



Holistic education in ancient India: Relevance of vedic and buddhist educational philosophy for 21st century education

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Abstract

Holistic education has gained renewed attention in the 21st century as educators and policymakers seek alternatives to examination driven and skill centred models of learning. While current debates often emphasize critical thinking, emotional wellbeing and ethical development, similar concerns occupied an important place in the educational philosophies of ancient India. Vedic and Buddhist traditions viewed education as a process of shaping the whole person by integrating intellectual growth with moral responsibility, self discipline and social commitment. Even so, these traditions are usually examined separately or presented in idealized forms leaving a gap in comparative and policy oriented scholarship. This paper examines the holistic educational philosophies of the Vedic and Buddhist traditions and evaluates their relevance for contemporary education. It compares their educational aims, teacher-student relationships, curriculum, pedagogical practices and ethical foundations while assessing their contribution to current educational reforms. This study adopts a qualitative-historical and comparative research design based on documentary analysis of primary texts and contemporary educational scholarship. The analysis shows that both traditions promoted holistic learning, experiential education and character formation, although they differed in their understanding of authority, methods of inquiry and institutional organization. Vedic education emphasized dharma, self-realization and the Guru-Shishya relationship whereas Buddhist education encouraged critical inquiry, dialogue and intellectual openness through monastic universities. The paper argues that these traditions continue to offer valuable insights for value education, teacher development and learner centred pedagogy. At the same time, their historical limitations require careful and secular interpretation before they are adapted to 21st century educational contexts.

Keywords: Holistic education, ancient Indian education, vedic education, buddhist education, NEP 2020, educational philosophy, value education

Introduction

The idea of holistic education has gained renewed importance in the 21st century as education systems across the world attempt to respond to challenges that cannot be addressed through examination based learning alone. Increasing concerns about student wellbeing, ethical decline, mental health, employability and the limitations of standardized testing have encouraged educators to rethink the broader purpose of education. Learning is now expected to develop intellectual ability alongside emotional maturity, ethical responsibility and social awareness. The shift is noticeable. International organizations such as UNESCO have emphasized learner centred education, critical thinking and lifelong learning while India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [5] similarly advocates multidisciplinary education, experiential learning and the integration of Indian knowledge traditions into contemporary curricula (Government of India, 2020) [5]. This renewed interest has brought ancient Indian educational philosophy back into academic discussions particularly the Vedic and Buddhist traditions, both of which viewed education as a process of developing the whole person rather than merely preparing individuals for occupations. Their educational systems emphasized character formation, self discipline, reflection, community life and the integration of knowledge with ethical conduct. Recent sociological research also suggests that indigenous knowledge systems survived through religious communities, monastic institutions and ascetic traditions where learning occurred through observation,

dialogue and lived experience rather than formal schooling alone (Mitra, 2025a) [6]. These historical traditions therefore provide valuable perspectives for contemporary debates on holistic education, although they require careful interpretation within present social realities rather than simple revival (Alam, 2024; Government of India, 2020 [1, 5]; National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2024; Mitra, 2025a) [8, 9].

Despite growing scholarly interest, important gaps remain in the existing literature. Much of the available research celebrates ancient Indian education as an ideal model without critically examining its historical context or internal diversity. Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophies are frequently studied as separate traditions leaving limited space for systematic comparison of their educational aims, teaching methods and social foundations. Another limitation is that educational history often receives descriptive treatment while sociological questions concerning knowledge, authority, religion and power remain underexplored. Comparative sociological studies have shown that religious beliefs concerning sacredness, morality and symbolic order shaped educational values and institutional authority in important ways yet these insights have rarely been integrated into educational research (Mitra, 2025b) [7]. Similarly, although concepts such as experiential learning, value education and holistic development are central to current educational reforms, few studies examine how these contemporary concerns relate to ancient Indian educational philosophy while also recognizing its historical

limitations. The relationship between ancient educational thought and the educational needs of the 21st century therefore remains insufficiently explored. Against this background, the present study addresses four interrelated questions. First, what were the defining features of holistic education in the Vedic and Buddhist traditions? Second, how did these educational philosophies differ in their understanding of educational aims, curriculum, teacher-student relationships and methods of learning? Third, which elements of these traditions continue to hold relevance for contemporary education particularly in relation to holistic development, experiential learning and critical thinking? Finally, what limitations should be recognized before adapting ancient educational ideas to present educational policy and classroom practice? These questions guide the comparative analysis developed throughout this paper.

The study has four objectives. It first examines the philosophical foundations of holistic education within the Vedic and Buddhist traditions by analysing their educational aims, pedagogical principles and institutional practices. It then compares these educational models to identify both shared values and significant differences. This paper further evaluates their relevance for contemporary educational reforms particularly in relation to the National Education Policy 2020 [5], learner centred education and value based learning. Finally, it identifies the strengths of these traditions while acknowledging their historical limitations arguing that ancient educational philosophies should inform present educational thinking through critical and secular interpretation rather than romantic reconstruction. Such an approach is also supported by recent sociological studies showing that indigenous knowledge traditions evolved through changing religious institutions and social contexts rather than remaining static across history (Mitra, 2025a; Mitra, 2025c) [7].

