



Multidisciplinary Learning and Indian Knowledge Perspectives Decolonizing Higher Education with NEP 2020

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Keywords: NEP 2020, holistic, multidisciplinary and culturally grounded learning environment. The policy accord special importance to Indian languages, arts, culture and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) along with multidisciplinary education. This article explores the potential of NEP 2020 as a framework for decolonizing higher education in India. The study is qualitative and analytical in nature based on policy documents, scholarly literature, educational reports and select writings of Indian educationists. It contends that decolonization cannot be seen as simply replacing Western knowledge with traditional Indian knowledge. Rather, it requires a critical reconstruction of the knowledge environment in which Indian intellectual traditions, local experience, indigenous practices and modern scientific knowledge can interact on relatively equal epistemic terms. The article is concerned with the colonial heritage of disciplinary compartmentalization, the marginalization of Indian languages and knowledge traditions and the continued hegemony of examination-centred and textbook-dependent pedagogy. It then discusses the multi-disciplinary nature of NEP 2020, the curricular opportunities provided by IKS, the use of Indian languages, experiential learning and community engagement, and the challenges of implementation. NEP 2020 can contribute substantially to the decolonization of Indian higher education only when IKS is approached critically, inclusively and evidence-based, while ensuring constitutional values, academic freedom, social justice, scientific temper and epistemic plurality, concludes the article.

ABSTRACT



1. Introduction

Higher education is not a channel for passing information from teacher to student. It is also the institution through which societies decide what is legitimate knowledge, whose knowledge is worth recognizing, which languages are appropriate for intellectual production and what kind of citizens the universities should develop. In countries with a colonial past these questions have a special significance, because the modern university was partly built on structures of knowledge introduced or strengthened during colonial rule. Thus, educational reform involves the revision of courses and institutions as well as the revision of the intellectual assumptions underlying education.

India possesses a remarkably diverse intellectual heritage encompassing philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, linguistics, literature, political thought, architecture, agriculture, metallurgy, environmental practices, arts, crafts and systems of ethical reflection. Yet the incorporation of these traditions into formal higher education has remained uneven. Colonial educational structures contributed to a hierarchy in which European knowledge and English-language academic forms acquired greater institutional authority, while several indigenous traditions were pushed towards the margins of formal education. Krishna Kumar's analysis of colonial education demonstrates that the colonial educational system influenced curriculum, pedagogy, textbooks, teachers and conceptions of legitimate knowledge, while simultaneously generating debates about equality, identity and progress (Kumar, 2005, pp. 23–47).

The National Education Policy 2020 attempts to resolve some of these historical and contemporary issues. It suggests a shift to holistic and multidisciplinary education, more choice in curriculum, propagation of Indian languages, integration of vocational and academic learning and more recognition of Indian Knowledge Systems. It explicitly rules out hard separations between arts and sciences, curricular and co-curricular activities and vocational and academic streams (Government of India, 2020, pp. 11-12). The policy's vision is therefore broader than a simple curriculum revision. It seeks to change the relationship of knowledge, of the learner, of the institution and of society. The Government's subsequent implementation initiatives are



Academic Bank of Credits, multiple entry and exit, internationalization and programs supporting Indian languages and IKS.

But the idea of decolonization must be understood carefully. It cannot mean just getting rid of Western knowledge in Indian universities. Modern science, social sciences, technology and global intellectual traditions have become part and parcel of contemporary knowledge production. Instead, the goal should be to overcome epistemic dependency and to create conditions in which multiple knowledge traditions can be critically examined. Poonam Batra points to the competition between colonial and emancipatory traditions that have historically shaped the Indian curriculum and emphasizes the continuing impact of colonial epistemic structures on curriculum and pedagogy (Batra, 2021, pp. 407–424).

In this context, this article attempts to examine how far NEP 2020 can facilitate decolonization of higher education through multidisciplinary learning and Indian Knowledge perspectives.

2. Objectives of the Study

The article has the following goals:

1. To interrogate the colonial legacy in shaping curriculum and knowledge formations in Indian higher education.
2. To study the inter-disciplinary approach of NEP 2020.
3. To study the place of Indian Knowledge Systems in the vision of policy.
4. To examine the relationship between Indian languages, indigenous knowledge and epistemic democratization.
5. To examine the opportunities and challenges in decolonization of higher education under NEP 2020.
6. To propose a workable framework to include Indian Knowledge perspectives without dilution of scientific temper, constitutional values and academic rigor.

3. Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative, analytical and conceptual research design. The study is mainly drawn on secondary sources such as National Education Policy 2020, University Grants



Commission guidelines, government documents, peer-reviewed research articles and scholarly works of Indian educationists and researchers. The focus was special on Indian scholarship in curriculum, coloniality, educational reform, social justice and indigenous knowledge.

The study does not claim to have empirically measured the impact of NEP 2020 on universities using primary survey data. Rather, it critically explores the conceptual possibilities and implementation requirements of the policy. The recent initiatives of UGC are very much relevant as the Commission has come out with specific guidelines for the inclusion of Indian Knowledge in the higher education curriculum and for faculty orientation on IKS.

4. Coloniality and the Structure of Higher Education in India

The entry point for the debate on decolonizing education must be coloniality. Colonialism was not only political rule or economic exploitation. It also influenced systems of classification, education and knowledge. Formal education was one of the institutional tools by which colonial authorities defined desirable forms of learning and produced particular categories of educated subjects.

Krishna Kumar's historical analysis of colonial education shows that the colonial educational project was associated with the formulation of a specific educational ideal and with efforts at controlling curriculum and teachers. His analysis additionally emphasizes the tension between curriculum and culture and the subsequent nationalist quest for self-identity (Kumar, 2005, pp. 47–76).

After independence, the effects of this history continued. University expansion and professional education certainly created enormous opportunities, but the curricular structures were often still heavily shaped by inherited disciplinary arrangements. In school, success was often defined by knowing the textbooks and passing the exams for which the textbooks were designed, with knowledge broken down into more or less separate subjects.

An important contemporary view is the work of Poonam Batra. She notes that the Indian curriculum has evolved along two competing lines: the colonial project of developing a compliant population and anti-colonial movements that saw education as empowering (Batra, 2021, pp. 407–424). She also contends that social and epistemic justice necessitate educational

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spaces that are capable of recognizing subaltern disciplines and transformative pedagogies.

Decolonization is therefore not to be reduced to a historical grievance against colonial rule. It is also a contemporary question of authority in curriculum, language, research priorities and pedagogical methods and recognition of different intellectual traditions.

5. NEP 2020 and the Multidisciplinary Shift

One of the important aspects of NEP 2020 is that it is moving toward multidisciplinary higher education. The policy talks of holistic and multidisciplinary education as an important feature of the Indian intellectual tradition and aims at restoring larger linkages between different fields of learning. It calls for the breaking down of rigid disciplinary boundaries and encourages institutions to be multidisciplinary.

This approach has a lot of decolonizing potential. The contemporary university inherited a disciplinary organization which often treats knowledge as a set of specialized compartments. While it is necessary to specialize for advanced research, too much compartmentalization can stop students grasping complex social problems that cross disciplinary boundaries.

For example, climate change is not an environmental science in itself. It includes economics, political science, sociology, geography, ethics, law, technology and local ecological knowledge. Likewise, public health requires medicine as well as nutrition, psychology, sociology, economics, and community studies.

The multidisciplinary orientation of NEP 2020 therefore provides an opportunity to move away from a narrow view of expertise to a more integrated understanding of knowledge. That does not mean abolishing disciplines. disciplines become resources to interact around meaningful intellectual and social questions.

The multidisciplinary university can also provide an institutional space where Indian Knowledge Systems are not segregated as cultural or heritage courses. For instance, Ayurveda may be viewed through the lenses of history, pharmacology, public health, Sanskrit studies, anthropology, and modern scientific research. Agricultural science, ecology, economics, sociology and climate studies can all be used to study traditional agricultural methods. One need



not just celebrate classical Indian mathematics, it can be explored historically and mathematically.

Such integration would turn IKS from an ornamental addition to the curriculum into a field of serious interdisciplinary inquiry.

6. Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemological Resource

Indian Knowledge Systems are a huge and internally diverse set of knowledge traditions. These include philosophical schools, linguistic traditions, mathematical and astronomical knowledge, medicine, architecture, the arts, agriculture, ecology, governance and community practices. UGC defines IKS as a systematic body of knowledge developed over generations and emphasizes its integration into curriculum and faculty development.

Hence, the importance of IKS in NEP 2020 is not just cultural. It is a matter of who has the authority to produce and transmit knowledge.

For decades, Indian students encountered Indian intellectual traditions largely through courses on history or culture, not as living fields of inquiry. A decolonized curriculum could transform this relationship. Instead of seeing Indian traditions simply as historical achievements, universities might see them as objects of research, comparison, critique and reinterpretation.

