

From Vision to Policy

A Critical Study of Swami Vivekananda's Educational Philosophy and Its Reflection in NEP 2020

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Abstract

The paper predominantly reflects upon the educational thought of Swami Vivekananda and its manifestation in the most recent National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) of India. It is worth investigating the policy implementation of NEP 2020, which is inspired by Swami Vivekananda's holistic and value-oriented postulation, particularly concerning education, commonly articulated as "man-making education". The study aims to explore how the most discussed NEP 2020, as a policy, concretises Swamiji's emphasis on character building, self-reliance, and the integration of material and spiritual knowledge for an ardent learner. The research foregrounds qualitative methodology in philosophical analysis and policy critique. The work places primary texts from The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (CWSV) in dialogue with the NEP 2020. It further delves into Indian epistemological categories, such as neer-ksheer viveka and khandana-mandana, to enhance the NEP's call for critical thinking grounded in the ancient Indian knowledge system (IKS). The NEP 2020 marks a genuine departure from systemic colonial legacies rooted in Indian education, which is quite evident since the policy is talking enthusiastically about promoting Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), experiential learning, and cultural contextuality. Taking note of Swami Vivekananda's contribution in shaping the latest policy on education, the paper situates Swami Vivekananda as an early theorist of IKS, whose educational insights align with contemporary debates on knowledge decolonisation, cultural sovereignty, and nation-building.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Indian Knowledge System, Man-making Education, National Education Policy 2020, Swami Vivekananda.

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INTRODUCTION

India has a long tradition of education dating back to the ancient period when the 'gurukul' system was prevalent. This system promoted a sacred affinity between the *guru* (teacher) and *shishya* (disciple), where the learning process transcended mere academics and extended to holistic development, deeply situated in India's cultural and spiritual ethos. During this period, India was globally eyed as the prime hub of education, with prestigious institutions such as Takshashila, Valabhi, Nalanda, Sharada Peeth, and Vikramashila, attracting students from different parts of the world. These learning centres weighed intellectual pursuits with moral and spiritual growth, which mark the true principles of a holistic education system. Dharampal's (2000) research highlights that before the arrival of the British, India had a widespread and well-functioning education system that contributed to its intellectual prominence. Among several factors, it was India's intellectual tradition that drew individuals from around the world to visit the country and engage in its rich intellectual and philosophical heritage.

The NEP 2020 seeks to revive and rebuild upon this rich legacy by stressing the kind of education that is rooted in Indian culture, traditions, and ethos. In a marked shift from previous policies, NEP 2020 highly focuses on local contexts and indigenous knowledge systems. As outlined in NEP (2020, Section 4.27, p.16)

of the policy, all programmes and pedagogy, beginning with the foundational stage, will be redesigned to capture the Indian context in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, language, philosophy, and societal needs. This methodology aims to check that education is relatable and relevant to students, allowing the potential creativity and critical thinking to flourish when they are situated in the learners' cultural and geographical contexts.

Despite India's ancient educational glory, the preceding policies on education have been critiqued due to fostering incompetence, unemployment, skill gaps between academia and industry, and a lack of a practical skill set. It is believed that this gap can be addressed by implementing NEP 2020, which emphasises on experiential learning, skill development, character building, and nation-building activities. The new educational policy of India aptly captures the educational philosophy advocated by Swami Vivekananda, phrased as 'man-making education'. A kind of education that centres on the holistic development of individuals by fostering the physical, rational, logical, emotional, cultural and spiritual dimensions of an individual learner.

The philosophical vision on education proposed by Swami Vivekananda goes far beyond bookish knowledge and talks about bringing full attention to the development of character, self-reliance, and

practical skills. NEP 2020 takes inspiration from Swamiji's vision by advancing value-based, skill-based, and research-oriented education that can promote cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth in an individual. The policy thus targets to empower individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values that are fundamental in building a strong, self-reliant nation. With such forceful emphasis on experiential and lifelong learning, NEP 2020 is seen by many as a transformative step towards realising Swami Vivekananda's vision of education. It can simultaneously address contemporary challenges in the Indian education system as well. The current study will critically examine Swami Vivekananda's educational philosophy and its reflection in NEP 2020.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research method, employing philosophical analysis, policy critique, and textual interpretation to critically examine the alignment between Swami Vivekananda's educational philosophy and India's NEP 2020. The research primarily draws upon two core sources—the official NEP 2020 policy document and CWSV (in nine volumes). To situate the analysis within broader academic discourse, the study incorporates an extensive review of secondary literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy evaluations, scholarly critiques, and contemporary