Literature Review

The idea of holistic education occupies a central place in discussions of ancient Indian educational philosophy. Rather than treating education as the acquisition of information or vocational training, ancient educational traditions viewed learning as a lifelong process that shaped intellectual ability, moral character and spiritual awareness together. Education aimed to transform the individual. Historical studies consistently note that learning extended beyond formal instruction because students were expected to cultivate discipline, self control, truthfulness and responsibility through daily practice as well as scholarly study. NCERT describes this educational philosophy as an integrated approach that sought harmony between physical, intellectual and spiritual development while encouraging ethical conduct and social responsibility (NCERT, 2024). Similarly, works on the history of Indian education argue that self realization (moksha) and character formation remained central educational goals, although practical disciplines such as grammar, medicine, astronomy, mathematics and political thought also formed important parts of the curriculum (Pradhan *et al.*, 2024) [11]. Ancient educational institutions therefore aimed to prepare individuals not merely for occupations but for responsible participation in social and moral life. Recent sociological research reinforces this understanding by demonstrating that knowledge systems in India were preserved through religious communities where education continued through

observation, practice and collective life instead of classroom instruction alone. Mitra's (2025a) [6] study of Vaishnav ascetics shows that learning remained deeply embedded within everyday religious practice suggesting continuity between ancient educational ideals and later indigenous knowledge traditions. Together, these studies indicate that holistic education in ancient India combined intellectual development with ethical discipline, community life and personal transformation making it fundamentally different from narrowly examination oriented models of education.

The Vedic educational tradition represents one of the earliest systematic expressions of holistic learning in India. Education was grounded in the concepts of dharma and moksha where knowledge was expected to guide individuals towards ethical living and ultimately spiritual liberation. Learning therefore carried both social and philosophical significance. The Guru-Shishya relationship formed the foundation of this educational model because students lived with the Guru in residential Gurukulas where education developed through close interaction, observation, discussion and participation in everyday activities. Experiential learning occupied an important place within this system as students combined scriptural study with practical responsibilities, physical labour and disciplined living. The curriculum extended beyond the Vedas and Upanishads to include grammar, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, agriculture and statecraft reflecting an educational philosophy that sought balance between intellectual inquiry and practical knowledge (NCERT, 2024; Pradhan *et al.*, 2024) [2, 11]. Rather than separating moral education from academic learning, Vedic thought integrated the two within a single educational process. Yet historians also point out that educational opportunities gradually became shaped by caste and gender distinctions during the later Vedic period reminding us that educational ideals coexisted with social inequalities. This complexity requires careful interpretation instead of idealized celebration. Recent comparative sociological work further suggests that concepts of sacredness and moral order strongly influenced educational authority within Vedic society giving religious institutions an important role in defining legitimate knowledge and educational practice (Mitra, 2025b) [6].

Buddhist educational philosophy developed a different understanding of holistic education while preserving the belief that learning should transform both the individual and society. Unlike the Vedic emphasis on preserving sacred knowledge, Buddhist education encouraged pragmatic learning through observation, dialogue and rational inquiry. Intellectual curiosity mattered. Monastic institutions gradually evolved into organized centres of higher learning where philosophy, medicine, grammar, logic, astronomy and languages were studied alongside Buddhist teachings. Nalanda, Vikramashila and other Mahaviharas became internationally respected centres of scholarship because they welcomed students from different regions and promoted open debate as an essential method of learning. Critical inquiry therefore occupied a more visible place within Buddhist education than unquestioned acceptance of authority. Compassion, ethical conduct and mindfulness remained central educational values, yet these ideals were supported through discussion, reasoning and reflective practice rather than ritual instruction alone. Historical studies emphasize that Buddhist educational institutions encouraged broader social participation and intellectual

exchange while contributing significantly to the spread of knowledge across Asia (Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Pradhan *et al.*, 2024) ^[2]. Recent research also argues that the remarkable expansion of Buddhism throughout Asia depended largely on these educational institutions and their transregional scholarly networks, while their decline in India reflected wider socio-political changes rather than weaknesses in Buddhist educational philosophy itself (Mitra, 2025c) ^[8]. This interpretation highlights the historical importance of Buddhist universities as centres of holistic learning that combined ethical education with critical scholarship.

Contemporary discussions on holistic education reveal striking similarities with several principles found in ancient Indian educational philosophy. International organizations such as UNESCO increasingly emphasize education that develops cognitive, emotional, ethical and social abilities together rather than focusing exclusively on academic performance. Similar priorities appear in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 ^[5] which promotes multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking, experiential education, value-based learning and the integration of Indian knowledge traditions into contemporary curricula (Government of India, 2020) ^[5]. Social-emotional learning has likewise become an important area of educational research because schools are expected to cultivate empathy, resilience, cooperation and responsible citizenship alongside academic achievement. These developments suggest that many educational concerns regarded as modern have deeper historical roots. Even so, ancient educational philosophies cannot simply be transferred to present educational systems because they emerged within social contexts shaped by religious authority, caste hierarchy and historical conditions that differ substantially from those of contemporary democratic societies. Their relevance therefore lies less in institutional imitation than in educational principles that can be interpreted critically within secular and inclusive educational frameworks.