For example, the study of Nyāya may be relevant for discussions on logic and argumentation. Pāṇinian grammar is of interest to linguistics and computational language studies. The traditional water management practices can be examined in terms of environmental history and sustainability studies. Indian philosophical traditions can participate in conversations about ethics, consciousness, and epistemology. Classical literature can be studied in relation to current literary theory.

The UGC's guidelines for IKS integration envisage the introduction of foundational knowledge, linking IKS concepts with modern textbooks, developing Indian thought models and applying them to contemporary problems.

This approach is important as it prevents the treatment of traditional knowledge as static historical material. Educationally, knowledge is meaningful when students can explore its



concepts, evidence, limitations, applications and contemporary relevance.

7. Decolonization Does Not Mean Abandoning Modern Science

One of the most dangerous ideas in the discourse of decolonization is the false binary between Indian knowledge and modern science. This would repeat the very binary that decolonization is supposed to overcome.

A truly plural knowledge system must allow for critical comparison. Appropriate historical, textual, empirical and scientific methods should be used to examine traditional claims. At the same time, modern scientific knowledge should not be seen as culturally neutral in all respects of the institutions. Both are open to critical examination.

The aim then is epistemic dialog rather than epistemic replacement.

When a traditional agricultural practice seems environmentally sustainable, researchers should explore the ecological mechanisms and socioeconomic conditions that sustain it. If a traditional medical practice is claimed to have therapeutic value it should be subject to appropriate clinical, pharmacological and historical investigation. If a mathematical text from antiquity contains sophisticated procedures, scholars can reconstruct and compare those procedures with modern mathematical reasoning.

Such research would be more intellectually productive than either the uncritical glorification or the automatic dismissal.

The UGC's IKS framework itself stresses the mapping of traditional knowledge with modern scientific advancement and technology, meaning the integration is to be through dialog and not in isolation.

8. Decolonization and Indian Languages

Language is one of the most important axes of educational decolonization. If language limits intellectual participation, then a knowledge system cannot be truly inclusive.

NEP 2020 places a lot of emphasis on Indian languages and multilingualism. In its summary of the policy, the Government has underlined the promotion of Indian languages and the choice of



home, mother tongue, local or regional languages as the medium of instruction, particularly in the early years of schooling.

The situation is more complex in higher education, where English continues to be important for international research communication. The goal should not be to destroy English, but to build a real multilingual academic capacity.

Universities can help:

- Indian language textbooks;
- bilingual academic materials;
- translation of important research;
- terminology development;
- digital repositories in multiple languages;
- Research publications in Indian languages;
- language-sensitive teaching;
- maintenance of oral tradition; and
- engagement with classical and regional texts in a scholarly context.

Multilingualism can increase participation by allowing students to think, discuss and research in languages in which they are intellectually comfortable. It also opens up the possibility for universities to engage with local communities in a more meaningful way.

The farmer, craftsperson, traditional healer, artisan or community knowledge-holder may have valuable experiential knowledge, but may not express it in the formal language of academic research. Universities need methods of bridging community knowledge and scholarly knowledge without co-opting or distorting either.

9. Experiential Learning Pedagogy and Interdisciplinary Learning

Decolonization requires a change in curriculum as much as pedagogy. If IKS is added to an examination-driven system through memorization, the underlying educational structure is not changed.

Multidisciplinary learning is meaningful when students engage with problems, not subjects. A



university course on sustainable rural development, for example, could integrate economics, sociology, agriculture, environmental science and local knowledge. Students could do fieldwork, interview community members, analyze local resources and develop evidence-based interventions.

Such pedagogy also echoes India's own traditions of educational reform. Gandhi, Tagore and Sri Aurobindo's ideas on education challenged narrow textbook-centric learning. Batra points out that these thinkers offered alternative visions of curriculum for a free India and challenged the assumptions embedded in imperial and modernist educational models (Batra, 2021, pp. 407–424).

NEP 2020's multidisciplinary vision can thus be linked to an indigenous history of educational experimentation rather than merely as a new policy innovation.

Experiential learning can involve field studies, community projects, internships, laboratory research, documentation of local knowledge, oral-history projects, craft-based learning and problem-solving exercises. These approaches can also assist learners in comprehending that knowledge is not contained within the traditional boundaries of the university.

10. The Role of University Staff in Decolonizing Higher Education

Faculty development is essential for successful curriculum reform. A university can officially offer an IKS course, but success will depend on the knowledge of the teachers, their pedagogical confidence and their research capacity.

This is explicitly acknowledged in the UGC's Guidelines for Training/Orientation of Faculty on IKS. The successful integration of IKS depends a lot on the faculty, they say, and they recommend orientation and training to introduce teachers to IKS and how to use it in classroom teaching.