commentaries on both NEP 2020 and Swami Vivekananda's educational thought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While Kaushik (2023) and Soy (2023) aptly establish a connection between NEP 2020 and Swami Vivekananda's educational idea, they mostly focused on "man-making education" and character-building. They have not explored how Swami Vivekananda actively engaged with and revived the Indian Knowledge System. There prevails a bridge between the broader epistemological, metaphysical, and pedagogical dimensions of Swamiji's educational philosophy. Jacob and Gaur (2024) and Bharadwaj and Pradeep (2023) duly emphasise the value-based and mass education and the character formation aspects of his education vision, but could not situate Swamiji in the context of current debates on cultural appropriation, global knowledge production, and postcolonial epistemic autonomy, which NEP 2020, in a way, addresses. Sharma (2023), in his chapter "Decolonising Indian Education: NEP 2020," strongly rethinks India's education system, by critically evaluating its colonial legacy, epistemological bent, and linguistic priorities as the medium of instruction. In dialogue with his argument, the present research further engages in the discussion by situating Swami Vivekananda's educational philosophy as a key precursor to the decolonial turn envisioned in NEP 2020.

While Sharma identifies the ideological mechanism behind the colonial continuity, this work focuses on the philosophical and pedagogical alternatives offered by Swami Vivekananda. Sharma's work provides the ideological and historical groundwork, while the current work complements it by elaborating on the philosophical and pedagogical substance for the implementation of the vision. Taking inspiration from this insight, the present study explores pedagogical emphasis, such as *nīra-ksīra viveka*, and the dialogical method of *khandana* and *mandana*, a method of critical thinking in IKS.

The current work draws from the educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and his interpretations to showcase how his early articulation of the IKS foresaw some of the core objectives of NEP 2020. By doing so, the paper positions him not merely as a social and spiritual reformer as perceived by the general population, but as an early IKS theorist and practitioner, inspired by Indian intellectual tradition. Unlike previous works of literature, the current paper tries to contextualise Swami Vivekananda's educational philosophy in a global and postcolonial discourse, connecting it to knowledge decolonisation, cultural sovereignty, and intellectual property covered in the discussion.

The current analysis explores the Vedantic fusion of spiritual (*aparā vidyā*) and material (*parā vidyā*) knowledge, highly talked about in classical Indian texts, and can be seen as a pedagogical model for twenty-first-century India. By employing the Indian epistemological categories of debate and discrimination, such as *neer-ksheer viveka* and the *khandana-mandana* technique, the work offers a culturally rooted alternative to critical thinking, strengthening NEP's emphasis on contextual education.

SWAMIJI'S IDEA OF EDUCATION AND NEP 2020

Swami Vivekananda was one of the foremost *sannyāsis* who could realise the significance of education in the all-around development of an individual, as well as the Nation. Even though he graduated from a colonial-era institution (Eastern and Western Disciples, 1989, pp. 25, 46)¹, he believed in a distinct philosophy of education that aimed to prepare individual learners into fully realised and self-reliant human beings. In addition to his formal Western education, Swami Vivekananda was firmly grounded in the indigenous knowledge traditions of India. He received his early instruction in the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavatam*, and other sacred texts from his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi

¹ In 1871, he joined English Department of Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's Metropolitan Institution and later in January 1880, he joined Presidency College as a student of Fine Arts. After a short time at Presidency College, he shifted to Scottish Church College (then General Assembly's Institution), where he completed his Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in 1884.

(Eastern and Western Disciples, 1989, p. 14), and later attained deeper scriptural understanding and spiritual realisation under the tutelage of his guru, Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Vivekananda envisioned a kind of education that can be seen as a potent tool in the Nation-building exercise. Education that can transcend the sheer accumulation of information. He believed in “Man-making Education,” which focuses on character-building, self-reliance, and manifesting the inherent potential of humans. According to his idea, education is not only about pouring knowledge into a learner; instead, it is more about awakening the inner strength and wisdom already present. His dynamic approach aligns with the core tenets of the NEP 2020 and seeks to bring a change in India’s education system for twenty-first-century learners. NEP 2020 is a path-breaking move toward realising Swami Vivekananda’s idea of education, underlining the development of individuals who are academically bright, ethically upright, and socially responsible. He famously stated, “Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man” (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 349). According to him, education should not focus solely on the development of the intellect but on strengthening the person’s willpower and character. Education must strive to bring out the inherent strength of individuals and enrich them with values that can be imparted for the well-being of society.