Although scholarship on ancient Indian education has expanded considerably during the past two decades, an important gap remains. Much of the literature continues to provide descriptive historical accounts or focuses exclusively on either Vedic or Buddhist educational traditions without placing them within a shared analytical framework. Comparative studies remain relatively limited, and sociological perspectives receive far less attention than philosophical or historical interpretations. Policy oriented analyses that connect ancient educational thought with present educational reforms are also comparatively scarce. Recent sociological contributions have demonstrated the value of examining indigenous knowledge systems (Mitra, 2025a) ^[6], symbolic structures of religious thought (Mitra, 2025b) ^[6] and the historical role of Buddhist educational institutions (Mitra, 2025c) ^[8] yet these insights have rarely been integrated into discussions of holistic education. This article addresses that gap by comparing Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophies through a historical, comparative and sociological perspective while evaluating their relevance for 21st century education. Such an approach moves beyond historical description and contributes to ongoing debates on holistic learning, educational reform and Indian knowledge traditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the relevance of Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophy for 21st century education through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines the educational philosophy of John Dewey with the sociological perspective of Émile Durkheim and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach. No single theory adequately explains the many dimensions of holistic education because education involves intellectual development, moral formation, social participation and individual freedom at the same time. A combined framework therefore provides a more comprehensive basis for interpreting ancient educational traditions. Dewey's emphasis on experiential learning explains how knowledge develops through participation and reflection, Durkheim highlights the moral and social functions of education and Nussbaum extends the discussion by emphasizing critical thinking, human capabilities and democratic citizenship. Together, these perspectives allow ancient educational ideas to be interpreted within contemporary educational debates rather than as historical relics or idealized cultural models.

John Dewey's educational philosophy serves as the primary theoretical framework because his concept of 'learning by doing' closely parallels important features of both Vedic and Buddhist education. Dewey argued that education should emerge from meaningful experience instead of passive memorization, with learners actively participating in the process of constructing knowledge (Dewey, 1938) ^[3]. This perspective resonates strongly with the Guru-Shishya tradition where students learned through daily interaction with the teacher, participation in community life and practical responsibilities rather than through formal lectures alone. Similarly, Buddhist monastic education emphasized observation, dialogue, meditation and intellectual debate allowing learners to develop understanding through inquiry and lived experience. Learning remained connected with life. Dewey also viewed education as preparation for democratic participation by encouraging independent thinking, problem solving and reflective judgment. Although ancient Indian educational institutions developed within very different political contexts, both Vedic and Buddhist traditions regarded education as a process of developing responsible individuals capable of contributing to society through ethical conduct and disciplined reasoning. Dewey's theory therefore provides an effective framework for understanding the experiential and learner centred dimensions of ancient Indian educational philosophy while connecting them with contemporary discussions on holistic education and experiential learning.

Durkheim's sociology of education complements Dewey by explaining the moral and social purposes of education. For Durkheim (1922/1977) ^[4], education was not merely concerned with intellectual development but with transmitting the shared values that enable societies to function cohesively. Moral education occupied a central position. This perspective helps explain why both Vedic and Buddhist educational systems devoted considerable attention to ethical conduct, discipline and social responsibility alongside intellectual training. In the Vedic tradition, concepts such as dharma, self restraint and respect for the Guru shaped the moral foundations of education while Buddhist education emphasized compassion, mindfulness and ethical behaviour as essential elements of learning. These traditions differed philosophically, yet both

understood education as a means of cultivating individuals capable of sustaining social harmony. Durkheim's concept of social integration therefore provides a useful sociological explanation for why moral education remained inseparable from intellectual development in ancient India.

Martha Nussbaum's capability approach extends this discussion by shifting attention from educational institutions to the development of human capabilities required for democratic citizenship. Nussbaum (2010) ^[10] argues that education should enable individuals to think critically, exercise imagination, respect cultural diversity and participate responsibly in public life. Her framework is particularly relevant because it moves beyond economic definitions of educational success and emphasizes human flourishing. Several of these ideas find important parallels within Buddhist educational philosophy which encouraged questioning, dialogue and rational inquiry, as well as within the Vedic emphasis on self-knowledge, ethical responsibility and personal discipline. At the same time, Nussbaum's work provides a critical perspective by reminding us that educational traditions should be evaluated according to their ability to promote inclusion, equality and individual freedom. This consideration is especially important because ancient educational systems also reflected historical inequalities related to caste and gender. Bringing Dewey, Durkheim and Nussbaum together therefore creates a balanced analytical framework that recognizes the educational strengths of Vedic and Buddhist philosophy while allowing their relevance for contemporary democratic education to be assessed critically rather than uncritically.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design because its primary objective is to understand the educational philosophies of the Vedic and Buddhist traditions and examine their relevance for contemporary education rather than measure educational outcomes through quantitative methods. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for exploring philosophical ideas, historical developments and educational values embedded in ancient texts and historical scholarship. The study also follows a historical and comparative design, allowing educational concepts to be interpreted within their original socio-cultural contexts while identifying similarities and differences between the two traditions. An interpretive perspective guides the analysis throughout the study because ancient educational texts often express normative ideals rather than direct descriptions of educational practice. Historical evidence therefore requires contextual interpretation rather than literal reading. Combining historical inquiry with comparative educational analysis enables a deeper understanding of how holistic education evolved across different religious traditions and how these ideas continue to influence present educational thought.

