

National Education Policy 2020 and Gandhian Educational Philosophy: A Comparative Analysis of Pedagogical Convergences and Ideological Resonances

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Abstract- India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is the most comprehensive restructuring of the Indian education system since 1986. This article undertakes a systematic comparative analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of NEP 2020 and the educational thought of Mahatma Gandhi, particularly his conception of Nai Talim (Basic Education), to identify points of ideological convergence, structural resonance, and persistent divergence. Employing a historical-analytical methodology grounded in primary and secondary sources, the study examines seven thematic domains: the meaning and purpose of education; curriculum design; medium of instruction; craft and vocational integration; teaching method and pedagogy; the teacher-learner relationship; and women's and mass education. The findings reveal substantial philosophical alignment between Gandhian pedagogy and NEP 2020, notably in advocacy for mother-tongue instruction, activity-based experiential learning, holistic character formation, and integration of vocational and academic streams. However, NEP 2020 departs from the Gandhian framework in its embrace of digital technology, standardised national assessment, and a multidisciplinary liberal-arts model attuned to twenty-first-century labour markets.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Gandhian Educational Philosophy, Nai Talim, Basic Education, Holistic Development, Mother Tongue Instruction, Craft-Centred Pedagogy, Character Formation, Indian Education System, Comparative Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is the most potent instrument for the transformation of societies and the realisation of human potential. In the Indian context, a country of

continental demographic diversity and staggering socioeconomic disparity, the question of how education may simultaneously serve individual flourishing, social justice, cultural continuity, and national development has been perennially contested. The National Education Policy 2020, the first comprehensive policy document of the twenty-first century, superseding the NEP of 1986, represents India's most ambitious attempt to address these imperatives in an integrated fashion. Approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, it proposes sweeping reforms across all levels of schooling and higher education, introducing a novel 5+3+3+4 curricular design, mandating foundational literacy and numeracy, integrating vocational education from the middle-school stage, promoting multilingualism rooted in mother tongues, and reimagining assessment as a continuous competency-based enterprise (Government of India, 2020).

Remarkably, many of these aspirations find their intellectual antecedents in the educational philosophy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who, nearly a century earlier, had articulated a vision of education remarkable for its radical simplicity and penetrating critique of colonial pedagogical structures. Gandhi's concept of Nai Talim, first enunciated at the Wardha Education Conference of 1937, proposed education centred on productive craft work, delivered in the mother tongue, and oriented toward holistic development of the child's body, mind, and soul (Gandhi, 1937). Despite voluminous scholarship on both Gandhian education and NEP 2020, there exists a lacuna in the literature with respect to systematic comparative analysis of the two frameworks across

multiple thematic dimensions. The present article addresses this gap, drawing upon the dissertation research of Srivastava (2025–2026) conducted at Abhinav Seva Sansthan Mahavidyalaya, Kanpur. The central question is: To what extent does NEP 2020 philosophically and pedagogically converge with, diverge from, or transform the Gandhian educational vision?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Scholarship on Gandhian Educational Philosophy

The scholarly literature on Gandhi's educational thought is extensive. Foundational works, including Dwivedi (1972) and Chaudhary (2016), establish the canonical architecture of *Nai Talim*: free and compulsory education for children aged seven to fourteen, craft-centred pedagogy, mother-tongue instruction, self-sufficiency through productive labour, and integration of moral formation into every dimension of schooling. These works emphasise that for Gandhi, education was inseparable from life itself, a processual engagement extending from birth to death encompassing physical, mental, moral, intellectual, and social dimensions.

Recent comparative scholarship has substantially enriched this picture. Kaur (2021) compared the educational philosophies of Aurobindo and Gandhi in the context of modern pedagogical methods, finding that both thinkers placed the child's holistic development at the centre of their visions while diverging significantly in emphasis: Aurobindo foregrounded spiritual and metaphysical dimensions, whereas Gandhi prioritised social and ethical ones. Both, however, conceptualised education as a lifelong process and accorded primacy to character cultivation. Verma, A. P. S. (2021), comparing Gandhi and Gijubhai, found that both thinkers advocated equal educational opportunity regardless of gender, age, or economic status, and sought to deploy education as an instrument of social transformation. Singh (2021) examined implementation of Gandhian and Vivekananda educational values, concluding that both thinkers placed extraordinary emphasis on high-order human values. Tomar (2020), comparing Gandhi and Sampurnanand, found a shared emphasis on self-study (*swadhyay*) and inclusion of basic education in the primary curriculum. Verma, Sudha (2020) reviewed five major Indian educational thinkers, Vivekananda,

Gandhi, Tagore, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo, and found cross-cutting commitments to lifelong education, learner-centredness, and the cultivation of ethical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and vocational values.