This philosophy paved the foundation of the most celebrated phrase of Swami Vivekananda’s educational philosophy, “man-making education”. For him, education was a tool for self-realisation and social upliftment, which could lead to a stronger and more self-reliant nation. The NEP 2020 incorporates many of Swami Vivekananda’s educational ideals. If we closely examine NEP 2020, it centres around value-based education, skill development, and experiential learning, which are the core aspects of Swami Vivekananda’s vision. The recent education policy explicitly advocates for a kind of education system that is rooted in Indian culture and values, while also promoting twenty-first century skills and knowledge. It promotes the assimilation of diverse ideas, which is able to build both intellect and character. This aligns with Swami Vivekananda’s belief that “we must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas” (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 316).

The NEP 2020 further outlines that education must go beyond textbook learning to comprehend real-world experiences. It is by fostering rational and logical thinking, and practical skills, that the policy aspires to create citizens who are responsible and who can contribute to nation-building—an ideal that Swami Vivekananda visualised more than a century ago. For Swami Vivekananda, the teacher plays a crucial role in unlocking a student’s inner potential.

In his conversation with Shri Priya Nath Sinha, Vivekananda (2013, p. 370) observes that “The teacher spoils everything by thinking that he is teaching. Within man is all knowledge, and it requires only an awakening.” Such a view on the role of the teacher points toward “guidance” over “instruction”, where the educator can be seen as a mentor for learners to discover their inner strength and knowledge. NEP 2020 mirrors this idea by promoting the kind of pedagogical reforms that can prioritise active learning, mentorship, and a student-centric approach. It inspires teachers to become facilitators, who can guide the learners while exploring their innate abilities instead of solely passing the information.

Swami Vivekananda critiqued the education systems that focused solely on remembering facts, neither improving critical thinking nor real-world skills. He sided with secular knowledge, in modern terminology, experiential learning that keeps learners equipped with practical knowledge and improves their ability to apply it to whatever they learn. NEP 2020 emphasises experiential learning, skill-building, and real-world applications in the same manner. The policy introduced many naïve initiatives like internships, vocational training, and hands-on learning projects to make sure that students are not only informed but they are also prepared to cope with the demands

of the modern world. In the Union Budget for the fiscal year 2025–26, a noteworthy expansion of the Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL) initiative in schools was announced. According to PIB (2025), for the coming five years, the government has planned to establish 50,000 ATLs in government schools across India. This initiative will realise the government’s vision of creating a technology-driven and innovation-led economy, ensuring that students are turned into tinkerers and are well-equipped with the required skills to compete in a rapidly evolving global landscape. Like Swami Vivekananda’s vision, NEP 2020 seeks to pioneer graduates who are not only intellectually proficient but are also practically skilled and can readily contribute to society.

Swami Vivekananda was well aware of the fact that education not only shapes the individual, but also has a central role in the upliftment of the nation. He firmly believed that education should be tailored in a way that align with the broader needs and cultural values of the nation. This will add to both learners’ empowerment and national progress. At the core of Swami Vivekananda’s educational philosophy was the idea that education is fundamental for a strong nation. He envisioned an education that would produce individuals capable of uplifting society and who would lead India toward greatness. NEP 2020 is a realisation of this vision, since it gives importance to nation-building through education.

The policy aspires to train learners in a manner that they are able to live up to responsibilities in their communities, develop leadership skills, and contribute to national development. It can be summed up that by promoting a value-based, skill-driven education system, NEP 2020 seeks to empower learners with the knowledge, skills, and ethics necessary to build a self-reliant and prosperous India, just like Swami Vivekananda.

Material and Spiritual Knowledge

Swami Vivekananda toured over a dozen Western countries² and with time, he came up with a wide-ranging perspective on education, which was informed by his exposure to Western and Eastern educational systems. Swami Vivekananda stressed the overarching features of both Western and Eastern knowledge systems. While Western education prioritises acquiring the material knowledge, the Eastern education system concentrates on the spiritual aspects of learning. For a strong nation, Vivekananda propose to apply the blend of Western and Eastern education. He gave prominence to educating the masses and the general public at large because he considered that Education is the only powerful instrument that can bring social transformation. He mentions,

“I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for” (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 215).

