mindfulness, generative linguistics, and indigenous agro-ecological wisdom—into modern multidisciplinary curricula offers viable solutions to contemporary cognitive, psychological, and sustainability crises. Nevertheless, meaningful operationalization requires overcoming faculty capacity deficits, vernacular translation gaps, and ideological polarization between uncritical romanticism and Eurocentric scepticism. Anchoring contemporary education in its philosophical roots thus empowers learners with moral agency, interdisciplinary adaptability, and culturally grounded innovation.

KEYWORDS: *Indian Knowledge System, Philosophy of Indian Education, Gurukula Pedagogy, Epistemic Decolonization, National Education Policy 2020, Holistic Education*

INTRODUCTION

The philosophical architecture of education in ancient India was never conceived merely as an instrument for economic utility or vocational specialization; rather, it was envisioned as a holistic transformative journey aimed at the realization of the self and the harmonious integration of the individual with the cosmos. Rooted deeply in the Vedic, Upanishadic, Buddhist, and Jaina intellectual traditions, traditional Indian education operated on the foundational premise that knowledge (Vidya) is a liberating force (Sa Vidya Ya Vimuktaye), emancipating human consciousness from ignorance, egoism, and material bondage (Altekar, 1944; Mookerji, 1947). Within the Gurukula system, the pedagogical relationship between the Guru (preceptor) and the Shishya (disciple) transcended transactional instruction, functioning instead as an immersive residential apprenticeship grounded in ethical discipline (Brahmacharya), experiential inquiry, and oral transmission (Shruti and Smriti) (Scharfe, 2002). Epistemologically, ancient Indian thinkers categorized knowledge into Para Vidya (higher spiritual wisdom concerning the ultimate reality) and Apara Vidya (empirical, worldly, and scientific knowledge encompassing linguistics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, statecraft, and the arts), treating both domains as complementary rather than antagonistic (Radhakrishnan, 1923; Chattopadhyaya, 1996). Ancient centres of higher learning such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Vallabhi exemplified this synthesis by attracting scholars from across Asia to engage in rigorous dialectical debate (Shastrartha), critical hermeneutics, and multidisciplinary scholarship (Sen, 2005; Ghosh, 2001). Through these institutions, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) flourished as a living, self-renewing epistemic ecosystem in which moral character (Dharma), ecological stewardship (Rta), and intellectual rigor were cultivated simultaneously, ensuring that the pursuit of truth remained inseparably anchored to social responsibility and universal well-being (Tilak, 2018; Kumar, 2020).

Colonial Rupture and the Evolution of Contemporary Indian Higher Education

The organic continuity of the traditional Indian educational ethos experienced a profound structural and epistemological disruption during the colonial era, particularly following Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education in 1835 and Wood's Despatch of 1854, which systematically dismantled indigenous learning institutions in

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favour of an Anglocentric, utilitarian curriculum designed to produce administrative functionaries (Dharampal, 1983; Viswanathan, 1989). This colonial intervention displaced vernacular languages, marginalized indigenous sciences and philosophical frameworks, and institutionalized a standardized, examination-centric model of schooling that prioritized rote memorization and credentialism over critical inquiry and holistic self-development (Naik & Nurullah, 1974; Seth, 2007). In the post-independence period, successive national commissions—including the University Education Commission (1948–49) chaired by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the Secondary Education Commission (1952–53), and the Kothari Commission (1964–66)—recognized the urgency of reconnecting Indian education with its cultural roots while simultaneously modernizing scientific and technological infrastructure to drive national development (Government of India, 1966; Ghosh, 2000). Despite significant quantitative expansion in literacy rates, university enrolment, and technical proficiency over the subsequent decades, contemporary Indian education largely retained its colonial structural DNA, characterized by rigid disciplinary silos, an overemphasis on standardized testing, and an uncritical adoption of Western epistemological paradigms (Pathak, 2002; Altbach, 2009). Consequently, a widening chasm emerged between formal academic instruction and India's civilizational heritage, often leaving learners alienated from local ecological contexts, indigenous ethical frameworks, and holistic well-being while exacerbating employability deficits and psychological stress in an increasingly hyper-competitive global economy (Choudhary, 2008; Panikkar, 2011).