Studies addressing contemporary relevance have been numerous. Shinde (2018) argued that Gandhi's educational objectives, curriculum, and teaching methods remain profoundly relevant in the present era. Alladin Veerbhadra (2017) similarly concluded that Gandhian educational ideas are relevant for holistic child development in the contemporary context. Chaudhary, Ravshuma (2016) confirmed that Gandhi's Basic Education scheme remains useful for current schooling. Mohammad Salim (2016) found Gandhi's and Tagore's educational ideas contemporary relevant. Jain (2008) and Ved Prakash (2008) provided valuable comparative perspectives on Gandhi's thought in relation to Tagore/Aurobindo and Annie Besant respectively.

2.2 NEP 2020: Key Scholarly Perspectives

Scholarship on NEP 2020 is still crystallising given its recency. The policy document itself (Government of India, 2020) remains the primary reference, articulating a vision premised on equity, inclusion, quality, and twenty-first-century skill formation. Its advocacy for mother-tongue instruction, integration of arts, crafts, and vocational education, emphasis on critical thinking and experiential learning, and insistence that assessment serve learning all bear unmistakable philosophical resonance with Gandhian ideals. Ashok K. Gaba (2019), examining online education and employment opportunities, provided contextual background on technology-mediated distance learning, a domain NEP 2020 addresses extensively and one representing a significant departure from the Gandhian framework. Despite the growing literature, no study has yet undertaken a systematic multi-domain comparative analysis of NEP 2020 and Gandhian educational philosophy, the gap this article addresses.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical-analytical research methodology, the most appropriate design for a study whose primary material consists of historical and documentary sources (Whitny, cited in Srivastava,

2025–2026; Carlinger, cited in Srivastava, 2025–2026). Historical research involves problem identification, delimitation of scope, data analysis, organisation, authentication, validity determination, and hypothesis testing (Best, cited in Srivastava, 2025–2026). The method is appropriate here because the primary object of inquiry, Gandhian educational philosophy, is a historical phenomenon whose relevant documentation spans approximately a century, while NEP 2020 must be understood against the backdrop of India's educational history, the Wardha Conference (1937), Kothari Commission (1964–66), NPE (1986), and NCF (2005), to reveal its philosophical genealogy and departures. Primary sources for the Gandhian dimension include Gandhi's own writings: *Atmakatha*, *Gita Bodh*, *Gita Darshan*, *Sacchi Shiksha*, and his journalistic output in *Harijan* and *Young India*. Primary sources for NEP 2020 are the policy document itself and associated official publications. Secondary sources encompass Srivastava's (2025–2026) dissertation research and the body of scholarly literature surveyed above. The comparative analysis is organised around seven thematic domains derived inductively from primary sources, within each of which the Gandhian position is first reconstructed, the NEP 2020 position described, and a comparative assessment offered identifying convergences, divergences, and transformative departures.

IV. GANDHI'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY: AN OVERVIEW

4.1 Philosophical Foundations and the Meaning of Education

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) brought to educational philosophy a rare combination of practical experimentation and moral seriousness. His educational ideas were tested in the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa and the Sabarmati and Sevagram Ashrams in India, institutions that functioned as laboratories for his convictions about education, labour, character, and community (Gandhi, 1975). Gandhi's philosophy of education cannot be understood apart from his broader commitments to Truth (*Satya*) and Non-violence (*Ahimsa*), which pervade his educational thought as thoroughly as his politics and ethics. For Gandhi, truth was not merely propositional but an existential orientation, a quality of being in thought, word, and deed, and education, at its

best, was the process through which this orientation was cultivated. His concept of *Sarvodaya*, the welfare of all, derived from Ruskin's *Unto the Last*, provided the social framework: the well-being of the attorney and the barber is of equal worth, and education must serve universal flourishing rather than the interests of any class or caste (Gandhi, 1975).

