



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Education

THE BHAGAVAD GITA AND NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: RE-ENVISIONING INDIAN PEDAGOGY FOR HOLISTIC EDUCATION

KEY WORDS: National Education Policy 2020; Bhagavad Gita; Indian Knowledge Systems; Pedagogy; Holistic Education; Value Education; Hermeneutics; Critical Thinking

Dr. Rajeshwari Garg

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

Shreyash Anand

M.Ed. Scholar, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reorients Indian education towards holistic development, multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking, ethical awareness, experiential learning, and the development of capacities required for a rapidly changing society. At the same time, the Bhagavad Gita constitutes an important source within the Indian intellectual tradition for examining questions of action, knowledge, self-discipline, ethical decision-making, and responsibility. This conceptual study examines the possible convergences between selected pedagogical orientations of NEP 2020 and selected teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, with particular attention to Nishkama Karma (action without attachment to its fruits), Svadharma (one's duty or appropriate responsibility), self-discipline, reflective inquiry, and ethical conduct. A qualitative document-analysis and hermeneutic approach was employed. The primary documents comprised NEP 2020 and selected passages from the Bhagavad Gita; secondary literature was used to contextualize the interpretation. The analysis identified four major areas of convergence: holistic development, critical and reflective thinking, skill and action-oriented learning, and value-based education. The paper argues that the Gita should not be treated as a prescriptive religious curriculum for a pluralistic school system. Rather, selected philosophical ideas may be interpreted as culturally situated resources for dialogue, ethical reflection, self-regulation, and learner development, provided that their educational use remains inclusive, non-coercive, and sensitive to constitutional values. The paper concludes by proposing a cautious, secular, and pedagogically mediated framework for connecting Indian knowledge traditions with the objectives of NEP 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a major reorientation of Indian education. The policy places emphasis on equitable access, foundational literacy and numeracy, holistic development, multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking, experiential and inquiry-based pedagogy, vocational exposure, ethical development, and the cultivation of responsible and capable citizens. It also explicitly situates educational reform within India's traditions and knowledge systems while seeking to prepare learners for the social, economic, scientific, and technological demands of the twenty-first century (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The policy's emphasis on Indian knowledge traditions creates an opportunity to examine how classical texts and intellectual traditions can contribute to contemporary educational discourse. One such text is the Bhagavad Gita, whose pedagogical significance can be approached through its sustained treatment of dialogue, doubt, ethical choice, disciplined action, knowledge, and self-reflection. The text presents an extended teacher-learner dialogue in which Arjuna raises questions, expresses uncertainty, receives explanations from Krishna, and is ultimately left with the responsibility to deliberate and act. Such features make the Gita relevant to a philosophical discussion of learner agency and reflective education, although they should not be equated uncritically with modern pedagogical methods.

Previous scholarship has examined the relationship between the Bhagavad Gita and education, including its possible implications for pedagogy under NEP 2020. Maharaj, Ahuja, and Malhotra (2021), for example, used desktop and hermeneutic analysis to discuss learner-centred, discussion-based, value-oriented, multidisciplinary, creative, discovery-oriented, and critical pedagogical possibilities. Dabas and Singh (2018), using a quasi-experimental design with school students, reported positive changes in hope, optimism, and resilience following an intervention based primarily on Bhagavad Gita teachings. These studies suggest that the educational relevance of the Gita deserves systematic examination, but they do not establish that the text itself constitutes an educational policy or that its teachings can simply be transferred into contemporary classrooms.

The present paper therefore adopts a deliberately cautious position. It does not attempt to prove the superiority of the Bhagavad Gita over contemporary educational theories, nor does it claim that NEP 2020 derives directly from the Gita. Instead, it investigates conceptual intersections and asks how selected philosophical ideas may inform educational reflection within the broad objectives of NEP 2020. This distinction is important in a constitutionally plural and religiously diverse educational context.