The research is based on documentary research and comparative textual analysis. Documentary research provides a suitable method because the educational philosophies examined belong to historical periods where textual sources remain the principal evidence for reconstructing educational ideas and institutional practices. Comparative textual analysis allows educational concepts to be examined across traditions without assuming that they developed under identical historical conditions. Instead of

treating Vedic and Buddhist education as isolated systems, the study analyses how each tradition understood knowledge, moral education, teacher-student relationships and educational aims within its own philosophical framework. This approach also makes it possible to compare ancient educational principles with contemporary discussions on holistic learning, value education and learner-centred pedagogy. The objective is not simply to describe educational institutions but to interpret their continuing significance for educational theory and policy.

The analysis draws upon both primary and secondary sources to ensure historical depth and scholarly balance. Primary sources include the Rigveda, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Tripitaka and Jataka literature, which together represent the principal philosophical foundations of Vedic and Buddhist educational thought. These texts provide insights into educational aims, ethical principles, concepts of knowledge and methods of teaching. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, NCERT publications on the ancient Indian education system, the National Education Policy 2020 ^[5], UNESCO reports on holistic and lifelong learning and recent interdisciplinary studies on religion, education and Indian knowledge traditions. Bringing these sources together enables the study to compare historical educational philosophies with contemporary educational discourse while maintaining analytical balance between historical evidence and present policy debates.

Purposive sampling has been employed to select texts and scholarly works that are directly relevant to the objectives of the study. The selection is guided by three criteria like historical significance, contribution to educational philosophy and relevance to contemporary educational debates. The study does not attempt to include every available historical source; rather, it focuses on texts that have exercised lasting influence on educational thought in India. The analysis combines thematic analysis, comparative analysis and interpretive analysis. Educational ideas are organized around recurring themes such as holistic development, moral education, experiential learning, teacher-student relationships, critical inquiry and educational values before being compared across Vedic and Buddhist traditions. This thematic organization makes it possible to identify both shared principles and distinctive philosophical orientations while relating them to present educational concerns.

The scope of the study is limited to the Vedic period, the Buddhist period and contemporary educational reforms, particularly debates surrounding holistic education and the National Education Policy 2020 ^[5]. Later educational developments are considered only where they provide useful historical continuity. Certain limitations should also be acknowledged. The research is based entirely on historical documents and published scholarship and therefore does not include fieldwork, interviews or empirical observation. Furthermore, the analysis focuses exclusively on Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophies and does not examine Jain, Islamic or other educational traditions in detail. Despite these limitations, the use of diverse historical texts, contemporary educational literature and comparative interpretation provides a robust framework for examining the continuing relevance of ancient Indian educational philosophy for 21st century education.

Holistic Education in Vedic Philosophy

Vedic educational philosophy developed one of the earliest and most comprehensive models of holistic education in human civilization. Rather than limiting education to literacy or vocational preparation, it sought to cultivate the intellectual, moral, physical and spiritual dimensions of human life simultaneously. Education was understood as a transformative process that enabled individuals to realize their full potential while contributing to social harmony. Knowledge carried ethical responsibility. The ultimate purpose of learning was not merely the acquisition of information but the formation of a disciplined, self-aware and socially responsible individual capable of living according to dharma. This philosophy rested upon the belief that education should bring harmony between the individual, society and the cosmic order, making learning an integral part of everyday life instead of a separate institutional activity (NCERT, 2024; Pradhan *et al.*, 2024) ^[11].

The educational aims of the Vedic tradition revolved around the interconnected concepts of dharma, moksha and self-realization. Dharma provided the ethical foundation of education by guiding individuals towards truthfulness, self-discipline, compassion and social responsibility. Students were expected to develop moral judgment alongside intellectual competence because knowledge without ethical conduct was considered incomplete. The pursuit of moksha, or liberation, represented the highest educational goal, although it was understood not simply as a religious objective but as the attainment of wisdom, self control and inner freedom through disciplined living. Self realization therefore became a continuous educational process in which learners gradually developed intellectual understanding together with emotional balance and spiritual awareness. This educational vision differed markedly from contemporary systems that often measure success through examination scores or professional qualifications. Instead, Vedic education evaluated learning through the development of character, ethical conduct and personal transformation. Recent studies on indigenous knowledge systems similarly argue that Indian educational traditions emphasized lived experience and moral practice as essential components of knowledge suggesting that intellectual growth was inseparable from ethical life (Mitra, 2025a) ^[6].

