



Ancient Indian Education and Present-Day Education: A Comparative and Analytical Study

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Abstract

Ancient Indian education emphasized holistic development—intellectual, moral, and spiritual. Rooted in the *Gurukula* system, it fostered deep teacher-student relationships and integrated ethical values into all aspects of learning. In contrast, the modern system is characterized by institutionalized learning, technological integration, and a focus on employability. This paper explores both systems, highlights their key differences, and reflects on how ancient ideals can guide meaningful reforms in contemporary education, especially in light of India's National Education Policy 2020.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Education, Modern Education, *Gurukula* System, Holistic Learning, NEP 2020, Teacher-Student Relationship, Value-Based Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education in India has a long and illustrious history. Ancient Indian education, deeply spiritual and humanistic, aimed not only at acquiring knowledge but also at cultivating wisdom, discipline, and self-realization. It was rooted in tradition, community life, and close teacher-student bonds. However, the colonial period and subsequent global influences shifted education toward utility, examinations, and degrees. Present-day education in India is structured, technologically enabled and job-oriented.

India's educational heritage is among the oldest and most comprehensive in the world¹. From the earliest days of civilization, education in India has held a place of high significance in the individual's personal growth and society's cultural continuity. In the ancient period, learning was not confined to rote memorization or occupational training but was seen as a sacred duty — a means for self-realization (*mokṣa*) and the pursuit of truth². Education was intimately linked with philosophy, religion, ethics, and the cosmic understanding of

life. It aimed to cultivate the total personality of the learner: intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual. Knowledge was considered sacred, and its transmission was entrusted to the *gurus* — enlightened teachers who not only taught but shaped lives³.

The *Gurukula* system, prevalent during the Vedic and post-Vedic periods, was a unique model of personalized, value-centric education⁴. Students lived with their teachers, performed daily chores, learned through dialogue, recitation, contemplation, and practical application. The curriculum was vast and interdisciplinary — covering the *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas*, logic (*nyāya*), metaphysics (*mīmāṃsā*), medicine (*āyurveda*), astronomy (*jyotiṣa*), grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) and more. Education was considered the gateway to liberation, and the purpose of life was aligned with universal well-being and harmony⁵.

However, with the passage of time and especially after colonial intervention, India's educational paradigm underwent a seismic shift. The British model introduced a system focused on administration, clerical training, and European values. This led to the institutionalization of education, standard curricula, examination-based evaluation, and a growing disconnect between teacher and student. In the post-independence period, though access to education significantly improved, the philosophical core of the ancient system which emphasized character, self-control, and moral insight was largely sidelined.

In contemporary times, the Indian education system is characterized by technological advancement, global competitiveness, and mass literacy campaigns. It now prepares students for the modern workforce, prioritizing employability, technical proficiency, and measurable outcomes. Schools and universities are equipped with digital tools, career guidance systems, and globally aligned curriculums. Yet, this progress has not come without challenges. Modern education is often critiqued for



promoting rote learning, academic stress, commercialization, and neglect of values and indigenous knowledge. Students today, though equipped with degrees and digital literacy, often lack emotional resilience, moral grounding, and a sense of rootedness in their culture.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has attempted to bridge this gap by reintroducing the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems, value-based education, multilingualism, and holistic development⁶. It recognizes the need to learn from ancient India's rich educational traditions while embracing modern pedagogical tools and global perspectives. In this context, it becomes essential to study the ancient and present-day education systems side by side to understand their core principles, strengths, limitations, and the possibilities of integration.

This paper, therefore, explores the two educational paradigms ancient Indian and present-day systems through a comparative and analytical lens. It reflects on how ancient practices such as the *guru-śiṣya* model, experiential learning, and spiritual goals of education can inform and enrich contemporary education. The paper also highlights the challenges of the modern system and proposes ways in which both systems can complement each other for a more balanced and transformative approach to learning.

I. Ancient Indian Education: An Overview

The ancient Indian education system evolved around a core objective: self-realization and living in harmony with *Dharma*, or moral law⁷. Unlike today's target-driven education, it encouraged inner development and emphasized character formation alongside intellectual training. The goal was not merely the acquisition of information, but the transformation of the individual into a wise, self-disciplined and responsible member of society.

Educational institutions took various forms. The most prevalent was the *Gurukula* system, where students (*śiṣyas*) lived with their teacher (*guru*) in forest hermitages or villages, receiving instruction through close personal interaction, discussion, and practical demonstration⁸. In addition to *Gurukulas*, India also hosted some of the world's earliest and most prestigious universities such as Nālandā, Takṣaśilā, and Vikramaśilā, which attracted scholars from China, Tibet, Korea, and Central Asia⁹. These institutions offered advanced education in philosophy, medicine, logic, grammar, and Buddhist studies.