1.1 Rationale of the Study

The contemporary educational environment requires learners to manage information, uncertainty, competing values, social diversity, technological change, and complex decisions. Academic achievement alone is therefore insufficient for educational development. NEP 2020 responds to this challenge through an integrated conception of cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, physical, and vocational development. The Bhagavad Gita, interpreted as a philosophical rather than exclusively devotional text, provides concepts related to disciplined action, reflective judgment, responsibility, and self-regulation. Examining the relationship between these two frameworks may contribute to the emerging discussion on Indian knowledge systems and culturally responsive pedagogy.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although NEP 2020 encourages the incorporation of Indian knowledge traditions, the educational implications of specific classical texts require careful conceptual interpretation. The problem addressed in this paper is the absence of a sufficiently differentiated framework that connects selected philosophical ideas from the Bhagavad Gita with specific pedagogical orientations of NEP 2020 while also recognizing the limitations of such a comparison.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To examine selected pedagogical orientations of NEP 2020 in relation to holistic, ethical, experiential, and learner-centred education.
- To interpret selected concepts from the Bhagavad Gita that may have educational relevance, particularly Nishkama Karma, Svadharma, self-discipline, reflective inquiry, and ethical action.

- To identify conceptual convergences and differences between selected Gita-based ideas and the pedagogical orientations of NEP 2020.
- To propose pedagogically appropriate and constitutionally sensitive ways in which Indian knowledge traditions may inform contemporary educational practice.

1.4 Research Questions

- What major pedagogical orientations of NEP 2020 are relevant to holistic and value-based learner development?
- Which selected concepts in the Bhagavad Gita can be interpreted as educationally relevant to these orientations?
- What conceptual convergences and differences emerge when the two frameworks are examined together?
- What are the possible implications and limitations of using Gita-based philosophical ideas in contemporary, pluralistic educational settings?

2. Review of Related Literature

The relationship between Indian philosophical traditions and contemporary educational thought has received growing attention in scholarship on Indian psychology, value education, and culturally grounded pedagogy. The Bhagavad Gita has particularly attracted attention because of its treatment of action, knowledge, duty, self-regulation, and the problem of ethical decision-making.

Dabas and Singh (2018) investigated the efficacy of Bhagavad Gita teachings in comparison with a Western positive psychology intervention among semi-urban school students. Their study used a pre-test/post-test three-group quasi-experimental design with 630 students aged 13–16 years and examined hope, optimism, and resilience. The authors reported statistically significant between-group differences and argued that the findings warranted further investigation of culturally grounded interventions. The study is relevant to the present paper because it provides empirical evidence that Gita-based educational content can be operationalized as an intervention; however, its results should not be generalized to all educational outcomes or treated as evidence that philosophical teachings alone cause broad educational transformation.

Maharaj et al. (2021) directly examined NEP 2020 through a pedagogical perspective derived from the Bhagavad Gita. Their qualitative study combined desktop analysis and hermeneutics and discussed learner-centred, discussion-based, value-based, multidisciplinary, creative, discovery-oriented, critical-thinking, and decision-making dimensions. The present paper extends this line of inquiry by emphasizing the interpretive nature of the proposed connections and by distinguishing philosophical resources from policy mandates.

The wider scholarship on the Gita also demonstrates that the text has been interpreted in diverse intellectual contexts. Davis (2014) documents the historical circulation of the Gita and notes its reception among Indian nationalists and Western intellectuals, including Mahatma Gandhi and Aldous Huxley. This diversity of interpretation is educationally significant: no single interpretation should be assumed to exhaust the meaning of the text.

NEP 2020 itself provides the policy context for this discussion. The policy describes education as a means of developing human potential and emphasizes character, ethical and rational capacities, compassion, creativity, multidisciplinary learning, and cultural preservation (Ministry of Education, 2020). It also promotes flexibility across curricular and vocational areas and encourages experiential, inquiry-based, discussion-based, and discovery-oriented learning. These

provisions create a legitimate policy context for examining Indian knowledge traditions, but they do not prescribe a particular religious text as a mandatory pedagogical source.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative conceptual design based on document analysis and hermeneutic interpretation. Because no primary participants were recruited and no intervention was conducted by the present researcher, the study is appropriately characterized as a conceptual/document-based study rather than an empirical impact study.