Revival of the Indian Knowledge System and Contemporary Pedagogical Relevance

In response to the limitations of fragmented, market-driven modern pedagogy, the early twenty-first century has witnessed a decisive philosophical and policy-level renaissance aimed at reclaiming and revitalizing the Indian Knowledge System within mainstream academia. The promulgation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a historic paradigm shift by explicitly mandating the integration of IKS across all levels of schooling and higher education, advocating for multidisciplinary flexibility, mother-tongue instruction, experiential learning, and ethical value education rooted in Indian civilizational ethos (Ministry of Education, 2020; Kasturirangan et al., 2020). Far from representing a nostalgic retreat into antiquity, the contemporary revival of IKS seeks to bridge traditional wisdom with modern scientific inquiry to address complex global challenges such as climate change, mental health crises, sustainable agriculture, and ethical artificial intelligence (Kapoor & Singh, 2005; Mahadevan et al., 2022). By reintroducing classical frameworks—such as Panchakosha Vikas (five-fold holistic personality development), Pramana epistemology (validated means of knowledge acquisition), Ayurvedic preventive healthcare, traditional water harvesting, and contemplative mindfulness practices—modern curricula can cultivate cognitive adaptability alongside emotional resilience and moral agency (Bhawuk, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2014). Furthermore, integrating IKS fosters epistemic decolonization, empowering Indian scholars and students to transition from passive consumers of imported theoretical models to original knowledge creators capable of offering culturally grounded, globally relevant solutions (Devy, 2017; Malhotra, 2011). Examining the philosophical continuum connecting traditional Indian education, contemporary educational reforms, and the living Indian Knowledge System is therefore essential for constructing an inclusive, sustainable, and deeply human-centric educational future (Achar, 2015; Subramanian, 2021).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this review study is to critically examine the philosophical foundations of Indian education across its traditional and contemporary eras while evaluating its organic rootedness in and enduring relevance to the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). Specifically, the study seeks to trace the epistemological, pedagogical, and ethical continuity from ancient Indian learning traditions—encompassing the Gurukula ethos, Vedic-Upanishadic metaphysics, Buddhist and Jaina monastic universities, and classical Pramana inquiry—to modern educational frameworks shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence reforms. By conducting a comparative synthesis of traditional holistic education and present-day standardized, market-oriented schooling, the study aims to identify structural divergences, pedagogical gaps, and opportunities for constructive integration. Furthermore, this review intends to analyse how contemporary policy initiatives, particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, operationalize IKS to foster multidisciplinary scholarship, experiential learning, ethical consciousness, ecological sustainability, and holistic human development (Panchakosha Vikas). Ultimately, the study aspires to establish a coherent conceptual framework demonstrating how harmonizing timeless Indian philosophical wisdom with modern scientific and technological pedagogy can decolonize knowledge production, enrich global educational discourse, and address pressing twenty-first-century socio-ecological and human challenges.

METHODS OF THE REVIEW

This study adopts a rigorous qualitative systematic literature review and narrative synthesis methodology, following established protocols for integrative conceptual and philosophical reviews in educational research (Snyder, 2019; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). To ensure comprehensive coverage of both historical foundations and contemporary policy transformations, a structured multi-database search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Indian digital repositories including Shodhganga and the Ministry of Education's Indian Knowledge Systems Division archives. The search strategy utilized Boolean combinations of core descriptors such as "Philosophy of Indian Education," "Indian Knowledge System," "Gurukula pedagogy," "traditional versus modern Indian education," "epistemic decolonization," and "National Education Policy 2020." Literature retrieval encompassed foundational classical commentaries, seminal historical monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and national policy documents published between 1923 and 2025. Initial screening yielded 148 scholarly records, which were subsequently evaluated against explicit inclusion criteria requiring peer-reviewed academic credibility,

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direct thematic relevance to the philosophical continuity between traditional Indian pedagogy and contemporary IKS frameworks, and analytical depth regarding comparative educational paradigms. Duplicate records, non-scholarly opinion pieces, and works lacking substantive philosophical or empirical grounding were systematically excluded during title, abstract, and full-text screening, resulting in a final corpus of 38 authoritative sources. Data extraction and thematic coding were executed using an inductive-deductive thematic synthesis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), enabling the systematic categorization of findings across four core analytical dimensions: epistemological foundations (Para and Apara Vidya), pedagogical modalities (Gurukula mentorship versus standardized instruction), structural ruptures under colonialism, and contemporary curriculum integration under NEP 2020.