He advocated that the blend of *para* (material) and *apara* (spiritual) *vidya* (education) will certainly erase ignorance from the minds of the youth. Education here implies a kind of journey to encompass and experience the complete growth of an individual. It is not merely materialistic, but implies the development of the spiritual realm too. According to Swami Vivekananda, “No knowledge comes from outside—it is all inside. When we say a man “knows,” should, in strict psychological language, be what he “discovers” or “unveils”; what man “learns” is really what he discovers by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge” (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 30). Here, a Vedantin like Vivekananda emerges as a modern cognitive scientist, focusing solely on the mind as the subject of inquiry. He believed, “This is the systematic development of the mind. To me, the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting of facts. If I had to do my education over again

² Swami Vivekananda visited United States of America, England, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Japan, China among others. These visits occurred during his two trips to the West between 1893–1896 and 1899–1900.

and had any voice in the matter, I would not study facts at all. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment, and then, with a perfect instrument, I could collect facts at will. Side by side, in the child, should be developed the power of concentration and detachment” (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 39). However, he asserts that this education must be combined with modern Western science. He himself poses this question—“Does higher education mean mere study of material sciences and turning out things of everyday use by machinery? The use of higher education is to find out how to solve the problems of life, and it was solved in our country thousands of years ago” (Vivekananda, 2013, pp. 371–372)³. He adds that Western countries are advanced in terms of scientific culture, but they are infants in the philosophical and spiritual realm. Vivekananda firmly believed that while Material science can only provide temporal prosperity, it is only the spiritual science that can be regarded as the essence of life (Vivekananda, 2013, pp. 394–395).

Against the backdrop of Swami Vivekananda’s philosophical thought, it becomes even more important to consider the most talked-about portion of NEP 2020. The significance of incorporating the IKS into India’s education framework, as advocated

by the NEP 2020. One of the rationales behind this emphasis stems from the fear that if India does not actively integrate and promote its traditional knowledge in educational curricula, it may risk losing ownership of its rich heritage. For reference, we can consider the case of turmeric being patented by foreign entities due to its medicinal properties, which have been in knowledge and used in India for centuries. It is a prominent example of how traditional knowledge of a region can be claimed or exploited by others if not protected and recognised by the local population itself. The NEP 2020 recognises that India’s vast knowledge systems, such as Ayurveda, yoga, philosophy, architecture, agriculture, and mathematics, are the repositories of knowledge that need to be researched, articulated, documented, studied, and transmitted to future generations. The policy also aims to modernise this knowledge and to make it relevant in contemporary contexts by integrating traditional wisdom with modern scientific approaches. If the Indian educational system ignores this responsibility, it risks allowing other countries or entities to appropriate, patent, or commercialise these ancient practices as their own. The example of turmeric refers to the potential dangers of cultural and intellectual misappropriation. In the 1990s, a patent was issued in the

³ While this exact quote does not appear verbatim in the NEP 2020, its essence is reflected in several parts of the policy. Like, “The aim of education in ancient India was not merely the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realisation and liberation of the self (Vol. 5, Vivekananda, 2013) pp. 371–372.

U.S. for the use of turmeric in wound healing, despite its long-established medicinal use in India. It was the time when Indian scientists and legal experts had to challenge this, eventually succeeding in revoking the patent. Therefore, it is by stressing the inclusion of the IKS in education, NEP 2020 seeks to build a sense of pride among Indian students and scholars in their heritage, promoting further research and exploration in these areas. The inclusion of the IKS in education does not merely secure the continuity of India's intellectual heritage but also safeguards it against cultural appropriation and foreign exploitation.

INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM (IKS) AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

The IKS began to gain recognition as a distinct area of study in the early years of the third decade of the twenty-first-century, that is, after the NEP 2020. However, with his comprehensive understanding of IKS since the late nineteenth century, Swami Vivekananda played a central role in articulating and propagating its principles globally. Swami Vivekananda's lectures and discourses, delivered both in the Eastern and Western nations, encompassed a comprehensive exploration of the IKS, demonstrating his profound understanding and

global advocacy of its principles. The promotion of the IKS in NEP 2020 echoes Swami Vivekananda's powerful message,

“Give up these weakening mysticisms and be strong. Go back to your Upanishads—the shining, the strengthening, the bright philosophy. Take up this philosophy; the greatest truths are the simplest things in the world, as simple as your existence. The truths of the Upanishads are before you. Take them up, live up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand” (Vivekananda, 2013, pp. 239–240).

