

## Great Indian Knowledge Networks of *Ashrams & Gurukuls* for the benefit of HEIs: Mandate of NEP 2020<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract

Bharat's rich tradition of ancient knowledge has shaped the cultural and social fabric of our country. Bharatiya knowledge system is a robust knowledge network that has been preserved through well-documented large collection of surviving manuscripts and texts. In earlier times, this knowledge was passed on to next generation through a well-established system of *pathshalas* and *gurukula*. This well-established system was disrupted with the advent of the British, who brought in "factory schooling" that was unbecoming in the Indian milieu. The legacy of colonial education system has been challenged in NEP 2020 that envisions integration of the great knowledge traditions into the modern education framework so as to make Bharat *Vishwaguru*. In this context, this paper explores the *Gurukul parampara* for contemporary relevance and how higher education institutions can be connected with ashrams that still bear the essence of that *parampara* to offer Vedic and sanskritic teachings. The *Bharatiya* Knowledge networks of ashrams in places like *Rishikesh, Ujjain, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Haryana* impart experience based, student centric and skill oriented education. All these aspects are reflected as salient features of NEP 2020 and thus, the relevance of connecting them with HEIs for imparting *Bharatiya* Knowledge with a future vision. This endeavour is aligned with the mandate of NEP 2020 which envisions an education system that inculcates a sense of pride and rootedness in the learners. The paper works towards exploring forward and backward linkages where *ashrams* can be connected with HEIs through institutional mechanism to offer value added courses and internships that are an integral aspect of the new curriculums being designed as per the mandate of NEP.

### Introduction

Bharat has a very rich tradition of ancient knowledge, philosophy, wisdom and practices that have shaped the cultural and social identity of the country. Bharatiya knowledge system has

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thrived through well-documented collection of surviving manuscripts and texts on traditions, astronomy, astrology and more. This knowledge was imparted through a well-established system of *pathshalas* and *gurukulas* that were “the watering holes of the culture of traditional communities” (Dharampal, 18, 1983). Education is essential for national development, social progress and for achieving human excellence. Quality education develops and augments any country’s rich resources, promotes economic growth, scientific advancement, national integration and most importantly cultural sustainability. Bharat, in pre-colonial era, had a very vibrant and robust education system that focused on imparting holistic knowledge and understanding of the individual’s surroundings. The primary aim of this education system was to develop values as well as personality by imparting knowledge of right and wrong. *Bharatvarsha* already had a well-established system of pathshalas and gurukulas functioning in the country when England opened its first school around 6<sup>th</sup> Century. With the advent of the British, these traditional educational institutions declined and were, gradually, replaced by British sponsored schools that were part of the “factory schooling” unbecoming for the Indian milieu. British education system took roots in India with the introduction of English Education Act in 1835 and with Macaulay’s Memorandum on Indian Education that disdainfully rejected Indian culture and learning as inferior. The legacy of colonial education system has persisted and guided policy-making processes in independent Bharat till very recently. This colonial legacy is most visible in the continuing portrayal of cultural prejudices in school and higher education textbooks and study material. The persisting colonial vision of education has propagated western cultural impacts and knowledge paradigms especially in the fields of social sciences and humanities. However, NEP 2020 envisions transformation in Bharat's education system by re-establishing our great country as the super power of knowledge – the *Vishwaguru*.

Bharat’s existing education system is unrelated to the local cultural experiences of learners or undervalues their belief systems, socio-cultural practices and national pride bringing in cultural alienation. The modern learners must not only be equipped with global competencies and skills but must also have an understanding of the *Vedas*, *Brahmanas*, *Upanishads*, *Dharmasutras*, Writings of Panini, Patanjali and the medical treatises of Charaka and Sushruta etc. Specific focus was given to Shastras (learned disciplines) and Kavyas (imaginative and creative literature) in addition to other disciplines such as history, logic, architecture, polity, agriculture, trade, commerce etc. Bharat, with its rich civilizational history has had a continuous trajectory of spiritual and social progress that needs to be

preserved and taken forward. The discourses of dharma, the temple and pilgrimage tradition, philosophical and belief systems, ethics and values, the tradition of *shastrartha*, ancient vision of ecology, aesthetics and arts, developments in astronomy and sciences and more must be integrated as per NEP 2020 so that the learners can connect with their local and national context giving rise to cultural rootedness. In this context, it becomes pertinent to explore the *Gurukul parampara* for contemporary relevance and connect HEIs with ashrams that still bear the essence of that *parampara* to offer Vedic and sanskritic teachings. The essence of this paper is to develop a working model based on forward and backward linkages where *ashrams* can be connected with HEIs through institutional mechanism to offer value added courses and internships that are an integral aspect of the new curriculums being designed as per the mandate of NEP.