3.1 Sources of Data

- Primary policy document: National Education Policy 2020, Government of India, Ministry of Education.
- Primary philosophical source: selected passages of the Bhagavad Gita, with attention to Chapters 2, 6, 16, and 18.
- Secondary literature: peer-reviewed and scholarly publications addressing the Bhagavad Gita, education, positive psychology, and pedagogy under NEP 2020.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, major pedagogical orientations were identified from NEP 2020. Second, selected Gita concepts and verses were identified on the basis of their explicit relevance to action, self-regulation, ethical conduct, and reflective judgment. Third, the two bodies of material were compared thematically. Fourth, educational implications were developed while distinguishing textual interpretation from policy requirements.

3.3 Trustworthiness and Interpretive Caution

To strengthen interpretive credibility, the analysis was limited to concepts that could be explicitly connected to the selected texts and secondary scholarship. The paper avoids treating philosophical interpretations as empirical facts. Multiple interpretations of the Gita are acknowledged, and the educational implications proposed here are presented as possibilities for pedagogical reflection rather than as causal claims.

4. Thematic Analysis and Findings

The analysis indicates four principal areas of conceptual convergence: (1) holistic development, (2) critical and reflective thinking, (3) skill and action-oriented learning, and (4) value-based education. The convergence is meaningful but partial. NEP 2020 is a contemporary public policy framework, whereas the Bhagavad Gita is a philosophical and religiously significant text from a different historical context. The two should therefore be read in dialogue rather than treated as equivalent frameworks.

NEP 2020 orientation	Selected Gita concept	Possible educational interpretation	Caution
Holistic development	Karma, Jnana, Bhakti; self-regulation	Integration of cognitive, ethical, reflective, and practical dimensions of learning.	Avoid reducing holistic education to a religious programme.
Critical/reflection-based learning	Dialogue, discernment, self-examination	Use questioning, deliberation, ethical case discussion, and reflective activities.	The Gita should not be presented as a substitute for modern critical-thinking pedagogy.
Skill and action-oriented learning	Karma Yoga; disciplined action	Emphasize process, responsibility, perseverance, and quality of action.	Nishkama Karma does not imply indifference to learning outcomes.

Value-based education	Ahimsa, truthfulness, compassion, self-control	Develop ethical reasoning, empathy, responsibility, and social awareness.	Values must be taught inclusively and without coercive religious instruction.
-----------------------	--	---	---

4.1 Holistic Development

NEP 2020 presents holistic development as a central educational aim and encourages a broad curriculum incorporating arts, sports, languages, culture, values, and vocational exposure. It also emphasizes physical and psychological well-being. The Bhagavad Gita can be read as supporting an integrated conception of human development through its discussion of knowledge, disciplined action, devotion, self-control, and ethical responsibility.

Chapter 2, verse 47 is particularly relevant to the educational interpretation of action. The verse is commonly understood as emphasizing commitment to action without attachment to its fruits. In a pedagogical context, this may be interpreted as encouraging learners to value disciplined engagement with learning rather than becoming exclusively preoccupied with grades or external rewards. Such an interpretation should not be taken to mean that assessment and achievement are unimportant; rather, it suggests balancing outcomes with the quality of the learning process.

4.2 Critical and Reflective Thinking

NEP 2020 encourages inquiry, questioning, discussion, analysis, problem-solving, and experiential learning. The dialogical structure of the Bhagavad Gita provides a useful philosophical example of learning through questioning. Arjuna does not begin the dialogue as a passive recipient of information; he expresses doubt and confusion, and the teacher responds through explanation, argument, conceptual distinctions, and ethical reasoning.

Chapter 6, verse 5, which describes the mind as capable of functioning as both a friend and an adversary, may be interpreted educationally in relation to self-regulation and metacognition. The educational implication is not that the verse scientifically establishes a theory of cognition, but that it can provide a culturally meaningful prompt for reflection on attention, self-control, decision-making, and personal responsibility.

4.3 Skill Development and Action-Oriented Learning

NEP 2020 seeks to reduce excessive dependence on rote learning and create opportunities for experiential, practical, vocational, and competency-oriented learning. The Gita's sustained emphasis on action provides a complementary philosophical vocabulary for discussing responsibility and disciplined performance.