Thus, faculty development should not be limited to short term awareness programs. Universities need to build long-term interdisciplinary research communities of scholars from history, philosophy, science, social sciences, languages and IKS.

Faculty training should be on:

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1. primary source interpretation;
2. textual criticism;
3. comparative knowledge research;
4. community research;
5. interdisciplinary research methodology;
6. digital record;
7. ethical research with communities of knowledge;
8. assessment of the evidence; and
9. communication for multilingual academics.

This would help to avoid two opposite problems: shallow celebration of IKS and uninformed dismissal of indigenous knowledge.

11. Social Justice and Whose “Indian Knowledge” Counts

A major challenge is the diversity of Indian society. There is no single homogeneous knowledge tradition in India. Its intellectual history includes the Sanskrit, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, regional, tribal, Dalit, women's, artisanal and many community-based traditions.

So, decolonizing higher education is not about replacing one dominant canon with another. If the IKS is defined too narrowly, the reform may reproduce internal hierarchies. Here, Batra's concern with social and epistemic justice is particularly relevant. She notes that curricular traditions related to anti-caste movements and struggles against social hierarchy have often been excluded from mainstream educational frames (Batra, 2021, pp. 407–424).

A truly inclusive Indian Knowledge system must then ask:

- Which communities produced this knowledge?
- Who is it from?
- Who was not allowed to have access to it?
- What was the social context that led to it?
- What evidence supports its claims?
- How has the knowledge changed over the years?
- How to study it without romanticizing or appropriating it?



This critical approach is essential for connecting decolonization to the constitutional values of equality, dignity and social justice.

12. NEP 2020 Opportunities

The NEP 2020 gives a number of opportunities for higher education to change.

- **Breaking Disciplinary Silos:** Students can mix subjects beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries. This can lead to intellectual flexibility and better problem-solving skills.
- **IKS Recognition of Indian Knowledge:** Indian Knowledge Systems offers institutional space for the study of Indian intellectual traditions through formal academic structures.
- **Promoting Indian Languages:** Multilingual resources can help improve access and reduce the linguistic distance between universities and communities.
- **Research Innovation:** Traditional knowledge can be a source of new research questions for sustainability, health, agriculture, linguistics, philosophy, architecture and environmental studies.
- **Community-University Partnerships:** Local communities are not just objects of research, they can be knowledge partners.
- **Cultural Self-confidence:** Students can have a better sense of India's intellectual history, while also engaging with global scholarship.
- **Knowledge Sharing across Borders:** A well-researched Indian Knowledge framework can contribute to the global discussions on sustainability, ethics, holistic education and indigenous knowledge.

Institutionally, these possibilities are increasingly supported. UGC has issued separate guidelines for integration of Indian Knowledge in higher education curriculum, and for conversion of higher education institutions into multidisciplinary institutions.

13. Challenges of Implementation

The NEP 2020 is promised to be transformative in nature, but there are challenges in its implementation.



- **Lack of trained faculty:** There may be many faculty with specialized disciplinary training but without sufficient exposure to IKS.
- **risk of Tokenism:** IKS could be added as another elective without altering the fundamental structure of the curriculum and pedagogy.
- **Lack of Research Infrastructure:** Meaningful research on historical texts, manuscripts, archeology, linguistics, indigenous practices, and scientific traditions requires specialized resources.
- **Confusion about Knowledge:** In the absence of clear standards of research, unsubstantiated claims may be mistaken for established knowledge.
- **Unequal institutional capacity:** Larger, well-funded universities are more likely to be able to introduce multi-disciplinary programs than smaller colleges.
- **Language Barriers:** Producing high quality academic material in multiple Indian languages is a costly exercise as it involves substantial investment in translation and terminology.
- **Internal Social Hierarchies:** A narrow definition of Indian knowledge would push Dalit, tribal, women, regional and minority knowledge traditions to the margins.
- **International Academic Recognition:** Universities must ensure that IKS research is conducted to an internationally credible standard of scholarship, documentation and peer review.

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the importance of challenges such as faculty preparedness, regional disparities and systematic documentation in the implementation of IKS-oriented educational reforms.

14. Toward a Practical Framework for Decolonizing Higher Education

A sustainable framework can be built upon six inter-related principles.

- **Epistemic Plurality:** Universities should recognize multiple traditions of knowledge, but not at the expense of critical standards of evidence.
- **Inter-disciplinary Integration:** IKS should not be treated as a separate cultural studies program but should be integrated with existing academic disciplines.