### **Theoretical Construct**

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) outlines the vision of India's new education system towards re-connecting and re-establishing the foundations of centuries old Indian education system and connect it with modern information and pedagogical developments for synergistic benefits. Indian knowledge system is a vast repository of knowledge and wisdom that is immensely relevant in the present context and offers opportunities to synthesize new knowledge in the light of this accumulated wisdom. There is hardly any work or organized study available on assimilating the rich traditions and knowledge networks of our country in the institutional setup for maximizing the dissemination of the country's abundant knowledge oeuvre in different disciplines. There are no research available on previous education policies, curriculum and textbooks which introduced content where local social fabric was presented in negative light which, in turn, has damaging impact on the self-esteem and motivation of the learner. Thus, the relevance of integrating the gurukul education system into the institutionalized education setup. There is gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required as per the mandate of NEP 2020. There needs to be systemic changes so as to disseminate the vast knowledge oeuvre of *Bharat* among young generation. The *gurukuls*, prevalent in Bharat since Vedic age, are the centers of learning where the pupils reside till their education is complete. The *Gurukul* system focuses on holistic development of the individual and on imparting knowledge about traditions, practices, values, culture, family, society etc. Apart from the essential teachings in subjects related to language, sciences, history, gurukuls lay equal emphasis on education through experience of arts, crafts, sports, archery, music etc. In British raj, this robust system gradually disappeared

giving way to an anglicized education system. Bharat is all set to overcome this colonial legacy with the implementation of NEP 2020 that lays down the roadmap for 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

The revival of *gurukul parampara* by connecting HEIs with *ashrams* is crucial from many angles as they are a carrier of national and local culture, values, ethos and heritage. The *gurukul* system is focussed on pursuing *Jnan* (Knowledge), *Pragyaa* (wisdom) and *Satya* (truth) as considered to be the highest human goal in Indian thought and philosophy. Bharatiya *gurukul parampara* was very systemic with stringent admission policies (upnayan), low teacher student ratio, environment friendly teaching ambience, free education, discipline and regulation. The pursuit of knowledge for the pupils was the pursuit of spirituality and learning to lead a disciplined life. No other education system, at present and even in ancient times, emphasized upon character building as the ultimate aim of education and infused a spirit of piety and religiousness, formation of character, development of personality, inculcation of civil and social sense, promotion of social efficacy, & preservation and spread of national culture (Altekar, 1944). As the pupils entered the *gurukul*, their training and education involved rituals, religious observances (*vratas*), prayers, meditations etc. that moulded their intellect, body and soul, and determined the ideals of their lives. It was the *gurukul parampara* that became an inspiration for many ancient structured university system established at places like Nalanda, Taxila and Vikramshila. The application based learning, value based education and the guru-shishya parampara of the *gurukul* system of education can bring about revolutionary changes in the modern education system to make it more relevant to the local context and global relevance. *Bharatiya* knowledge centric learning in the *gurukuls* promote cultural awareness and expression, in the young generation, which are core competencies to be developed in learners to inculcate a sense of identity, belonging and an appreciation of own culture. There were no systemic effort, before NEP 2020, to integrate *Bharatiya* knowledge in different disciplines of education. We are aware about great *Bharatiya* traditions of ashrams but never tried linking with HEIs. Some of the ashrams have their own educational institutions but in a very limited way and resources are vastly underutilized. A study of *gurukul* education system will set footprints and build a roadmap for fulfilling the vision of NEP 2020 by integrating *Bharatiya* Knowledge networks preserved in the ashrams with the modern education system. The need is to build pathways towards tapping the reservoir of knowledge of *gurukuls* and map the dissemination of these knowledge networks via universities and institutions. This mapping may result in an

integrated institutional framework for replication in schools, medical colleges, engineering colleges etc.