The curriculum of Vedic education reflected this broad educational philosophy. Although the Vedas and Upanishads formed the intellectual and spiritual core of learning, education extended well beyond religious instruction. Students studied grammar, linguistics, philosophy, logic, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, agriculture, music, poetry and political thought according to their interests and stage of learning. Physical education also occupied an important place through activities that promoted health, endurance and discipline, including exercise, archery, wrestling and other martial skills. The curriculum therefore sought to balance intellectual inquiry with practical competence, artistic expression and physical well being. Such diversity demonstrates that Vedic education was never confined exclusively to ritual or theology. It recognized that society required individuals possessing many forms of knowledge and practical ability. Historical studies consequently describe Vedic education as multidisciplinary long before the emergence of the modern university system (Bhat & Javaid, 2024; NCERT, 2024) ^[2].

This broad curriculum resonates with present educational reforms that encourage interdisciplinary learning rather than narrow specialization.

Central to the Vedic educational system was the Guru–Shishya relationship, which distinguished learning as a deeply personal and ethical process. Education took place primarily within residential Gurukulas where students lived with the Guru for extended periods, participating in household activities while receiving intellectual and moral instruction. The relationship extended beyond formal teaching because the Guru served simultaneously as educator, mentor and moral guide. Students learned by observing conduct as much as by studying texts. Character formation therefore occupied a central position in Vedic pedagogy. Qualities such as humility, honesty, patience, self-restraint, respect for elders and commitment to truth were cultivated through everyday interaction and disciplined living rather than through abstract moral lessons. Experiential learning emerged naturally within this environment because education combined reading, discussion, observation, physical work and practical responsibilities. Learning happened through experience. This educational model anticipated many ideas associated with modern learner-centred education, particularly the belief that knowledge develops through active participation instead of passive reception. Dewey's concept of "learning by doing" finds a striking parallel in this educational tradition, even though the philosophical foundations differ considerably (Dewey, 1938) ^[3].

Despite its many strengths, the contemporary relevance of Vedic educational philosophy lies less in reproducing ancient institutions than in adapting its educational principles to present democratic societies. Current educational debates increasingly emphasize holistic development, value education, experiential learning, emotional well-being and multidisciplinary curricula, concerns that closely resemble important aspects of Vedic educational thought. The National Education Policy 2020 ^[5] similarly encourages learner-centred education, ethical development and greater engagement with Indian knowledge traditions while remaining committed to scientific inquiry and constitutional values (Government of India, 2020) ^[5]. Nevertheless, the historical limitations of Vedic education must also be acknowledged. Access to formal learning gradually became influenced by caste and gender distinctions, restricting educational opportunities for many sections of society. These inequalities cannot be overlooked when drawing lessons from the past. Contemporary educational practice should therefore adopt the inclusive principles of holistic learning, teacher mentorship and experiential education while rejecting historical forms of exclusion. Interpreted in this critical manner, Vedic educational philosophy continues to offer valuable insights for building educational systems that promote intellectual excellence together with ethical responsibility, personal growth and social commitment.

Holistic Education in Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhist educational philosophy developed a distinctive model of holistic education that combined intellectual inquiry with ethical living and personal transformation. While the Vedic tradition emphasized dharma and moksha, Buddhist education centred on the cultivation of wisdom (prajñā), compassion (karuṇā) and liberation from suffering

(nirvana). Education was understood as a continuous process of understanding oneself and the world through disciplined reflection, observation and ethical conduct. Knowledge alone was not sufficient. Learners were expected to develop qualities such as mindfulness, empathy, self control and social responsibility alongside intellectual ability. This broad conception of education reflected the Buddha's belief that ignorance was the root of human suffering and that genuine learning should cultivate both rational understanding and moral awareness. Consequently, Buddhist education sought to develop balanced individuals capable of critical reflection while remaining committed to compassion and social welfare. Historical studies therefore describe Buddhist education as one of the earliest educational traditions to combine philosophical inquiry with practical ethics in a systematic manner (Bhat & Javaid, 2024; Pradhan *et al.*, 2024) ^[2].

The educational aims of Buddhist philosophy were closely connected with the pursuit of nirvana, although this objective extended beyond religious salvation. Nirvana represented the attainment of wisdom through freedom from ignorance, attachment and suffering making education an instrument of intellectual and ethical transformation. Wisdom occupied a central position because learners were encouraged to examine experience critically rather than accept ideas solely on the basis of tradition or authority. Compassion formed the second major educational objective encouraging students to develop concern for the welfare of others while recognizing the interdependence of human life. Education therefore sought to create thoughtful individuals whose intellectual development was inseparable from ethical conduct. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that knowledge should lead to right understanding and right action making education both a personal and social responsibility. This emphasis on reflective learning distinguished Buddhist educational philosophy from approaches based primarily on memorization or ritual instruction. Contemporary sociological studies likewise argue that Buddhist educational institutions became important centres for preserving intellectual traditions through dialogue, ethical practice and collective learning rather than merely transmitting religious doctrine (Mitra, 2025c) ^[6].

