

# Sri Aurobindo's Integral Education Philosophy and the National Education Policy 2020 Towards a Holistic and Transformative Education

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## Abstract

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*The ancient education system of India, was a citadel of knowledge and practices, that not only encouraged humanity but also provided sustainable alternatives for a collective and harmonious life. The very idea of education was rooted in its philosophical aim of enlightenment and raised consciousness. It helped in the holistic development of the physical, intellectual, spiritual, and artistic aspects of life. Several Indian philosophers have illuminated their thoughts on the true essence and meaning of education. One such philosopher is Sri Aurobindo, whose philosophy of integral education is immensely valuable in contemporary times, when an individual's holistic development is gaining prominence. Education that merely focuses on its instrumental value obscures its fundamental aim, which transcends beyond marks, degrees, and other measurable outcomes. The present paper explicates Sri Aurobindo's profound thoughts on education and attempts to unfold its overarching significance amidst the backdrop of the changing landscape of education and in the light of the NEP 2020 policy discourse.*

**Keywords:** Integral Education, NEP 2020, Sri Aurobindo, The Mother, Holistic Education

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, education in Indian culture was always viewed as a means to enlightenment. It was rooted in the traditional knowledge and local

language, which was value-oriented, and had a close connection with the immediate environment. The aim was not to acquire skills but to prepare the students to live meaningful

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and harmonious lives. India has always been the heartland of educational excellence, representing centre of knowledge and learning. Great universities like Taxshila and Nalanda were the world's first universities to stand as a testimony of India's ancient glory. With its rich cultural heritage and in-depth traditional knowledge systems, India has given the world some of the most significant discoveries. It has been the birthplace of many fields—sciences, mathematical concepts, medicine, astrology, astronomy—are only a few to cite. Such great discoveries could not have been possible if the education imparted was abstract, bereft of critical thinking, and devoid of reasoning and creativity. There was a perfect balance between spirituality and materialism until it came under colonial rule, which completely changed the course and greatly affected the Indian education system.

Ideally, what is desired from education, is to cultivate a reflective and imaginative mind instead of just a technically efficient consciousness (Pathak, 2009). They do not exist in isolation but constantly reinforce each other. Unfortunately, a shift towards quantifiable and market-driven views has obscured profound philosophical perspectives on education. In this perilous grip, a reflective and emancipatory view of education put forth by many visionary Indian thinkers and philosophers like Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Jiddu

Krishnamurti, Mahatma Gandhi, and others have constantly triggered and rekindled a profound view that goes beyond a purely pragmatic and market-driven perspective of education.

The present paper delves deeper into the philosophy of one such great thinker and visionary—Sri Aurobindo, whose philosophy of integral education has transcended time and space boundaries and enunciates a transformative view of education that harmoniously connects the mind, body, heart, and soul. In essence, Sri Aurobindo's educational philosophy is deeply transformative and provides a pathway to address the pressing challenges of our times, while nurturing the potential for a more progressive and harmonious future.

### **ON EDUCATION AND TEACHING**

From the early decades of the twentieth century, the chief proponents of the philosophy of integral education, Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghosh, 1872–1950) and his spiritual collaborator The Mother (Mirra Alfassa, 1878–1973), put forth a holistic approach to education, which was visionary and transformative. Needless to say, their philosophy exemplifies a cohesive synthesis of historical educational practices while offering foresight into prospective advancements in the educational landscape. Education, for Sri Aurobindo, is a process that enables the individual to fulfil their inherent potential. Emanating

through this view of education is its aim, wherein education should help the growing soul to draw out what in itself is best and make it perfect for noble use (Sri Aurobindo, 1910). He envisioned the need for a National Education system rooted in India's spiritual heritage, while integrating modern advancements. The Mother extended this vision to universal education for all humanity, advocating an integral approach adaptable to diverse cultures. She highlighted India's unique role in bridging the spiritual wisdom and material progress. Contrary to the current education system, which often prioritises success, career, and money, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother advocated moving beyond conventions to nurture intrinsic joy and inner worth in learning. According to the Mother (The Mother, 1950), education should not only prepare individuals for worldly success but also spiritual growth. She stressed the importance of creating an atmosphere charged with spiritual force, which influences students even if they are not consciously aware of it.