Gandhi's conception of the meaning of education is expressed most succinctly in his statement: 'By education I mean an all-round drawing-out of the best in child and man, body, mind and soul' (Gandhi, 1937). This formula, the transformation of 3R education (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic) into 3H education (Head, Hand, Heart), signals his fundamental conviction that education must engage the whole person. Literacy, he insisted, is neither the end nor the beginning of education; it is merely one instrument among many. The purposes Gandhi assigned to education were multiple: perfect development (*poorna vikas*), harmonious cultivation of all faculties; livelihood (*jeevikoparjan*), economic self-sufficiency; cultural purpose (*sanskritik uddeshya*), transmission of India's civilisational inheritance; and character formation (*charitra nirman*), which he regarded as primary: 'I have always given the first place to culture of the heart, that is, to character formation' (Gandhi, 1975).

4.2 Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Institutional Vision

The curriculum of *Nai Talim* was activity-centred and craft-focused, comprising mother tongue as the medium of all instruction; practical mathematics; social studies; general science; handicraft and industry appropriate to local conditions; art; music; and physical education (Gandhi, 1975). The unifying principle was that all subjects should be taught through and in relation to the central productive craft, so that learning was simultaneously intellectual, physical, and economically meaningful. Gandhi's preferred pedagogy was learning by doing. He insisted that children should learn to read before writing and draw before the alphabet, so that literacy emerged organically from meaningful engagement with the world. Teaching was to be dialogical and cooperative; discipline was self-generated through a pure natural environment, exemplary teacher conduct, and the internalisation of moral values, Gandhi fiercely opposed corporal punishment. The ideal school was a productive community in which teachers and students

laboured together in mutual respect, economically self-sufficient through craft revenues, and serving as a community centre for the surrounding village.

Gandhi was an uncompromising advocate of mother-tongue instruction, regarding English-medium education as cultural violence that alienated Indian children from their own inheritance. He attached enormous importance to women's education: 'the education of a boy is the education of an individual, but the education of a girl is the education of a whole family' (Gandhi, 1975). Mass education, the eradication of illiteracy, was for him both a moral imperative and a prerequisite of democratic self-governance.

V. NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: KEY FEATURES

5.1 Vision and Structural Reforms

The National Education Policy 2020 is the first education policy of the twenty-first century and the most comprehensive since 1986. Developed through an unprecedented process of nationwide consultation, it envisions India as a vibrant knowledge society producing learners equipped with the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions necessary for personal flourishing and responsible global citizenship (Government of India, 2020). Its philosophical foundations are explicitly rooted in Indian values and cultural heritage, including the ancient pedagogical legacy of Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Vallabhi, while addressing twenty-first-century demands. The policy's foundational principles include: recognition of each child's unique capacities; prioritisation of foundational literacy and numeracy; flexibility in learning pathways; elimination of hierarchies between academic and vocational streams; a shift from rote learning to conceptual understanding and critical thinking; development of ethical, social, and emotional dimensions alongside cognitive capabilities; and continuous assessment replacing high-stakes year-end examinations (Government of India, 2020).

The most visible structural innovation is the replacement of the 10+2 framework with a 5+3+3+4 design calibrated to developmental stages: the Foundational Stage (ages 3–8) prioritises play-based, activity-centred learning; the Preparatory Stage (Classes 3–5) introduces structured but still activity-

centred curriculum; the Middle Stage (Classes 6–8) introduces subject teachers and abstract reasoning; and the Secondary Stage (Classes 9–12) provides flexibility of subject choice, dissolving rigid disciplinary silos. The policy affirms a robust trilingual formula, insisting that wherever possible the medium of instruction up to at least Class 5 should be the home language or mother tongue, a decisive endorsement of the principle Gandhi championed a century earlier. NEP 2020 advocates substantial reduction in curricular load, integration of arts, crafts, sports, and vocational subjects into the mainstream, and the reform of assessment toward continuous, competency-based evaluation.

5.2 Equity, Technology, and the Vision of Education

NEP 2020 places equity and social inclusion at its heart, calling for special attention to historically marginalised communities, girls, children with disabilities, and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It envisions that every child, regardless of social or economic background, has access to the highest quality of education. In a domain with no Gandhian precedent, NEP 2020 devotes substantial attention to digital and online education, virtual classrooms, e-learning platforms, mobile learning, AI-assisted assessment, and a national digital infrastructure for education. The policy calls for blended models retaining the irreplaceable value of face-to-face, relational learning alongside digital modes, and explicitly notes that 'education should establish the individual's mastery over technology rather than making the individual its slave' (Government of India, 2020), a formulation that resonates with Gandhi's deepest concerns about technological dependency.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: SEVEN THEMATIC DOMAINS