The curriculum was interdisciplinary and expansive. Students studied the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Purāṇas*, and *Dharmasāstra*, as well as practical disciplines like *Āyurveda*, Mathematics, Astronomy, Architecture, and Music. Philosophy was a central element, covering *Nyāya* (logic), *Vyākaraṇa* (grammar and linguistics), *Mīmāṃsā* (hermeneutics and metaphysics), and *Vedānta*. The system was holistic in approach, nurturing intellectual excellence along with moral discipline and spiritual depth¹⁰. Pedagogical methods included oral transmission, memorization, questioning, observation, and contemplative practices. Knowledge was internalized through a three-step method: *śravaṇa* (listening to teachings), *manana* (reflection), and *nitidhyāsana* (deep meditation and assimilation)¹¹. This ensured that learning was not superficial but deeply rooted in personal experience and comprehension.

The *guru-śiṣya* relationship was foundational. The teacher was seen not only as a guide but as a spiritual mentor. The relationship was characterized by reverence, trust, and dedication. Education was often provided free of cost, and students contributed through service (*sevā*) to the guru and the ashrama¹². This system fostered humility, gratitude, and discipline—qualities that complemented academic knowledge with ethical grounding.

Thus, Ancient Indian education was not transactional but transformational—aimed at nurturing human potential in alignment with cosmic and moral order. It laid the foundation for India's intellectual, spiritual, and cultural legacy.

II. Present-Day Education: Structure and Orientation

Modern education in India is structured, institutional, and primarily designed to produce skilled professionals and economically productive citizens¹³. Unlike the holistic and value-oriented model of ancient India, the contemporary system is oriented toward academic achievement, job-readiness, and measurable outcomes. Its primary aim is to equip individuals with knowledge and skills relevant to the demands of modern society and the global job market.

The system is organized into various levels: pre-primary, primary, secondary, higher secondary, undergraduate, and postgraduate. It is governed and regulated by statutory bodies such as the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the University Grants Commission (UGC), and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)¹⁴. Education today follows a standardized



curriculum that emphasizes literacy, numeracy, scientific temper, and critical thinking, in alignment with national objectives and global trends. The curriculum spans a wide range of subjects including Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Languages, along with newer areas such as Environmental Education, Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Business Studies. However, there is increasing concern that these subjects are often taught in a mechanical, exam-focused manner, with limited emphasis on ethics, civic sense, or emotional intelligence. Competitive exams, rankings, and degrees have become the primary indicators of success, sometimes at the cost of creativity and intrinsic learning.

Pedagogical methods have undergone a major transformation. The traditional oral and interactive models have been replaced by classroom lectures, digital tools, PowerPoint presentations, and online learning platforms such as SWAYAM, DIKSHA, and e-Pathshala. While these innovations have expanded access, they have also led to a more depersonalized learning environment. The emphasis on tests and grades often limits students' ability to engage in experiential or hands-on learning¹⁵.

The teacher-student relationship in present-day India is largely formal and transactional, shaped by institutional pressures, time-bound syllabi, and administrative constraints. Unlike the ancient *guru-śiṣya* bond that emphasized mentorship and moral guidance, modern teaching is often confined to academic instruction within a fixed classroom setting. While contemporary education in India has made notable progress in terms of access, technology, and standardization, it faces critical challenges. These include a growing disconnect from cultural values, stress-inducing competition, and the erosion of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of learning. There is thus an urgent need to rethink the goals and methods of education, blending technological progress with moral depth, and efficiency with humanistic insight.

III. Comparative Analysis: Ancient vs. Modern Education

The ancient and modern systems of education in India differ fundamentally in their goals, content, methodology, and values. Ancient Indian education was grounded in the pursuit of *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation), the cultivation of ethical virtues, and the holistic development of the individual¹⁶. Knowledge was not only a means to an end but an end in itself, aimed at harmonizing the inner self with the universal order. In contrast, modern education, though broad in its disciplinary

reach, is often oriented toward economic utility, employability, and quantifiable performance¹⁷. Success is largely measured by academic grades, career placements, and global competitiveness.