Sri Aurobindo's educational thought stemmed from his deep spiritual consciousness and sharp scientific analysis. He was of the view that the conventional education system only trains in storing memory and facts, and neglects the training of the three significant faculties, viz., the power of reasoning, the power of comparison and differentiation, and the power of expression. This

fundamental mistake resonates well even in the current times where teaching is solely to provide information to the students, and the relationship between the teacher and the taught is hierarchical, didactic and authoritarian. Such a mode of teaching was challenged by Sri Aurobindo, who put forth the three fundamental principles of true teaching (Sri Aurobindo, 1910/2003:384)

According to him, the first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster; he is a helper and guide. He elucidates that the ideas should not be imposed on any child. The role of the teacher, according to him, is to encourage the child in the process of acquiring knowledge. The teacher facilitates the student's discovery of their own capacities and knowledge, encouraging self-learning and self-perfection. This principle is radical as it challenges the role of the teacher as a supreme authority imposing his knowledge on the empty mind of the passive learner (Pathak, 2002).

The second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth. The idea of hammering the child into the shape desired by the parents or teacher is a barbarous and ignorant superstition. He suggests that it is the child who must be induced to expand following his own growth. Hence, forcing a child into predetermined moulds or careers suppresses their unique potential.

Instead, the aim should be to help the student to discover and develop their innate strengths and divine qualities.

The third principle of education is to work from the near to the far, that is, starting from something that is concrete to a higher-order abstraction. He elaborates that the foundation of an individual's nature is influenced, in addition to the soul's past, by various factors, including heredity, immediate surroundings, nationality, country, the environment from which one derives sustenance, the air one breathes, and the sights, sounds, and habits to which one is accustomed. Teaching should begin with the student's immediate environment, experiences, and cultural context, gradually expanding to broader and universal knowledge. This ensures natural and free growth, avoiding artificial impositions that alienate the student from their roots. If anything is to be introduced from external sources, it must be presented as an offer rather than imposed upon the mind. This principle leverages the student's familiarity with their surroundings as a foundation for learning, making education more relatable and engaging.

Together, these principles form a holistic framework for education that integrates psychological, spiritual, and practical dimensions. All these three principles are organically connected and humane in character. They unpack the relationship between the teacher and the taught and the processes involved to enable the child

to reflect critically on it. They challenge conventional methods that prioritise external knowledge over inner growth, advocating for an approach that nurtures the whole being—mind, heart, and soul. They also mirror the journey of consciousness, evolving from the personal and local to the universal and transcendent, making education an important means of this evolutionary process. By shifting the focus from rote learning to self-discovery, these principles transform education, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and self-awareness. By implementing these principles, education can become a transformative force that not only imparts knowledge, but also fosters self-realisation and evolutionary progress.

### **THE PHILOSOPHY OF INTEGRAL EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW**

To view education as a catalyst for social transformation, it must encompass four core principles—critical consciousness, aesthetic imagination, inner awakening, and sensitivity to one's vocation—that constitute an integrated whole (Pathak, 2009). In this direction, the philosophy of integral education offers a thought-provoking paradigm for teaching and learning that emerges from a holistic understanding of humannature. It is multi-dimensional, and a deeper understanding of each of its aspects is essential. In the approach to Integral Education, there is a meaningful combination of Western and Eastern perspectives. It is anchored in a theoretical

framework that synthesises Eastern philosophy, as developed in India, with a Western inclination towards empirical science. It begins with the notion that every learner is a unique person who is constantly evolving and requires an education that accepts their uniqueness and complexity (Osterhold, 2022). Integral education aims to provide an environment for learners to develop their full potential, facilitating the harmonious growth of the mind, body, heart, and soul. According to the Mother:

*“Education to be complete must have five principal aspects corresponding to the five principal activities of the human being: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. Usually, these phases of education follow chronologically the growth of the individual. This, however, does not mean that one of them should replace another, but that all must continue, completing one another until the end of his life”* (The Mother, 1950:9).

The Mother’s approach to schools and education, reflects her vision of integral development and the preparation of individuals for a higher consciousness. She underscores the essentiality of addressing specific innate human attributes to attain a comprehensive and integrated education. These qualities are intrinsically holistic, humanistic, and divine in nature. The philosophy of integral education encompasses the

physical, mental, vital, psychic, and spiritual dimensions of the individual and requires the individual to tread the path of self-discovery. Their cultivation serves to facilitate the expression of one’s inner psychic and spiritual essence. Each of the five principles of integral education is discussed below.