6.1 Meaning and Purpose of Education

The most fundamental convergence between the two frameworks lies in their shared insistence that education must serve the holistic development of the person, not merely cognitive achievement but harmonious cultivation of physical, emotional, ethical, aesthetic, and social dimensions. Gandhi's formula of Head, Hand, and Heart finds its policy equivalent in NEP 2020's insistence on 'the holistic development of

learners, their physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, ethical, and aesthetic capacities' (Government of India, 2020). Both frameworks resist the reduction of education to examination performance or vocational credentialism. The significant difference lies in philosophical register: Gandhi's conception is grounded in a spiritual and ethical metaphysics, education must orient the soul toward Truth, and the aim is the realisation of the divine in the human. NEP 2020 articulates its vision in a more secular, psychologically and sociologically informed idiom drawing on twenty-first-century skills, global citizenship, and the SDGs. The convergence is genuine but mediated by different philosophical vocabularies and ultimate aims.

6.2 Curriculum Design and Craft Integration

Both Nai Talim and NEP 2020 advocate for an activity-centred, experiential curriculum that integrates knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. Gandhi's insistence that all subjects be taught through the central productive craft prefigures NEP 2020's call for elimination of hierarchies between academic, vocational, and artistic disciplines. Both frameworks advocate reduction in curricular load and a shift from content coverage to deep understanding of core concepts, Gandhi through his critique of rote-learning and book-centred education, NEP 2020 through its explicit call for 'reduced content load' and 'critical thinking and inquiry-based learning' (Government of India, 2020). The differences are equally instructive: Gandhi's curriculum, rooted in productive craft, was designed for a predominantly rural pre-industrial society and reflected his scepticism about large-scale industrialisation. NEP 2020's curriculum is designed for a technologically complex, globalised, and rapidly urbanising India, national in scope, standardised through a national curriculum framework, and oriented toward twenty-first-century labour market participation and scientific literacy.

6.3 Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction

This is the domain of most unambiguous convergence. Gandhi's insistence on mother-tongue instruction was absolute and uncompromising, regarding English-medium education as cultural colonisation. NEP 2020 endorses mother-tongue instruction with comparable firmness, stipulating that the medium of instruction 'wherever possible' should be the home language up to

at least Class 5, with no language imposed on any student. The trilingual formula, ensuring at least two of three languages studied are Indian, reflects a commitment to linguistic diversity thoroughly Gandhian in inspiration. The significant qualification, 'wherever possible', introduces flexibility Gandhi would not have countenanced, reflecting political and logistical complexities of implementation across India's 22+ scheduled languages. Nevertheless, the directional commitment represents a decisive philosophical alignment.

6.4 Vocational Integration and Productive Labour

The integration of productive craft and vocational learning into general education is Gandhi's most distinctive contribution and the area where NEP 2020 most clearly resonates with his tradition. Gandhi's insistence that every child learn a useful handicraft, and that craft be the organisational centre of the curriculum, was a radical departure from colonial educational models. NEP 2020's advocacy for vocational education from Class 6 onwards, proposals for student internships with local craftspeople and artisans, and insistence on dissolving vocational and academic streams all reflect a philosophical inheritance unmistakably resonant with Gandhi's vision. The differences concern political economy: Gandhi's craft integration was embedded in village self-reliance and a critique of industrialism, whereas NEP 2020's vocational integration is oriented toward economic productivity in a market economy and twenty-first-century labour market participation.

6.5 Teaching Method

Both frameworks are united in rejecting rote learning and advocating active, experiential, dialogical pedagogy. Gandhi's insistence on learning by doing finds its NEP 2020 equivalent in calls for 'discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning,' for regular 'creative, collaborative, and inquiry-based activities,' and for 'a more dialogical way of teaching' (Government of India, 2020). Both privilege depth over breadth, understanding over coverage, and cultivating curiosity over accumulating information. NEP 2020 goes beyond Gandhi in its embrace of technology as a pedagogical medium, digital platforms, virtual classrooms, AI-assisted learning, with no counterpart in the Gandhian framework. The underlying pedagogical philosophy, that the learner

should be active, curious, collaborative, and reflective, is shared.

6.6 Teacher-Learner Relationship

Gandhi's vision of the teacher was elevated and demanding: 'I believe that a teacher is the textbook of students. He can stir the soul of his students through his conduct' (Gandhi, 1975). The teacher functions simultaneously as parent, friend, and guide, a person of exemplary character whose moral stature provides the primary pedagogical resource. NEP 2020 shares this emphasis on teacher centrality, insisting on the best possible recruitment, continuous professional development, positive working environments, and service conditions. Its vision of the teacher as facilitator and co-learner is consistent with the Gandhian conception, even as its institutional apparatus, national teacher eligibility tests, four-year integrated B.Ed. programmes, continuous professional development systems, reflects a bureaucratic modernity quite alien to Gandhi's ashram-based model of teacher formation.