The curriculum of Buddhist education reflected this broad understanding of knowledge. Although Buddhist philosophy and monastic discipline remained central, students also studied logic, medicine, linguistics, grammar, literature, astronomy and philosophy. Learning extended into many disciplines. Subjects were selected not only for their practical usefulness but also for their contribution to intellectual development and ethical reasoning. The inclusion of medicine demonstrated concern for public welfare while the study of logic and philosophy encouraged analytical thinking and reasoned argument. Language education enabled students to preserve and transmit knowledge across different regions, contributing to the remarkable spread of Buddhism throughout Asia. Buddhist educational institutions therefore became centres of multidisciplinary learning rather than narrowly religious schools. Historical evidence from Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri and other Mahaviharas indicates that students from different parts of Asia gathered to study under distinguished scholars creating vibrant intellectual

communities characterized by scholarly exchange and cultural interaction. Recent historical research argues that the flourishing of Buddhism across Asia depended largely on these educational networks whose influence extended far beyond religious instruction into philosophy, science and intercultural dialogue (Mitra, 2025c) ^[7].

The institutional organization of Buddhist education further strengthened its holistic character. Monastic universities such as Nalanda and Vikramashila developed sophisticated systems of teaching, residential learning and scholarly discussion that attracted students from China, Tibet, Korea, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. These institutions encouraged open debate as an essential educational method because truth was expected to emerge through careful reasoning rather than unquestioned acceptance of authority. Debate occupied a central place. Students participated in structured philosophical discussions where ideas were examined critically and competing interpretations were evaluated through logic and evidence. This emphasis on dialogue cultivated habits of independent thinking while encouraging intellectual humility. Teachers functioned as mentors and scholars rather than unquestionable authorities, creating an educational environment where questioning was viewed as an important part of learning. Buddhist educational philosophy also displayed a comparatively broader concern for equality by admitting students from different social backgrounds into monastic communities, although complete social equality was not always achieved in practice. Compared with many contemporary educational systems of the ancient world, however, Buddhist institutions provided relatively greater opportunities for intellectual mobility and scholarly participation across regional and cultural boundaries (Alam, 2024; Bhat & Javaid, 2024) ^[1, 2].

The relevance of Buddhist educational philosophy for contemporary education is increasingly recognized because many of its core principles correspond closely with current educational priorities. Modern educational reforms emphasize critical thinking, experiential learning, emotional wellbeing, intercultural understanding and ethical citizenship, concerns that closely resemble the Buddhist educational emphasis on inquiry, compassion and reflective learning. The National Education Policy 2020 ^[5] similarly encourages multidisciplinary education, flexibility, problem solving and learner centred pedagogy while UNESCO advocates educational approaches that promote peace, global citizenship and lifelong learning (Government of India, 2020 ^[5]; UNESCO, 2021). Buddhist educational philosophy offers valuable insights into these discussions by demonstrating how intellectual excellence can coexist with ethical responsibility and emotional awareness. At the same time, its historical context should not be ignored. Monastic education developed within specific religious institutions and cannot simply be transferred to modern secular education without critical adaptation. Contemporary educational systems must therefore draw upon principles such as dialogue, compassion, critical inquiry and holistic development while remaining committed to constitutional values, scientific reasoning and educational inclusion. Understood in this way, Buddhist educational philosophy continues to provide a significant intellectual resource for building educational systems that value knowledge, humanity and democratic participation together.

Comparative Analysis: Vedic and Buddhist Educational Philosophy

Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophies emerged from different religious traditions, yet both developed comprehensive approaches to education that extended well beyond the transmission of knowledge. Their educational systems sought to cultivate the intellectual, moral and personal development of learners while preparing them to contribute meaningfully to society. This shared commitment to holistic education forms an important point of convergence between the two traditions. Nevertheless, they differed in their philosophical assumptions, institutional organization and pedagogical methods. A comparative perspective therefore helps explain both the continuity and diversity of ancient Indian educational thought. Rather than viewing these traditions as competing models, they may be understood as complementary approaches that addressed different dimensions of human learning and development.

The educational aims of the two traditions reveal both common aspirations and significant differences. Vedic education regarded dharma, self-realization and ultimately moksha as the highest objectives of learning. Education sought to cultivate moral discipline, spiritual awareness and responsible social conduct through the guidance of the Guru. Buddhist education likewise viewed learning as a path toward liberation, but it emphasized nirvana, wisdom and compassion through critical understanding rather than ritual knowledge. The role of the teacher also reflected these philosophical orientations. In the Vedic tradition, the Guru functioned as a spiritual guide, moral authority and custodian of sacred knowledge while in Buddhist institutions teachers acted primarily as scholarly mentors who encouraged dialogue, reasoning and intellectual inquiry. Authority remained important in both traditions, but its basis differed. Vedic education attached greater significance to inherited religious knowledge, whereas Buddhist education increasingly legitimized authority through scholarship, debate and ethical practice.