In integral education, the physical aspect is a prerequisite and a foundational component of the integral model. Physical education encompasses three primary aspects: (1) the regulation and discipline of bodily functions, (2) the integral, systematic, and harmonious development of all bodily parts and movements, and (3) the correction of any defects and deformities. The Mother was of the view that the physical aspect of learning needs to be rigorous and methodical in its undertaking. She explains:

*“Of all the domains of human consciousness, the physical is the one most completely governed by method, order, discipline, and process. The lack of plasticity and receptivity in matter has to be replaced by a detailed organisation that is both precise and comprehensive. In this organisation, one must not forget the interdependence and interpenetration of all the domains of the being. However, even a mental or vital impulse, to express itself physically, must submit to an exact process. That is why all education of the body, if it is to be effective, must be rigorous*

*and detailed, far-sighted, and methodical (The Mother, 1950:12).*

Through physical education, the aim is to have a healthy, harmonious, and flexible body, that is strong enough to resist adversity. The body needs to remain agile enough to adapt to the needs of the growth and development of the being in varied circumstances. This supreme capacity of the body can be attained through various games that involve playing together and teaching important life lessons. Some aspects that are imminent in physical education includes developing flexibility, strength, stamina, and coordination for harmonious body development.

The vital refers to the emotional part of a human being; it is the seat of energy, the life force. It is the storehouse of power that gives enthusiasm and motivation to act. This energy can perform all kinds of activities—positive and negative. According to the Mother:

*“The education of the vital has two principal aspects, very different as to the goal and the process, but both are equally important. The first concerns the development and use of the sense organs. The second is the progressing awareness and control of the character, culminating in its transformation” (The Mother, 1950:20).*

These two categories—sense organs, which facilitate the reception of information from the environment,

and reflective self-examination, through which individuals evaluate their reactions, thoughts, and experiences from an internal perspective—offer learners a broad range of sensorial, perceptual, and contemplative insights. It involves the development of the senses, and of aesthetic, and also development of socialisation skills. It is also the source of all our emotions and impulses. Truth, sincerity, courage, perseverance, humility, and compassion are some of the qualities to attain the vital dimension.

The third, that is, in mental education, the mind is perceived as a crucial instrument of infallible knowledge. It serves as the cornerstone for studying diverse subjects, such as history, science, philosophy, and art. However, this process is not executed in an intrusive and overly formal manner. Sri Aurobindo emphasised that almost every child possesses an inherent imagination, an instinct for words, a dramatic faculty, and a plethora of ideas and fancy. Within the framework of integral education, a range of cognitive faculties are detailed, including critical thinking, reasoning, analytical skills, creative thinking, and problem-solving. The objective is to impart a comprehensive education that focuses on academic knowledge and the development of an individual's intellectual and emotional capabilities.

For the Mother, true mental education has five principle phases:

- Development of the power of concentration and the capacity of attention.
- Development of the capacities of expansion, widening complexity and richness.
- Organisation of one's ideas around a central idea, a higher ideal or a supremely luminous idea that will serve as a guide in life.
- Thought-control, rejection of undesirable thoughts, to become able to think only what one wants and when one wants.
- Development of mental silence, perfect calm, and more and more total receptivity to inspirations coming from the higher regions of the being.

Aligning with these five phases of mental education, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have emphasised the mental faculties, which include observation, logical reasoning, memory, comparison and contrast, imagination, judgement, and expression.

As discussed earlier, education involves various aspects, including physical, vital, mental, psychological, and spiritual education. While physical, vital, and mental education primarily deals with the external aspects of an individual and contributes to building their personality, psychic, and spiritual education focuses more on self-discovery. It aims to help individuals understand the true motive of their existence and the

purpose of their life on earth. It is a process that involves exploring one's innermost thoughts and feelings, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, and discovering their true potential. This type of education helps individuals develop a deeper understanding of themselves, about their beliefs, and their place in the world. The Mother aptly puts it in the following way:

*“Every human being carries hidden within him the possibility of a greater consciousness which goes beyond the bounds of their present life and enables them to share in a higher and a vaster life. What the human mental consciousness does not know and cannot do; this consciousness knows and does. It is like a light that shines at the centre of the being, radiating through the thick coverings of the external consciousness.”* (The Mother, 1950:30)

In contrast to physical, vital, and mental education, which is often taught in a structured environment with a set curriculum, psychic, and spiritual education is more fluid and personal. It is a journey that individuals embark on themselves, seeking guidance and knowledge from mentors and experts along the way. The ultimate aim of this type of education is to help individuals discover their inner truth, leading to a more fulfilling and purposeful life. This education makes us realise

that we are not who we are from our skills and abilities; this is only the external part. We are who we are from the inside, the spirit who helped us through infinite ages of our lives.