6.7 Women's and Mass Education

Both frameworks accord high priority to women's education and eradication of mass illiteracy. Gandhi's foundational arguments for women's education and his insistence that women deserve equal educational access across all domains find clear echoes in NEP 2020's commitment to equitable and inclusive education, its call for promotion of women's education at all levels, and its mandate to eliminate gender discrimination in curriculum and textbooks. On mass education, both frameworks are equally clear: extension of quality education to all citizens regardless of social or economic background is a moral imperative. Gandhi pursued this through craft-financed free schools; NEP 2020 pursues it through the Right to Education Act framework, universal early childhood care and education, targeted support for disadvantaged groups, and leveraging digital technology. The philosophical commitment is shared; the institutional vehicles reflect the very different contexts in which the two frameworks were developed.

VII. DISCUSSION

7.1 The Philosophical Legacy of Gandhi in NEP 2020

The comparative analysis reveals a pattern of significant philosophical convergence between NEP 2020 and Gandhian educational thought, mediated by substantive differences in context, vocabulary, and institutional vision. The convergences are not accidental: NEP 2020 explicitly acknowledges that its vision cannot be separated from Gandhi's concept of *gram swaraj* (village self-rule), and that education should empower individuals through technology rather than making them its slaves, a formulation that might have come directly from Gandhi's writings (Government of India, 2020). The most important convergences concern curriculum integration, the pedagogy of active and experiential learning, the primacy of mother-tongue instruction, the equal value of vocational and academic education, and the centrality of character formation to educational purpose. These convergences reflect the enduring relevance of Gandhi's insights, insights that anticipated by decades the global shift toward competency-based, learner-centred education.

7.2 Divergences and Tensions

The most significant divergences concern the role of technology, the scale and standardisation of the educational system, and the political economy of education. NEP 2020's embrace of digital platforms, AI, and mobile learning represents a departure with no Gandhian precedent. Its national curriculum framework, national assessment centres, and national teacher eligibility criteria reflect a centralising ambition that sits uneasily with Gandhi's vision of community-based, locally responsive education. These divergences are not merely technical; they reflect deeper philosophical differences concerning the relationship between education and the economy, the individual and the state, and tradition and modernity. A truly Gandhian education policy would need to grapple with these differences explicitly rather than assuming them resolved.

7.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The comparative analysis carries several implications. First, implementation of NEP 2020 would be enriched by a more explicit engagement with the Gandhian philosophical tradition, not as an antiquarian exercise but as a source of living insights about education, community, labour, and moral formation. Second, it highlights the importance of teacher preparation: both

frameworks insist that teacher quality is the decisive determinant of educational outcomes, and both call for teachers who are themselves persons of exemplary character, deep knowledge, and genuine love for children. Third, it underscores the importance of community engagement: both frameworks conceive of the school as a hub of community life and development. Fourth, it highlights the tension between economic instrumentalism and humanistic holism, the risk of reducing NEP 2020's vocational integration to mere job training, losing Gandhi's deeper insight that productive labour is a medium of intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. Fifth, it recommends that India's educators and curriculum developers familiarise themselves more deeply with the Gandhian educational tradition as a living philosophical resource rather than a historical monument.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has undertaken a systematic comparative analysis of NEP 2020 and Gandhi's educational philosophy across seven thematic domains. The central conclusion is that these two frameworks share a substantial philosophical foundation, a commitment to holistic education, active and experiential learning, mother-tongue instruction, integration of vocational and academic education, and the centrality of character formation, alongside significant divergences in their orientations toward technology, scale, standardisation, and political economy. Gandhi's educational legacy is not a historical relic but a living philosophical resource: one that can illuminate, enrich, and ground the implementation of NEP 2020 in ways that mere policy advocacy cannot. The insights Gandhi developed concerning education's relationship to community, knowledge, productive labour, and moral formation remain as pertinent and as challenging in the twenty-first century as they were in the twentieth. This study's primary limitation is its reliance on documentary sources; future research should examine the empirical implementation of NEP 2020 in practice, assessing the extent to which Gandhian pedagogical principles are actualised in classrooms and exploring teachers' and students' experiences of reformed curricula.

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