The learning environments also differ markedly. Ancient students studied in *Gurukulas*, often situated in natural settings such as forests or hermitages, promoting peace, simplicity, and reflection¹⁸. These spaces fostered a close relationship with nature and allowed for the uninterrupted development of mind and character. Modern schools and colleges, by contrast, are typically located in urban, institutional settings, bound by rigid timetables, infrastructure limitations, and performance metrics¹⁹. In terms of pedagogy, ancient methods emphasized dialogue, contemplation, and memorization, using techniques such as *śravaṇa* (listening), *manana* (reflection), and *niṭidhyāsana* (meditative absorption)²⁰. Learning was experiential and deeply internalized. Modern education employs textbooks, PowerPoint presentations, multimedia content, and standardized teaching aids. While these tools enhance accessibility and coverage, they often compromise depth, creativity, and ethical engagement.

The role of the teacher has undergone a significant transformation. In ancient India, the *guru* was not merely an academic instructor but a spiritual guide and life mentor, responsible for shaping the student's values, behaviour, and purpose. This sacred relationship was built on mutual respect, trust, and devotion. In today's system, educators are often seen as facilitators or information providers, with interactions limited by class sizes, administrative duties, and curricular constraints. Assessment practices have also shifted. In ancient times, evaluation was continuous, personalized, and informal, based on observation, discussion, and practical application. It focused on understanding and wisdom rather than memory recall. In contrast, modern education relies heavily on written examinations, grading systems, and performance reports, which often induce stress and reduce learning to a competitive exercise.

Thus, the two systems stand apart not just in format but in philosophical orientation. While ancient education centred on character formation and inner awakening, modern education emphasizes achievement, efficiency, and external validation. Each has its strengths and limitations, and an ideal system would seek to synthesize the spiritual depth of the past with the technological and scientific advancements of the present.



IV. Challenges of the Present Education System

While the modern education system in India has democratized access and ushered in a new era of technological and scientific advancement, it also faces significant limitations that hinder its transformative potential. One of the foremost concerns is the overemphasis on rote memorization and exam-centric learning²¹. Students are often trained to reproduce information rather than understand, question, or create. This focus leads to academic stress, performance anxiety, and diminished creativity—problems that are especially visible during national-level competitive examinations.

A critical issue is the growing disconnect between teachers and students, largely exacerbated by the commercialization of education with the proliferation of private institutions and coaching centres, education is increasingly seen as a market-driven service, where students are viewed as consumers and teachers as service providers. In such an environment, there is little room for personalized mentorship, moral development, or emotional support. The sacred *guru-sisya* bond of ancient India has been reduced to a transactional exchange.

Modern education also suffers from a fragmentation of knowledge. Subjects are compartmentalized, and interdisciplinary learning is rare²². In this framework, students are taught isolated facts but are rarely encouraged to connect knowledge across domains. Moreover, there is a noticeable neglect of India's rich intellectual and cultural traditions. Ancient Indian contributions in fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, linguistics, and logic are seldom emphasized in mainstream curricula²³. As a result, many students graduate with little awareness of their cultural roots, indigenous knowledge systems, or ethical heritage.

Another concern is the lack of emphasis on emotional intelligence, values, and mental well-being. While soft skills and mental health awareness are slowly gaining ground, they are still underrepresented in policy implementation and daily classroom practice. Students often emerge from the system with technical skills but without adequate development in resilience, empathy, ethical reasoning, and self-awareness. In sum, while modern Indian education has achieved impressive milestones in scale, standardization, and innovation, it continues to grapple with deep-rooted structural, cultural, and pedagogical challenges. There is an urgent need to reintegrate the wisdom of ancient traditions including ethical instruction, spiritual

inquiry, and experiential learning into the framework of 21st-century education.

V. Lessons from the Past: Toward a Balanced Education System

The ancient Indian education system holds numerous insights that can enrich and reform modern educational practices. At the heart of traditional learning was the cultivation of values such as *satya* (truth), *karuṇā* (compassion), *ahimsā* (non-violence), *vinaya* (humility), and *guru-bhakti* (respect for the teacher)²⁴. These moral foundations helped students become not just knowledgeable, but wise and socially responsible. Reviving these ideals today would require integrating value education into mainstream curriculum through storytelling, reflective discussions, and ethical reasoning embedded across subjects. Another hallmark of ancient education was experiential and holistic learning. Students learned not only by listening but by meditating, serving, observing, and participating in daily tasks²⁵. This method fostered deep comprehension, memory retention, discipline, and emotional growth. Contemporary education could benefit from this model by introducing project-based learning, meditation and mindfulness practices, and community service programs in schools and colleges.