### **Research Built-up**

The central tenets and beliefs of Indian ethos that are a part of social and cultural consciousness of people in the Indian subcontinent and constitute a living tradition are yet to be adequately explored and documented. There is a need to work to build database of *ashrams* and *gurukuls* that are reservoirs and custodians of *Bharatiya* knowledge networks and further connect this knowledge base with HEIs and other institutions for the benefit of posterity. According to a study conducted by Vediconcepts in 2022, there are 4500 plus gurukuls in Bharat that can be divided into three types: one where the pupil lives with the guru and learn different arts, skills and subjects ranging from mathematics to yoga, another type is where the main focus is on studying Sanskrit language with the help of Asthadyayi of Panini and on studying *samhitas*. This type of gurukuls do not undertake holistic approach as in the case of type 1. The third type is the most popular one in present times as they follow a hybrid approach with residential schooling, Sanskrit language teaching, value based education and being affiliated to a board (perhaps CBSE or state boards). In this context, with the implementation of NEP 2020, an *ashram* and *gurukul* census of the country, when conducted, would offer a significant head start towards creating an educational framework born out of the synthesis of modern disciplines and ancient *shastras*. The success story of initiatives such as *Patanjali*, which has taken a comprehensive approach to popularize Bharatiya knowledge system, is the result of systemic innovations and institutionalization of traditional practices. There are learnings in such success stories for replication by connecting existing ashrams and modern educational institutions.

Knowledge is the most valuable economic currency in present times. With global IPR regulations and patent laws India with vast reservoir of ancient knowledge must tap this currency. Due to intellectual apathy towards Bharatiya knowledge system in our country, we are already struggling with patent claims on many herbs and plants which have been used as traditional remedies in India for centuries. If this knowledge is not preserved, we will be unable to prevent the spillover of our economic value arising out of this knowledge system. Such an initiative would also be immensely relevant for policy making and implementation of NEP 2020 which envisions “an education system rooted in Indian ethos”. The relevance of introducing and familiarizing young generation with the vast knowledge tradition serves multiple purposes. The preserved knowledge of the living traditions of India defines the

identity of its people, their social practices and the norms that govern their way of life. At the same time, the “prevailing knowledge and the literary traditions play a significant role in shaping the culture of the society” (Mahadevan, 7, 2022). Thus, it is imperative to impart knowledge of living traditions of India to the young generation so that they can take the mantle to protect, preserve and take forward this heritage and legacy. In this context, even NEP 2020 has laid down foundations of an education system that promotes “national progress, a sense of common citizenship and culture and to strengthen national integration”. The need is to create linkages between institutions and *ashrams* and *gurukuls* so as to make young learners, in urban Bharat, imbibe this knowledge in their personal, social and professional interactions. For instance, studies of Vedas are very relevant in the Bharatiya context, since Vedas form the very basis of life for bharatiya people. Vedas are the source of all spiritual knowledge comprising all aspects of life including *Dharma*, morality, righteous conduct etc. Vedic knowledge has survived for centuries through scientific methods of oral rendering and this is perhaps the reason that “UNESCO has recognized Vedas as heritage of preservation” (Mahadevan et.al, 29). These divine revelations indicate vast body of knowledge pertaining to spiritual values, principles and practices for rewarding and content living. *Rigveda*, the oldest scripture, comprises of 1028 hymns and 10,522 verses dealing with four ashrams of life: *Brahmacharya* (student), *Grhastha* (householder), *Vanaprastha* (forest dweller) and *Sannyasa* (renunciate). *Yajurveda* broadly contains rituals and procedures of sacrifices and is composed in 1,984 verses. *Samveda* with 1,875 verses details the history of music and songs. Lastly, *Atharvaveda* in 5,977 verses deals with medical sciences. These four Vedas contribute towards the overall development of the pupil by introducing him/her to the culture, civilization, philosophy and scientific achievements of the people of the sub-continent.