Spiritual education is, thus, the culmination of the entire educational process. For a life to be complete, a disciplined and methodical development of the body through physical dimension, development of sense organs, and character formation through the vital dimensions, developing the power of concentration and organisation of one's thoughts through mental faculties and realisation of the inner self through the psychic being, are the basis towards spiritual perfection and education forms one critical means through which this can be attained. An integral education would naturally consider the growth and perfection of each of these parts for holistic and harmonious individual development. The focus on psychic and spiritual education encourages students to connect with their inner selves and discover intrinsic joy in learning. This can transform education into a process of self-discovery and empowerment and equip individuals to navigate complexity and uncertainty with clarity and resilience.

The Mother introduced the concept of "free progress," which is education guided by the soul rather than being constrained by habits, conventions, or preconceived ideas. This method allows students to

explore their unique capacities and interests, fostering self-discovery and intrinsic motivation. According to her, teachers should not merely impart knowledge but act as guides and living examples. They must possess psychological discernment, patience, and a constant aspiration for self-improvement. Teachers are encouraged to observe students closely to understand their nature and help them discover their potential. She believed in tailoring education to the needs and capacities of each child. This involves observing their natural inclinations, interests, and talents and providing opportunities for their development. The aim is to help students know themselves and grow in alignment with their inner truth.

The relevance of three principles of education and five dimensions of integral education, as enunciated by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, resonates with every such parent who envisions progress towards the path of integral education. They proposed a vision of integral education that embraces spirituality and diversity, and creates a space for personal growth and evolution of consciousness. Integral education, thus, fosters participation of all human dimensions in the learning processes. It is a collaborative participation of all human attributes: body, heart, mind, and consciousness (Ferrer, Romero, Albareda, 2005). It also nurtures students' unique vital potential and creative development

in the process of constructing knowledge. Their vision for schools transcends conventional education, focusing on the integral development of individuals and their preparation for a higher evolutionary purpose.

### **RELEVANCE OF INTEGRAL EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES**

Since its independence, the Indian education system has traversed through several commissions, constitutional provisions, programmatic interventions, and three national policies. The irony remains that education is mainly perceived through its instrumental value as a means to earn a livelihood. This view is manifested in practices like—exams, marks, tests, syllabi, and curriculum—which are internalised within the system and are constantly negotiated by students and teachers across conventional schools. In this routinised process, education becomes an act of depositing in which students are the depositories and teachers are the depositors (Friere, 1970). The quality of a teacher, thus, is determined by how well they fill their students' receptacles. The more compliant the students are in allowing themselves to be filled, the better they are as students. This fundamental flaw is still evident today, where teaching is primarily aimed at providing information to students, and the teacher-student

relationship is hierarchical, didactic, and authoritarian.

Sri Aurobindo constantly challenged such an approach to teaching. Such an education, he argued, only trains individuals to store memory and facts, neglecting the development of their essential faculties, namely, the power of reasoning, comparison and differentiation, and the power of expression. Furthermore, the disturbing trends of joyless learning, textbooks as the ultimate truth, the competition-based social ethos, and the 'catching-up' syndrome have deeply permeated the education system (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1993).

With its reputation for strictness and impartial treatment of all examinees, the examination system played an indispensable role in the development of a bureaucratic system of education and textbook-centred teaching, thus giving rise to textbook culture, where the teacher has limited space and very little autonomy (Kumar, 1988). The focus is on producing predictable outcomes that can be measured through large-scale testing. Consequently, in this structured and rigid academic regime, there is no scope left to foster critical thinking and creativity among the children. Arousing curiosity is replaced with a deeply entrenched competitive spirit. The term 'quality education' has become synonymous with instrumentalist features of education (Kumar, 2010). As the student navigates to higher

education, a few more additional concerns are added to the already existing jargons—qualification, jobs, placements, employment, packages—thus annihilating the student from reflexivity, imagination, and critical consciousness. Society has, thus, fallen victim to the 'diploma disease' (Dore, 1976), which is indiscriminately used as an access card for the job market and genuine education is relegated to the backseat. This approach has encouraged a technocratic perspective of education, which has dominated the policy discourse. Concomitantly, discussions on the philosophical aims of education has all but disappeared from the discourse of education (Kumar and Sarangapani, 2004).

