

**GANDHI'S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS AND THE
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY, 2020****Dr. Puja Kumari Gupta**

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi was a modern and visionary educationist whose ideas on education were far ahead of his time. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gandhi combined deep theoretical understanding with practical application. His philosophy of education, popularly known as Basic Education which emphasizes on holistic development, moral values, self-reliance, dignity of labour and learning through productive work. Gandhi viewed education as a powerful means for building character, social responsibility and national development. In the year 2020, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 with the aim of transforming the Indian education system and preparing the nation for the challenges of the twenty-first century. The core vision of NEP 2020 is to provide inclusive, equitable and quality education for all, thereby contributing to the creation of a developed and self-reliant India. The policy focuses on experiential learning, vocational skills, value-based education, multilingualism, flexibility and holistic development of learners. A close examination of NEP 2020 reveals strong similarities with Gandhian educational philosophy. Many of its principles reflect Gandhi's emphasis on practical learning, character formation, social commitment and integration of education with life and work. Thus, NEP 2020 can be seen as a contemporary reflection and revival of Gandhi's educational ideas, adapted to meet present-day needs and aspirations.

Key Words: Mahatma Gandhi, NEP, 2020, Inclusive Education, Holistic Education

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Introduction

India is the world's second most populous country and has the largest population of school and college going students in the world. It is also one of the fastest growing nations and among the largest economies globally. In this context, the development of human resources at the highest possible level is a primary concern. This need has been well recognized by the present government, which introduced a comprehensive education policy to fulfill the nation's long-term aspirations. In recent years, there has been considerable debate across various forums regarding the philosophical foundations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Scholars and educationists have questioned the extent to which the policy is inspired by the ideas and philosophies of India's great thinkers. Among them, Mahatma Gandhi stands out as one of the most influential Indian educationists. Consequently, there is growing academic interest in examining how far the vision of NEP 2020 aligns with Gandhiji's educational philosophy. The present article is descriptive in nature and is based on an analysis of policy documents, opinions available through various media sources and previously published studies. The primary objective of this study is to present a clear understanding of the similarities and differences between Gandhian educational ideas and the National Education Policy 2020.

Gandhi's Educational Ideas

To understand the research question of how far the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is inclined toward or differs from Gandhian educational philosophy, it is important to first examine the educational ideas proposed by Mahatma Gandhi and then analyze the vision of NEP 2020. Mahatma Gandhi's life philosophy forms the foundation for understanding his educational vision. His life philosophy was based on several key principles, such as ahimsa (non-violence), satyagraha and civil disobedience, swadeshi, and self-reliance. The sources of his life philosophy lie in his deep association with classical and traditional Indian knowledge systems, his active involvement in the struggle for India's freedom, and the vast experiences he gained through his encounters with the British in various contexts.

At a very early stage of his life, Gandhi established the Tolstoy Ashram in South Africa, where he practiced and experimented with the essence of the teaching-learning process. Later in India, he founded two influential centers of knowledge and multidisciplinary discourse, particularly at Sabarmati and Sevagram, which became important sites for educational and social experimentation. Gandhiji was well aware of the needs and aspirations of the Indian people of his time; therefore, he strongly disagreed with the education system imposed by the British, which he believed was disconnected from Indian realities and values (Kumar,2019).

Gandhi's aims of education were very clear. According to him, education is a means for the all-round development of the individual, encompassing the body, mind, and soul. He believed that true education leads to character building and that strong moral character among individuals ultimately contributes to nation-building. Socialism, inclusivity and equality in education were central to his educational philosophy. Gandhi's philosophical foundation was far ahead of John Dewey's and many of his contemporary purely practical and utility-based model of education. His educational thought reflected a unique synthesis of idealism, naturalism, realism and pragmatism. Through this integration, Gandhi emphasized moral values and spiritual growth alongside practical skills and experiential learning, making his philosophy both ethically grounded and socially relevant.

Gandhi was a strong proponent of mass education rather than limited community-based education. He firmly advocated that education should be the responsibility of the state and must be free and compulsory, especially at the school level. He emphasized that students should be taught in their mother tongue, as it promotes better understanding and cognitive development. Gandhi strongly believed that education should be practical and skill-based rather than merely theoretical. According to him, productive work and vocational training were essential components of meaningful education. He promoted the concept of "earning while learning", which he considered particularly relevant in the Indian context, as it would help learners become self-reliant and economically empowered.

By introducing craft-based education, Gandhi laid the foundation of vocational education in India. His approach integrated intellectual development with manual labor, thereby ensuring the dignity of work and the holistic development of learners (Behera & Sahu 2022). This model aimed not only at individual self-sufficiency but also at broader social and economic transformation. Like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and many other social thinkers, Gandhi strongly supported the education of women on an equal basis with men, without any form of discrimination. He believed that women's education was essential for social reform and national development. Gandhi also advised women to stay away from excessive materialistic attractions, such as wearing heavy jewellery, and instead promoted the values of simplicity, self-discipline, and simple living.

