

India in Indian Curriculum: Sri Aurobindo's Educational Vision and NEP 2020

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National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has given much hope that finally there will be shedding of the McCaulay's burden which has plagued Indian education for a long time, and our education will be 'Indianised,' something truly necessary for a new India. As NEP document states:

"Instilling knowledge of India and its varied social, cultural, and technological needs, its inimitable artistic, language, and knowledge traditions, and its strong ethics in India's young people is considered critical for purposes of national pride, self-confidence, self-knowledge, cooperation, and integration." [1]

Several aspects of NEP 2020 reflect the vision of National Education as given by Sri Aurobindo. This becomes especially clear when we read the policy's emphasis on holistic education, greater decentralization in decision-making, institutional autonomy, greater curricular choice, rethinking student assessment, revitalizing teacher education and a few more areas. For this article, our focus is limited to

the topic of education's role in inculcating in the learners a healthy awareness of India's cultural past and knowledge traditions.

Sri Aurobindo speaks of three aims of an education that is truly Indian in spirit:

“...there are three things which have to be taken into account in a true and living education, the man, the individual in his commonness and in his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity. It follows that that alone will be a true and living education which helps to bring out to full advantage, makes ready for the full purpose and scope of human life all that is in the individual man, and which at the same time helps him to enter into his right relation with the life, mind and soul of the people to which he belongs and with that great total life, mind and soul of humanity of which he himself is a unit and his people or nation a living, a separate and yet inseparable member.”[2]

We see three equally significant units here – individual, nation, and humanity – which must be the concern of a true and living national education. An education rooted in the deeper aim of ‘knowing oneself’ is absolutely indispensable. A true knowledge of who we are as individuals, in the complexity of our being, is essential for us to become more conscious of our choices and decisions in life. This is how we become not only responsible and creative citizens but also more conscious and well-balanced individuals walking on the path of a conscious evolution of the human race.

A learner's gradual journey of self-discovery must be made in the context of another journey, that of discovering his nation and its culture. This important role of education can never be ignored. Only when we know where we come from, we can truly begin to figure out where we are at the present, and how we can go ahead in future. This learning about India's heritage and history need not be a chauvinistic or narrow-minded retelling of the past glory of India. But similarly, the glorious spiritual, intellectual and material history of ancient India need not be kept hidden from the younger generations. In this regard, NEP 2020 makes some important recommendations:

“Knowledge of India” will include knowledge from ancient India and its contributions to modern India and its successes and challenges, and a clear sense of India's future aspirations with regard to education, health, environment, etc. These elements will be incorporated in an accurate and scientific manner throughout the school curriculum wherever relevant; in particular, Indian Knowledge Systems, including tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning, will be covered and included in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, yoga, architecture, medicine, agriculture, engineering, linguistics,

literature, sports, games, as well as in governance, polity, conservation. Specific courses in tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional (organic) crop cultivation, natural farming, etc. will also be made available. An engaging course on Indian Knowledge Systems will also be available to students in secondary school as an elective. Competitions may be held in schools for learning various topics and subjects through fun and indigenous games. Video documentaries on inspirational luminaries of India, ancient and modern, in science and beyond, will be shown at appropriate points throughout the school curriculum. Students will be encouraged to visit different States as part of cultural exchange programmes.”[3]

A truly national education must help the youth of India learn about the deeper, inner driving forces of history, the significance of various psychological factors that have shaped India’s history. This is important because when we understand history only from the point of view of outer events (dates, key figures etc.), we get only incomplete knowledge. Only when Indian children and youth know the outer and inner history of India and its evolutionary march, can they truly be connected to the Indian spirit and work toward manifesting it through their own works and actions.

When implementing NEP 2020 recommendations on designing “Knowledge of India” study modules, we hope some serious thinking will be given to making age-appropriate study of Indian culture, heritage and history an integral part of learners’ overall educational experience. What is heartening to note is that the NEP clearly recognizes that cultural awareness and education are important contributors to individual and societal well-being.

“The promotion of Indian arts and culture is important not only for the nation but also for the individual. Cultural awareness and expression are among the major competencies considered important to develop in children, in order to provide them with a sense of identity, belonging, as well as an appreciation of other cultures and identities. It is through the development of a strong sense and knowledge of their own cultural history, arts, languages, and traditions that children can build a positive cultural identity and self-esteem. Thus, cultural awareness and expression are important contributors both to individual as well as societal well-being.”[4]

When we fail to appreciate, love and really know about our cultural richness, we also fail to acknowledge the distinctive aspects of other cultures. By truly appreciating the inner truths and dimensions of our culture, we become equipped to begin an understanding of how other cultures are inwardly different from ours. This makes us also capable of appreciating how the great diversity of cultures actually enrich the

overall human experience. Only then the possibility of a healthy dialogue of civilisations and cultures may arise. Because as India teaches us, those who live most powerfully in themselves can also most largely use the world and all its material for a greater self-discovery and can most successfully help the world and enrich it out of their own being.

But here we must pay heed to the following note of caution from Sri Aurobindo:

“The mere inclusion of the matter of Indian thought and culture in the field of knowledge does not make a system of education Indian... It is not eighteenth century India, the India which by its moral and intellectual deficiencies gave itself into the keeping of foreigners, that we have to revive, but the spirit, ideals and methods of the ancient and mightier India in a yet more effective form and with a more modern organisation.”[5]

Each nation is a unique shakti, and has a distinct group-soul with its particular temperament and inner genius which determines the role it is destined to play in the world. India today is trying to re-discover her unique place and role in the future of the world. Sri Aurobindo reminds us that if we have to be reborn as a society, as a nation, if we have to raise ourselves to work toward the true mission of India, to fulfill India’s true destiny, we must grow in Shakti. But what is truly necessary to make Indians, and especially the youth of India grow in Shakti?

One obvious answer is: an education that helps build their capacities and capabilities. Only a strong and capable base, a well-formed ādhāra, can be the right receptacle for the shakti. As the Mother, the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo guides us:

“Education is certainly one of the best means of preparing the consciousness for a higher development.”[6]

When rethinking education’s role in shaping the India of tomorrow, it is critical to have some broad understanding of the unique Indian temperament which shaped the India of the past. As the contemporary Indian mind tries to re-discover the real spirit of Indian civilisation, the soul of India, it should not result in a misplaced chauvinistic pride leading to a regressive thinking which tries to imitate the past without a comprehensive understanding of the present challenges and future needs of the nation and the world. We must remember the Mother’s advice:

“...we realise the value of ancient Indian things, but we are here to create something new, to bring down something that will be quite fresh for the earth. In this endeavour, if your mind is tied down to the ancient things, then it will refuse to go forward. The study of the past has its place, but it must not hamper the work for the future.”[7]

About the author

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Dr. Mehra has a PhD in Education from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, and a Master's in Economics from Delhi School of Economics. She also has an M.Ed. from Annamalai University. She worked as a professor for a decade in the US until 2007 when she decided to move to Pondicherry to work in the area of Sri Aurobindo Studies. She has extensive experience in curriculum development, undergraduate and post-graduate teaching, and academic research, and has several academic publications and presentations to her credit.

Author of books titled 'Understanding Contemporary India in the Light of Sri Aurobindo' and 'ABC's of Indian National Education', Dr. Mehra regularly writes for various publications on topics related to Education, Culture, and Society.

[1] NEP 2020, p. 4

[2] CWSA, Vol. 1, p. 425

[3] NEP 2020, p. 16

[4] NEP 2020, p. 53

[5] CWSA, Vol. 1, pp. 368-369

[6] CWM, Vol. 7, p. 58

[7] CWM, Vol. 12, 216