India is in the midst of implementing the policy provisions of its third education policy of India, the National Education Policy, 2020, which is transformative and aims to create an inclusive, equitable, and quality education system aligning with the goals of SDG 4 while concurrently building upon India's traditions and value systems. Emphasising the holistic development of students in both academic and non-academic spheres, the policy advocates for recognising, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student and encourages creativity and critical thinking in each student (Ministry of Education, 2020). It is based on the premise that education must develop not only cognitive capacities but also social,

ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions. Envisioning education as a great leveller, the policy further aims towards making the system inclusive and equitable for achieving economic and social mobility of all learners regardless of their socio-economic background.

Many of the principles of integral education resonate well with the third education policy. While the education system often focuses on academic achievement and career preparation, Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on physical, vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual education provides a comprehensive framework for nurturing well-rounded individuals capable of thriving in all dimensions of life. His call for national education, which is rooted in India's spiritual heritage, offers a way to preserve cultural uniqueness while embracing universal values. This can foster a sense of belonging and purpose among students, countering the alienation often experienced in modern educational systems. This resonates with the current education policy, too, which focuses on education, that promotes rootedness and pride in India and its rich, diverse, ancient, and modern culture, knowledge systems, and traditions. The emphasis on fostering understanding and harmony among diverse cultures, can guide educational reforms aimed at promoting peace and collaboration on a global scale.

In a scenario where the state of education is pernicious, the

philosophy of integral education does provide optimism for a sustainable and humane society and a responsible human being. It advocates for the exploration and cultivation of all aspects of one's being, culminating in a more integrated and fulfilling existence. It recognises that every learner is different and requires education that aligns with their uniqueness and complexity. It is not confined to tangible or measurable aspects but extends to intangible, subtle, and incalculable aspects, such as personal values, beliefs, and emotions. The integral education philosophy holds profound relevance in the current NEP 2020 policy discourse, addressing both the challenges and aspirations of modern society. Both have emphasised learner-centric approach, self-discovery, creativity, critical thinking, flexible curriculum, and underscoring the importance of ancient wisdom and knowledge in the modern education systems.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Education in contemporary times faces a dual challenge—addressing the immediate needs of a rapidly changing world—while fostering deeper, long-term growth in individuals and society. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's vision of education offers profound insights into how these challenges can be met. The comprehensive approach for integral

education philosophy, ensures the holistic development of individuals, by addressing intellectual capacities and nurturing emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Given the enormous significance of integral education philosophy in contemporary educational contexts, its incorporation into education systems is imperative for policymakers, practitioners, and teachers. While several tenets of the philosophy are already included in the NEP 2020 policy document, its implementation and realisation of the broader goals remain of utmost importance. Changes at every level—systemic, at the school level, and in Classrooms—are paramount to fostering students' holistic development. To start with, the more profound and philosophical aims of education for life should be given prominence rather than merely focussing on education for employment. This awareness and sensitisation for all stakeholders—administrators, teachers, parents and students—is a pivotal step towards a transformative education. It is crucial to recognise that education ought to be a process of nurturing individuals to become responsible and productive members of society. The goal is to build an education system that is not only academically rigorous but also promotes personal growth and development.

Systemic reforms concerning the examination system need to be undertaken to promote rote learning, the prevalence of textbook culture

and the unwarranted burden on the students. The curriculum should be aligned with the principles of the integral education philosophy and needs to be contextualised and learner-centric. At the school level, the focus must shift towards providing a more comprehensive and holistic educational experience that promotes critical thinking and fosters creativity in the truest sense. Embracing this holism, integral education not only encourages cognitive development, but also emotional and spiritual well-being to enable them to cope with the complexities of the modern world. Teachers remain the main pillars who shoulder the responsibility of implementation. The criticality of their role as a mentor and learning being a two-way process needs to be underscored to nurture the unique

potentials of every child. Most importantly, all stakeholders must collaborate and work in tandem to realise the goals of the integral education philosophy.

In today's unabated technological advancement and its permeation in every aspect of human life, the philosophy of integral education provides a thoughtful perspective on education that is worth seriously considering and offers immense potential and hope for a truly transformative education. The alignment of several dimensions of the integral education philosophy with the principles of NEP 2020, provides pathways not just for developing cognitive capacities but also social, and emotional capacities and dispositions for a more inclusive and progressive future.

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