Karma Yoga can be interpreted as an orientation towards responsible action in which the learner develops commitment to the task rather than being governed entirely by external rewards. In contemporary pedagogy, this perspective may support project work, collaborative tasks, community engagement, internships, and reflective portfolios. The key principle is not withdrawal from achievement but the development of a responsible relationship with action.

4.4 Value-Based Education

Value-based education is another area of convergence. NEP 2020 emphasizes ethical, rational, compassionate, and responsible learners. Chapter 16 of the Bhagavad Gita describes qualities such as fearlessness, purity of mind, self-control, charity, straightforwardness, and compassion. These qualities can be examined as themes for ethical dialogue and character education.

However, the educational use of such material requires particular care. In a pluralistic public education system, the purpose should be to develop ethical reasoning and universal human values rather than to impose religious belief. The same principle can be applied to other Indian and world philosophical traditions, thereby maintaining inclusivity and respecting constitutional commitments to equality and freedom of conscience.

5. Interpretive Perspectives on the Bhagavad Gita

5.1 Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi's reading of the Gita placed considerable emphasis on ethical action, self-discipline, and the moral struggle within the individual. In an educational interpretation, this perspective can support discussion of responsibility, ethical decision-making, and the relationship between personal conduct and social well-being. Gandhi's interpretation also illustrates why the Gita should be approached as a text open to philosophical interpretation rather than as a single fixed pedagogical manual.

5.2 Aldous Huxley

Huxley's engagement with Indian philosophical traditions contributed to a universalist reading of the Gita. His perspective is useful in the present study because it highlights questions of inner discipline, consciousness, and the relationship between spiritual insight and ordinary life. Educationally, these themes may be connected to reflection and self-awareness, but claims about psychological or educational effectiveness require empirical evidence.

5.3 A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

Prabhupada's interpretation places strong emphasis on devotion, duty, and action oriented toward the Supreme. His commentarial tradition can help clarify the devotional dimensions of Karma Yoga and Svadharma. For public education, however, the devotional interpretation should be distinguished from a secular educational application. The latter may draw on concepts such as responsibility and disciplined action without requiring students to adopt a particular religious belief.

6. DISCUSSION

The central finding of the conceptual analysis is that the strongest relationship between NEP 2020 and the Bhagavad Gita lies not in direct policy derivation but in thematic resonance. Both can be read as challenging a narrow view of education based solely on the accumulation of information. NEP 2020 explicitly seeks broader human development, while the Gita addresses the formation of judgment, responsibility, self-discipline, and ethical action.

A second implication concerns the teacher's role. The Gita's teacher-learner dialogue can be interpreted as a model for education in which learners are invited to articulate uncertainty and engage in reasoned reflection. This is compatible with discussion-based and inquiry-oriented pedagogy, but it should not be presented as evidence that the Gita anticipated modern educational science in a literal sense.

A third implication concerns assessment. Nishkama Karma offers a philosophical basis for distinguishing intrinsic engagement with learning from excessive fixation on external rewards. This may be relevant to competency-based and formative assessment, where feedback and learning processes are valued alongside final performance. Nevertheless, this is a conceptual proposition that requires empirical testing.

A fourth implication concerns culturally responsive education. The inclusion of Indian knowledge traditions can make curriculum more culturally meaningful when undertaken critically and inclusively. The Gita may be one

resource among many, alongside Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Islamic, Christian, tribal, regional, and modern philosophical traditions. Such plurality is essential if cultural integration is to strengthen rather than narrow educational possibilities.

6.1 Proposed Pedagogical Framework

On the basis of the thematic analysis, a four-component framework is proposed for future curriculum and teacher education research:

- Reflective learning: use structured reflection, questioning, journaling, and ethical case analysis to develop self-awareness and reasoned judgment.
- Responsible action: connect learning with projects, community engagement, collaborative work, and reflection on consequences.
- Ethical dialogue: examine values such as compassion, truthfulness, responsibility, and self-control through multiple philosophical and cultural perspectives.
- Process-oriented learning: encourage learners to focus on sustained effort, feedback, improvement, and meaningful engagement rather than only external rewards.

This framework is intentionally non-prescriptive. It does not recommend compulsory religious instruction. Instead, it positions selected philosophical ideas as objects of critical study and reflective learning within an inclusive curriculum.