Differences also appear in curriculum, teaching methods and educational institutions. Vedic education centred upon the Vedas, Upanishads, philosophy, grammar, sciences, arts and physical training, all integrated within the residential Gurukul system. Buddhist institutions developed broader multidisciplinary curricula that included logic, medicine, languages, philosophy and monastic studies within

organized universities such as Nalanda and Vikramashila. Learning methods likewise reflected contrasting educational priorities. The Guru–Shishya tradition relied heavily on observation, disciplined living, memorization and experiential learning through daily participation in community life. Buddhist education, while also emphasizing experience, placed greater importance on debate, discussion, logical analysis and critical inquiry as essential components of intellectual development. This distinction made questioning an accepted educational practice rather than a challenge to institutional authority. Ethical education occupied a central place within both systems. Vedic philosophy emphasized dharma, truthfulness and self-restraint while Buddhist education stressed compassion, mindfulness and non-attachment as the moral foundations of learning.

The two traditions also differed in their approach to social inclusion and institutional organization. Historical evidence indicates that Vedic education gradually became more closely associated with caste and gender distinctions during the later Vedic period, although earlier periods displayed greater flexibility. Buddhist educational institutions generally offered broader opportunities for learners from different social backgrounds and welcomed international scholars through extensive monastic networks, even if complete equality was not always achieved in practice (Mitra, 2025) ^[6]. Their institutional structures reflected these differences. Gurukulas functioned as relatively small residential communities centred on individual teachers, whereas Buddhist Mahaviharas evolved into large centres of higher learning with organized curricula, libraries and scholarly exchange. Despite these contrasts, both traditions continue to hold considerable relevance for contemporary education. Vedic philosophy contributes valuable insights into character formation, value education, teacher mentorship and experiential learning while Buddhist philosophy strengthens contemporary discussions on critical thinking, dialogue, compassion and inclusive learning. Rather than choosing one model over the other, modern education can benefit from integrating their complementary strengths within democratic, secular and learner-centred educational frameworks. Such an approach preserves the ethical depth of Vedic education alongside the intellectual openness of Buddhist pedagogy, offering a balanced vision of holistic education for the 21st century.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Vedic and Buddhist Educational Philosophy

Dimension	Vedic Educational Philosophy	Buddhist Educational Philosophy
Educational aims	Dharma, Moksha, self-realization, character formation	Nirvana, wisdom, compassion, liberation from suffering
Teacher	Guru as spiritual guide and moral authority	Teacher (Bhikkhu) as scholar, mentor and facilitator of inquiry
Curriculum	Vedas, Upanishads, sciences, arts, philosophy, physical education	Philosophy, logic, medicine, languages, ethics, monastic studies
Learning methods	Guru–Shishya tradition, observation, experiential learning, memorization	Debate, dialogue, reflection, critical inquiry, experiential learning
Ethics	Dharma, truthfulness, discipline, self-restraint	Compassion, mindfulness, non-violence, ethical conduct
Critical inquiry	Present but generally within scriptural traditions	Strong emphasis on questioning, logic and rational debate
Social inclusion	Increasingly influenced by caste and gender distinctions	Comparatively more inclusive, though not completely egalitarian
Educational institutions	Gurukulas and Ashrams	Viharas, Mahaviharas, Nalanda, Vikramashila
Contemporary relevance	Value education, teacher mentorship, holistic development	Critical thinking, learner-centred pedagogy, global citizenship, inclusive education

Relevance for 21st Century Education

The educational philosophies of the Vedic and Buddhist traditions continue to attract scholarly attention because many of their central principles resonate with the challenges confronting contemporary education. Around the world, education systems are moving beyond narrow measures of academic success and increasingly emphasizing the development of the whole learner. Holistic development has become a central educational goal. Intellectual ability is now expected to develop alongside ethical responsibility, emotional resilience, creativity and social awareness. This broader understanding of education reflects ideas that occupied an important place in both Vedic and Buddhist traditions where learning was viewed as a lifelong process concerned with shaping human character as much as intellectual competence. Although these traditions emerged in different historical settings, their educational philosophies offer valuable insights into current discussions on learner-centred education and educational reform (Government of India, 2020; UNESCO, 2021) [5, 12].

One of the strongest contributions of ancient Indian educational philosophy lies in its emphasis on value education and emotional wellbeing. Vedic education regarded dharma, self-discipline, truthfulness and ethical conduct as essential components of learning, while Buddhist education emphasized compassion, mindfulness, empathy and self awareness as the foundations of personal growth. These values have regained importance as schools increasingly address issues such as mental health, bullying, social isolation and ethical decision making among young people. Emotional well-being matters. Contemporary educational research likewise recognizes that students learn more effectively when education supports emotional development together with academic achievement. The close teacher-student relationship found in both educational traditions also offers useful lessons for present educational practice. Rather than functioning merely as instructors, teachers acted as mentors who guided learners through personal example, dialogue and continuous support. Such relationships can strengthen trust, motivation and meaningful learning in modern classrooms while preserving professional autonomy for teachers to adapt pedagogy according to the needs of diverse learners.