We have yet to produce Polymaths of Indic Knowledge⁴ from our modern institutions (Sharma, 2023, p.143). Until now, the Indian education system, a legacy of Macaulay's design, has been a much-celebrated colonial relic, built on the assumption of the “intrinsic superiority of Western literature, metaphysics, and science” (Macaulay, 1835/1958, pp. 107–117). However, the needs of postcolonial India have evolved, and in an era of the internet revolution and rapid global connectivity, the world has turned into a Global Village. India must decolonise its education system, if it is to reclaim its identity, assert itself on the global stage, and offer a vision for an alternative

⁴ Like Aryabhatta, Baudhayana, Bhaskaracharya, Brahmagupta, Chanakya, Charaka, Dhanvantri, Gargi, Kanada, Mahaviracharya, Maitreyi, Nagachandra, Nagarjuna, Panini, Patanjali, Pingala, Sankardev, Sushruta, Thiruvalluvar, or Varahamihira.

world order. Bhattacharyya (1954) referred to this as the “slavery of the spirit”, which fostered a sense of inferiority, eroded memory and culture, introduced alien concepts, and imposed a hegemonic worldview. This resulted in a “shadow mind,” devoid of originality, unknowingly embracing intellectual imitation and mimicry—while diversity and plurality are the foundation of IKS. Previously, this has been overlooked in the chase for information and imitation of the West.

The NEP 2020 gives considerable emphasis on making the mother tongue a medium of instruction, alongside the promotion of Indian languages and the learning of foreign languages. The policy has recognised the deep connection between language and cognitive development, and it recommends that, wherever possible, education must be imparted in the learner’s mother tongue at least until Grade 8. Policymakers acknowledged the fact that the transition from English to regional languages in the classroom would not be quick; it is going to be gradual and challenging. To make this shift smooth, the policy advocates for the generation of high-quality bilingual textbooks and teaching aids, particularly for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines, both in the mother tongue and English.

NEP 2020, taking inspiration from

Swamiji’s thought, emphasises that education is not just the transmission of knowledge but the awakening of the inherent potential within each individual. And for this instructor plays a very fundamental role. Swami Vivekananda writes, “The teacher spoils everything by thinking that he is teaching. Within man is all knowledge, and it requires only an awakening, and that much is the work of the teacher.” The moral integrity of the teacher is a cornerstone of effective education. This has been indicated in the Taittiriya Upanishad (1.11.6) (Lokeswarananda, 2010). The seer of Taittiriya Upanishad⁵ also gives a list of the dos and the don’ts for a learner. Essentially, education was regarded as a journey toward knowledge (*Jñāna*), wisdom (*Prajñā*), and truth (*Satya*). These core ideals were upheld in the Mundaka Upanishad (1.1.4–5) as part of para *vidyā* (Nikhilananda, 1939). During the ancient tradition, the real objective behind education extended beyond the mere memorisation of facts. It aimed for holistic development and the final release of the self from all sorts of worldly bondages. In alignment with the ancient vision of Indian knowledge tradition, the NEP 2020 aims to integrate insights from Indian philosophy into prevailing educational practices. It advocates for a balance between both ancient knowledge systems and contemporary academic rigour.

⁵ *Shiksha Valli*, Anuvak I–XI

CRITICAL THINKING IN INDIAN TRADITION

The term “Critical Thinking” features prominently in the NEP 2020. Our ancient texts truly delineate the intent behind true education; it is intended that human beings are endowed with a sense of discrimination, what we describe as *neer-ksheer vivek*. “A swan is white, a crane is (also) white, then what is the difference between the two? When it comes to extracting milk from a mixture, a swan is a swan (a swan can extract milk and drink it), and a crane is a crane (a crane does not have this ability)” (Śankarācārya, 1921). It is this faculty of *vivek* (ability to distinguish between right and wrong) that makes an individual socially responsible.

One should not get swayed away by a fancy term and assume that adopting an idea from the West leads to neo-colonisation. In reality, while the concept of ‘critical thinking’ has evolved in the West over the past century, the Indian epistemological tradition has long been rooted in

a similar approach. It engages in rigorous discourse through the refutation of opposing arguments (*khandan*) and the defence or affirmation of one’s stance (*mandan*). Furthermore, Indian tradition differentiates between various forms of dialogue and debate based on their purpose, such as *Vāda*, *Jalpa*, and *Vitandā* (Sharma, 1993).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the NEP 2020 embodies several core tenets of Swami Vivekananda’s educational philosophy. It aspires to transform the Indian education system by aligning it with ancient Indian knowledge tradition and contemporary needs. However, the successful realisation of its objectives necessitates sincere institutional commitment and meticulously crafted implementation strategies. A policy, however visionary, remains ineffectual if it fails to translate into tangible outcomes at the ground level.

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