7. Educational Implications

- Teacher education: Teacher-education programmes may include comparative modules on Indian knowledge traditions, ethics, and reflective pedagogy, with attention to multiple interpretations and constitutional values.
- Classroom pedagogy: Teachers may use dialogue, ethical dilemmas, reflective journals, case studies, project-based learning, and process-focused feedback to operationalize the broader principles discussed in this paper.
- Curriculum development: Selected philosophical concepts may be integrated through interdisciplinary approaches involving education, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, and social studies.
- Student development: Carefully designed activities may explore self-regulation, responsibility, empathy, resilience, and ethical reasoning without requiring religious adherence.
- Research and policy: Future studies should empirically test whether culturally grounded educational modules influence measurable outcomes such as ethical reasoning, resilience, engagement, self-regulation, and well-being.

8. Limitations of the Study

- The study is conceptual and document-based; it does not provide primary empirical evidence from students or teachers.
- Interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita is inherently plural, and the present paper examines only selected concepts and selected interpretive traditions.
- The proposed pedagogical relationships are conceptual associations rather than causal claims.
- The study focuses primarily on school education and does not systematically examine higher education, teacher education, or vocational education implementation.
- The paper does not evaluate the effectiveness of any specific Gita-based instructional intervention.

9. Directions for Future Research

- Develop and validate culturally responsive instructional modules based on clearly defined philosophical concepts.
- Conduct quasi-experimental and longitudinal studies examining outcomes such as resilience, ethical reasoning, self-regulation, engagement, and well-being.
- Compare Gita-based modules with secular values-education and positive-education interventions using appropriate control conditions.

- Examine how students from different linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds interpret the same philosophical material.
- Investigate teacher attitudes, preparedness, and perceived challenges in integrating Indian knowledge traditions into NEP 2020-aligned pedagogy.
- Use mixed-methods designs to combine measurable learner outcomes with qualitative accounts of student and teacher experiences.

10. CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Bhagavad Gita and NEP 2020 is best understood as a field of philosophical and pedagogical dialogue rather than as a direct line of policy derivation. The analysis identified meaningful convergences around holistic development, reflective thinking, responsible action, self-regulation, and ethical education. These convergences suggest that selected concepts such as Nishkama Karma, Svadharma, disciplined action, and ethical conduct can provide culturally situated prompts for educational reflection.

At the same time, the educational use of the Gita requires methodological and constitutional caution. A pluralistic education system should not convert a philosophically rich religious text into compulsory belief or instruction. Instead, its ideas may be studied critically alongside other knowledge traditions and translated into inclusive educational practices such as dialogue, reflection, ethical reasoning, project work, and process-oriented learning. The contribution of this paper is therefore not a claim that the Bhagavad Gita provides a complete pedagogy for NEP 2020, but a framework for examining how selected Indian philosophical resources may enrich contemporary educational thought while remaining empirically testable, academically rigorous, and inclusive.

REFERENCES

1. Aurobindo, S. (1950). *Essays on the Gita*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
2. Dabas, P., & Singh, A. (2016). The Bhagavad Gita teachings for promoting resilience and optimism among school children: A narrative overview. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(2), 232.
3. Dabas, P., & Singh, A. (2018). Bhagavad Gita teachings and positive psychology: Efficacy for semi-urban Indian students of NCR. *Cogent Psychology*, 5(1), 1467255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2018.1467255>
4. Davis, R. H. (2014). *The Bhagavad Gita: A biography*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400851972>
5. Gandhi, M. K. (1929). *The Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi*. Navajivan Publishing House.
6. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.
7. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020: Background note*. Government of India.
8. Maharaj, G. M. S. G., Ahuja, M., & Malhotra, A. K. (2021). Implementation of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India: A perspective on pedagogy from Bhagwad Gita. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 8(8), 144–158. <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v8i8.3844>
9. NCTE. (2021). *National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST): Draft for public consultation*. National Council for Teacher Education, Government of India.
10. Prabhupada, A. C. B. S. (1972). *Bhagavad-gita as it is*. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.
11. Radhakrishnan, S. (1948). *The Bhagavadgita*. George Allen & Unwin.
12. UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. UNESCO.