Apart from Vedic oeuvre, there are also *Kavyas*, *performing arts*, *Darsanas*, *Puranas*, *Itihasas*, *Sastras* and *Smritis* that showcase cultural practices, history, social customs, guidelines and serve as the repository of Bhartiya wisdom through the ages. Young learners can learn valuable foundational lessons in shared history, moral values, social etiquettes, cultural pride, traditional ethos and much more through the treasure trove of stories, *lokoti* (proverbs), *nyaya* (maxims), *upadesha* about the living traditions of our country. Upanishadic stories shed light on the origin, history and development of *Brahmavidya* and an insight into the life’s supreme values as exemplified in the lives of sages and kings. Tales of *Panchatantra*, penned by Pundit Vishnu Sharma, has fables on five systems of *Nitishastra* – *mitra bheda* (loss of friends), *mitra labha* (gaining friends), *Apariksitakarakam* (acting

without thinking), Labdhapranásam (Loss of gains), rules and strategies of war and peace in Kákolùkīyam (Crows and owls) explained using talking animals. Jataka tales communicate the teachings of Lord Buddha about the transcendental virtues that are key for attaining *moksha*. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have several stories within stories or sub-plots that enlighten the mind about the ideal way of life, the values of truthfulness, righteousness, morality and nobility as supreme ideals, patriotism, legends, Puranic episodes, spiritual roots, traditions of war and diplomacy etc. At the same time, as mentioned in NEP, ancient Indian literary work *Kadambari* (Banabhatta) described “a good education as knowledge of the 64 Kalaas or arts” (37). These arts ranged from subjects of *Geet vidya* (singing), *Vadya vidya* (art of playing on musical instruments), *Nritya vidya* (dancing), *Ugandha-Yukti* (art of practical application of aromatics), *Prahelika* (art of making and solving riddles), *Pustaka-Vacana* (art of reciting books), *Vastu-Vidya* (art of engineering), *Vrikshayur-Veda-Yoga* (art of practicing medicine), *Yantra-Matrika* (art of mechanics) among others. All of these branches of study were considered arts and gave rise to the notion of ‘knowledge of many arts’ that formed the basis of evolution of a cultured individual in ancient times. Ancient Indian education system equipped the learner to follow the path of *Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha* which required education in 18 major Vidyas and 64 Kalas. These Kalas are an expression of communities belonging to different social and cultural groups in ancient India. Life and creativity become inseparable in mastering these Vidyas and Kalas. NEP emphasizes upon bringing back this notion into the Indian education system because multidisciplinary learning and developing varied competences in the learners will be required to make India as the knowledge capital in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, when Indian values and ethos inform the academic interactions, young people can establish a unique Indian identity for themselves everywhere and carry this legacy and heritage forward.

## Conclusion

Modern education system must integrate the idea of *Bharat*, with its rich civilizational history, values and cultures, continuous trajectory of spiritual and social progress to inculcate a sense of understanding, belongingness and pride in being *Bharatiya* amongst the students. Bhartiya values are embedded in Vedic teachings, spiritual learnings of *Bhagawad Gita, Manusmriti, Ramayana, Mahabharata, jataka-tales, Dhammapadda* etc. The primordial wisdom encompassing in this knowledge tradition must be imparted to the young learners for their holistic nurturing beyond schooling as has been the aim of education in India since

ancient times. The study and learnings of Vedic oeuvre, *Kavyas*, *Puranas*, *Itihasas*, *Sastras* and *Smritis*, have immense relevance in the present education system in developing leadership qualities, principled outlook, problem-solving techniques, sharpened intellect and memory, and inculcating spiritual awakening among the young learners. In this context, NEP 2020 focuses on transforming curriculum and pedagogy to encourage holistic development of the learners by imparting skills such as developing scientific temper, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, creativity, ethics, and digital literacy etc. The implementation of NEP 2020 can be complete only when education system integrates the ideals of *gurukul shiksha* system and create learning resources and database with focus on the idea of *Bharat* and its knowledge systems to understand the trajectory of the spiritual and social progress of the nation in the global context.

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<sup>i</sup> This article is the outcome of an ICSSR (Major) project by the title “Exploring & Connecting Great Indian Knowledge Networks of *Ashrams* & *Gurukuls* for the benefit of HEIs: A Working Model as per Mandate of NEP 2020” (PI: Kusha Tiwari)