REVIEW ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Epistemological Architecture: Integral Knowledge versus Disciplinary Fragmentation

A rigorous synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals a fundamental philosophical divergence between the epistemological foundations of traditional Indian education and those of the modern educational paradigm. In the classical Indian tradition, knowledge was conceptualized as an indivisible continuum uniting empirical observation with metaphysical realization, articulated through the complementary categories of Apara Vidya (secular, scientific, and practical knowledge) and Para Vidya (transcendental self-knowledge) (Radhakrishnan, 1923; Mookerji, 1947). Within this framework, mastery over phonetics (Shiksha), grammar (Vyakarana), prosody (Chandas), etymology (Nirukta), astronomy (Jyotisha), and ritual geometry (Kalpa)—collectively known as the Vedangas—served as the intellectual scaffolding for higher philosophical inquiry rather than existing as isolated vocational compartments (Altekar, 1944; Scharfe, 2002). Furthermore, classical Indian schools of logic, particularly Nyaya and Vaisheshika, established a sophisticated theory of valid knowledge acquisition (Pramana), encompassing direct perception (Pratyaksha), logical inference (Anumana), comparison (Upamana), and reliable testimony (Shabda), which fostered rigorous analytical skepticism alongside contemplative insight (Matilal, 1986; Chattopadhyaya, 1996). By contrast, the contemporary Indian education system, shaped indelibly by nineteenth-century colonial institutionalization, operates upon a Cartesian dualism that separates facts from values, humanities from sciences, and intellectual cognition from ethical consciousness (Dharampal, 1983; Viswanathan, 1989; Seth, 2007). Scholars consistently note that modern disciplinary hyper specialization in Indian universities has inadvertently produced fragmented knowledge silos, wherein engineering, management, and medical students rarely engage with ethics, environmental philosophy, or indigenous sociology, thereby weakening their capacity to address complex, multidimensional societal problems (Pathak, 2002; Panikkar, 2011; Tilak, 2018). The contemporary Indian Knowledge System (IKS) movement seeks directly to mend this epistemological fracture by demonstrating that ancient Indian contributions to zero-based positional arithmetic, metallurgy, Ayurveda, linguistics, and ecological management were deeply empirical yet philosophically anchored in cosmic interconnectedness (Rta) (Kapoor & Singh, 2005; Kak, 2016; Mahadevan et al., 2022).

Pedagogical Modalities: Transformative Mentorship versus Standardized Credentialism

The comparative analysis further highlights stark contrasts in pedagogical delivery, institutional ethos, and teacher-student dynamics across the two eras. In the traditional Gurukula and Buddhist monastic Vihara ecosystems, education was residential, dialogic, and deeply personalized, predicated on the moral and intellectual exemplar of the Acharya or Guru (Scharfe, 2002; Sen, 2005). Learning unfolded through a tripartite cognitive progression comprising attentive listening (Shravana), critical rational reflection (Manana), and deep meditative assimilation (Nididhyasana), supplemented by structured public disputation (Shastrartha) that sharpened argumentative precision and intellectual humility (Mookerji, 1947; Ghosh, 2001). Assessment in traditional centres like Nalanda and Takshashila was continuous, holistic, and competency-based, evaluated through oral defence, peer debate, and practical demonstration rather than standardized numerical grading (Altekar, 1944; Sen, 2005). Conversely, the modern Indian educational apparatus evolved toward mass standardized instruction governed by centralized syllabi, bureaucratic regulation, and high-stakes summative examinations (Naik & Nurullah, 1974; Altbach, 2009). While modern mass education successfully democratized access across caste and gender boundaries that had historically restricted parts of traditional schooling—a critical socio-historical limitation acknowledged widely in contemporary scholarship (Choudhary, 2008; Kumar, 2020)—it simultaneously commodified learning into credential accumulation. Studies indicate that rote memorization, coaching culture, and examination anxiety have displaced intrinsic curiosity and experiential mastery in contemporary Indian classrooms (Pathak, 2002; Raina, 2011). However, modern educational thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi consistently challenged this mechanical paradigm by advocating man-making, character-building, nature-integrated, and craft-centred pedagogies (Nai Talim) that anticipated modern constructivist and experiential learning theories (Vivekananda, 1907; Tagore, 1933; Gandhi, 1953; Aurobindo, 1956). Reclaiming these pedagogical principles within contemporary IKS frameworks enables educators to shift from passive lecture delivery to mentor-guided experiential inquiry, community-engaged fieldwork, and reflective dialogue (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Prakash, 2025).