Experiential learning represents another important area where ancient educational philosophy remains relevant. Vedic Gurukulas encouraged students to participate in everyday activities, practical responsibilities and community life allowing knowledge to develop through experience rather than memorization alone. Buddhist educational institutions similarly promoted learning through observation, reflection, discussion and philosophical debate, encouraging learners to question assumptions and construct understanding through reasoned inquiry. These educational methods closely resemble present discussions on experiential learning, inquiry based education and problem solving pedagogy. Critical thinking receives particular support from Buddhist educational philosophy because dialogue and logical reasoning occupied a central place within monastic universities such as Nalanda and Vikramashila. Likewise, the broad curricula of both traditions which combined philosophy with sciences, arts, medicine and language studies anticipate the multidisciplinary approach promoted by contemporary educational reforms. The National Education Policy (NEP)

2020 [5] similarly advocates flexible curricula, interdisciplinary learning, critical thinking and experiential education while the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all (Government of India, 2020 [5]; UNESCO, 2021). These parallels suggest that several educational principles associated with modern reforms possess deep historical roots within Indian educational thought.

The relevance of these traditions also extends to contemporary discussions on global citizenship and responsible social participation. Both Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophies emphasized respect for others, ethical conduct and responsibility toward society, although they expressed these values through different philosophical frameworks. Such educational ideals remain valuable in multicultural societies where education seeks to develop empathy, intercultural understanding and peaceful coexistence. Yet these historical traditions should not be adopted without critical examination. Their educational systems developed within social contexts shaped by caste hierarchy, gender inequality and religious authority, all of which limited educational opportunities for many groups. These historical realities cannot be separated from their educational achievements. Furthermore, institutions such as Gurukulas and Buddhist monasteries operated within cultural and political environments that differ fundamentally from contemporary democratic societies. Direct transplantation of ancient educational models would therefore overlook important constitutional commitments to equality, secularism and universal education.

For these reasons, the continuing value of Vedic and Buddhist educational philosophy lies in contextual adaptation rather than direct adoption. Modern education can draw upon their enduring principles holistic development, ethical learning, teacher mentorship, experiential education, critical inquiry and multidisciplinary knowledge while rejecting historical practices associated with exclusion or social hierarchy. Such an approach allows ancient educational wisdom to inform present educational reforms without romanticizing the past or ignoring contemporary democratic values. Interpreted critically, these traditions contribute not as fixed educational models but as intellectual resources that enrich ongoing discussions on quality education, sustainable development and the cultivation of thoughtful, compassionate and responsible global citizens.

Conclusion

This study has examined the holistic educational philosophies of the Vedic and Buddhist traditions and evaluated their relevance for 21st century education through a comparative and sociological perspective. The analysis demonstrates that both traditions viewed education as a process of developing the whole person rather than merely transmitting knowledge or preparing individuals for employment. Intellectual growth, moral responsibility, self discipline and social commitment were understood as interconnected dimensions of education. At the same time, the study shows that these traditions differed in their educational priorities and pedagogical approaches. Vedic education emphasized dharma, self-realization, character formation and the Guru-Shishya relationship whereas

Buddhist education placed greater emphasis on wisdom, compassion, dialogue and critical inquiry within organized monastic universities. Despite these differences, both educational philosophies contributed significantly to the development of holistic learning and continue to offer meaningful insights for contemporary educational thought. The study also makes a theoretical contribution by bringing together Dewey's concept of experiential learning, Durkheim's understanding of moral education and Nussbaum's capability approach to interpret ancient Indian educational philosophy within a modern analytical framework. Rather than treating Vedic and Buddhist education as isolated historical traditions, the paper demonstrates how these perspectives complement one another in explaining the relationship between knowledge, ethics, experience and democratic citizenship. This interdisciplinary framework moves beyond descriptive educational history and places ancient Indian educational thought within broader debates in the sociology and philosophy of education.

The findings have important educational implications. Current educational reforms increasingly recognize the importance of holistic development, value education, experiential learning, critical thinking and multidisciplinary curricula all of which find meaningful parallels within ancient Indian educational philosophy. The National Education Policy 2020 ^[5] and the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4 similarly emphasize learner centred education, lifelong learning and inclusive educational opportunities. However, the study also demonstrates that these traditions should not be idealized. Their historical association with caste hierarchy, gender inequality and religious exclusivity requires careful critical examination before educational ideas are adapted to contemporary democratic societies. The relevance of ancient educational philosophy therefore lies in its educational principles rather than the direct revival of historical institutions. This paper recommends that educational policymakers and curriculum developers engage with Vedic and Buddhist educational thought through a secular, inclusive and evidence based framework that emphasizes ethical learning, teacher mentorship, experiential education and critical inquiry while remaining fully consistent with constitutional values and educational equality. Future research may extend this discussion by comparing additional Indian educational traditions, examining regional variations in educational practice and exploring how ancient educational principles can be integrated into teacher education, digital learning and contemporary curriculum design. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how India's educational heritage can inform educational innovation without losing sight of the social realities and democratic aspirations of the twenty-first century.

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