The *guru-sisya* model also offers a template for reviving mentorship in modern institutions. While large-scale adoption may be impractical, elements such as smaller class sizes, teacher-student dialogue, and mentorship training in emotional intelligence can help restore human connection in learning environments. Teachers need to be equipped not only with subject knowledge but also with socio-emotional skills, allowing them to guide students in both academic and life matters. Curriculum reform is another vital area. A balanced education would integrate ancient Indian disciplines such as philosophy, *Āyurveda*, *Yoga*, Sanskrit, and logic (*Nyāya*) with modern sciences, technology, economics, and humanities²⁶. This would create learners who are both culturally rooted and globally competent. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks an important shift in this direction by emphasizing Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), holistic learning, and multilingualism.

Therefore, to move toward a more humane, inclusive, and transformative education system, India must look not only forward but also inward—drawing inspiration from its own civilizational wisdom while embracing technological innovation and global standards.



VI. Role of Education in Nation-Building

Education has always been a vital force in shaping the future of a nation. In ancient India, it served not only as a path to personal enlightenment but also as a social duty aimed at building a just and harmonious society²⁷. The ethical and spiritual training imparted to students produced citizens who contributed to governance, culture, and collective well-being. In the present day, education continues to be crucial, especially in preparing individuals for a globalized, knowledge-based economy. However, economic progress alone is insufficient. Without moral grounding and cultural identity, development risks becoming superficial. To ensure meaningful nation-building, it is essential to revive the moral and civic values of ancient education within modern schooling, thereby cultivating responsible, empathetic, and culturally rooted citizens.

VII. Spiritual Dimension in Education

One of the most profound distinctions between ancient and modern education lies in their approach to spirituality. In ancient India, education was intrinsically spiritual in nature, aiming to cultivate self-awareness, inner peace, and universal harmony²⁸. Students were encouraged to engage in introspection, meditation, and philosophical inquiry, fostering a deep connection with the self, society, and the cosmos. Education was seen as a path to self-realization and to understanding the interconnectedness of all life.

In contrast, modern education tends to emphasize material success and utilitarian goals. The spiritual or contemplative aspects of learning have largely been sidelined, and subjects related to consciousness, mindfulness, or inner well-being receive minimal attention in mainstream curricula. Reintroducing a spiritual dimension, even within a secular educational framework, can enrich the learning process. Practices such as *yoga*, meditation and reflective thinking can foster emotional balance, mental health, and ethical awareness among learners. This revival need not be religious, but rather universal and humanistic, aligning with the broader goal of holistic education that nurtures both intellect and soul.

VIII. Women's Education: Then and Now

In ancient India, particularly during the Vedic and early post-Vedic periods, women enjoyed considerable access to education. Female sages like Gārgī, Vācānavī, Maitreyī and Lopāmudrā were well-versed in the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads* and philosophy, actively participating in intellectual debates and spiritual discourses²⁹. Education for women was

viewed as a means of self-realization and contribution to society, rather than mere domestic training³⁰. The existence of *Upanayana* (initiation ritual) for girls and their involvement in Vedic learning signify a progressive attitude toward women's education during early times³¹.

However, with the passage of time, especially during the later Smṛti period and medieval era, patriarchal values intensified. Women's roles became increasingly confined to the domestic sphere, and access to formal education declined. Societal restrictions, early marriages, and caste hierarchies curtailed their intellectual freedoms³².

In modern India, the scenario has gradually improved. Following independence, the Constitution of India guaranteed equal rights to education for all, and initiatives like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Right to Education (RTE) Act, and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have significantly increased female literacy and school enrolment. Women today excel in diverse fields from science and technology to literature, politics, and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, challenges persist. Issues such as gender discrimination, safety concerns, dropout rates, and limited access to quality education in rural areas remain significant barriers. Moreover, women continue to be underrepresented in STEM fields and leadership roles.

Ancient India's inclusive approach, where women were respected as learners and thinkers, offers valuable lessons. Reinstating those ideals — by fostering gender-sensitive policies, encouraging female mentorship, and ensuring safe, inclusive learning environments is essential for building an equitable and empowered society.

IX. Education and Environmental Awareness

Ancient Indian education fostered a profound respect for nature and ecological balance. Students were educated in ashrams, forests, and hermitages, living in harmony with natural surroundings that served as both classroom and teacher³³. This immersive environment nurtured an eco-centric worldview, where nature (*Prakṛti*) was revered as sacred and interconnected with human life. Philosophical concepts like *Rta* (cosmic order), *Dharma* (righteous duty), and *Ahimsā* (non-violence) embedded ecological ethics within everyday life and learning³⁴. Ancient texts such as the *Atharva Veda*, *Upaniṣads* and *Purāṇas* emphasize preservation of natural resources, responsible consumption, and reverence for trees, rivers, animals, and the earth itself³⁵. Such teachings



instilled a spiritual ecology—a belief that harming nature is a violation of moral and cosmic law.