- **Linguistic Diversity:** Academic material should be made available in Indian languages along with English gradually.
- **Community Participation:** Knowledge-bearing communities should be involved in documentation, interpretation and dissemination.
- **Scientific and Critical Evaluation:** Traditional knowledge should not be accepted or rejected automatically but subjected to appropriate research methods.
- **Constitutional Ethics:** Decolonization has to be in accordance with equality, liberty, dignity, secular democratic citizenship, social justice and scientific temper.

This framework can shift universities from being consumers to generators of knowledge based on India's diverse intellectual and social experiences.

15. Discussion

The central argument emerging from this analysis is that NEP 2020 is a policy opportunity, not an automatic process of decolonization. Policy language can create institutional opportunities; real transformation depends on execution.

What is particularly important about NEP 2020 is its multidisciplinary orientation as decolonization cannot be brought about by just adding a few traditional subjects to existing departments. The very structure of knowledge itself has to become more open. A university that allows students to combine economics and philosophy, computer science and linguistics, environmental science and indigenous ecological knowledge, or public health and anthropology is better positioned to study complex social realities.

At the same time, Indian Knowledge Systems should not be romanticized. India's intellectual heritage has had extraordinary achievement, but it also developed in particular social and historical contexts. Therefore, a mature academic position must acknowledge both its successes and its shortcomings.

This is where the idea of critical indigenization comes in handy. Critical indigenization is concerned with positioning knowledge within Indian contexts without allowing cultural identity to displace evidence. It encourages scholars to investigate Indian intellectual traditions on their own terms, but also to subject claims to rigorous scholarly scrutiny.

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This institutional basis for faculty orientation, curriculum integration and linking IKS concepts with contemporary problem-solving has recently been explicitly encouraged by the UGC guidelines.

The ultimate goal should thus be neither Westernization nor cultural isolation. It must be the making of a confident, plural and intellectually independent Indian university which can contribute to global knowledge.

16. Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following measures are suggested.

1. Establish IKS research centers with interdisciplinary faculty and not restrict IKS to isolated departments.
2. Develop multilingual academic repositories of manuscripts, oral histories, regional literature and community knowledge.
3. Introduce Interdisciplinary IKS modules in science, social science, humanities, management and professional programs.
4. Develop faculty development programs that combine IKS scholarship with contemporary research methodology.
5. Support community based research particularly with tribal, rural, artisan and traditional knowledge communities.
6. Develop evidence based evaluation protocols for claims associated with traditional medicine, agriculture, technology and environmental practices.
7. Promote comparative research, bringing Indian traditions into conversation with African, Asian, European and other global intellectual traditions.
8. Strengthen translation infrastructure for good quality academic material in Indian Languages.
9. Documentation of indigenous knowledge regarding community rights and intellectual property.
10. Make sure that all decolonization initiatives are informed by constitutional values so that cultural revitalization doesn't reproduce social exclusion.



11. Promote research projects of students which are based on local knowledge and current social problems.
12. Put in place measures to demonstrate results such as cross-disciplinary registration, multilingual publications, research projects, community partnerships and student learning outcomes.

17. Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents a huge step in India's ongoing quest to rethink the purpose and structure of education. Its focus on multi-disciplinary learning, Indian languages, cultural knowledge, experiential learning and Indian Knowledge Systems offers tremendous opportunities for re-orienting higher education.

But decolonization is a more profound process than mere curricular substitution. It demands that universities rethink the hierarchy of knowledge, the organization of disciplines, the dominance of particular languages, the relationship between academic and community knowledge, and the pedagogical assumptions that govern teaching and learning.

Indian Knowledge Systems, when studied as dynamic intellectual traditions, can have a meaningful role in this process, not as sets of unquestionable historical claims. Integration with modern disciplines can create new questions for research and opportunities for education. At the same time, IKS integration needs to be sensitive to India's internal diversity and social inequalities.

The most fruitful reading of NEP 2020 is therefore one of epistemic dialog. Indian knowledge should not have to compete with global knowledge, but rather be in a critical dialog with it. Similarly, decolonization does not mean rejecting modern science; it means creating an educational environment where scientific knowledge, indigenous experience, classical traditions, regional knowledge and contemporary scholarship can interact without pre-determined hierarchies.

In the end the success of the vision will depend on universities, teachers, researchers, students and communities. If supported by rigorous scholarship, multilingualism, interdisciplinary research, community participation and constitutional commitments to equality and justice, NEP

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2020 can be more than an administrative reform. It can help develop a higher education system that is intellectually free, culturally grounded, socially inclusive and globally responsive.

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