Contribution of Indian Educational Philosophy to the Living Indian Knowledge System

A critical synthesis of the literature demonstrates that the philosophy of Indian education is not merely an artifact of historical curiosity, but the generative engine sustaining the Indian Knowledge System across scientific, psychological, and socio-ecological domains. In the realm of cognitive science and mental health, traditional Indian educational philosophy conceptualized human personality through the Taittiriya Upanishad model of Panchakosha—comprising the physical

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(Annamaya), vital energy (Pranamaya), mental-emotional (Manomaya), intellectual-discriminative (Vijnanamaya), and blissful-spiritual (Anandamaya) sheaths (Bhawuk, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2014). Contemporary psychological and educational studies validate that pedagogical practices derived from this model—such as Ashtanga Yoga, Pranayama, and mindfulness meditation—significantly enhance executive functioning, emotional regulation, and stress resilience among modern students compared to purely cognitive curricula (Rao, 2011; Mahadevan et al., 2022). Similarly, in linguistic and computational sciences, Panini's Ashtadhyayi—composed as an educational treatise on Sanskrit generative grammar—continues to inform modern formal language theory, natural language processing, and algorithmic knowledge representation (Kiparsky, 2009; Kak, 2016). In environmental and agricultural education, traditional Indian pedagogical traditions embedded ecological ethics (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Ahimsa) directly into daily student life, fostering indigenous agro-ecological practices, soil conservation wisdom, and decentralized water-harvesting systems (Ahar-Pynes, Johads, and temple tanks) that contemporary sustainability scholars recognize as vital antidotes to industrial ecological degradation (Dharampal, 1983; Agarwal & Narain, 1997; Subramanian, 2021). Thus, Indian educational philosophy functioned historically as an institutional transmission belt that preserved, tested, and refined empirical community wisdom across generations, proving that IKS is inherently dynamic, pluralistic, and responsive to lived human experience (Devy, 2017; Achar, 2015).

Operationalizing IKS in Contemporary Higher Education: Policy Promise and Implementation Challenges

Examining the contemporary policy landscape reveals that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most ambitious post-independence effort to re-anchor Indian education in its civilizational philosophy while maintaining global scientific competitiveness (Ministry of Education, 2020; Kasturirangan et al., 2020). By introducing the National Credit Framework, multidisciplinary undergraduate programs, Indian language instruction, and dedicated IKS credit courses across engineering, medicine, management, and social sciences, NEP 2020 operationalizes the ancient ideal of integrating Para and Apara Vidya within modern institutional structures (Mahadevan et al., 2022; Shanwal, 2025). Nevertheless, the reviewed literature identifies substantial structural and epistemological challenges that threaten meaningful implementation. First, there is a pervasive deficit in trained faculty capable of teaching classical Indian texts and indigenous sciences with dual proficiency in traditional hermeneutics and contemporary empirical methodologies (Badlakkanavar, 2024; Prakash, 2025). Second, linguistic barriers restrict direct engagement with primary sources composed in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, and regional vernaculars, often leading to superficial or secondary interpretations (Devy, 2017; Kumar, 2020). Third, scholars caution against two equally detrimental extremes in contemporary discourse: uncritical chauvinism that romanticizes the past without empirical scrutiny, and persistent Eurocentric skepticism that dismisses indigenous knowledge systems as pre-scientific folklore (Panikkar, 2011; Malhotra, 2011; Subramanian, 2021). Overcoming these obstacles requires rigorous interdisciplinary research, translation initiatives, empirical validation laboratories, and critical pedagogical training so that IKS is taught not as dogmatic heritage, but as an evolving, testable, and globally relevant body of knowledge capable of enriching twenty-first-century human flourishing (Kapoor & Singh, 2005; Tilak, 2018; Shanwal, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The philosophical trajectory of Indian education demonstrates an enduring civilizational commitment to cultivating holistic human flourishing through the harmonious synthesis of empirical knowledge (Apara Vidya) and ethical-spiritual self-realization (Para Vidya). While the traditional Indian educational ecosystem—exemplified by the Gurukula ethos and ancient centres such as Takshashila and Nalanda—fostered dialogic inquiry, ecological stewardship, and character formation, colonial interventions disrupted this organic continuum by imposing a fragmented, examination-driven, and utilitarian schooling apparatus. Despite substantial post-independence expansion in educational access and technical capacity, contemporary Indian education has continued to grapple with disciplinary silos, rote credentialism, and epistemological alienation. The current resurgence of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), catalysed by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, offers a transformative pathway to bridge this historical divide by integrating classical philosophical insights—such as Panchakosha holistic development, Pramana-based critical reasoning, indigenous ecological management, and contemplative mindfulness—into modern multidisciplinary curricula. However, realizing the full potential of this philosophical renaissance requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward rigorous faculty capacity building, vernacular translation initiatives, and empirical validation that avoids both dogmatic romanticism and colonial scepticism. Ultimately, anchoring contemporary pedagogy in the living philosophical roots of the Indian Knowledge System equips learners with cognitive adaptability, moral agency, and ecological consciousness, thereby transforming Indian education into a globally resonant model for sustainable, inclusive, and human-centric knowledge creation in the twenty-first century.

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