Gandhi's ideas on curriculum, methods of teaching and the evaluation process can be understood through his concept of Basic Education (Nai Talim), which was introduced in India through the establishment of Basic Schools (Mondal & Pramanick, 2025). This system of education was job-centred, value-based, and mass-oriented. It is important to note that these features continue to remain essential requirements of education in India even today. In Gandhi's scheme of education, knowledge was closely linked with activity and practical experience. Therefore, his curriculum was essentially activity-centred. Its main objective was to prepare the child for practical work, experimentation, and inquiry, enabling holistic development of the individual—physically, mentally, and spiritually—so that the learner could become a useful and responsible member of society. Within this activity-based curriculum,

Gandhiji included subjects such as the mother tongue, basic crafts, arithmetic, sociology, general science, art, music, and other related disciplines. Gandhiji advocated that the curriculum for boys and girls from Classes I to V should be the same. At the later stages, he suggested that boys should be taught specific crafts, while girls should study home science. It should be noted that Gandhiji's scheme of Basic Education was limited to the primary and junior stages.

He also emphasized that primary education should include elementary principles of sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition, along with compulsory physical training through musical drills. Gandhiji believed that such an educational system would make students strong, confident, and useful to their families and the nation. He further argued that this common system of education for all would promote communal harmony and represent a form of "practical religion"—the religion of self-help (Maryam, 2022). Gandhiji strongly disapproved of rote learning and considered it a defective method of education. Instead, he emphasized the use of crafts and vocations as effective means of teaching. He believed that local crafts should serve as the medium of education so that children could develop their body, mind, and soul harmoniously while also preparing for their future livelihood.

Thus, Gandhiji's methods of teaching differed significantly from conventional approaches. He emphasized principles such as mental development, training of the senses and the body, reading and writing, learning by doing, and learning through experience. According to him, student evaluation should be holistic, focusing on character formation, moral development, and practical skills rather than merely academic or bookish knowledge. Evaluation, in his view, must assess the development of the three H's—Head, Heart, and Hand, ensuring balanced growth of the mind, body, and soul through practical work, self-reliance, and ethical conduct.

Analysis of National Education Policy, 2020 in Context to Gandhi's Educational Vision

In the above section of this article, a clear and concrete picture of Gandhiji's educational vision has been presented. In the present section, some of the key areas of education are analyzed thematically in order to examine the extent to which the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aligns with or differs from Gandhian educational philosophy.

Aims of Education

NEP 2020 defines education as a process for achieving holistic development, focusing not only on cognitive growth but also on ethical, emotional, physical, and social development. The policy repeatedly emphasizes values such as constitutional morality, empathy, cooperation, and responsible citizenship, which closely resonate

with Gandhiji's belief that education should produce morally strong individuals capable of contributing to nation-building. However, while Gandhi placed spiritual and moral development at the core of education, NEP 2020 adopts a more secular and skill-oriented framework, reflecting contemporary socio-economic demands. Thus, although the philosophical language differs, the underlying vision of holistic and value-based education in NEP 2020 reflects a clear Gandhian influence.

Mass Education, State Responsibility and Inclusivity

Gandhiji was a strong advocate of mass education and firmly believed that education should be the responsibility of the state. He argued that education must be free and compulsory, especially at the elementary level, to ensure social equality and national development. From a Gandhian perspective, NEP 2020 demonstrates substantial alignment with this vision. The policy reaffirms the state's commitment to universal access, equity, and inclusion, particularly through initiatives aimed at early childhood care and education, foundational literacy and numeracy and the reduction of dropout rates. NEP 2020 places special emphasis on disadvantaged groups, including socio-economically disadvantaged sections, girls, rural populations and marginalized communities, reflecting Gandhi's concern for the upliftment of the masses. Gandhi also strongly supported education in the mother tongue, believing it to be essential for meaningful learning and cultural rootedness. NEP 2020 echoes this principle by recommending that the medium of instruction, wherever possible, be the home language or mother tongue at least until the primary level. This provision aligns closely with Gandhian thought, although its successful implementation remains a challenge in multilingual and urban contexts.