In modern education, Environmental Studies has been introduced at various levels, often with a focus on scientific facts, pollution control, and sustainability practices. While necessary, these lessons are often technical and lack the philosophical and ethical depth found in ancient Indian perspectives. As environmental crises such as climate change, deforestation, and water scarcity escalate, there is an urgent need to reintegrate the ecological wisdom of the past into present-day curricula. A holistic environmental education should combine scientific understanding with ethical reflection, encouraging students to adopt sustainable lifestyles, empathy for nature, and a sense of interconnectedness with all forms of life. Reviving Indian ecological philosophy—through discussions on *Rta*, *Ahimsā*, *Pancha Mahābhūta* (five elements), and *Vrkṣāyurveda* (science of plant life)—can transform students into environmentally conscious and responsible global citizens.

X. Medium of Instruction and Language Policy

In ancient India, Sanskrit served as the primary medium of instruction in Vedic and philosophical education, while regional languages and Prākṛit dialects were used in Buddhist, Jain, and local educational contexts. This multilingual approach allowed education to be both scholarly and accessible, especially at the primary and community levels, where instruction was often delivered in the learner's mother tongue³⁶. This inclusivity promoted better comprehension, cultural continuity, and a strong connection between education and the lived realities of learners.

In modern India, however, the dominance of English, particularly in urban and elite educational institutions, has led to a disconnect from indigenous languages and cultures. While English offers global mobility and access to international knowledge, early immersion in a foreign language can hinder conceptual clarity and emotional expression among young learners. Recognizing this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least till Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8. This aligns with cognitive research which shows that early education in one's native language leads to better learning outcomes and stronger intellectual foundations³⁷. A balanced multilingual policy, informed by the ancient Indian model of inclusive linguistic pedagogy, can bridge the gap between cultural rootedness and global competence. By promoting mother tongue

instruction, encouraging regional languages, and offering English and foreign languages as complementary, the system can enhance cognitive development, creativity and national integration.

II. CONCLUSION

India's ancient education system was a model of holistic, value-based learning that integrated intellectual training with ethical development and spiritual insight. While modern education has expanded access and opened global opportunities, it often lacks depth in character-building and cultural connection. A synthesis of both systems—drawing on the wisdom of the past and the innovation of the present—can help shape a generation that is not only skilled but also wise, rooted, and humane. The vision of NEP 2020 to create such a system is both timely and necessary.

The journey of Indian education from the Gurukula system of the ancient era to the technologically driven classrooms of the 21st century reflects both the cultural evolution of the nation and its response to changing societal needs. Ancient Indian education was far more than the transfer of academic knowledge—it was a way of life. It emphasized values such as truth, humility, respect for nature, discipline, and self-inquiry. Education was closely connected to the spiritual and moral dimensions of human existence and aimed at cultivating wise, responsible, and self-realized individuals who could contribute meaningfully to the welfare of society.

In contrast, present-day education, while advanced in infrastructure, research, and access, often lacks the deeper philosophical foundation and moral orientation that characterized ancient learning. The modern system has made significant progress in democratizing education and expanding literacy, especially through institutionalized schooling, digital technologies, and global curriculum standards. However, it has also led to increased competition, stress, and a mechanized approach to knowledge where grades and degrees often become the sole markers of success. This reductionist outlook overlooks the holistic development of the learner.

Despite their differences, both systems have distinct strengths. The ancient system promoted introspection, personalized mentorship, and ethical living, whereas the modern system ensures scalability, scientific advancement, and global relevance. What India requires today is not the abandonment of modern frameworks, but rather the integration of ancient wisdom into the current educational paradigm. The values of compassion,



community service, ecological awareness, respect for teachers, and the importance of inner growth must be reinstated in contemporary classrooms.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly emphasizes the revival of Indian knowledge systems, multilingual education, experiential learning, and the nurturing of values and creativity. It opens a path for rebalancing our education system by drawing from the roots of India's intellectual and cultural heritage while embracing the best of modern innovation. If implemented thoughtfully, such reforms can bridge the gap between head and heart, intellect and intuition, tradition and progress. In conclusion, education should not be seen merely as a means to employment or economic mobility, but as a lifelong journey toward wisdom, self-awareness, and responsible citizenship. The synergy of ancient ideals and modern strategies can offer a dynamic, inclusive, and transformative education system for India. By honoring the past and innovating for the future, we can create a model of education that is not only efficient and competitive but also meaningful and humane.

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