Vocational Education and Learning through Work

Vocational education and productive work formed the core of Gandhiji's educational philosophy. Through his concept of craft-based education, Gandhi emphasized learning through productive activity, dignity of labour, and the integration of intellectual and manual work. He believed that education should enable learners to become self-reliant and economically empowered through the principle of "earning while learning." When evaluated from this Gandhian perspective, NEP 2020 shows a strong philosophical convergence. The policy places renewed emphasis on vocational education, skill development, and experiential learning from the school level onwards. It proposes the integration of vocational courses, internships, and exposure to local crafts and trades, aiming to remove the historical divide between academic and vocational streams. NEP 2020's focus on employability, entrepreneurship, and skill-based education closely resonates with Gandhi's belief that education must be connected with life and work. However, while Gandhi viewed craft as the central

medium of education, NEP 2020 treats vocational education as an important component within a broader, flexible curricular framework. This represents a pragmatic adaptation of Gandhian ideals to the demands of a modern, technology-driven economy. Nevertheless, the policy's emphasis on dignity of labour and experiential learning reflects a clear Gandhian influence.

Curriculum and Methods of Teaching:

Gandhiji's curriculum and methods of teaching were deeply rooted in the principles of activity-based learning, learning by doing, and learning through experience. He strongly opposed rote memorization and emphasized that knowledge should be closely linked with real-life activities and productive work. His concept of an activity-centred curriculum aimed at the holistic development of the learner—physically, mentally, and spiritually (Sahoo & Sahoo, 2024). When examined from this perspective, NEP 2020 reflects a significant alignment with Gandhian pedagogy. The policy advocates experiential learning, inquiry-based learning, project-based activities, and multidisciplinary education, moving away from content-heavy and examination-oriented practices. NEP 2020 encourages flexibility in curriculum design and promotes the integration of arts, sciences, vocational skills, and local knowledge systems, which resonates with Gandhi's emphasis on education rooted in life and society. The focus on creativity, critical thinking, and conceptual understanding further strengthens this alignment. Unlike Gandhiji's craft-centred curriculum, NEP 2020 offers a broader and more diversified curricular structure that incorporates modern subjects, technology, and global competencies. This reflects an effort to balance Gandhian educational ideals with contemporary educational and economic needs.

Assessment and Evaluation

Gandhiji strongly believed that evaluation in education should be holistic and should go beyond the assessment of bookish knowledge. According to him, true evaluation must focus on the development of the three H's—Head, Heart, and Hand, ensuring the balanced growth of intellectual ability, moral character, and practical skills. He emphasized continuous and qualitative assessment based on learners' participation in productive work, ethical conduct, self-reliance, and social responsibility. From a Gandhian perspective, NEP 2020 reflects a meaningful shift in this direction. The policy advocates competency-based assessment, formative evaluation, and a move away from rote memorization and high-stakes examinations. It emphasizes continuous assessment to evaluate conceptual understanding, skills, values, and application of knowledge. NEP 2020 also proposes reforms in examination systems to reduce stress and encourage holistic learning outcomes, which resonates with Gandhi's critique of examination-oriented education. However, while NEP 2020

acknowledges the importance of values and life skills, the assessment of moral and ethical development remains largely indirect and institution-dependent. In contrast, Gandhiji placed moral and character evaluation at the very centre of education. Thus, although NEP 2020 substantially aligns with Gandhian ideas on holistic assessment, it adapts them within a modern, standardized educational framework.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a major milestone in India's educational transformation. However, a critical concern arises when Gandhi's vision of an inclusive educational model is examined in relation to the increasing trends of privatization and commercialization of education, which appear to be contrary to Gandhian thought. The purpose of mass education or the universalization of quality education cannot be achieved unless public educational institutions are strengthened and standardized at the highest level. Although NEP 2020 is currently in the implementation phase, several studies suggest that while the policy appears inclusive in its outward vision, it offers limited real opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalized groups in practice. Some scholars argue that such a comprehensive and ambitious policy cannot be successfully implemented without adequate public funding, and in the absence of sufficient financial support, educational inequality and division are likely to widen. While the ideals of NEP 2020 are lofty, concerns arise from the "developmental imperatives" underlying the policy, which appear insufficiently inclusive, egalitarian, and sensitive to social justice. Notably, the policy does not explicitly engage with the Right to Education Act nor fully incorporate its philosophy of equity and inclusion.

A major criticism of NEP 2020 lies in its implicit assumption that the entire education system must be deconstructed and reimaged. For instance, Section 10.12 recommends phasing out the affiliated college system over fifteen years through a framework of graded autonomy, reducing distinctions between public, private, and deemed universities, while encouraging private participation in higher education. While every policy has both merits and limitations, the real challenge lies in the government's commitment and capacity to implement the policy in a manner consistent with its stated vision. Although NEP 2020 aligns with Gandhian educational ideas in several respects, it also diverges in important ways. Gandhi's educational philosophy remains highly relevant in the Indian context and must be meaningfully integrated into the implementation of NEP 2020 to ensure equity, inclusiveness, and social justice.

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